

AND THEY WERE GUIDED BY A STAR

(By NORA McAULIFFE, for the N.Z. Tablet.)

Annie Egan leaned out of her window and gazed at the stars, and from the sky her glance swept downwards to the lights of the city that lay stretched beneath her. It was Christmas week, so the thronged streets shone with an added brilliance. Merrymakers and Christmas shoppers good-naturedly jostled one another. The heart of the city was pulsing joyously, youthful once more with the old Romance that is ever new. And, aloof from the life around her, Annie Egan stood at her open window and confessed herself a failure. Six months before she had leaned from her window and laughed up at the stars. 'Jewels of the night, you are glorious, but the lights of the city have bewitched me—the dear throbbing intimate lights of our city.' Well, the city would have none of her. 'You do not belong,' it seemed to cry. 'You cannot give me anything in exchange for a foothold.' A foothold! It had come to that. Once she had dreamed the whole city was within the hollow of her hand. Well, she would go back, and if she winced at the thought it was as much for those to whom she was returning as for her own hurt. And she wouldn't return to them the same girl. The city had made her doubt the value of what she had been taught to prize. She had lost her bearings. She was a voyager in an open boat adrift on an uncharted sea. There was a God in heaven, no doubt, but His ears were deaf to the cries of His children and He no longer walked amongst His people.

At this point Dennis, who was sitting on the front step, looked up and caught sight of her. 'Isn't it a bosker star, Miss Annie?' he shrilled, pointing with his crutch. 'See it's right above the Church of our Lady of the Stars, down near the wharves, where they're having a novena.' He hobbled round till he stood beneath her window. 'I've got a candle alight before the statue down there, and I guess you'll see me captain of St. Pat's eleven, yet, Miss Annie. My word,' he added reflectively, 'won't we just wipe out that Grammar School lot.'

'Good luck to you, Dennis; I'm sure you'll be having a happy Christmas.' Annie beamed on him through a mist of tears. When he had gone she looked accusingly at the stars—'And at the hospital, to-day, they told his mother that tuberculosis of the knee had set in.'

Next morning Annie woke with her sense of failure still strongly on her. The knowledge accompanied her into the streets, after her sketchy breakfast, but she squared her shoulders, as she swung into the *Megaphone* office with the bearing of a gallant boy. 'Anything for me this morning, Mr. Price?' she inquired, with a smile. Jimmy had remarked that the brilliance of her smile increased as her hats grew shabbier. There so seldom had been anything, but Jimmy's way of replying 'I'm afraid there's nothing this morning,' always held a delightful implication that there had been yesterday and that to-morrow, of course, there would be again. This morning, however, he had just turned to the girl when his telephone rang. 'All right, Carteret, we'll manage.' He hung up the receiver. 'Here,' he said, 'there's some sort of a racket at one of the down town churches. A novena, or something of that sort, and they claim that all sorts of miracles are being worked. The congregation's mostly French fisher-folk and Assyrian hawkers—we'll give it half a column.' The color flamed to Annie's cheeks. Her chance! Her chance at last. Jimmy turned away so that he might not see the eagerness in her face. It would mean nothing, he was simply using her as a stop-gap. 'And, oh, I say Miss Egan, don't treat it too solemnly, a touch of humor.' She nodded, scarcely hearing him. Already the opening lines danced before her eyes. She boarded a down town car, and noted whilst doing so that the passengers were the really poor; some looked startlingly sick. In the corner sat little Dennis nursing his crutch. She secured a strap near him, and smiled down at him. He returned the smile with interest. 'I'm getting off at the next corner,' he said, so you'll

be able to sit down then. I suppose you are going to the Church of our Lady of the Stars; we're nearly all going there.' 'Then why are you getting off at the next corner,' asked Annie. 'Oh, I'm going to walk the rest of the way,' the youngster replied easily, and Annie remembered that the corner marked the beginning of another penny section. 'Well,' she said, 'I do wish you'd ride all the way, because I'm a stranger, and it wouldn't do for me to get lost.' She paid the conductor for two as she spoke, and the boy uttered the faintest sigh of relief. 'I won't be late, now. You see, I'm buying candles to burn, and that takes a penny every day, and there's a penny for the car.'

'Twopence is a good deal every day,' Annie admitted, but this was her first visit.

Well, then, she didn't know of the wonderful things that were happening. Tom Murphy's sister was dying, two doctors said so, and her mother had taken her to the church and the old Assyrian priest had touched her and blessed her, and now she was getting better. As for himself, he wanted to walk straight again. 'The doctors at the hospital say I can't get better, but I will.'

Annie looked away. Her eyes were full of sorrow for the child's disappointment. Of course, he wouldn't get cured. Miracles like that didn't happen. The clear-featured man standing beside her looked with sympathy at both of them. 'Here we are,' he said quietly, as the car stopped, and, stooping, without more words, he lifted Dennis and placed him gently on the pavement.

The Church of our Lady of the Stars was a plain wooden building, and humbly it stood between two warehouses; there was a salt freshness in the air that spoke of the nearness of the harbor. Annie entered the little porch. In a niche stood a crudely colored statue of the Blessed Virgin, around her head a halo of gilded stars. The people, excited and chattering, thronged the porch; many were intently placing lighted candles about the statue. To Annie, in her new-born wisdom, the scene was inartistic; nay, even vulgar. Then her gaze rested on Dennis. His eyes were fixed on the statue, and his lips were moving in silent prayer. That was the very heading for her paragraph: 'The Eyes of Faith.' There would be laughter running through it, but, oh, the tenderest laughter, for once, she too had believed. Dennis had at last succeeded in placing his candle on the little altar. Such a little flame amongst so many. How could its light reach to heaven!

Dennis came back to her side. 'He's coming. He's coming,' he whispered excitedly. 'If we stand here he might bless us. Sometimes he touches you—then you get better.'

An elderly priest came slowly through the people. Reaching Dennis and Annie, he stopped. The boy grew rigid, but leaning forward the priest touched Annie's eyelids. 'You see badly, my child,' he said gently, and entered the church. The people, all silent and reverent now, followed him.

In the church old memories came crowding round Annie Egan. She was back again in the Chapel at St. Mary's and the nuns were singing the Benediction. She lived over again that last distribution, when, glowing with excitement, her voice trembling with feeling, she had read her farewell verses to the school. How they had applauded her! How they had looked to her to keep the 'light burning on the altar of Faith.' Her face suddenly burned as she remembered the few paragraphs she had written. Not much of the old ideals about them. In a dream, she knelt on. The priest left the altar, and gradually the church was deserted. Still dreaming, she left the church. In the porch she lingered reverently before the shrine.

'It was the ninth candle, this morning, wasn't it, Dennis?' said the voice of the clear-featured, cleanly-built man. And as they turned, he added, 'Now we're going to see what can be done for this foot of yours.' He carried Dennis down the church steps, and placed him in a shabby motor car. Annie hesitated on the pavement.

'My name is Lindon. Could you spare another half hour till we look into this.'

Lindon! The wonderful doctor whose power of