

THE LOST CHILD.

On a wet November afternoon John Dwyer paced the headland of his six-acre potato-field, his hands in his pockets, his head bent to the rainstorm. A wire-haired Irish terrier trotted patiently beside him, shivering and uncomfortable under the rain; looking up now and again in her master's face with eyes that seemed to sympathize, as though she might be the recipient of all his troubles, while the man went on dogged and unheeding.

And sure it was no wonder at all that he should have the gloom heavy in him to-day. This black year, a bad one for all the farmers, when the rainfall had been heavier than any year since '68, had weighed doubly heavy on him. He had little capital at his command, and the tide of emigration, flowing steadily on for years, bleeding the country slowly but surely to death, had made labor scarce and dear. With John Dwyer, who could ill-afford in these hard times to keep a couple of men, the work had since the spring lagged behind for want of helping hands. And now his fine field of potatoes, to which he had been looking forward in a great measure to pay his half year's rent, was stricken with the blight.

He had not realized how bad the blight was until to-day; for week after week had gone by, and he was too busy with other things trying to get his hay safely ricked, his corn threshed and housed; whilst the land was so rained out that he could not hope to get the potatoes cleanly out of the ground till a dry time should set in. And now, late in the fall of the year, the dry time had not yet come, and John Dwyer looked askance at his blackened potato drills, doubting whether it would pay him now to take them out at all, even to feed the pigs.

As he stood there pondering, the dog, which had been so patient hitherto, began to whine and shiver, and to jump up with her muddy paws on her master's knees, as if begging him to return.

"Ay, Sheila, old girl," he said, at last taking notice of her, and turning for home, "we're getting the worst of it out here in the cowl and the rain, you and I. Sorra bit o' good can we do here to-day, and I suppose we may as well go back the way we came, whether we're wanted at home or no!" he added, with a touch of bitterness.

Sheila only blinked her eyes in answer to this last remark, knowing better perhaps, than to agree with her, and took the homeward way cheerfully enough.

John Dwyer was a big black-looking fellow of about five-and-thirty, with a few little flecks of white beginning to show in his dark curly hair. His eyes were of a grey-blue color, flashing like steel under the thick black brows which gave him such a fierce look at times. Not that he was in the least fierce in his normal state, for as Sheila could tell, were she able to talk, there was a not unkindly nature behind those dark eyes, although many a small child shrank close to its mother, in hiding, when it happened to encounter their gaze.

But as the neighbors often said, John Dwyer was "a quare-humored sort of man he times, and dark (i.e. secretive) more betoken." Perhaps his mother had been to blame for this; for ever since her husband died, leaving the little two-year-old boy behind him, the fond mother had spoiled and petted him, allowing him his own way in everything, whether for good or evil, till the neighbors shook their heads ominously, prophesying all sorts of evil to come of it.

The wonder was, after all, that he had turned out so well, considering his upbringing. Nevertheless, the spoilt boy grew into a spoilt man, petulant, jealous, impatient of the slightest obstacle which came in the pathway of his desires. A little while before his mother died, he had married a pretty, fair-haired gentle creature, who promised from the start to out-do even his mother in the spoiling of him. Mollie Dwyer had not a thought in the world beyond her husband's happiness and comfort, daily denying herself some small delicacy that she might save it for him, who needed it less. If he had a cold, a headache, or the most trifling ailment she nursed and petted and coddled him, till he began to fancy ten times worse than he really was. The first pullet's egg in the winter, when days were damp and cold and the hens refused to lay except in the most spasmodic fashion, was jealously laid by for him. The fattest of Mollie's chickens was killed for his dinner, or boiled down to make a chicken-jelly for him when his wife took it into her simple head that he "wasn't lookin' too well at all." The creamy top of the milk was always went first into his cup of tea. And John, though not originally a selfish man, soon grew to look upon all these little attentions as his natural right and only what was due to him; nor did it strike him as

anything to be especially thankful for that he should find all his wishes gratified even before he had had time to give expression to them.

Seven years of happy married life passed by, bringing neither great sorrow nor great joy. They had no children to make or mar their happiness, and neither John nor his wife had any near relatives to divide their affections or come between them. They seemed perfectly content with their loneliness.

But one sunny summer morning, after an anxious night, when John Dwyer had paced up and down his hay-yard from sunset until dawn, or stood listening, with beating heart and a troubled face and footsteps of someone coming to look for him, a new little life came into theirs.

He found himself at last in his wife's room, stealing on tip-toe to the bedside, hushed and awe-stricken at this new wonder, and thanking God that she was safe. For, after all, she, with her dear eyes shining with a new happiness and love, was the dearest thing on earth to him, and with a thankful heart he stooped down and kissed the pale sweet face. The little pink bundle lying beside her, which she gazed at so fondly, and so proudly called "our son," was a very secondary consideration with him, and at the present moment was more to him an object of alarm than anything else. In all the quiet years of his married life he had never felt the want of a child, and now that it had come he was not so certain that it gave him any pleasure, though, to be sure, he felt proud in an abstract sort of way to have a son to inherit the farm. But he thought he would rather have had a little daughter; somehow he had looked forward to its being a girl, and now he, who had always been the spoiled darling of his womenkind, felt that this sturdy little member of his own sex might prove something of an interloper.

Not that he felt this all at once. The feeling grew gradually on him, and became more troublesome as the little boy grew strong and insistent about his rights, taking up the greater part of his mother's time and attention, and leaving very little at the disposal of his hitherto all-important father. Certainly kind-hearted Mollie never meant to neglect her husband in the least; but try as she would, she could not overtake everything, and naturally the baby was not the one to suffer. So now it sometimes happened that when John came in from his day's work in the fields, cold and hungry, he found himself for the moment forgotten; no armchair drawn to the fire, no slippers put to warm in the fender for him as of old, no dry warm coat ready to replace the wet one. Perhaps sometimes, as to-night, he would come in unawares, and find the baby lying on his blanket before the fire, his wife bending over it, talking foolish fond baby-talk, in delight, catching his tiny fingers in her curls and tugging at them.

To-night poor Mollie jumped up with a guilty feeling, as she turned round suddenly and saw her husband with a frown on his face. She had not thought it was so late, or rather had not expected his return so early. No table set for his supper, nothing put in readiness for him, as if his existence were completely forgotten, and these two perfectly happy without him! By-and-by when he should want to talk to her, and tell her all his troubles as of old, he felt she would only give him half her attention. He knew now, no matter how much she sympathized with him or how patiently she heard him, that she had one ear listening all the time for the baby crying in his cot upstairs, and the knowledge irritated him.

As he turned to put on a dry coat, he was filled with a deeper sense of injury when he found nearly all the buttons were missing from it. He cast a reproachful glance at his wife, who was getting the supper ready, while the baby still rolled and kicked on the floor. Then he went to the little wooden box in which Mollie kept her needles and thread, and proceeded to sew on the buttons himself.

ing what he was after. "Can't you 'Now, darling," cried Mollie, see-wait a wee-bit an' let me do that for you while ye're atin' your supper?"

"Don't you bother your head about me," he answered in a sulky tone, which showed Mollie the deep disgrace into which she had fallen.

"It's about time, I daresay, that I took to looking after myself. I'm all right."

Thereupon he took the first needle that came to his hand, which hap-

pened to be a darnin' one, and after many vain efforts succeeded at last in filling it, to Mollie's horror, with white thread. Next he unbuttoned a black button several sizes too small for his purpose, and proceeded without the aid of a thimble to sew it laboriously on the coat. He put the thread through once, twice, a third time, but now he found that the holes were too small, or the needle too big to draw it through any more, and his further efforts only resulted in the needle sticking half an inch or so into his middle finger. He smothered an imprecation, and looked shamefully at his wife.

"Musha, ye poor foolish fellow," cried Mollie, with a laugh which somehow sounded like a sob, as she came and put her arms around him, and wiped away the big drop of blood which oozed from the pierced finger. "I'm beginning to think lately that it's not wan baby I have, but two!"

Three more years had passed, and the Dwyers still lived on at the little farm. Things had gone more prosperously with John Dwyer during those three years. His hay-crop last season had been a heavy one, and he had sold it well. Reports of the failure of the wheat crop in Russia had sent the price of corn up with a rush, and John Dwyer like a wise man had sent his wheat to market at once, getting the top price for it, instead of waiting like some of his neighbors until prices should be still higher, as was prophesied, and then having to sell it at a reduction after all.

The three years had made very little difference in John's looks, though Mollie had lost her girlish air and had grown stouter and more matronly. The little boy had thriven and flourished and was now a sturdy little man of four, with a head of tiny golden curls, and eyes that were bluer than the bluest forget-me-nots. Of course Mollie adored him, though she had grown wise enough now, and often tried to hide at least some of her affection for her son from her husband's jealous eyes. He on his part was fond enough of the child, too, and proud of him in his own undemonstrative way. Perhaps because he had been so spoilt himself, he didn't believe in spoiling his son. So that the youngster turned instinctively to his mother, as probably all little boys do, in his every trouble and want, and if his soft little child's heart longed sometimes for his father's attention and love, too, he had learned after many lessons that father very often did not want him, and so he wasn't to bother or worry him.

When little Owen was just four years old, there came a time when he felt very sad and lonely—the very loneliest little boy, he thought, that could be in the whole wide world. For his mamma was ill, very ill, he heard the people say, and he must not make a noise nor go near her room, for her head was very bad, and any noise would surely make it worse.

His mother was indeed very ill. She had gone to the gates of death to bring another life into the world, only to have it flicker out after one short hour's feeble glimmering. This time the baby was a girl, and John Dwyer's heart ached over this little dead baby as it had never yearned towards his boy. All the days that lay fretting in that darkened room, the blinds drawn to keep out the hot August sun, he wandered restlessly to and fro, neglecting his work and forgetting to throw one kind look or word to poor Owen, who was banished from his mother's room. Poor Owen felt lost altogether those days, with his mother shut away from him, and his father so gloomy and cross; and with no one to talk to except the woman, who had come in to keep house for them while mother was ill. She was an ugly old woman, and smoked a pipe when she thought no one was looking, and Owen regarded her from a distance with curiosity and a childish awe. To-day he felt more desolate than ever. It was now many days since he had seen his mother, and his father, when he saw him, hardly noticed him except to tell him not to make a noise.

Even Sheila was no good to play with these days. She had three little puppies in a potato basket in the barn, sleek fat little brown things that squealed all day, with eyes shut. Owen went in very often to look at them; but Sheila was unaccountably cross these days, too, and growled when he ventured to put his hand near the puppies.

So to-day he thought he'd go down the Cuckoo-meadow next to the wheat field and look for birds' nests.

It was long past the time for birds' nests, to be sure, that Owen didn't mind that, and even to find an empty nest would be better than nothing. He went down the pathway to the Cuckoo-meadow, where the couple of cows were grazing, and along the cart road at the side of it, where the carts used to come up laden with hay, and sheaves of corn, or sacks of potatoes, and wheat freshly threshed. There was a green grassy bank, with a thick low hedge on top and along the bank there were quantities of blue corn-flowers growing thickly. Such heaps of them! and so blue, that Owen forgot about the birds' nests, and began to gather a big bunch of them. His mother loved flowers, and often they two together had come down here to gather them, but he had never seen all those blue blossoms until to-day.

He would gather a great big bunch for her now, and when he got back perhaps his father would let him go to her room to give them to her. Owen's solemn little face brightened and he laughed gleefully at the thought. So he gathered the corn-flowers, and with them the feathery sweet-smelling cluster of tiny yellow blossoms which grew beside them, and which his mother called "Our Lady's bed-straw." Then he pulled some moon daisies and brown grasses, and a big bunch of cow-parsley—mother called it "Our Lady's lace-handkerchief!"—then some St. John's-wort with its shining leaves and yellow blossoms. He did not so much care for the look of this, and after some deliberation threw it contemptuously away.

This brought him as far as the wheat-field gate, and after gazing wistfully for some time through the bars at the golden heads swaying gently in the summer wind, he crept under the gate and got in. He pulled two or three of the golden ears, and put them in his bouquet; then he gathered a few more, and sat down and picked out the golden grain and tasted it. His eyes fell on a group of poppies farther in the corn, and he thought they would look very pretty in his bunch of flowers. He made his way down through the corn till he reached them. Such lovely poppies, Owen thought, and the whole field here was spread with them. He pulled one after another and looked down into the black heart of each and felt their soft silken caressingly with his chubby little fingers. They were just like the red satin ribbons daddy brought mammy home from the fair. Some fell to pieces as he pulled them, but he went on gathering till his little hands could hold no more. Then he began to find himself very hot.

The noon-day August sun was shining pitilessly overhead. The field of wheat, except where Owen stirred it, lay quite still now for want of a little breath of wind. He thought he would go home now, for he felt tired, and this was the hour when, if mother were well, she would be putting him to sleep for a while in the little wooden cot beside her own big bed.

He tried to go back the way he came but he had made so many twists and turns whilst gathering the poppies that he could not find the way very easily. And the wheat was so high about his ears that he could only catch a glimpse of the distant hedges, and did not know at all where the gate was that he had come in by. After a long time he at last found himself at the hedge. But alas! this was not the hedge he knew at all, and he could not see that tiresome gate anywhere!

Now, if Owen had any sense he would have kept on by the hedges till he found the gate at last, but being only a little boy, and not having any more sense than most little boys of four, he turned back into the wheat to get more quickly to the other side. But the farther he pressed on the slower his progress became. The wheat seemed to grow thicker and taller every step he took, and bow lay like a wall before him. His little hands grew tired pressing back the strong stalks; he could hardly lift his little feet any longer, so heavy did they seem. His straw hat, too, had got lost; he could not remember where; he only felt now so hot and sleepy that he could not go a step further. So Owen lay down at last in the wheat, curled one arm under his bare head, blinked his eyes lazily up at the blazing sun, and soon lay sleeping the quiet dreamless sleep of childhood.

That night there was sore trouble in John Dwyer's heart. For Owen had gone out in the forenoon, and no one had seen or heard of him since. For some time his father had taken his disappearance easily,

thinking that, childlike, he had wandered off with some of the neighbors' children, and remained with them. But as the hours passed away and night began to fall without bringing any tidings of him, cold fear took hold on John Dwyer's heart. He dared not say anything to Mollie about the boy's disappearance. Once or twice she had asked about him, and he had answered carelessly enough that the boy was all right, believing indeed at the time that he was. But now he went hurriedly from one neighbor's house to another, asking in a strange hoarse voice, that he tried hard to keep steady, if they had seen his little son anywhere. And when nine o'clock came, and brought no word of him, John Dwyer began to be at his wits' end.

He saddled a horse and rode to the village a mile away, vaguely hoping that he might have strayed down there, went to the police station and told the sergeant of his trouble, looked in at any of the shops that were yet open, questioned every one he met, to no purpose; then rode hastily home again, half-believing that he would find the child safely there before him.

But not the old woman and the couple of neighbors who had come to enquire and sympathize, had no news of him. John put his horse in the stable and went heavily upstairs to his wife's room.

"Is it you, darling?" she asked wearily. "You've been a long time away, and it's terrible lonesome I was without you. Have you had your supper? And how is my little boy? 'Tis wishing I am I was up and about and able to look after ye again. For I'm onaisy like that ye're not minding yourselves, an' I think ye're not looking too well to-night. I suppose Owen is in bed long ago?"

"Yes, alanna, he is all right," her husband answered, with an aching heart, and a face that flushed guiltily at the lie. "I'll bring him up to see you in the mornin', if ye'll be a good girl and go to sleep now. Sure you must be tired out, and it's high eleven o'clock."

"No, darling, I don't feel very tired. But you," she asked, "sure you're not going out again so late?" as she saw him moving towards the door.

"Yes," he answered heavily, "there's something wrong with the hay mare to-night, an' I'm thinking I'll want to watch her for a while. Now go asleep, and don't bother your head about me. I'll come back as soon as I can."

He went out again and began his search anew, vainly seeking around the hay-yard for the twentieth time, and bitterly upbraiding himself for his neglect of the child. He mounted the stairs to the oat-loft and opened the door and called, "Owen, Owen," into the darkness, thinking the child might have climbed up and been locked in by mistake. He went again through each dark stall of the stable, lantern in hand, fearing he might have been hurt by a kick from a horse. Then he went hopelessly out in the fields again, not knowing where to turn. Each dangerous ditch was searched by him over and over again. He looked long and fearfully into the marl hole pond in the corner of the horseshoe field, then turned away shuddering, and went down the very pathway bordered with cornflowers by which Owen had passed that morning.

Once or twice he stopped and listened; he thought he heard a child's voice crying in the darkness. But it was only the sighing night wind, growing louder and gathering as if for a storm. It was hot and sultry, and John Dwyer stood and wiped his brow as he listened again for that sound. But now another sound came, a low peal of thunder vibrating over the eastern hills, followed in a minute by a brilliant flash of lightning and another loud peal.

The black clouds gathering fast and coming quickly towards him warned John that it was time to be returning. He knew from experience that the worst thunderstorms always came from that point in the east over the sea. Not that he was the least afraid for himself; but he knew Mollie would be horribly frightened, and it would not do for him to be away from her just now. He got back not a moment too soon, for as he reached the door a vivid blue flash of fire lit up the whole wood, whilst simultaneously a loud peal of thunder crashed almost overhead, ripping and tearing the clouds and re-echoing with a sound as of artillery over the distant range of hills. Now big rain drops began to fall, and presently the clouds discharged themselves in a downpour over the thirsty land.

He found Mollie sitting up in bed, with a white, terrified face.

"Oh, thank God you're back," she cried, tremulously. "I thought you'd never come, an' I've been so frightened for you and Owen. Is he awake?"

"Now don't be exciting yourself, dear; there's no fear of us, and you've only got to mind yourself, and not catch cold by sitting up like that, without a shawl or a thing about your shoulders. I knew you'd be afraid, so I came as quickly as I could."

"An' poor little Owen," she said, shuddering as the thunder rolled again and again. "Don't you think you ought to bring him in to me? My poor lamb, he'll be terrified in there by himself."

John did not know what to say. "Oh! bring him in, bring him in!" she cried again, seeing his hesitation. "It can't be bad for me to have him now, surely."

"Well," he said, "if he is awake I will," and he turned to go, hating himself in his heart for the part he had to play. For a moment he was tempted to tell her the truth. He came back in a few minutes.

"He is fast asleep, dear"—one lie more or less this night did not matter, he told himself—"and it would be a pity to waken him. In any case, I think the worst of it is over now. In the morning," he repeated, with a fervent "Please God" to himself, "I'll bring him to you, and you can keep him as long as you like."

He sat by the bedside holding his wife's hand and talking to her as cheerfully as his heavy heart would allow him, till at last the storm was over and the rain ceased, and the first faint flush of the summer dawn appeared in the sky. He stood up then and went wearily from the room, saying he must go and look at the sick beast again. As he went down the narrow stairs, he heard something beating and crying at the door below.

"Can it be the child?" he asked himself, with a catch at his heart, and hurried down to open the door, to meet with but another disappointment.

For it was only Sheila, who had torn herself away at last from her puppies. She leapt on him, barking and yelping with noisy excitement.

"Down, Sheila, down!" he cried, irritably.

But the dog ran backwards and forwards, shivering and crying, as she jumped up again insistently, as though begging him to come with her. John Dwyer understood at last and with a glimmer of hope he followed her.

Out through the farm-yard, across the hay-yard, down again along the rough cart-road he had traversed a few hours before, the dog went, still giving little short yelps of excitement and wagging her tail gladly as she looked back at the man following. She jumped through the red bars of the wheat-field gate, and bounded into the midst of the wheat, leaping madly over the tall corn-stalks, now drenched and broken and tossed by the storm. At last she stopped, and John Dwyer following close behind, knew by the quick wagging of her tail, alone visible above the sheafs, that she had found what she looked for.

His eyes fell on something which filled him at once with a fearful joy and dread. Here was his Owen, his own little son, lying cold and drenched amidst the wheat—dead perhaps—a broken crushed little flower like one of the withered blossoms he still held tightly in his wee cold hands.

Dead! Ah no! thank God! The blue eyes opened wearily, swollen and tear-stained, as Sheila's warm little tongue frantically licked the pale face. Not dead, thank God, as the father lifted him in his arms and folded him tenderly to his breast, whilst hot tears of love and joy, of shame and repentance, fell thickly on the little boy's face. John Dwyer thanked God again and again that his little son, this dear precious gift for which he had never really thanked Him before, was spared to him.

Not dead, but very ill poor Owen proved to be. God alone knows what terrors and torture the lost little child had suffered that day and night, when the terrifying storm had come, and the weary little feet and tired brain could no longer try to find the way!

But when he came out of the fever, his mother's arms were round him, and her cool soft cheek lay by his. And his daddy's eyes looked down at him with a love and tenderness that Owen had never seen in them before. From that day on there was no more loving and devoted father in all the country round than John Dwyer proved to be. And Owen, riding gaily on the seat of the mowing machine as his father reaped the corn, or swung high on his shoulder as he went home from work in the evening, was the happiest child in the world.—Nora Tynan O'Mahoney, in Donagoe's Magazine.