

Irish Review (Dublin)

The Cuckoo Lamb

Author(s): M. A. Rathkyle

Source: *The Irish Review (Dublin)*, Vol. 3, No. 26 (Apr., 1913), pp. 70-81

Published by: [Irish Review \(Dublin\)](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30063715>

Accessed: 14/06/2014 09:07

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Irish Review (Dublin) is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Irish Review (Dublin)*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE CUCKOO LAMB

By M. A. RATHKYLE

Author of "Farewell to Garrymore."

IT was a small thatched farm-house about fifty yards from the road, with two windows at one side of the door and one at the other. At the end of the barn, which was a continuation of the house, ran a bright little stream, whispering over the pebbles, then gurgling into the little bridge or gullet through which it passed under the road. A little boy in a brown linsey frock sat watching the running water. The walls sheltered him from the bitter east wind, and reflected the hot sun, for it was a day early in March. He was five years old, but no taller than a child of three, the finely arched head was wonderfully small, and all his bones were like those of a little bird. The dark grey eyes, very soft and bright, though they seemed intent on the water, took note of everything that moved. His mother, coming out of the kitchen, smiled on him and said :

"Well, aroon, the water isn't all run away yet."

She then threw a white cloth on the roof, which was a signal that the dinner was ready. Her husband, James Mooney, a tall, thin man of sixty, soon came in from the field, followed by the eldest son, Mike, with a pair of horses. The father put down a bill-hook, saying over his shoulder, as he took the child by the hand :

"See, Mike, that you give a betther bit to your Uncle Martin's horse than to our own."

There were twenty-five years between the brothers, and more in looks, for Mike's dark and rather heavy face was older than his years. James seemed to have neither eyes nor ears for anything but the child; he kept him on his knee and fed him with little bits of potato and butter, talking to him in a quaint, confidential way :

"I think you an' me will borra Mrs. Hennessy's ass an' car some fine mornin' an' go off for the day to Aunt Polly's. It's there you'll see the river; this is no more to it than what you'd pour out of the tay-pot. And Mr. Smith's mill an' all."

"Will we go next week?" asked the child.

"Well, maybe we'll wait till the days are long, when the apples are in blossom. Polly has a show of them."

"When will the days be long, father?"

"Maybe in the month of May," said James. Stephen looked up with glowing eyes and parted lips, trying to bring something back from the long past, then said slowly, "the Maybush."

"Sure enough," answered the father. "Some day afther you make the May bush. See how he remembers of it!"

THE CUCKOO LAMB

The child then fell into meditation, and the father applied himself to his own dinner. Mike took the opportunity of saying :

"Tom Flaherty wants me to go to the fair along with him to-morra."

"What to do would you be goin' to the fair?" said James. "Fitter for you stick to the plough. Martin will want the horses next week, an' when I finish cuttin' the bushes I'll want you to lay 'em with me."

"Me uncle could get the horses for to-morra to plough the turnip ground."

"Aye, an' kill them goin' back an' forward for no use," said James. "While they are here you'll just have to go on with the work."

At that moment Stephen woke up from a day-dream, and said :

"Will we get Mrs. Hennessy's white ass, father?"

At that, Mike rose up and went out, very hot and angry. *Thou never gavest me a kid.*

"For all that I'll go to the fair," he said to himself. "I'll take up the horses to me uncle, an' tell him I'm going to the fair. Me father can't make a show of himself sendin' me back for 'em."

For half the afternoon he kept in this mind, then the habit of a lifetime fell on him again, and something from the patient creatures he followed. Like them, he was strong, and walked up and down all day at another's will. So when evening came he led the horses home. Meantime his father was hacking away at the old thorn hedge, which had grown wild and straggling. It was too late in the season for the work, but they had put it on the long finger as their way was.

About ten years before, when she was forty and her eldest son was near twenty, Ellen Mooney began to mope. She looked very ill, but said there was nothing wrong with her. Long fits of silence would be broken by a few painfully sad or bitter words. Then one day, in a wild burst of eloquence, she told them all that her soul was lost, and the sooner she quitted this life the better. With a great deal to do, James got her to go to the Parish Priest. From long experience he knew at once there was nothing for it but the Asylum, and in the end there she had to go and spend near four years. They grew poorer while she was away; everything missed her care, and the girls, being young and heedless, thought their father hard for finding fault when things were lost or mismanaged. When she came home, two sons and a daughter had gone to America, and the other girl was only waiting eagerly till they should pay her passage and she could go too.

THE IRISH REVIEW

Nearly a year after little Stephen was born, on the twenty-sixth of December. He brought his name with him, as Nancy Whelan said. He was two years old before he tried to speak or walk. He never lisped or toddled; when he could only walk two or three steps, he walked them steadily and then sat down; when he could only speak two or three words, he spoke them distinctly, exactly like a grown person. He never ran about, but walked quietly along the stream and round the pasture. When it was too wet or cold to sit by the water he would sit on the window-ledge watching the flies and the sparrows, or the branches of the ash-tree waving in the wind. He had hardly ever spoken to another child. Once or twice he approached boys going home from school, but they called him the pooka and asked in what rath he spent last night. He knew no reason why this question should offend him, but as he could not answer it, he withdrew till he should get more light.

This was lovely weather for him in his sheltered nook, but it was very bitter for his father. For near a fortnight he stood all day in the piercing wind and hot sun, with his feet in the wet dyke. He thought it no hardship; it was the sort of thing he had done all his life, and never suffered from it, but the last day or two he could hardly bear the pain and misery. As Ellen said afterwards through her tears, he just finished the job the same as if it was bespoke, and then lay down. It was the evening of the second Wednesday in March, when he came in and said, "Thank God that is finished."

Before morning he wakened in dreadful pain from internal inflammation. After three days and nights of horrid suffering, before day on Sunday morning, he fell into a quiet sleep which lasted far into the day. He woke bright and cheerful, the pain and swelling all gone, and said:

"With the help of God, I'll be all right in a day or two."

But Ellen's heart sank, for she always heard it was a bad sign to get better on a Sunday. After dinner-time the neighbours all came in one by one to see him, and he told them that it was all wind, and, please God, he would soon be out. But his voice grew very weak, and Nancy, who had sat up with Ellen the last two nights, told the people privately to stay in the kitchen and let him rest a while. About three o'clock Stephen was sitting on the bed holding his hand, Ellen sat in a chair under the window at the head of the bed, where he could not see her face, but her hand would be ever ready, while Nancy sat on the floor in a corner, gazing earnestly at the sick man, who was saying to the child:

"We'll go some day soon to Aunt Polly's."

"Will we go next week?" asked Stephen, and James began to

THE CUCKOO LAMB

answer, but something passed over his face, and he stopped. Ellen put out her hand to lift down the child, saying :

"Don't annoy your father, and he so tired with the pain."

But they clung together; and James said, "Let him stay." After a while he asked for tea, and as Ellen opened the door into the kitchen, a low but terribly distinct voice was heard to say :

"He's a dead man. When the pain went, mortification——"

The poor woman shut the door; but it was too late, he had heard. Shaken with terror and dismay, he gasped : "Oh, Lord !"

"James, alanna," said his wife, folding her arms around him. "Alanna, machree, don't say against the will of God. Sure, you're prepared to go, agra."

The storm passed as quickly as it had risen; he lay back, whispering :

"Welcome be the will of God."

"That's right, me poor man," said Ellen. "But, oh, what will we do when you go from us?"

"Take me with you, father," said the child, looking from one to the other.

"I can't, avic," said the father, in a failing voice.

"Why, father, are you too tired?"

James opened his eyes and looked at his darling, while a strange look came into his face which awed his wife, and answered in a clear, strong tone :

"I can't take you, but maybe I'll come back for you before long."

"Will you come next week?" asked Stephen; but Ellen laid her hand on the little face, saying : "Hush, alanna, lie down an' sleep beside your father."

Soon the child fell fast asleep, and the father dozed and wakened, but did not speak again. At the end of an hour Nancy rose suddenly, breathed rather than said :

"Get the habit and the blest candle"; and taking up Stephen, carried him to the kitchen and laid him on the settle. She spoke no word, but all there *knew*; and Mike rose up and went in to help his mother to put on his father the brown robe in which he was to die, to put the lighted candle in his hand, and say the prayers for the dying.

When Stephen knew that his father was gone, he wept, but not much. He missed him as he used to do when he went to a fair or to work all day with a neighbour. He watched for him in the evening as he did then, till he fell asleep and his mother carried him in to bed. She could not talk to him of his father as she would

THE IRISH REVIEW

have done, but for those words about coming back for him. He said nothing, but the loneliness in his face went to her heart. She tried to turn his thoughts to the calf and chickens, and he took great interest in them, but she felt there was always something else in his mind. Once he asked, "When will we make the May bush?"

The word brought back the remembrance of that other day, and she spoke of something else. As the weeks went on she said to herself that children always forgot, and hoped that the thought of his father's return would pass from his mind.

One day he wandered down to the road, and she saw him talking to two little boys. She checked herself for not liking this; surely it was better for him to make friends with other children. After a while he came slowly back, and as he sat on her knee, said:

"Jack Dempsey said that my father was not in Heaven, but that they put him in a big hole."

She let no sign of anger appear in voice or look, as she answered:

"That was only his poor body, honey dear."

"Then Bill said," the child went on, "that he wasn't in Heaven, or in the big hole—that he was in Purgaterry. Where is Purgaterry, mother?"

And he turned his eyes intently on her. She felt a burning anger against the two boys, but she must say nothing to raise doubt or fear.

"It's a place God Almighty has for people to rest themselves a while, till they're ready to go to Heaven," she said. He thought a while, then went on:

"When old Mrs. Hennessy said her Tom got a blow of the sun, she said New York was Purgaterry. Why did she say that mother?"

"They say there's part of it is hot, and New York is hot, too. That is all she meant," she answered carefully, after thinking a moment.

"My father always liked the warm," said he, smiling. "Will God Almighty put him in a good place?"

"I'm sure He will, aroon, for he never said against the will of God."

On the last day of April, Nancy came in with a ball of cotton and a little hawthorn-bush in her hand, saying cheerfully:

"Come, Stephen, until we make the May bush."

As he rose joyfully to follow her, his radiant eyes and the little flush on his face made his mother uneasy; she feared he might connect the words, "Some day after you make the May bush," with the promise of return. She wished she had told Nancy of this, but there were things she could not talk over, even with her,

THE CUCKOO LAMB

When they brought back the little bush, covered with bunches of cowslips, violets and primroses, and stuck it up on the bank opposite the door, he sat and looked at it till he fell asleep. He was very happy next day, sitting by the bush and looking towards the road and along the field path. He watched for days, till the leaves and flowers were withered and black, and the lonely look had deepened on his face.

On the afternoon of a wet day in the middle of May, Mike was sitting inside the door, nailing soles on his boots. Stephen was sitting in the window, looking wistfully out, when a cuckoo spoke loud and joyously from the ash tree, and he gazed earnestly in the vain attempt to see her. Then his mother said suddenly:

"Would you like to have a cuckoo lamb of your own, honey?"

"Oh, mother, I would, I would. Could I hold it in my hands?" he cried.

"To be sure you could, if you wouldn't squeeze the life out of it. They have a couple at Hennessy's. He asked me would I take one, but I said I didn't care. But I'll go up this minute for it, the rain is amost over."

When she came out of the room with her shawl and the shillings that were to pay for the lamb, Stephen was saying, "What is a cuckoo lamb like?"

Mike began a rough answer, but as he looked at his brother's face his own changed, and he answered with a half-laugh, "I believe you're one yourself."

As Ellen walked along, these words of her eldest son stuck in her mind. She flushed as if some misdeed of her own was spoken of. A cuckoo lamb is one that comes when the season is long past, and Stephen was a child born out of due time. For a moment she seemed to stand in Mike's place; all his lonely, unregarded life seemed to pass before her. She was conscious, though she had never put it into words, that she wished to rob him of his birth-right. In all her day-dreams of when Stephen was a man, he was in the old place, the owner of it. "Sure it's his own child, not his brother, he ought to be," she said to herself. "I'll not say against him if he talks of bringing in a wife another time."

Three or four years before she had turned a deaf ear when he spoke words about Kitty Murphy, and then her friends made a match for her with a man in the town, who kept a public-house. She turned hurriedly away from this subject, and tried to think how she would make up to him for any want of kindness there might have been. In about an hour she came in, saying: "I have it here, alanna."

THE IRISH REVIEW

"Oh, mother mother, shut the door, or it will fly away," cried Stephen, as she set down a very small and very dirty lamb. He started back in disgust as the little thing staggered towards him, thrusting its wet nose into his face. For the first time in his life his mother saw him angry. He raised his hand to strike; then, with a quick change, let it fall in a caress on the woolly neck, and hugged the creature to him. "See there," said Ellen, "it's twice as good as a bird that would want to fly away from you. When it is a big sheep, Mrs. Maher will spin the wool, and I'll knit stockings for you out of it."

"We'll have a pair for Mike, too," said the child. For a moment she felt a jealous pang, then answered cordially, "To be sure, we will."

Stephen's first thought every morning was to bring the lamb out of its nest in the barn, and hold the bowl of milk while it drank. When he sat looking at the water, its head was in his lap; together they walked along the stream and through the fields, or lay in the shade. The lamb grew somewhat bigger and a great deal whiter, and in its own way returned the child's love. He called it Shoogo, and talked to it just as his father used to talk to him—all the old stories and promises of going to Aunt Polly's, a place as unknown to the child as to the lamb. So for nearly two months little Stephen rested in the land of Béulah.

One day in July he came into the yard, where his mother was washing under the shade of the ash tree, and said:

"Mother, the little lamb grew very big."

Pulling off her apron as she ran, she darted out into the field, where the poor thing lay on its side terribly swollen. She bandaged it with her apron, but it was too late, in a few minutes it was dead.

When Stephen knew that Shoogo would never move again, his grief was hard to see; he did not cry aloud, but the tears fell slowly down a face worn as by the cares of a life time. Mike reproved his mother for her raining tears, saying it was not right to cry for a creature the same as if it was a Christian.

"It's not for it I'm crying," she said; "it's for him."

The days that followed were worse than those after his father's death, for the lamb had left no promise of return. His poor mother knew not what to do to divert his thoughts. To give him another living thing was only to lay bare his breast to the stroke of death. The robins and sparrows were safer to look at and admire, for when one died another came in its place, he did not know the difference; but then he could not hold them in his hands.

She took him about the fields, and told him how the corn would

THE CUCKOO LAMB

grow ripe, and all that would be done to it before it was fit for food. They found strawberries and mushrooms, and helped Mike to make the hay. When he smiled and talked of what they would do next week, she would think he was forgetting. And then he would stand, and listen, listen, whether for the call of the lamb or his father's step she dare not ask.

One day she found among the weeds, in a corner of the garden, a little chestnut tree; she showed it to him and told him how it would grow to a big tree with white blossoms, like those on the other side of the road; indeed, it came from a nut off one of them. And then she stopped, for it was James who used to gather and bring in the leaves. They pulled up the weeds from around the little tree, and put down a stake to save it from the spade, and every day he carried a little vessel of water and poured it at the root. Many times a day he went to look at it, and always found it had grown. His mother thought of what she would say when the leaves fell off, with some dim notion of the parable of it.

On the evening of the second Tuesday in August, Mike finished thatching the hayrick. When it was done he came into the kitchen, where Nancy was with his mother. She had been on a professional visit in Gorteen, and he sat down to ask her how soon the harvest would be cut up that side.

Presently Stephen came in, and leaning against his mother's knee, said :

"When the chestnut tree is a big tree, whose tree will it be, mother?"

"Yours, to be sure, honey," she answered. At that Mike started up, took his coat from behind the door, and went out with a look at his brother that shocked Nancy. She followed him, saying :

"Wait, Mike, will you give me a lock of hay to make a nest for a hen?"

"Pull it yourself," he said, half-turning.

"No, wait now, I'd rather you gave it to me yourself." When she had drawn him out of sight of the window, she said : "Why then, Mike, what call have you to be jealous of that poor child?"

"It's what I never said to man or mortal," he said, after a moment's silence. "It's not that she thinks more of him than me, but I know as well as if I was inside her that she's laid out to give him the place."

"To give the place to Stephen," said Nancy slowly. "Ah! Mike, it's a short pole will measure all the ground he'll want."

"What's that you say?" he cried, turning on her.

"What everybody knows. The day he was born I knew he'd

THE IRISH REVIEW

never comb a grey head. But it isn't that now, anyone can see the time is short. Not a bit I'd wonder any day. He's always watching for his father, God be good to him, and them often come for one their heart was set on. It was the last word the poor man said."

Mike had come out meaning to go up to Dempsey's for the evening; they had a card school there, and he knew it would vex his mother; but what matter for that, she would have her pet with her. But after thinking for a while, he went in, sat down, and said:

"The Flaherty's won't get in the hay till Thursday, an' there's no great weight of work for to-morra, I might as well yoke the mare and me an Stephen go over to me Aunt's for the day."

His mother was silent for a moment from surprise, then said:

"That is a grand plan. Do you hear, Stephen, to see Aunt Polly and all?"

"The river, and the mill, and the big wheel," said he, with shining eyes.

Then coming close to Mike, he put his hand into his, as he used to do to his father. A feeling came over the elder brother so keen that he could not bear it.

"You'd want a good sleep," he said kindly, "if you have to start the mornin' airly. You ought to put him to bed, mother."

Stephen went, but turned at the door, and came towards Mike, saying slowly, "Will we see—"; then stopped and went quietly away.

Next morning when she had washed his face till it shone, and combed the fair, brown hair, she put on him—instead of his old petticoats—a little blue suit that one of his sisters had sent from New York, and which he had never seen. She had put off from week to week the day when he would no longer be her baby. Then she set a little new white straw hat on his head, and kissed him as she lifted him into the cart.

She felt as if it would be the longest day of her life, and that she must keep working all the time. So she washed the patch-work quilt, scoured the dresser, tables and chairs, and brightened the crane and tins till they shone like silver. In the afternoon she was weeding in the garden, when the curate, who had charge of that part of the parish, rode by and called out:

"I want a word with you, if you please, Mrs. Mooney." When she stood beside his horse, he said: "You have a little boy of age for school."

"Ah, sir, he's very small and weak," she said, looking up piteously.

"Oh, you know the distance is but small," he answered kindly

THE CUCKOO LAMB

"And it will do him all the good in the world to be with other children."

"Well, sir, maybe after harvest," she answered faintly.

What more he said fell on unhearing ears. When he was gone she went and sat on the stone bench outside the door, and thought of her child going to and fro daily with the Dempseys, and with other boys maybe a great deal worse. Boys that gave impudence to their betters, fought, and killed birds, and stole eggs to buy tobacco. She went over all she knew or fancied of such doings. Her child was like no child she ever knew. And then her heart was silent before a question she dare not ask or answer. Did she wish her child was like other children?

She rose up, went in, put down the griddle and made some little cakes. She kept watching for their return, but she had ironed the quilt, milked the cow, and seen that everything was in its place, and the sun was near its setting when the cart drove up. She lifted the child down and carried him in, saying: "You're not too proud to sit on my knee, although you are dressed like a man. And what did you see, aroon?"

He answered not in sentences, but in single words spoken ecstatically—the mill, the river, the wheel, the apples. And then he took from his two little pockets two small red Eve apples, which she put on the window-sash to ripen in the sun. He drank some milk eagerly, but scarcely tasted the cakes.

"It's like you, eat too much at your Aunt's," she said.

"Why then, no," said Mike, coming in; "he scarce used anything, till she boiled a little egg and fed him like a child."

"A guinea-hen's egg," said Stephen. "They're all brown, and they're speckled, and they say 'Go back!'"

"You'll tell me all to-morra, you're tired now," said she, seeing the eyes closing.

"I will," he said, looking up at her; and she took one long, long look into his eyes, then the weary lids closed, and she took him into bed.

When Mike was starting for Flaherty's hayrick next morning he said, "Let him sleep as long as he likes, for he must be very tired."

He drank some milk without awakening, and she shaded the window, and went about her work, going in often to look at him. Mike came back in the middle of the day for a ladder, and said to let him sleep all day if he liked; but when he came home at night and went into the room, he looked very grave, and said: "It's not

THE IRISH REVIEW

like a right sleep ; you never used to hear his breath that way. I'll go for Nancy this minute."

Nancy came, put a poultice to his chest, and hot flannel to his feet, and bathed his forehead with vinegar, and they thought he was a great deal better. She could not stay because she did not know the minute Mrs. Hennessy might send for her. So Ellen sat by her child all night. Before morning the breathing was worse than ever, and he no longer swallowed what she put to his lips. When Nancy came before six o'clock, she said she was going to send for the doctor, and Nancy answered :

"'Twill be a satisfaction to you. There's no occasion to send to the town, for the young doctor is above at the big house; he'll come, an' welcome."

"Ah, many's the time he came through that gate," said Ellen "and he scarce bigger than him, with his little bowarra in his hand. And he'd say, 'Good morning Mrs. Mooney ; it's a lovely day.'"

Before the young doctor reached the door, the sound of that breathing told him all ; but he went in, laid his hand softly on the little head, felt the pulse and the heart, and gently raised one eyelid. When he went back to the kitchen, he answered the unspoken question :

"I'm very sorry, Mrs. Mooney, I can do nothing for you."

"Nothing, sir."

"No one could do anything," he said very gently.

"If you came yesterday?" whispered Ellen.

"It would be no use. I might only try something that would hurt him and do him no good." He might perhaps have made those eyes open once more, but he would not tell her that. He only said, "If you think he is in pain, send for me; but while he lies that way, you can only moisten his lips," and gave her some simple directions.

Her heart was cut in two. And yet she felt that she had always known that such a child could not live. Known, but not believed. The question was answered now. Thank God, her child would never be like other children. She went in and sat beside him. His father was coming for him, and she must never take her eyes off him. She did not wish to see James; she shrank from the thought, feeling herself unworthy; but Stephen would see him and tell her. If he did not speak, she would see it in his face. And, oh! for one look from her child.

She had put him in her own bed, and he lay just where James did. She watched him day and night, for Mike did everything outside, and stood looking down at his brother while she went out

THE CUCKOO LAMB

for a minute to eat the food he had made ready. On Saturday she lay down for an hour while Nancy watched, under promise of waking her in a minute if there was need, but she did not sleep. There was no change, only the face grew whiter, the breathing slower and more harsh. On Sunday morning she said :

"You ought to go over, Mike, and tell your Aunt. She'd think it hard if she heard from them that are nothing to us."

So he borrowed a saddle and rode away. In the course of the morning two or three women came in, but she did not ask them to stay. She knew Nancy would come as soon as she could leave Mrs. Hennessy. But the day wore on, and she was still alone. About three o'clock she was sitting in the chair under the window, as she had sat that other day. Her right hand was under the clothes holding his left hand. She felt that his father would come for him before night. It was the second Sunday in August, that was the second Sunday in March.

The day was very still. It seemed that there was no sound in all the world but that breathing. She gazed as she had gazed those days and nights. Then her sight would swim, and the white face seem to rise up in the air. At length she fell asleep.

She wakened suddenly in a great silence, with the sun hot upon her head, and something very cold in her hand.

The troubled breath was still. The lovely eyes would open never more.

She stood up and looked down long, long at the image of her child.

Then she said slowly : "I was not worthy to see him go."

.

Nearly two years after she stood at the fire carefully making a cup of whey, when Mike came up close to her and whispered :

"Mother, will we call him Stephen?"

She passed her hand over her face before she answered :

"Thank you kindly, Mike, for thinking of it. But you may as well let him be James. I couldn't call another child——"

"That's what I thought, mother; but I said to Mary we'd give you your choice."

"It's natural to call a child for an old person," she said haltingly. "And there could never be but one—Stephen—for me."

But she turned and laid her hand lovingly on the bundle Nancy held. She could not look forward thirty years to a day when she might sit under the chestnut tree, and smiling say to this James :

"I'd love to hold a little Stephen in my arms once more."