

The Storyteller.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TESSIE.

THE strand at Kilfaroge is a fine one, broad and level, and, like the bay, of a horseshoe shape. On a bright September morning it presented a very lovely scene, for Kilfaroge had lately bloomed into a fashionable watering place. It is true that the accommodation was not of the most luxurious, for the natives were poor, and that amusements, save those derived from Nature's great theatre, were of the most limited, for the same reason. Indeed, these simple fisher-folk would have only stared at you in wonder had you hinted that you found the place rather dull.

My cousin, Meg, and I, being simple-minded girls, were at one with the natives on this point. We asked no greater pleasure than that which the wild Western ocean and the scarcely less wild Western mainland afforded. And when, now and again, we yearned for less æsthetic enjoyments, it sufficed for us to loiter by the sea wall and study humanity as represented on the beach or the promenade.

We sat on the one seat available on the strand—a massive beam of wood, part of the cargo of some hapless ship which the pitiless sea had sucked into its bosom. One wondered at the giant strength which had borne it—so stout and heavy—ashore. Now it lay, half embedded in the sand, presenting an immovable front to the fury of the incoming tide, which dashed against it with as little effect as if it were some sturdy rock, whose base, thick and solid, stretched a hundred feet below the water's surface.

We amused ourselves with watching the evolutions of the bathers, sometimes not a little laughable, and observing those coming to and from the bathing boxes.

'Do look at this lady coming towards us, Kitty,' whispered Meg presently. 'No, not that one, the one with the little girl. Is she not pretty?'

A tall, fair-faced young woman in widow's raiment, leading by the hand a pretty, flaxen-haired child, was approaching. They passed on to the bathing boxes, and after some time we saw the little one borne out to her dip, while the mother looked on from the strand.

By and bye the child reappeared fresh and rosy, and we heard the lady say:

'Now, Tessie, you must be very good while I am bathing.' Then turning to the old woman who was the keeper of the bathing box she said: 'You will look after her, Joanie?'

'Indeed, then, I will, ma'am. Sure the little angel will be all right digging away there in the sand.'

We observed the child's movements for a little while, but presently some newcomers diverted our attention, putting her entirely out of our minds.

We were about going away when we noticed some commotion near Joanie's domains. Several women and girls were gathered around that worthy personage, who was talking and gestulating excitedly. The fair-faced lady, her face white and frightened, broke away from her impatiently as we drew near, and ran wildly towards the water. In a moment we grasped the cause of the excitement. Her little girl had disappeared!

I shall not attempt to describe the scene that followed. Everyone in Kilfaroge seemed immediately to be aware of what had happened. Everyone in Kilfaroge was on the strand looking in vain for a flaxen-haired child dressed in a pink frock. But the time sped, and no one found her. The distracted mother, possessed with the idea that she had slipped unnoticed into the water, ran up to her waist into the sea, wildly searching for her beneath the waves. Of course, it was ridiculous to think that she could have drowned with such a number of people about, but the mother could not be convinced of that. Her fears pointed to the worst, and to allay them several boats were got out, but no trace of the child was found. Then someone suggested that the little one might have gone back to their lodge. Everyone felt immediately relieved. Of course, that was it. Why had they not thought of it before? And while the mother, hope springing up in her breast, sped to see if it was really so, the crowd laughed at her fears and at their own.

But she was not long away, and her face was paler now than before. No, the child had not been to the lodge, and again the wild search began, to end as the previous one, in failure.

People began to look at each other strangely. It was plain the child had disappeared as completely and as mysteriously as if the sand had opened out and drawn her down into its soft, deadly bosom. It transpired that Meg and I were the last that had seen her. Joanie, thinking her quite safe had not noticed her at all. It was such a queer thing!

At last the search was given up as hopeless, and the matter given into the hands of the police. The poor young mother, all hope dead, gave vent to her distraction in a fit of piteous wailing. Though many turned to comfort her, we soon learned that she had no friends in Kilfaroge, that she was a Mrs. MacMahon, whose husband had but lately died, and that the child was her only one. Seeing that her grief would completely overwhelm her if left to herself, Meg and I constituted ourselves her friends, and insisted on bringing her with us to our lodge, where we did our best to cheer and comfort her. But though a vigorous search was made by the police, no trace of the child was found that day nor any succeeding day. But for our companionship—for we would not let Mrs. MacMahon go—I am sure the poor young thing must have lost her senses. As it was her distress was terrible to witness, and when at last the police desisted from the inquiry as hopeless, it burst forth in a passionate tide, which we thought it wise not to restrain. Poor Emily! when it was spent she was like a child, so quiet and passive. Meg and I did our utmost to rouse her, and after a while succeeded. Then her gratitude was excessive; for though charity

prompted our action at first, after a day or two it became a labor of love to minister to the poor stricken creature, whose gentle nature showed even through this weary time. She, on her part, conceived a great affection for both of us, and was most pleased, as we were to learn that we lived in the same locality as herself.

When at length she returned to her own lonely abode in Cecil street, I accompanied her. Thus she became our dearest friend, and if, as she often gratefully reminded us, we were sent to her by God in her hour of sorrow, so she was given us by Him as an addition to our happiness.

II.

In a low shieling, within a mile of Kilfaroge and the sea, sat a sad-faced woman gazing vacantly at the grey hills which rose sheer and cold not a dozen yards before her. Pale and wan and care-worn; she looked old, though her age could not have been above 30, perhaps not so much; her hair, brown and thick and luxuriant, was here and there sprinkled with grey; her eyes, of a liquid colorless hue, were entirely devoid of light or fire; her hands, thin and worn, were clasped listlessly upon her lap; in fact, her whole appearance bespoke a deep and habitual spirit of dejection which was most disheartening to behold.

Her surroundings were even more suggestive of this spirit than herself, if that were possible. There was nothing of comfort within the four mud walls of the cabin. The few necessary articles of furniture and the cooking utensils were of the poorest. The earthen floor was rugged and uneven, the walls were rude and grimy, and but a single sod of turf smouldered among the ashes on the hearth. A tiny window, no bigger than a skylight, discovered all too clearly the cheerlessness of the humble abode.

Outside the prospect was scarcely more inviting. It was composed of a small valley, so small as to be almost a glen, shut in on every side by steep hills and containing no human habitation save the rude hovel we have been describing. A wild, lonely place it was, as lonely as if the nearest village were a dozen miles away, yet Kilfaroge nestled beyond that southern hill. But the health and pleasure-seekers there knew nought of this little nook in the hills, the cliffs and the shore alone had charms for them, and Winnie's domain was shut in as much from these as from the town. Thus it was that the sad-faced young woman and her history were known but to a few fishermen and their families, who had been her friends in happier days—the days before Tade, her husband, died of fever, and while yet her little Nonie lived. Now, when they saw her coming down the hill of a Sunday on her way to Mass, they only shook their heads and smiled pityingly. For it was well known among their little circle that poor Winnie was 'touched.' The death of her husband and her only child had been too much for her, and what with her utter friendlessness—she had no relations—and the loneliness in which she lived, her grief had told on her poor weak head, and now she saw things through strange lights. And yet on every point save one she was almost as sane as anybody else. Her Nonie, her rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed darling of two summers, had not died—no, she had been taken away by the 'Good People.' They had envied her her happiness and had snatched her darling from her—her darling, who was now the brightest of all their fairy band.

Sometimes Winnie had hopes. It was possible—Maureen, the knowledgeable woman in the mountains had told her so—that her darling might some time, somehow, be restored to her. Such an event was very rare she knew. Yet it was possible, and often, when the sun was sinking behind the western hills, she sat at her cabin door and watched the path which led towards the Rath—the path also to Kiltaroge—lest her darling should come to her unseen.

Her thoughts ever on the subject, pressed on her mind with such force this evening that she gave them vent in words.

'An' do ye think of yer poor mother at all, asthoreen, when yer dancin' an' singin' an' all covered with flowers? yer poor mother that pines for ye, an' longs for ye?'

She sprang to her feet, and gazed with distended eyes towards the hill, on the summit of which the figure of a child was visible. Was it her darling returning from fairyland?

But she must not issue forth to make sure, for Maureen had said that she must not go to meet the child, but let her walk in of her own accord.

With a wildly-beating heart she waited. Shawn, the old grey dog, her one friend, roused by her excited exclamations, walked soberly out to discover what had caused them. No sooner did he catch sight of the little figure standing irresolute on the slope than he wagged his shaggy tail and bounded up the hill, barking joyously, to Winnie's intense delight for it seemed confirmation of her hopes. She saw the child stoop down to caress him, then follow him quickly down the path. Now they were near enough to see whether the child was her Nonie or not. Yes, it was a flaxen-haired, fair-faced little girl that approached, only taller and healthier looking than the Nonie of 14 months ago. And how prettily she was dressed. Surely the fairies had been kind to her to clothe her in that lovely pink frock. Oh, would she never, never, reach the cabin that she might clasp her to her heart and cover her face with kisses! But at last, led by the faithful Shawn, she stands on the threshold and glances timidly around. There are traces of tears upon her face, and her blue eyes are red as if with weeping. With a great cry of joy Winnie starts forward and clasps her in her arms, half smothering the child with her wild caresses.

'I have ye at last, Nonie,' she crooned.

The child stared at her bewilderedly.

'Me not Nonie, me Tessie,' she said. 'Me want to go home to mother.'

Winnie laughed happily.

'Listen to the crathur! an' they changed yer name, did they? No wonder ye wouldn't know yer own mother, alanna, for she wouldn't know ye, only for the signs an' tokens, ye are that