

# L I F E

A STORY

BY LIAM O'FLAHERTY

THE mother lay flat on her back, with her eyes closed and her arms stretched out to their full length above the bedclothes. Her hands kept turning back and forth in endless movement. Her whole body was exhausted after the great labor of giving birth.

Then the infant cried. She opened her eyes as soon as she heard the faint voice. She seized the bedclothes fiercely between her fingers. She raised her head and looked wildly towards the grandmother, who was tending the newborn child over the fireplace.

The old woman noticed the mother's savage look. She burst out laughing.

"For the love of God," she said to the two neighboring women that were helping her, "look at herself and she as frightened as a young girl on her wedding night. You'd think this is her first child instead of her last."

She took the infant by the feet, raised him up high and smacked him quite hard on the rump with her open palm.

"Shout now, in God's name," she said, "and put the devil out of your carcass."

The child started violently under the impact of the blow. He screamed again. Now there was power in his voice.

"Upon my soul!" said one of the neighboring women. "I don't blame her at all for being conceited about a young fellow like that."

She spat upon the infant's naked stomach.

"I never laid eyes on a finer newborn son than this one, 'faith," she said in a tone of deep conviction.

"A fine lad, God bless him," said the other woman, as she made the sign of the Cross over the child. "Begob, he has the makings of a hero in him, by all appearances."

"He has, indeed," said the grandmother. "He has the makings of a man in him, all right."

A deep sadness fell upon the mother when she heard the old woman say that this child would be the last to

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come from her womb. She was now forty-three. The years had already brought silver to her hair. She knew very well that she would never again bring life, by the miraculous power of God, from the substance of her body. She had done that fourteen times already. Except for the first time, when the intoxication of love was still strong in her blood, she got little comfort from giving birth. As the holy seed of life multiplied under her roof, so also did misfortune and hunger multiply. It was so hard for a poor couple, like her husband and herself, with only a few acres of stony land, to feed and care for so many little bodies and souls.

Yet she now felt miserably sad at the thought that her womb would henceforth be without fruit. She closed her eyes once more, crossed her hands on her bosom and began a prayer to Almighty God, asking for divine help on the hard road that lay ahead of her.



When the infant and the mother were put in order, the father was allowed to enter the bedroom. He was still in his prime, even though he was nearly fifty years of age, most of which time had been spent in drudgery on the land. He uncovered his head when he came into the presence of the newborn. He crossed himself and bent a knee in homage to the new life.

"May God bless you," he said to the child.

Then he went over to the bed and bowed to his wife in the same way.

"Thank God," he said to her gently, "you have that much past you."

She smiled faintly as she looked at him.

"I'm glad," she said, "that it was a son I gave you as my last child."

"May God reward you for it!" he said fervently, as he again bowed to her.

The old woman brought the child to the bed and laid him against the mother's bosom.

"Here you are now," she said. "Here is the newest little jewel in your house."

All trace of sorrow departed from the mother's soul, as she put her hands about the infant's little body and felt the strong young heart beating behind the ribs. She got a lump in her throat and tears flowed down her cheeks.

"Praised be the great God of glory!" she cried fervently.

The cock began to crow out in the barn. Its voice rose high and sharp above the roar of the November wind that was tearing through the sky.

"May the hand of God protect my child!" cried the mother, when she heard the crowing of the cock.

All the village cocks kept joining in the crowing until they were of one voice saluting the dawn.

"May God preserve the little one!" said the other women.

Far away the sound of the waves was loud as they lashed the great southern cliffs.

"Safe from sickness," prayed the

mother, "safe from blemish, safe from misfortune, safe in body and soul."

After a while, the other children were allowed to enter the room, so that they might make the acquaintance of their youngest little brother. There were seven of them. Four of the fourteen had already died. Another three had gone out into the world in search of a livelihood. All that remained were between the ages of fifteen and three. They became silent with wonder when they caught sight of the baby. They stood about the bed with their mouths open, holding one another by the hand.

Then the grandfather was allowed into the room. He was far from being silent. He began to babble foolishly when he caught sight of his youngest grandson.

"Aie! Aie!" he said. "Everything is more lasting than man. Aie! The Virgin Mary have pity on me! Look at me now and I only the wreck of a man. Yet there was a day. . . ."

He was very old. A few years previously, the sun had hurt him while he was asleep in a field on a warm day. He had been practically a cripple since then, having lost the use of his limbs almost entirely. He was doting. His body shrank from day to day. Now he was no heavier than a little boy. His head was so stooped that one would think it was tethered to his ankles like that of a wicked ass. He trembled like a leaf.

"Aie! Aie!" he said bitterly. "There was a day when I wasn't afraid of any

man, I don't care what man it was, from east or west, that might challenge me, looking for fight or for trouble. 'Faith, I'd let no man take the sway from me, for I was that sort of a man, that never looked for a fight and never ran from one. That was the class of a man I was, a man that could stand his ground without fear or favor. . . ."

The old woman had to take hold of him and carry him out of the room.

"Come on down out of this," she said, "and don't be bothering the people with your foolish talk."

"Ah! God help me!" said one of the neighboring women. "The longest journey from the womb to the grave is only a short one after all."

When the baby took up residence in his cradle by the kitchen hearth, he was like a king in the house. The whole family waited on him. It was thankless work. The newborn was entirely unaware that the slightest favor was being conferred on him. He was completely unaware of all but the solitary instinct that he had brought with him from the womb. That was to maintain and strengthen the life that was in him.

When he awoke, he screamed savagely until he was given hold of his mother's breast. Then he became silent at once. His toothless jaws closed firmly on the swollen teat. His little body shivered with voluptuous pleasure when he felt the first stream of warm milk pouring onto his tongue. He sucked until he was replete. Then

again he fell asleep. When he felt unwell, from stomach ache or some other trivial complaint, he yelled outrageously. He went on yelling in a most barbarous fashion until they began to rock the cradle. They had to keep rocking until his pain had gone.

They sang to him while they rocked.

"Oh! My darling! My darling! My darling!" they sang to him. "Oh! My darling, you're the love of my heart."

Far different was their conduct towards the old man. There was little respect for him. When they waited on him, it was through charity and not because it gave them pleasure. They begrudged him the smallest favor that they conferred on him.

"Look at that old devil," they used to say. "Neither God nor man can get any good out of him and he sitting there in the chimney corner from morning till night. You'd be better off begging your bread than waiting on him."

True enough, it was hard to blame them for complaining. It was very unpleasant work having to wait upon the poor old man. They had to take him from his sleeping place each morning. They had to clean and dress him and put him seated on a little stool in the chimney corner. They had to tie a horsehair rope around his waist, lest he might fall into the fire. At meal times, they had to mash his food and put it in his mouth with a spoon.

He was dependent on them in every way exactly like the infant.

"Aie! The filthy thing!" they used to say. "It would be a great kindness to the people of this house if God would call him."



The grandfather remained tied in his chimney corner all day, between sleep and wake, jabbering, threatening imaginary people with his stick, scolding enemies that were long since dead, making idiotic conversation with the creatures of his folly about people and places.

He only emerged from his witless state when he heard the infant cry on awakening from sleep.

"Who is this?" he would say with his ear cocked. "Who is squealing like this?"

When the mother took the baby from the cradle and gave it suck in the opposite corner, the old man's eyes would brighten and he would recognize the child.

"Ho! Ho!" he would cry in delight. "It's yourself that's in it. Ho! My lovely one! That's a pretty young man I see over opposite me and no about it."

Then he would try to reach the infant. He would get angry when he failed to go farther than the length of his horsehair rope.

"Let me at him," he would cry, struggling to leave his stool. "Let go this rope, you pack of devils. He is over there, one of my kindred. Let me at him. He is a man of my blood. Let me go to him."

His rage never lasted long. He would get overcome with delight on

seeing the infant stretch and shudder voluptuously as he sucked.

"Bravo, little one!" the old man then cried, as he jumped up and down on his stool. "Throw it back, my boy. Don't leave a drop of it. Ho! You are a man of my blood, all right. Drink, little one. More power to you!"

Winter was almost spent before the infant recognized anybody. Until then he only knew his mother's breasts and the warmth of his cradle by means of touch. Even though he often watched what was happening about him, there was no understanding in his big staring blue eyes. Then the day came at last when the resplendent soul shone out through his eyes.

He was lying on his belly across his mother's lap, suffering a little from stomach ache owing to having drunk too much, when he took note of the old man's foolish gestures in the opposite corner. He smiled at first. Then he began to clap hands and to leap exactly like the old man. He uttered a little jovial yell.

"Praised be the great God of glory!" said the mother.

The household gathered round. They all stood looking at the infant and at the old man, who were imitating one another's foolish gestures across the hearth. Everybody laughed gaily except the grandmother. It was now she began to weep out loud.

"Aie! My Lord God!" she wailed. "The foolishness of infancy is a lovely thing to behold, but it's pitiful to see an old person that has outlived his reason."

From that day onward, the old man and the baby spent long spells playing together, clapping hands, jabbering and driveling. It would be hard to say which of them was the more foolish. When the infant was weaned, it was with the same mash they were both fed.

According as the infant grew strong from day to day the old man weakened. He got bronchitis in spring and they thought that his end had come. He received extreme unction. Yet he recovered from that attack. He was soon able to leave his bed and resume his position in the hearth corner. Now he was merely a shadow of his former self. They could lift him with one hand.



A day came early in May when there was a big spring tide and the whole family went to pick carrageen moss along the shore. The grandmother was left to take care of the house, the infant and the old man. It was a fine sunny day.

"Take me out into the yard," the old man said to his wife. "I'd like to see the sun before I die."

She did as he asked her. She put him sitting in a straw chair outside the door. She herself sat on a stool near him, with the infant on her bosom. She began to call the fowl.

"Tiuc! Tiuc!" she cried. "Fit! Fit! Beadai! Beadai! Beadai!"

They all came running to her at top speed, hens and ducks and geese. She threw them scraps of food from a big dish. The birds began to fight for the

food, as they leaped and screamed and prodded one another with their beaks.

The infant took delight in the tumult of the birds. He began to clap his hands and to leap, as he watched the fierce struggle of the winged creatures. He screamed with glee in answer to their harsh croaking.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" he cried, while the spittle ran from his mouth.

The old man got equally excited and he imitated the gestures of the infant. He began to clap hands and to hop on his chair and to babble unintelligibly.

"Musha, God help the two of you!" the old woman said.

The old man became silent all of a sudden. She glanced anxiously in his direction. She saw him half erect and leaning forward. Then he fell to the ground head foremost. She rushed to him with the child under her arm.

When she stooped over him, she heard the death rattle in his throat. Then there was nothing at all to be heard from him.

She stood up straight and began the lamentation for the newly dead.

"Och! Ochon!" she wailed. "It was with you I walked through the delight and sorrow of life. Now you are gone and I'll soon be following you. Och! Ochon! My love! It was you that was lovely on the day of our marriage. . . ."

When the neighbors came, the old woman sat lamenting on her stool by the corpse with the child within her arms, while the birds still leaped and fought savagely for the food in the dish.

The infant hopped up and down, shouting merrily as he struggled to touch the bright feathers of the rushing birds with his outstretched hands.



# CHILDREN WHO DRINK

BY ALSON J. SMITH

RECENTLY the head psychiatrist at a hospital specializing in the treatment of alcoholism told me he was treating a 16-year-old boy for chronic alcoholism. I asked him if it weren't true that it took about ten years to become a chronic alcoholic. Quite right, he said. Freddie had begun drinking before he was seven, when an unscrupulous governess had discovered that several spoonful of whisky could calm tantrums. The father and mother had been divorced; Freddie saw his mother irregularly, and by the time he was eleven or so he didn't have to be fed whisky — he was getting it himself from his father's amply-stocked cabinet. Subsequently he had to leave prep school because of repeated intoxication. Happily his father married again and his new wife took an interest in the boy. He was persuaded to go to the hospital, and his chances for recovery from alcoholism are now considered good.

But, the psychiatrist went on, this was not an isolated case. Many other children had been treated at the hospital. He told me there had been a

considerable increase in drinking among children in the last few years.

Organizations like the Juvenile Protective Association of Chicago, the Judge Baker Foundation in Boston, New York's Osborne Association, and the various children's courts reveal that there has indeed been a startling increase in juvenile drinking since 1939. In 1945, for instance, the arrest for drunkenness of boys under 18 had increased 101 per cent over 1939. For the year 1945 the FBI reports 269 children arrested for violating liquor laws, 426 for drunken driving and 2722 for drunkenness.

A recent survey conducted by *The Grapevine*, official organ of "Alcoholics Anonymous," shows that most alcoholics begin addictive drinking as children. Seventy-one per cent of alcoholics had first got drunk between the ages of 10 and 19, 6.1 per cent between the ages of 10 and 14, and 1 per cent below the age of 10. Twenty-nine per cent said they had first "blacked out" as children, 20 per cent began sneaking drinks as kids, 15.8 per cent lost control of their drinking while

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