

THE THREE LIVES LEASE.

[BY J. S., IN THE "IRISH CATHOLIC."]

There could be little doubt that Granny was dying. When a woman of eighty-six is suddenly stricken and lies in a state of immobility and stupor, it is natural to fear that her days are numbered. So thought the sons and daughters of this aged woman as, hearing the news, they hastened from their own to their mother's house. And when all were gathered round the kitchen hearth with saddened, care-worn faces, one felt that Granny had been blessed with many children.

Idly the grey-haired sons stood about the room telling in low tones of their success with crops and cattle. Quietly the women sat with care worn hands crossed awkwardly in unaccustomed rest, whispering to each other their own fears and the opinion of the village doctor.

"It cannot be the falling sickness, for mother's too old for that," said the eldest of Granny's daughters in a low, sad voice.

"True for you, Sarah," answered brother John's wife; "your mother is eighty-six come Michaelmas, father says."

"I wonder what the boys would do if mother—if anything happened to mother?" queried sister Kate sighing.

"We'd all have to leave the land for one thing, and go to America; there's naught for poor folks here," declared practical sister Anne.

"Why would we have to leave home, mother?" whispered one of the granddaughters tearfully.

"Because the lease is up with the lives Mary. Is that not so, John?" And Anne turned to her brother.

"That is so, that is so," answered he. "You see it's this way," settling to his story with the garrulity of approaching age: "Your great grandfather, may he rest in peace! made the lease with Lord Maco for three lives. There was his own, and his eldest boy that died when he was four years old—from the look of an evil eye, they say—and Granny here, who is eighty-six come Michaelmas. A long life had Granny, and it kept the lease for us all; an' now there's no renewal, for his honour wants an increase, and I'm giving all the land's worth; there can't be aught more taken from it."

"If we're all going away, you and I'll be wed the sooner," whispered a stalwart youth to Mary, who, smiling shyly, left her mother's side to stand with him in the doorway.

"If we could but stay till the children were grown," murmured one anxious woman; sadly.

"What's to be done if Granny goes the night, John?" asked sister Anne; "there's the crops in the ground as will be lost, an' the trees an' the bushes that was set in the fall, an' Peter's new shed, and all will be gone if you don't renew."

"Will we have a white lamb in America, and a donkey with a turf-cart?" piped one of the children.

Just here there entered from an inner room Father Cleary, the parish priest, who had been with the sick woman.

"You may all go home for to-night," he said, looking brightly about the circle of anxious faces. "Granny will not die to-night, and, please God, she may live many a long day yet."

With words of hope and comfort to each other, the sons and daughters went their several ways, each man speaking earnestly to his wife of the time when Granny was laid at rest in the old churchyard, and they would have to leave the old home for America, and, womanlike, each wife hastily dismissed the subject with, "Please God, Granny will live many a long day yet, and then—well then, perhaps, his honour will renew cheap."

And, strange to say, the women were right. Was it due to the old doctor's skill? or the unflickering of the lamp of life before it went out for ever? Certain it is that Granny grew slowly better. Not her own strong self again, she who had so nimbly tripped about at eighty-five, but well enough and strong enough to sit by the window or hearth in her high backed, big arm-chair, contentedly chatting with children or neighbours. An odd little figure she was, the mother of ten old men and women, with her brown face and her bright black eyes, her cheery smile, and her glad, shrill laugh. She had been quite a beauty in her day, tradition said, and, in fact, it was her pretty face that first attracted "his honour's lady," and changed the even tenor

of Granny's life. Riding alone one day, the landlord's wife had met and tarried to talk with Granny, then a girl of sixteen, and when the interview was ended Granny had promised to enter my lady's service.

How excited were friends and neighbours as on the morrow they watched the girl ride away to her new life. Five miles was a good journey in those days, and Granny, tearful and joyous, sat behind her father on a pillion as they rode on.

"Thou art to be a good girl Ellen, and a credit to the mother that brought you up; remember that, my girl," said the father sternly as he left her.

"Yes, father, I will try!" sobbed the little maid, and well she kept her word. From an extra pair of hands in the kitchen she soon became under-nurse and constant companion to my lady's only daughter, and as the years went by, changing the child Margaret into Miss Maco of Dunford Hall, the two remained fast friends. So it came to pass that when the beautiful spoiled daughter secretly left her father's house to become Robert Nugent's wife, Ellen went with her.

"Why is that woman here, Margaret?" Robert Nugent had asked angrily, "I will not go without Ellen." No more could be said, so three journeyed where the bridegroom had hoped there would be but two.

To the country girl who had never been ten miles from home the journey was full of marvellous sights, and in the years that followed Granny never tired of telling, nor her children of hearing, of the wonderful trip to England. For Granny returned home a grief-stricken and care-worn woman, who had just bidden a long farewell to her dear young mistress, and watched the saddened wife sail, with her babe in her arms, to a far-away land in the West. Both "my lady" and "his honour" were well aware of the girl's return to her kindred, but never by word or sign did they inquire for their lost daughter. Granny was still a beauty despite her heartache, and might have chosen higher than a farmer's youngest son had not her father and Michael's father met one market day and arranged the match together.

Then she and Michael had been married, and had loved each other, not passionately but well, working together and weeping together through forty long years, until the father died, and this fragile little woman lived on "to hold the land for her sons," she often said; for Granny had always been an able manager. But this was over now, and the Granny who rose from the almost fatal illness was not the Granny of old. Gone where the sharp tongue and quick temper, the contempt for failure and the pride in her own success, and in their place the children found a wise and gentle little woman, sitting in her great chair, patiently awaiting the coming of the summons. Were her sons perplexed, her daughters weary, it was to Granny they came; and with shrewd suggestion and loving word she eased their heavy burdens.

"A very bundle of sunshine!" exclaimed the little doctor; and the listeners silently acknowledged it was true.

One year became two, then five, and still Granny "held the land," taking a very earthly pleasure in the fact that her mere existence was a grievous disappointment to the noble lord of the soil, eager for new and more profitable leases.

It must have been Granny's wonderful age that awed her neighbors. For almost half a century she had been "Granny" to half the village; now she was their oracle, confidant, friend, in every happening of importance.

Was it not she who forbade the marriage of her grandchild Sally to the sailor lover, and conclusively proved the would-be husband was the descendant to be expected of a race of ne'er-do-weels?

Who would have known the rightful owner of the buried treasure found on the village pasture had not Granny told of a miser who lived and died in a cabin near the place full sixty years ago?

To the children Granny was a fairy god-mother. None so well as she could cure their childish ailments, telling them wonderful tales the while; and no youthful sinner but fled to Granny's hearth for protection, trusting that her soft words might turn away paternal wrath.

And so it came to pass that in ten-odd years of Granny's life had been lived, and still she sat in the great chair close to the hearth; and here one day they

came to tell her that William, her eldest grandson, was dead.

"And is Willie dead too?" she questioned, raising her trembling hands to her streaming eyes. "Willie dead too, with Anne, and John, and Peter—ah me! I am very old; and Willie was a grown man too; near fifty years, you say?" slowly shaking her aged head and murmuring softly to herself, "and yet I remember the day that Willie was born. Near fifty years, and 'twas I who laid the babe on its young mother's arm, and she smiled at me in her joy. She was but a girl, and I was an old woman then—and Willie is dead! They must have forgotten me." And Granny wept, suffering the passionless grief of age; and even as she mourned there came into the room two of her grandsons whose faces were white and drawn.

"What is it?" cried their sister, feeling that William's death could not account for their excitement.

"His honor's dead!" answered one.

"Dead!" screamed Mary. "Why, he passed by the gate not three hours gone by. I took thought of it, because Granny noticed the horse tread."

"Dead?" murmured Granny, as if waking from a dream, "and he dead, too? He was a hard man on the poor?"

"How did it happen, John?" asked the girl.

"I was at work in the wheat," said John, "and saw him come riding my way, when one of the dogs at his heels ran in among the grain. Then his master jumped the wall, and rode through the field hunting the dog. I called that his horse was trampling the crop that was to be out on the morrow; but he paid no heed, and the dog ran up. He was near the wall by that, yet he turned and rode across to the gate. I called it was closed fast, but he tried to take the gate. It was too high, and I saw him fall, and when I ran up he was dead."

"It was punishment for his pride," said Granny. "May the Lord have mercy on him!"

"Amen," added the others; and no more was said either in praise or blame of the man that was dead.

While the countryside were still talking of his honor's funeral, there came to Granny's cottage two strangers who had travelled down from London to see this aged woman.

"You are very welcome. What may your business be?" Granny said in her sweet, shrill voice.

"We have come from London, my good woman," said the elder man, speaking very slowly and distinctly, "to find, if possible, some trace of the heir to this estate, otherwise the land will lapse to the Crown. My name is Mr. Snelling, the late lord's legal adviser; this is my friend, Mr. Pratt. We are told you accompanied the late lord's daughter when she—when she left home. Now, if you tell us where she went the task will be very simple."

"That I will gladly, sir," answered Granny. "We went to Dublin, and then to Kingstown, and we took a ship."

"Where did this ship go to?"

"That I have forgot, sir," said Granny, sadly, "it's very long ago—full sixty years."

The strangers looked at each other silently. Their only hope lay with this aged woman, and she had failed them.

"Make an effort to remember," entreated the younger man.

"I cannot, sir," said Granny very slowly; "an' strange it is, for I remember the dock and the inn we lodged at as if it was yesterday, an' it's sixty years ago."

"Will you come and show us the place?" asked Mr. Snelling eagerly.

"That I would, sir, but I am very old, and it cost Miss Margaret many a pound before, she had so little to spare, poor dear."

"If you come with us, Granny, we can never repay you."

"I'll go, and gladly, sir, if 'twill do you good," said Granny, sweetly.

"Will you start in two days?"

"That I will; but, sir, if it is not too costly, may—may my grandchild Mary—I'm old and weak, and not used to strangers."

"Take whomever you wish," said Mr. Snelling.

In the excitement that ensued, Granny, despite her age, was still mistress of her household, and paying little heed to the lamentations of her daughters and the arguments of her sons, she cheerfully prepared for what might prove her last journey.

"I am going to Miss Margaret and her boy," she said, speaking no word of the husband she had so long ago learned to despise. Sixty years ago Granny had travelled stealthily and rapidly, now she journeyed by slow degrees, surrounded every luxury.

No one of the little party but watched each movement of the aged woman, and none harassed her with questions about the past, trusting that the impressions made sixty years ago had not faded entirely from her mind.

To Dublin they went, and to Kingstown before she showed recollection.

"This is not the ship," she said anxiously, as they led her up the gang-plank. "It was a sailing packet; not like this."

"That was sixty years ago," they told her, and Mr. Snelling added to the others, "There was but one line of packets in those days, stopping at three ports. We will try each in turn."

"Ah, well-a-day!" murmured Granny, "this is not the place we came to," and she wept in her bewilderment.

"Of course it is not, Granny. Do not trouble yourself; we know the way."

"Come to the baggage shed out of this crush. I'll find a cab at the station," said Mr. Snelling to Mary, as together they guided the faltering feet. "Wait here a moment," he continued, when a sudden exclamation made them turn. There stood Granny leaning on her staff, shading her eyes with the trembling hand.

"This is the town!" she cried in glad triumph. "There's the church that was on the corner and the inn is across the way."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Snelling, encouragingly, as he gazed at the great business block which marked the spot where the inn had once stood.

"Now we will go to a hotel to rest," he said, anxious at the sight of Granny's agitation. To the hotel they went, but rest was out of the question for Granny, into whose clouded mind had suddenly flashed a ray of recollection.

"Now we've found the place, and the money's not ill spent," she murmured happily, and no one had the heart to tell her that their journey had been all in vain.

"And 'twas there that we stayed waiting for the letter, but his honour was ever a hard man; and there Miss Margaret's boy was born, and he that was her husband bade me go home, and took her away."

"Where did he take her, Granny dear?" asked Mary, timidly.

"He took her in a ship," explained Granny, with much condescension, to a place he called—they called—they called it New York."

A shout from Mr. Snelling interrupted her.

"What is it?" she cried in alarm.

"We've found the heir!" cried the lawyer; "you've told us the place where he is living."

"Child, child," answered Granny, "yes, that was the name of the town. Miss Margaret bade me never tell, and I have not thought on it for fifty years. It was the church made me think."

Two days later began their homeward journey, and as the little party travelled slowly back the cable hummed with messages asking tidings of Robert Nugent.

That sixty years had come and gone, making the finding of the heir almost impossible, did not enter Granny's mind.

Miss Margaret's beautiful boy would of course appear in a short time to claim his own.

Strange to say come he did, a worn and grey-haired man, with little save a few almost worthless papers with which to prove his claim.

"He is an impostor," said the lawyer, and the stranger could say nothing in reply. What was to be done?

"It is a foolish test, but let us go to Granny," suggested Mr. Snelling.

As of old, she sat in her arm-chair by the hearth and smiled brightly on her visitors.

"Granny," said Mr. Snelling, "we have come to you again about the heir; this gentleman claims to be Mrs. Nugent's—Miss Margaret's son. He comes from New York. What do you say?"

"Has he Miss Margaret's marriage lines?" asked Granny, sharply.

The keen old lawyer looked at his colleague in astonishment. That had been his first question to the claimant.

"My mother's papers, and much besides, were lost in a fire twenty years ago," said the American quietly.