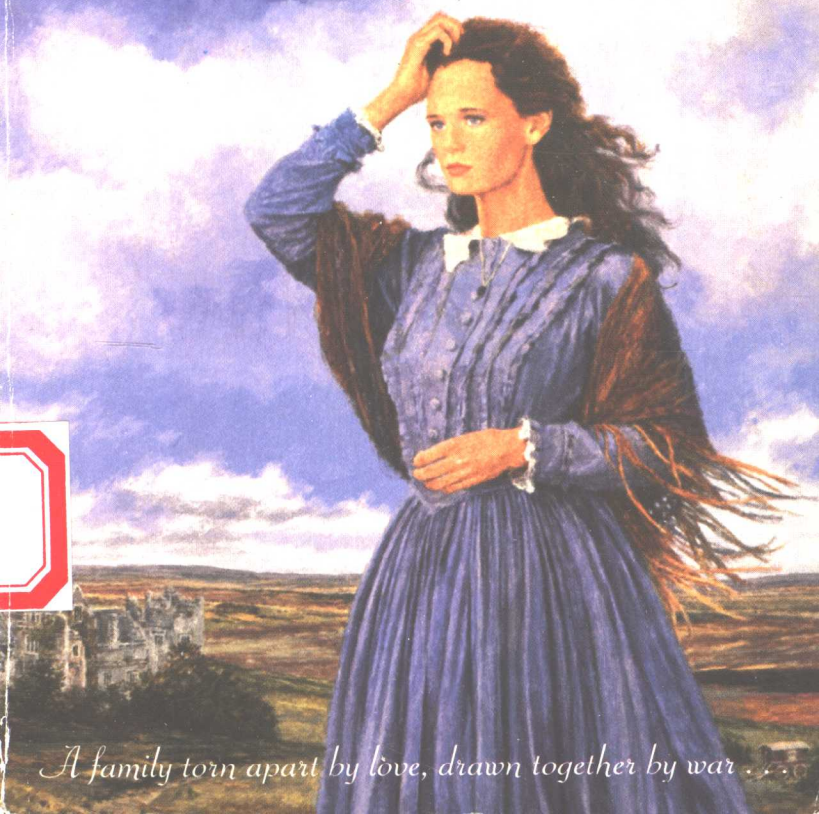


SUSANNAH CURTIS

Inherit the Wind



A family torn apart by love, drawn together by war

INHERIT THE WIND

Susannah Curtis

He that troubleth
his own house shall
inherit the wind
Proverbs 11 verse 29

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PART I

Chapter 1

1924

Rory Riordan kept himself hidden behind the stack of crates containing Sunlight soap which he had brought to the dockside awaiting export. He was much thinner than he had once been so it was easy to flatten himself between the wooden boxes as he watched the heavily built captain of the *Kilsheelagh* escort two customs men off the laden cargo vessel.

'Good-day to you, Cap'n, and a safe journey,' he heard one of the officers say. Rory's keen eye followed them anxiously along the dockside to another larger vessel which was also preparing to leave Birkenhead via the Mersey. He ran his tongue round his dry, sore lips, emotion tugging at his conscience as the name *Kilsheelagh* reminded him of his elder sister, Shelagh. He wished with all his heart that he could turn the clock back, that he was home in Ireland sheltered beneath the hazy blue of the Wicklow mountains, but it was too late for regrets. Escaping from prison, and being on the run, even if he had been lucky enough to get to England, had been a traumatic ordeal for a country boy, but of necessity he had become tougher, sleeping rough, stealing food to survive, sometimes even fighting over a crust of bread.

After weeks of being on the brink of starvation during the winter he had at last in desperation plucked up courage to queue with other dockers on Merseyside, and because of his knowledge of horses he had been taken on as carter at the Sunlight soap factory. But he knew he dared not stay long in one place, and seeing the *Kilsheelagh* stirred his eagerness to get home to Ireland. It struck him as odd that the captain appeared to be in no hurry, but it was of little consequence to him as he could see no way of getting aboard even as a stowaway. Suddenly he drew back in alarm as the seaman seemed to be taking undue interest in the crates

where Rory was hiding, and to his horror heavy footsteps came lumbering towards the space where he was wedged. A few coughs and spits and the sound of a match being struck were followed by a waft of tobacco smoke which filled his lungs and stung his eyes, and made him hold his breath for fear of giving himself away.

'Thinking of stowing away now is it, me laddo?'

Rory tried to suppress a gasp of surprise that he had been seen. He tried to find a voice, but the smoke in his parched throat paralysed it. 'Tis on the run y'are, I'm thinking, lad.'

'No! No!' Rory rasped. 'I work at Port Sunlight. I should be getting back. If I'm too long I shall get the sack, but I like to watch the ships coming and going.'

The captain puffed a few times, walking two or three yards farther on as he looked thoughtfully up at the cloudy sky, and then came to stand with his back against the space where Rory was tightly jammed in. He pretended to observe his crew preparing to cast off as he said in a low voice: 'In less than an hour when the light begins to fade the tide will be right. I'll run me ship alongside here to turn, so if you've a mind to join me crew, jump aboard.' He shuffled away with more vulgar coughs and spits.

The shifts were changing, and the bulk of dockers going home. Rory's spirits lifted. Even if his family wouldn't be pleased to see him again the temptation was just too great. He could return to Ireland after four months of living as a vagrant. His possessions were few, hidden in the lining of a huge old overcoat he'd stolen from another tramp. He hated the sea, and remembered with loathing the awful crossing from Dublin to Liverpool, cooped up in a beer barrel on a cold January day. He'd very nearly suffocated down in the hold, but when he was off-loaded onto Liverpool docks the salty sea air seeping through the air holes had revived him enough for him to use the crow-bar his brother Danny had secreted inside the beer barrel with him. It had been a daring escape – but it had worked.

Now he needed to get away again. Molly Hindley's father would soon be after his blood when he learned that his daughter was in the family way. Molly worked in the

Sunlight factory packing soap, and their friendship had started because Rory got teased about being so thin, and Molly had shared her sandwiches with him. He didn't pretend to love her, but he felt he was less conspicuous with a girl to walk out with, and she was willing enough to satisfy his need. The past six weeks were an improvement on the previous ones, but he didn't want to dwell on it: escape was his objective once more.

When darkness had fallen over the Mersey, Rory caught the echoes of shouted commands coming from the bridge of the *Kilsheelagh*. He was shaking with fright. He couldn't swim, supposing he missed? – Yet such was the urgency to get away that he found himself crouching on the dockside, and as the ship's stern came slowly round towards him he forced himself to leap leap . . .

Rory didn't know anything more for several hours, and when he did regain consciousness the captain was sitting beside the bunk he was lying on, sponging his forehead with a piece of damp, coarse flannel. It was several minutes before he remembered the leap, and he closed his eyes again quickly as renewed panic brought a wave of nausea.

'Tis all right, me laddo. 'Tis true you only just made it, but me first mate was there to pick up the pieces. Landed belly first on the capstan, so you did.'

Pain was everywhere. Rory felt as if he had a hole where his stomach ought to be. He ran his hand down his chest, and yes, his stomach was still there, and his manhood too – but with alarm he realized that beneath the rough wool blanket he was naked.

'Where are my . . . my clothes?' he stammered in a weak voice.

The Captain laughed. 'The good bits'll be laundered, the rest thrown away – a bit high you might say.'

'I'd like them back, please.'

'All in good time, me boy.' The captain patted him on the shoulder. 'A nice warm bath, and a good square meal before we can put you to work. Now you just lie there and rest awhile.'

'How long was I out?' Rory asked. 'Shouldn't we soon be reaching Ireland?'

'Ireland! Ireland!' The captain's massive paunch shook with laughter. 'Tis many a long day since I set foot on me native soil, and I'm thinking 'tis no hurry I'm in to be back there. Laddo, we're bound for Canada. Now, for a young man like yourself 'tis a good passage. Six or seven days, depending on the weather, a few days ashore at Quebec or Montreal where the gambling dens'll relieve you of some of your money, and then 'tis back to the Mersey again. Regular run till ice closes the St Lawrence river in winter and I like me men to be regular, so I do. Sleep on it, laddo, when we're set fair we'll enjoy a hearty breakfast together.'

Rory turned his face to the porthole, ashamed of the tears which filled his eyes. In spite of all the trouble he'd been in he did so want to go home and make amends to his family. Besides, there was still the Irish cause to fight for even if that was what had got him into trouble in the first place. He could hear the gentle slap of waves against the side of the vessel intermingling with the chug of the engine. Each hour was taking him farther away from them all, from Danny and his wife, Clare. He felt remorse that he'd frightened her into losing her baby, but they were young, they'd have more. Maybe Canada wasn't such a bad idea, a new country and a new beginning, but first there was the sea voyage. It made him feel sick just to think of that incomprehensible, vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. Once he reached land that would be it, he'd have to stay there, but perhaps he wouldn't tell that to the Captain just yet.

He dropped off to sleep, and the remainder of the night hours passed by without his knowledge, and when next he woke it was daylight with a shaft of sunlight beaming through the small porthole. He started to sit up, and promptly banged his head on the bunk above, so he rested again, taking in his surroundings. The captain must make a good living he decided, for the cabin was spacious and well-furnished. He looked about for signs of his old clothing, but there were none. His old coat was his only means of support, containing as it did the few pounds he'd earned at Port Sunlight. Supposing the captain was a dishonest man and had already found it! Rory hoped that being a fellow Irishman he was an upright, fatherly type,

yet he felt uneasy. He could hear the captain's bellows long before the cabin door opened and two young lads brought in a hip bath and buckets of hot water. The captain leaned over Rory smelling of rum, and breathing its fumes into his face.

'Now, me laddo, a nice sponge down is what you need. Soak away the bruises and aches and you'll be as good as new.' His expression was lewd as he pulled away the blanket and for the second time Rory moved so fast that he cracked his head sharply.

The captain guffawed loudly and while Rory's head was still spinning he was whisked up and over the captain's shoulder while calloused groping fingers clumsily explored his buttocks. Rory kicked and beat his fists against the captain's back until he was dumped into the bath.

'Don't you ever touch me again,' he said between gritted teeth – teeth that would have chattered with fright if he hadn't been so angry.

'Now don't get yourself upset,' the captain said in a soothing voice. 'Tis making you feel at home I am. Giving you fresh clothes and a good meal which, I daresay, you've not had for quite some time. I'll leave you now to get yourself clean, and then we'll have a nice cosy chat over breakfast.'

Rory's first thought after the cabin door closed was to bath, dress and run as fast as he could – but where to? Straight off the deck into the ocean? Dear God, he thought, just my luck to have landed in the lap of a wrong 'un, and there was no means of escape. He was too scared to enjoy the luxury of the bath, something he hadn't even seen for four months. He'd only managed to keep himself free of lice by stealing a packet of Keatings Powder. Soap, a stiff brush and, to his gratification, a clean, thick towel aided the process of making him feel human again, and at least the warm water soothed his bruises. The clothes folded on the captain's chair were clean too, and he noticed his overcoat hanging on the back of the door, but before he could check that his money was still safely hidden the captain returned with his lads who removed the bath.

'And I'm thinking you'll be feeling better for that,' the

captain said, a note of satisfaction in his voice. 'Now for some breakfast.'

As soon as Rory began to eat he noticed the roll of the ship. They must be well out to sea by now and just the thought of it turned his stomach, added to which the captain slurping, slopping his tea and eating a huge plateful of greasy bacon and eggs made him retch.

'Now, we'll have none of that, me boy. The way to learn to be a good sailor is to fill your stomach to hold it down.' He laughed noisily. 'We'll go up on deck and the air will get you accustomed to the sea's movement, so it will.'

Strong tea helped down some of the food he was encouraged to eat, and then with unsteady feet he was helped up the ladder to the deck. To his dismay he was surrounded by choppy water, and his head ached too much to be able to see where the captain was pointing.

'The north Irish coast away aft,' he explained. 'Say goodbye to your mother country for you'll not see it again for a while, I'm thinking.'

Rory gripped the deck rail, trying not to show the longing he felt for his country. He was trapped, and had the feeling that this voyage was going to be worse than any spell in prison. Oh, fool, he reproached himself, to have escaped only to end up in a worse predicament. He knew he hadn't murdered the English soldiers that night, but he didn't have any proof of his innocence, and no one wanted to believe him.

Out in the North Atlantic the sea was much rougher, but there were only a few clouds scudding across the sky, and when the midday sun shone through it was warm, strengthening with the coming of spring.

The *Kilsheelagh's* first mate appeared to be the one mostly in command keeping the deck hands and crew busy while the captain ate, drank and slept for much of the time. As yet Rory's bruises were too painful to be able to work, but he wished that he could be one of the hands rather than being constantly monopolized by the captain. During the late evening, after he'd slept up on deck for a couple of hours, the captain took him down to his cabin. A steward was waiting to serve dinner and Rory was able to face food

with more appetite. There was red wine, which he was pressed to drink a great deal of and this was followed by strong black coffee and rum. The cabin started revolving, pain settled in Rory's chest and abdomen and before long he was violently sick. It continued all night, and for the next twenty-four hours he lay on one of the two bunks in the captain's cabin, wishing that he could die. Towards evening on the second day the captain gave him some made-up potion, and after a more restful sleep Rory woke feeling better. The captain was sitting at his desk writing in his log book. He glanced up and noticed that Rory was awake.

'A-ah! So you've come back to us, me laddo.' He set aside his pen on a most handsome inkstand and dragged his chair across the floor close to the bunk. 'Are you feeling better?'

Rory nodded. 'Yes, thank goodness. Captain, you've been very kind. I should be working my passage.'

'Time enough for that. Now, lad, what's your name?'

Rory hesitated, and fear enveloped him again. If he gave his real name the captain could turn him over to the police on either side of the Atlantic. 'Come on, lad. 'Tis my guess you're on the run from the police, and - ' he leaned forward to speak in a conspiratorial tone, 'I usually picks up me crew that way. I know what it's like, I was young once in Ireland - ah, 'tis a troubled country so 'tis, and even when you fight for what's right they stick you in gaol and forget all about you.'

'I got picked up for killing English soldiers, but I didn't do it,' Rory said anxiously. 'I couldn't see how I could prove that though, so I escaped from prison. I got to my brother's house in Dublin, frightened his wife when she came to hang washing in the cellar where I was hiding, and she lost her baby.' Rory paused; the memory of that fateful day had haunted him cruelly. He went on to tell the captain how his family had helped him escape in a beer barrel. 'My brother, Danny, is carter for the brewery. It seemed a crazy idea, but I got away with it. I soon spent the money he'd given me though, so I slept rough with the tramps and stole food except when I sneaked into the queue at the soup kitchens. That's one thing about the Salvation Army, they

feed everyone and never ask questions. I got a job on one of the graving docks in Liverpool for a few days, but when I saw a poster showing my picture and saying I was wanted for murder I knew I had to keep moving.'

'I guessed it was you, Rory Riordan,' the captain said slyly. 'I'm well used to me fellow Irishmen looking to stow away. I saw you among the crates, and I recognized you from the posters. What are your plans?'

Rory gave a helpless laugh. 'I don't have any. I courted a girl at the Sunlight factory where I worked as a carter, but it was time to move on, and her Dad'll be looking for me. I'd decided to try to get back to Ireland. I hate the sea and I never thought of going to any foreign country.'

The captain punched Rory's shoulder in a friendly gesture. 'Then 'twas lucky I espied you. Now, laddo, it so happens that I lost one of me crew overboard during a storm a trip or two back. He was about your age – what are you, lad, around twenty?'

'A bit more'n that, I'll be twenty-three in November.'

'You'll pass for twenty, and you can forget your name and everything, 'cos from now on you'll be Mick Casey – that's if you'll be sensible.' The Captain's expression changed and his voice was low. Rory saw the lustful look in his small glinting eyes and he felt unease increase to fear.

'You wouldn't deny an old man, a fellow Irishman, a few favours now would you, lad?' he pleaded with a leer. 'No need for you to do any heavy work. I'll see to it that you get the light jobs.'

'I . . . I'd rather – '

'You'll soon get used to it, Mick lad. Probably are already if you've been inside. No women in prison any more than aboard ship, so we have to take our pleasures where we can find them.' The captain stood up and unbuckled his leather belt, winding it round his hand, the buckle swinging.

'Got some good French brandy,' he said, 'just the thing to put us in the right frame of mind.'

'But . . . but, I'm not like that,' Rory began, and swung his legs over the side of the bunk gathering the blanket round him for protection.

The captain's laugh was horrifying as he brought the

buckle end of his belt whizzing round Rory's head. Rory tried to outmove his assailant round the cabin to the door but the Captain was a practised attacker, and knew how to stalk his already weakened victim . . .

Clamped in the captain's arms in a vice-like grip from which there was no escape, the breath being savagely expelled from his lungs with each scream as what felt like a burning rod tore into his rectum, Rory's mind seemed to float away, completely severed from his abused body.

An hour later, while the captain lay on his bunk snoring loudly Rory picked himself up from the floor where the seduction had taken place. He was bleeding badly, and his body ached all over. He cursed anyone who was listening for letting him be enticed into a worse hell than the past four months had been. He stood over the sleeping captain swearing vengeance, wishing he had a knife to pierce the devil's heart, but he hadn't the strength or courage to do it.

There was water and soap in a corner of the cabin and he did his best to clean himself before dressing. He was almost too weak to get up on the top bunk, but that was his only refuge as the cabin door was securely locked, and he had no will power left to search for the key. Everything in the cabin was tainted by filth different from anything Rory had ever known. Prison had been bad enough for a boy who'd had a gentle, kind mother, and a decent enough father when he wasn't drunk. He'd been used to a comfortable bed at night, and the cottage was always warm and clean. Prison had seemed sordid by comparison, but this was an unparalleled experience. He took a swig of brandy before climbing up onto the top bunk; at first he couldn't even rest comfortably, then just as he began to doze from sheer exhaustion he heard the chink of a key being placed in the lock from outside. Rory's heart hammered against the wall of his chest with fright. What was going to happen to him now? Was there another sadist aboard who was going to expect his services? He held his breath as best he could and watched as a dim light filtered through a crack in the door. The crack slowly widened, the light remained

in the distance but sufficient to silhouette the large figure of the first mate as he tiptoed forward a step or two.

'Ssssh . . .' he hissed. 'You all right, lad?'

Rory's frightened voice could only make a low moan which was almost drowned by the captain's snores.

'I'm not going to hurt you, lad, I've come to take you below to the crew's quarters where you'll be safe till morning. Can you get down off the bunk without help?'

Rory hesitated, but the voice seemed friendly enough. Nothing could be worse than what he'd already endured, so he silently slid over the side. He was light, and although movement was painful he was able to reach the door without making any sound.

Rory followed the first mate below where some of the crew were lying on sacks on the floor, covered by blankets. The first mate held up his lantern, looking for a space.

'You'll be all right here, lad. Tomorrow I'll put you to work, it's the only way.'

Someone in the corner stirred. 'There's room over here by me.'

The first mate pointed to where the whispered voice had come from. 'Billy's a nice lad, he'll look after you,' he said sympathetically.

Rory picked his way between the bodies on the floor, most of them too tired to stir at the intrusion. But when he reached Billy's corner he felt apprehensive as he was invited to share the other boy's sacking.

'You looked sickly enough when you came aboard, bet you feel a darned sight worse now,' the boy said in a low voice.

Billy Sutcliffe looked about the same age as Rory. They huddled together while in whispered voices they exchanged some details about themselves.

'I ran away from home,' Billy said. 'This is my fourth trip. Once the captain's had you a few times he gets tired. The thing to do is to ply him with drink. You'll have to be his steward for the rest of this trip. Mix his drink, that'll knock him out, then he doesn't know next day whether he did or not, so you have to humour him.'

'How can you put up with it?' Rory asked in amazement.

'The first mate's good and looks after us well, but when I get ashore this time I'm off. Going to make me way down to Yankee land to try to find me Dad.'

Rory confided in his new found friend, but he sensed that Billy was shocked by his story.

'I didn't kill anyone, honest,' he insisted. 'Prison was awful, but the captain of this ship is worse. He says I'm to take Mick Casey's identity. Promised me his papers.'

'Ah - poor old Mick.'

'What happened? Captain said he was lost overboard.'

'That's right enough, but he jumped. He just couldn't take the captain's treatment. Better try to sleep now as it'll soon be first light.'

Rory felt there was some security being among the rest of the crew, about twenty of them in all, some of them on bunks, the younger ones on the floor. There was little ventilation, no sanitation, and the stench was nauseating, but Rory was just thankful to be out of the captain's cabin. No sooner had he drifted into a troubled sleep than a voice woke him with a start.

'Mick Casey! Bring water to my cabin, laddo, at once!' the captain ordered.

Chapter 2

Abuse was heaped upon abuse, and several times Rory was nearly driven to doing the same as Mick Casey had done, when the captain wasn't threatening to throw him overboard if he didn't do as he commanded. Rory counted the days, and even prayed for a calm and safe passage to Quebec, the *Kilsheelagh's* destination. They ran into a fierce storm off the coast of Newfoundland which thankfully spared Rory the captain's advances, and afterwards Rory spiked his drinks to such a degree that the captain remained too intoxicated to take command of his own ship.

'He'll drink himself to death,' the first mate told Rory as they progressed up the St Lawrence river. 'Or die of some terrible disease, that's if no one sticks a knife into him first.'

'I would meself if I wasn't - '

'Already wanted by the law?' The first mate grinned knowingly. 'That's what keeps him safe, Mick. He has us all by the tail, the *bastard*.'

'Don't know whether I'll ever get used to being called Mick Casey. I hope the captain will give me the papers he promised me.'

The first mate laughed. 'He won't hand those over, Mick, not if he comes round, but if he asks me to pay off the crew I'll get them out of his safe. I know they're there 'cos he showed me. Pretty unusual for any member of this crew to have legal papers, but Mick Casey hadn't been in any trouble. His mother died of a fever and he got turned out of the big house where she worked. He was a sick boy anyway. Drowning for him was a blessed relief. At least you won't be wanted by the law if you take on his identity. He had all the papers to go on a proper immigration ship, but our captain got to him first. There's relatives somewhere on the west coast of Canada. Find them, Mick, and you could do all right for yourself.'

Docking was a hazardous business, but Rory was so relieved to see land that he worked hard, and even thought he might like to become a docker except for the fact that he wanted to get right away from the *Kilsheelagh* and her captain. The rest of the crew were in good heart too, and Rory was complimented on having 'done for' the captain, as he remained on his bunk, unwashed, and obviously feeling too ill even to smoke his stinking old pipe.

At last they were able to go ashore, and when Rory reach the table up on deck where the first mate was paying off the crew he said in a low voice: 'Make good use of your earnings, Mick, and remember you're a guest in a strange country. Canada will be good to you if you go straight - Mick Casey was as honest as the day is long. Don't make me regret stealing his papers for you.'

Billy was waiting for him at the foot of the gangplank. 'We've got enough for a night's lodging in a decent bed,' he said, 'and then I shall spend the rest on me train fare as far into America as I can get.'

'But supposing you can't get work?'

'I'll take me chances. I've managed to save a few bob from the trips on that hell-hole. What are you going to do, Mick?'

'Get away from here as fast as I can, that's for sure.'

'Then come with me, Mick. When we find me Dad he'll see us all right. We can start a new life.'

'Mick Casey was going to visit relatives in Canada. The first mate advised me to do the same. Might do meself a bit o' good for once. I've got papers, letter, even a birth certificate. I'd like to go with you, Billy, but I think the first mate was right - Mick Casey ought to visit his folks, and they're over on the west coast, British Columbia they call it.'

'That's a long way, Mick. My father's down in Boston. You could work there with me for a bit and save up enough money to travel by train all the way to Vancouver.'

Rory thought this over; the offer *was* attractive, but so was the thought of having an adopted family. He decided to wait till morning before committing himself. They trudged along side by side until they came to the lower part of the town of Quebec on the north bank of the St Lawrence. In spite of his sore body Rory began to feel an upsurge of excitement as they explored the steep winding streets and cobbled squares with their old buildings.

'We should find a boarding house on the outskirts of the city,' Billy said. 'We must keep away from the harbour. If the captain comes out of his drunken stupor he'll like as not come looking for us - you anyway, when he realizes you damn near poisoned him.'

Rory laughed. 'I think he's going to feel pretty sick until it's time to cast off again. I made sure of that, but he's a tough old divil, and he'll be mad as hell to think I've got Mick's papers. The first mate was all right - won't the captain be wild with him?'

Billy laid a hand on Rory's arm. 'That's not your worry, Mick. Captain can't do without his first mate so I don't think you need to concern yourself about him.'

'How ever did you manage to stick it for four trips?' Rory asked.

'S'pose I was lucky. The first trip was in dreadful