

The Centenarian

By Will E. Ingersoll

From Harper's Magazine

There were few who knew--and, frankly, there were few who seemed to care to know--what Old Dalton meant when he mumbled, in his aspirate and toothless quest for expression of the thoughts that doddered through his misty old brain, "Thay wur-rld luks diff'rent now--all diff'rent now, yagh!" Sometimes he would go on, after a pause, in a kind of laborious elucidation: "Na, na! Ma there, now, she's gone. I--egh, egh--I went to school 'long of her; an' et didn't matter so much, mun, about th' rest going, 's long as she wer' here. But now--she's gone, ey. Agh-m! Ey, now she's gone-like, an' th' ain't nobody to help me keep--keep a-hold o' things. I'm a hundred years old, mun. Agh-m! You wouldn't--you wouldn't know what I was meanin', now, when I tell you this here world has growed all yellow-like, this month back. Ey, that's it, mun--all queer-like. Egh, it's time I was movin' on--movin' on."

Part of this monologue--a very small part--was Old Dalton's own, repeated over and over, and so kept in mind ever since the more initiative years a decade ago when he first began to think about his age. Another part of the utterance--more particularly that about "movin' on"--consisted of scraps of remarks that had been addressed to him, which he had hoarded up as an ape lays away odds and ends, and which he repeated, parrotlike, when the sun and his pipe warmed Old Dalton into speech. But that idea that the earth was growing yellow--that was a recent uncanny turn of his fancy, his own entirely.

He was pretty well past having any very definite inclination, but there seemed no special reason why the old man should wish to "move on." He appeared comfortable enough, pulling away at his blackened old pipe on the bench by the door. No man above fifty, and few below

that age, enjoyed better health than he had; and many of fifty there are who look nearer death than Old Dalton did.

"Crack me a stick 'r two o' wood, grampa," his married great-granddaughter, with whom he lived, would sometimes say; and up and at it the old man would get--swinging his ax handily and hitting his notch cleanly at every clip.

Assuredly, his body was a wonderful old machine--a grandfather's clock with every wheel, bearing, and spring in perfect order and alignment. Work had made it so, and work kept it so, for every day after his smoke Old Dalton would fuss about at his "chores" (which, partly to please him, were designedly left for him to do)--the changing of the bull's tether-picket, watering the old horse, splitting the evening's wood, keeping the fence about the house in repair, and driving the cows o' nights into the milking-pen.

To every man in this world is assigned his duty. To every man is given just the mental and physical equipment he needs for that duty. Some men obtusely face away from their appointed work; some are carried afield by exigency; some are drawn by avarice or ambition into alien paths; but a minor proportion of happy ones follow out their destiny. There do not occur many exceptions to the rule that the men who find their work and do it, all other conditions being equal, not only live to old age, but to an extreme, a desirable, a comfortable, and a natural old age.

Old Dalton had been built and outfitted to be a simple, colloquial home-maker, family-raiser, and husbandman. His annals were never intended to be anything more than plain and short. His was the function of the tree--to grow healthily and vigorously; to propagate; to give during his life, as the tree gives of its fruit and shade, such pleasant dole and hospitable emanation as he naturally might; and in the fullness of time to return again to the sod.

He had found and done thoroughly this appointed work of his. He was doing it still, or at least that part of it which, at the age of one hundred years, fittingly remained for him to do. He was tapering off, building the crown of his good stack. When Death, the great Nimrod, should come to Old Dalton, he would not find him ready caught in the trap of decrepitude. He would find him with his boots on, up and about--or, if in bed, not there except as in the regular rest intervals of his diurnal round.

And the fact that he, a polyp in the great atoll of life, had found his exact place and due work was the reason that, at one hundred years, life was yet an orange upon the palate of Old Dalton.

Nanny Craig--who later became Mother Dalton--had, in remote eighteen hundred and twenty, been a squalling, crabbed baby, and had apparently started life determined to be crotchety. If she had adhered to this schedule she would have been buried before she was sixty and would have been glad to go. But Old Dalton--then young Dave Dalton--married her out of hand at seventeen, and so remade and conserved her in the equable, serene, and work-filled atmosphere of the home he founded that Nanny far outdid all her family age records, recent or ancestral, and lived to ninety-three. She was seven years younger than Dave, and now three months dead.

Dave had missed her sorely. People had said the Message would not be long coming to him after she went. Perhaps if he had been in the usual case of those who have passed the seventh decade--weary and halt and without employment or the ability or wish for it--he would have brooded and worried himself into the grave very soon after the passing of his old "mate" and one living contemporary. But he was a born, inured, and inveterate worker, and as long as there were "chores" for him to do he felt ample excuse for continuing to exist. Old Dalton still had the obsession, too, that while and where he lived he was "boss" and manager; and one solid, sustaining thought that helped to keep him living was that if he died the Dalton farm (it was

the original old homestead that these young descendants of his occupied) would be without its essential head and squire.

So sturdy, so busy, and so well had he been always that all the deaths he had seen in his journey down a hundred years of mortality had failed to bring home to him the grave and puissant image of death as a personal visitant.

"Ey, I'm always out wur-rkin' when they send fur me, I guess," was the joke he had made at eighty and repeated so often since that now he said it quite naively and seriously, as a fact and a credible explanation.

But, although it took time to show its effect, Nanny's going hit him a little harder than any of the other deaths he had witnessed. She had traveled with him so long and so doughtily that he had never been able to form any anticipative picture of himself without her. Indeed, even now it felt as if she had merely "gone off visitin'," and would be back in time to knit him a pair of mitts before the cold weather came.

It was the odd idea about the world growing "yellow-lookin'"--sometimes he said "red-lookin'" and at other times seemed not quite certain which description conveyed the vague hue of his fancy--that appeared to be pulling him to pieces, undermining him, more than any other influence. Most people, however, were accustomed to consider the hallucination an effect of Mother Dalton's removal and a presage of Old Dalton's own passing.

This odd yellowness (or redness), as of grass over which chaff from the threshing-mill has blown, lay across the old pasture on this afternoon of his second century, as Old Dalton went to water the superannuated black horse that whinnied at his approach.

"Ey, Charley," he said, reflectively, as he took the old beast by the forelock to lead it up to the pump--"ey, Charley-boy"; then, as the horse, diminishing the space between its forefoot and his heel with a

strange ease, almost trod on him--"ey, boy--steady there, now. Es yur spavin not throublin' ye th' day, then? Ye walk that free. S-steady, boy--ey!"

But Grace, the granddaughter, glancing across the pasture as she came to the kitchen door to empty potato peelings, put it differently.

"See how hard it be's gettin' for grampa to get along, Jim," she said to her husband, who sat mending a binder-canvas at the granary door. "I never noticed it before, but that old lame Charley horse can keep right up to him now."

Jim Nixon stuck his jack-knife into the step beside him, pushed a rivet through canvas and fastening-strap, and remarked, casually: "He ought to lay off now--too old to be chorin' around. Young Bill could do all the work he's doin', after he comes home from school, evenings."

"He's not bin the same sence gramma died," Gracie Nixon observed, turning indoors again. "It ain't likely we'll have him with us long now, Jim."

The old man, coming into the house a little haltingly that evening, stopped sharply as his granddaughter, with a discomposingly intent look, asked, "Tired to-night, grampa?"

"Ey?" His mouth worked, and his eyes, the pupils standing aggressively and stonily in the center of the whites, abetted the protest of the indomitable old pioneer. "Tired nothin'. You young ones wants t'l maind yur own business, an' that'll--egh--kape yous busy. Where's me pipe, d'ye hear, ey? An' the 'bacca? Yagh, that's it." The old man's fingers crooked eagerly around the musty bowl. He lit, sucked, and puffed noisily, lowering himself on a bench and feeling for the window-sill with his elbow. "In my taime," he continued, presently, in an aggrieved tone, "young ones was whopped fur talkin' up t'l thur

elders like that. Lave me be, now, an' go 'n' milk thame cows I just fetched. Poor beasts, their bags es that full--ey, that full. They're blattin' to be eased."

With indulgent haste, the young couple, smiling sheepishly at each other like big children rebuked, picked up their strainer-pails and went away to the corral. The old man, his pipe-bowl glowing and blackening in time to his pulling at it, smoked on alone in the dusk. In the nibbling, iterative way of the old, he started a kind of reflection; but it was as if a harmattan had blown along the usual courses of his thought, drying up his little brooklet of recollection and withering the old aquatic star-flowers that grew along its banks. His mind, in its meandering among old images, groped, paused, fell pensive. His head sank lower between his shoulders, and the shoulders eased back against the wall behind his bench. When Jim Nixon and his wife, chasing each other merrily back and forth across the dewy path like the frolicsome young married couple they were, reached the doorway, they found the old man fallen "mopy" in a way uncommon for him, and quite given over to a thoughtless, expressionless torpor and staring.

"You'll be tired-like, grampa, eh?" Jim Nixon said, as he came over to the veteran and put a strong hand under Old Dalton's armpit. "Come on, then. I'll help you off to your bed."

But the old man flamed up again, spiritedly, although perhaps this time his protest was a little more forced. "Ye'll not, then, boy," he mumbled. "Ye'll just lave me be, then. I'm--egh, egh"--he eased gruntingly into a standing position--"I'm going to bed annyway, though." He moved off, his coattail bobbing oddly about his hips and his back bowed. The two heard him stump slowly up the stairs.

Jim Nixon drew the boot-jack toward him and set the heel of his boot thoughtfully into the notch. "They go quick, Gracie," he observed,

"when they get as old as him. They go all at onct, like. Hand me thon cleaver, an' I'll be makin' a little kindlin' for th' mornin'."

The alcove where the old man's bed stood was only separated by a thin partition from the room where the young couple slept; and the sounds of their frolic, as they chased, slapped, and cast pillows at each other, came to him companionably enough as he drew the blankets up about his big, shrunken chest and turned the broad of his back to the comfortable hay-stuffed bed-tick.

But all the merry noise and sociable proximity of the young people staved not off the great joust with loneliness this mighty knight of years had before he slept--a loneliness more than that of empty house and echoing stair; more than that, even, of Crusoe's manless island; utterly beyond even that of an alien planet; of spaces not even coldly sown with God-alooof stars--the excellent, the superlative loneliness of one soul for another. It is a strange, misty, Columbus-voyage upon which that hardy soul goes who dares to be the last of his generation.

There was in that bed a space between him and the wall--a space kept habitually yet for the Nanny who never came to fill it, who never again would come to fill it. (There would have been no great demonstration on the old man's part even if she had miraculously come. Merely a grunt of satisfaction; perhaps a brief, "Ey, ma--back?" and then a contented lapsing into slumber.) His want of her was scarcely emotional; at least it did not show itself to him that way. It took more the form of a kind of aching wish to see things "as they was" again. But that ache, that uneasiness, had upon Old Dalton all the effect of strong emotion--for it rode him relentlessly through all these days of his December, its weight and presence putting upon the tired old heart an added task. The ordinary strain of life he might have endured for another decade, with his perfect old physique and natural habits of life. But this extra pressure--he was not equipped for that!

"They go quick, at that age," his granddaughter's man had said. But, although even he himself did not know it, Old Dalton had been "going" for weeks--ever since the first confident feeling that "ma" would come back again had given place to the ache of her coming long delayed.

To-night it was cold in bed for August. Old Dalton wished "they" would fetch him another quilt.

But it should not have been cold that August evening. Beyond the wooden bed a small, rectangular window with sash removed showed a square of warm sky and a few stars twinkling dully in the autumnal haze. An occasional impatient tinkle of the cow-bell down in the corral indicated midges, only present on bland days and nights when there is in the air no hint of frost to stiffen the thin swift mite-wings.

High summer, and he was cold! Bedlam in the next room, and he was lonely! His sensations were getting out of hand, beyond the remedial influences and friendly fraternal sounds of this world he had so long tenanted. By a score of years he had exceeded his due claim upon earth's good offices to man. He was a trespasser and an alien in this strange present--he with his ancient interests, foggy ways of speech and thought, obsolete images and ideals, and mind that could only regard without attempt at comprehension the little and great innovations of the new age.

"We c'u'd make shift well enough with the things we had whin I was a lad," Old Dalton had often said to those who talked to him of the fine things men were inventing--the time-savers, space-savers, work-savers; "we c'u'd make shift well enough. We got along as well as they do now, too, we did; and, sir, we done better work, too. All men thinks of, these days, is gettin' through quick. Yagh, that's it, that's it--gettin' through quick-like, an' leavin' things half done."

So is a man born and implanted in his own generation. And if by strength he invades the next generation beyond, he does not go far before he finds he is a stranger utterly. In the current talk of men there are new smartnesses of speech built upon the old maternal tongue. There are new vogues of dress, new schools of thought, new modes even of play. Perhaps, again, new vices that the older simpler life kept dormant give the faces of this fresh generation a look and a difference strange and sinister.

A hundred years old! There are to be found, notably in steadily moving rural communities, not a few who endure to ninety hardily enough; but rare and singular are the cases where a man is to be found, except as dust in a coffin, a century after his birth. Old Dalton had inherited from his mother the qualities that are the basis of longevity--a nature simple and serene, a physique perfect in all involuntary functions and with the impulse of sane and regular usages to guide voluntary ones, an appetite and zest for work. She had married at eighteen and had lived to see her son reach his eightieth year, herself missing the century mark by only a few months.

But Old Dalton had breasted the tape, the first of his race to do it. And if it had not been for this wave of loneliness; this parching, astringent wind of sorrow that seemed to dry up the oil of his joints, evaporate the simple liquor of his thought, put out the vital sparkle in his eye; and now, latest act of dispossession, to milk his old veins of their warmth--if it had not been for this influence and prescience, Old Dalton might have run hardily quite a good little way into his second century.

But somewhere, afar and apart, the finger was about to descend upon the chronometer that timed his race. The dust atoms that a hundred years ago had been exalted to make a man now clamored for their humble rehabilitation. Man shall never, in this mortal body we use, exemplify perpetual motion.

Old Dave Dalton turned in his bed. Something beyond the chilliness was wrong with him, and he did not know what it was. There is no condition so vexatious as an unexplainable lack of ease; and Old Dalton twisted, gathered up his knees, straightened them again, tensed, relaxed, shifted the bedclothes, and busily but vainly cast about for the source of his disquiet.

Ah!--the thought slipped into his mind like a late guest.

"Et's thame sticks I forgot, ey," the old man muttered as he forthwith and arduously rose into a sitting position and pushed the blankets off him. "Ey, ey, that's it--the sticks for the mornin'!"

The chopping of the wood for the morning fire, in order that the sower, haymaker, or harvester, as the seasonal case might be, should have as little delay as possible in getting to his field or meadow; this had been a regular chore of Old Dalton's, a function never omitted before in all the scope of his methodical and assiduous days.

"Ey, but I never thought now that I'd ever lave that job not done," he muttered as he shuffled slowly and sheepishly down the stairs. "Ey, ey ... ma!"

There she was, at the foot of the stairs! Old Dalton saw her, as plainly as if it had been daylight. Gray apron with its horseshoe pattern almost obliterated by many washings, waist bulging halely, shoulders bowed forward, old wool hood tied over her head. There she was, with her visage, that in all their years together had not changed for him, squeezed and parched into the wrinkles of her thirty-four thousand days. (The only difference Old Dalton could see, as he stopped, his elbows bent a little, and regarded her in his quelling masculine way, resided in the eyes. Instead of being held downcast in the old attitude of deference, they now looked across at him, straight level, and--summoning!)

Immobile age and Old Dalton's habit kept him from any visible expression of the welcome that lay warm (though tempered by an odd feeling of strangeness due to that look she carried in her eyes) in his soul.

"Ey, ma--back?" he murmured, as he looked her up and down a moment, to get used to the sight of her, and then edged on in a vague, indifferent way toward the outside door and the chip-pile.

Mother Dalton followed, without comment or change of expression, but a tear seemed to flit and zigzag its way down the dried courses of her thousand wrinkles. She stood in the doorway, facing the moon as it rose above the roof of the granary. If she was a little translucent for so solid-shaped an old presence, Old Dalton did not notice it, as he picked up his ax and went handily to his wood-chopping.

She maintained her position on the step quietly, her hands folded across her waistband, her feet bluish and bare upon the pine sill. But, though she did not interrupt by word or movement, Old Dalton (who had used to be no more conscious of her than of the wind or the daylight) felt to-night as embarrassed by her proximity as though she were a stranger and a hostile presence. He was sweating and irritable when he finished his sticks; and, as he stood his ax against the end of a log, twisted his head around sharply, with the intent of asking the old woman why she was "gappin' there, place o' goin' and gettin' thon bed warmed up."

But the old pioneer himself fell agape as he encountered the look on her face. There is a vast respect in the country for that many-phased quality called "second sight"; and, if Old Dalton had ever seen signs of the possession of it on a human face, he saw them on his old woman's now. It struck him, too, for the first time definitely, as he groped about in the fog of his old mind for the reason she looked so queer, so like a stranger to him, that Mother Dalton had brought some odd quality back from this "visit" she had been making.

There grew upon Old Dalton something of fear. He stood fumbling and tetering, his hands wandering nervously up and down the edge of his coat.

Mother Dalton stood upon that step, facing the half-moon that looked down from above the grove. Her glance was not directed toward him, but up and away. In the pupils of her eyes was a shine which seemed a refraction of the silver-gray beams of the moon. There was about her gaze a something heavy, mournful, and boding which old Dave could not understand, but which made him think of the expression she had lifted in the old homesteading days toward the hail-cloud that swept from eastward to beat down their little, hard-sown crop.

"They 's trouble a-comin'." The voice was hers--at least it came from her direction--yet it seemed to Old Dalton that the words came not from her, but through her. "Ey, Davie ... there 's trouble a-comin' ... trouble a-comin'. Ess time you was movin' ... movin' on...."

Old Dave Dalton had never, in the long, long course of his years, had a sensation like that which took him, as the queer voice melted away, blending imperceptibly with the homely rustlings and lowings of the farm night. The ache he had carried in his heart for those last weeks seemed suddenly to bulge and burst, like a bubble. The old moon, the hills and trees and trail of his long travel; the night, the world, and the odd old figure over against him, were bundled up with a sudden vast infolding in a blanket of black, a corner of which seemed thrust against his mouth, gagging him and cutting off his breath. He was lifted, lifted as in a great wind--lifted by shoulders, crown, and knees, and whirled around--around ... then set again on his feet very softly, with the blackness gone and the clear country night above him as before.

He should have been giddy after that cataclysm, but he stood upright and steady. He should have been tired and shaken, but he was fresh

and calm. He should have been heavy and stiff and held to the earth by the ball and chain of a hundred years; yet he seemed scarcely more solid, scarcely less light, than an embodied wind. He should have been (for the atmosphere of the home in which you have dwelt for a century is not so easily dissipated) a doddering old corporeality, yet he felt he was now all thought and glorious essence of life. He should have seen on the step that old wife who had stood so uncannily by while he sweat over his wood-splitting; yet the presence that moved toward him from the pine sill, though wholly familiar and intimate and full of kind emanations, had neither wrinkles nor grayness nor any of the attributes and qualities of mortality. He should have bespoken that kindred presence in halting colloquialities, yet the greeting he gave flowed from him in the form of a thought untranslated into any sluggish medium of language. He should have been filled with a vague curiosity about that trouble she had just presaged, yet now he knew wholly....

"Let us thank God that our sojourn ended within the bourne of His peace!" was the thought exchanged as these two dutiful ones, cleared and lightened for swift voyaging, turned their faces toward the Gates of the Day.

On the earth they had left midnight was wearing toward morning--the morning of August the First, Nineteen Hundred and Fourteen!