

OLD PARR: THE OLD, OLD, VERY OLD MAN

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IT was on November 15, 1635, that they laid Thomas Parr, the Old, Old, Very Old Man, to his rest. In no less a Valhalla than hoary old Westminster Abbey did the solemn obsequies take place. Tradition insists that this gentleman had been born about the year 1483 and that he had reached the ripe old age of 152 years when the grim, if long-delayed, hand of Death smote him in the prime of his life. His longevity, to be sure, has not set up a record for Henry Jenkins, the modern Methuselah who died some thirty-five years after Thomas Parr, reached the amazing age of 169. Nevertheless, Old Parr captured the imagination of men and earned for himself everlasting fame on the labels of a brand of Scotch and by a place in that much coveted sanctuary of Britain, the Abbey at Westminster.

John Taylor, the London waterman poet, seized upon Old Parr and made him the subject of a rhyming biography. It is from this bit of piquant verse that later day scholars and wits have been able to reconstruct the life and times of the man who lived through a period of a century and a half and then a bit more. Taylor, to be sure, had an axe to grind, and in his biography of Old Parr he takes a fling now and then at the horrible march of time in England and the ruthless social and economic changes that took place in those eventful years from 1483 to 1635. The biography is amply supplied with sallies in this direction, and Taylor views with alarm the introduction of starch, of "masks, busks, muffs, fans, periwigs, and bodkins." He is quite bitter on the subject of coaches and he remarks that "Old Parr was eighty-one years old before there was any coach in England—since then they have increased with a mischief and ruined all the best housekeeping, to the undoing of the watermen by the multitudes of hackney or hired coaches: but they never swarmed so thick to pester the streets, as they do now, till the year 1605, and then was the gunpowder treason hatched, and at that time did the coaches breed and multiply."

This wag of a waterman indicates that Old Parr was the son of one John Parr, a commoner of the hamlet of Winnington, in the parish of Alberbury, a spot some thirteen miles

to the west of Shrewsbury. For a time, from about 1500 to 1518, Parr the elder was in service. Then John Parr died, and Thomas, his lusty son, succeeded to the small holding that the Parr family leased from the Porter family. The lease was renewed by John Porter, the son of Old Parr's first landlord, in 1522. Another renewal was made in 1564, and finally, in 1585 (when Old Parr was 102) the lease was again renewed by Hugh Porter. There can be no doubt but what the Porter family had a faithful and steady tenant in Old Parr of Alberbury parish.

In Taylor's poem there is a curious allusion to Old Parr's protracted period of adolescence:

A tedious time a bachelor he tarry'd
Full eighty years of age before he marry'd.

However, in 1563, at the age of four score, Old Parr succumbed to the charms and blandishments of a Shropshire lass and married his first wife. The happy lady was Jane Taylor. By this mate Old Parr is reputed to have had two children, John and Joan, both of whom died in infancy. For thirty-two years the married couple lived together in the blissful state of holy wedlock until the union was severed by the death of Jane. Nevertheless, it was during this period of matrimonial peace and calm that Old Parr, now well past eighty, began to sow his wild oats. In 1588 the old gentleman was constrained to do penance in Alberbury Parish Church, standing in a white sheet before the entire congregation. Alas, Old Parr had gotten a bastard child by a certain Katherine Milton! Several years after this disgraceful episode, for certainly it was no less for a man of such years of discretion, Old Parr buried his first wife. The sorrowing widower was just 112 years old when Jane Taylor was gathered in to her rest and, as the poet said, "died as all good wives will do."

Ten years later, in 1615, Old Parr embarked upon the sea of matrimony for the second time. This time the bride was another Jane, Jane the daughter of John Lloyd (or Floyd) of Guilsfield, in Montgomeryshire. Jane had been married once before herself, and she was the widow of Anthony Adda. For thirty years now Old Parr and his new wife lived peacefully on the little estate in Winnington. In 1635, however when Old Parr was 152 years old, an event took place that was to have a fatal consequence in the life of this undying and un-

decaying pillar of the Shropshire countryside. In that year the second Earl of Arundel, Thomas Howard, visited his estates in the neighborhood of Shrewsbury. The Earl was one of the most avid curiosity seekers of the realm, as well as one of its wealthiest landed peers. The fame of Old Parr soon reached the Earl's ear and the Old, Old, Very Old Man was brought to the nobleman's presence. Arundel was determined to exhibit this "piece of antiquity" at the court and to astound all London with this remarkable case from the west country.

By easy stages Old Parr was conveyed up to London in a specially constructed litter. The aged countryman was accompanied on this fatal journey by his daughter-in-law Lucy, by "an antick-faced fellow called Jack or John the Fool," and by Brian Kelley, a servant to the Earl of Arundel. The entourage set out from Old Parr's cottage in Alberbury "near a place called the Welch Pool" and their route lay through "Wool-verhampton, Birmingham, and Coventry." All along the line of march the people pressed to see the old man, and at Coventry, it is said, "those that defended him were almost quite tired and spent, and the old man in danger to have been stifled—so greedy are the vulgar to hearken to, or gaze upon novelties," It was at Coventry, many years before, that a certain Peeping Tom saw a strange sight, too.

In September, Old Parr arrived in the capital. In short order the Earl of Arundel brought his latest curiosity to the City of Westminster and presented him to the reigning monarch, King Charles I. The King was greatly interested in his superannuated subject and plied him with questions. "You have lived longer than other men," Charles is reputed to have said. "What have you done more than other men?", the man who is now called King and Martyr continued, Old Parr was at a loss to answer; that horrible scene that took place in Alberbury Parish Church when he was a century old seemed to keep coming into the mind of the old fellow. The Old, Old, Very Old Man made quick reply, "I did penance when I was a hundred years old." His biographer comments:

Should all, that so offend such penance do,
 O what a price should linen rise unto?
 All would be turned to sheets, our shirts and smocks,
 Our table linen, very porters' frocks,
 Would hardly 'scape transforming.

Old Parr told his ruler that he had lived under ten kings and queens, and that he remembered well the monasteries of the days before the English schism from Rome and the suppression under King Henry VIII. The King then questioned his ancient subject on religious matters, Old Parr, very much of a pragmatist, replied that he held it safest to be of the religion of the king or queen who was in power, "for he knew that he came raw into the world, and accounted it no point of wisdom to be broiled out of it."

For some weeks Old Parr was exhibited at the Queen's Head in the Strand. But the "Old, Old, Very Old Man", as he was billed, did not long live out his fame. The hospitality of London was his undoing. The journey, the excitement, and the change in the routine of life proved too much for the poor old gentleman and he died after less than a month of London life. The plethora of rich diet, too, is mentioned by the chroniclers as another cause of this over-long demise, which occurred at the town house of the Earl of Arundel on 14 November, 1635.

On the day of the death, the great physician William Harvey made an autopsy. The genius who discovered the circulation of the blood reported that Old Parr's chief organs were in a singularly healthy condition. The famous medico believed that the untimely death was due mainly to the change of air to which Old Parr had been subjected on his removal to London "from the open, sunny, and healthy region of Salop."

After the autopsy, Old Parr was interred in the south transept of Westminster Abbey, where an inscription was recut in 1870 and it reads: 'Tho: Parr of ye county of Sallop. Borne on A° 1483. He lived in ye reignes of Ten Princes, vix., K. Edw 4, K. Edw V, K. Rich. 3, K. Hen. 7, K. Hen. 8, K. Edw 6, Q. Ma, Q. Eliz., K. Ja and K. Charles, aged 152 years, and was buried here Nov. 15 1635.' A simple brass tablet in Wollaston Chapel in his native parish of Alberbury, also commemorates the old man.

It is suggested that plain living and "good wholesome Labour" might be Old Parr's formula for long life:

He was of Old Pathagoras' opinion
That green cheese was most wholesome with an onion;
Coarse meslin bread, and for his daily swig,
Milk, butter-milk and water, whey and whig.

It is said that he observed no rules or regular times for eating but "was ready to discuss any kind of eatable that was at hand." The old man did not hold with elaborate remedies and the waterman poet says:

Garlick he esteemed above the rate
Of Venic treacle, or best Mithridate

Old Parr was a great worker and throughout his long and abstemious life he engaged in the pursuits of husbandman and farmer. It is stated that he threshed corn when he was in his 130th year. Old Parr was not one to spend his time in the public houses or the taverns:

He had but little leisure time to waste.

Again the manner of his life might be construed as conducive to longevity:

Day found him work and night allow'd him rest,
Nor did affairs of state his brain molest.

Old Parr left no progeny, although tradition credits him with a horde of long-living children. His son is stated to have lived to 113, his grandson to 109, and one of his great-grandsons to 124. Catherine Parr, an alleged great-granddaughter, is described in the "Annual Register" as having died in Skiddy's Almhouse, in Cork, in October 1792, aged 103. One story would indicate that the Old, Old, Very Old Man was an inveterate smoker, while Taylor, the waterman poet of the Thames, recalls that:

From head to heel his body hath all over
A quick-set, thick-set, nat'ral hairy cover.

There are many portraits extant of this wonderous old man. Reubens painted one from memory, and Conde engraved it for the *European Magazine*. The same appears, slightly modified, in Wilson's book, *Wonderful Characters*. In 1878 the original was knocked down at auction at Christie's. A picture dealer from Paris paid 180 guineas for the painting. The Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, too, possesses a likeness of Old Parr painted in the manner of the school of Honthorst. A picture of the old man hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London today and represents the 152-year-old-Shropshire farmer with a bald pate, a long flowing white beard, dark brown

eyes, and shaggy eyebrows. In Dresden there is a portrait ascribed to Van Dyck, originally thought to have been in the collection of Charles I and described as "De 1' Ecosais Thomas Park, point dans sa 115me annee," Even the mystical William Blake selected Old Parr at the early age of forty as a subject for one of his imaginative portraits.

Old Parr was indeed a curiosity in an age when man's expectation of life was much less than it is now. It has been said that "as many persons now live to seventy as lived to forty in the year 1500." The respect in which three score and ten was then held is evident from countless epitaphs in the churches and churchyards. At Saint Mary's Church, Warwick, is buried Mrs. Elizabeth Chown, who died in 1597. Her epitaph bears the elaborate computations so eagerly formulated by our ancestors of earlier centuries:

. . . Twice happie wife
Of two good virtuous men blest from above
With both and without out a godly life
Till seventie five she lived in perfect love
Resting a widow eight and twentie yeares.

Some years before Old Parr's death, the Countess of Desmond died at the age of 140—although some of this lady's admirers insist that this number is an error and should read 104. The Countess, too, was a virtuous lady and a vigorous one as well, although she must have been rather giddy or skittish, for her death is said to have been caused by a fall from a tree. Authorities differ as to whether the tree was an apple tree, a cherry tree, or a common walnut. On Christmas Day, 1643, Lettice, Countess of Leicester, entered her rest at the age of ninety-four. This venerable dame was the widow of Robert Dudley and the mother of Robert Devereaux and of Sidney's Stella. Neither, of course, the Countess of Desmond nor of Leicester could be objects of curiosity, as was Old Parr, for both ladies were of the peerage. Reports hint that Old Parr had meetings with his aged cronies, the Countess of Desmond and Henry Jenkins, the modern Methuselah, but modern research has thrown no light on this shaded point.

A document known as "Old Parr's Will," a spurious thing forged by the writers of the chap books, circulated from 1835 onwards. This quaint bit was used to advertise the quack nostrum known as "Old Parr's Life Pills." One T. Roberts, a Manchester druggist, sold the formula for these pills to

Herbert Ingram. Ingram determined upon a publicity campaign and employed a schoolmaster to write a history of the recipe and its potency through the centuries. In the brochure it was stated that the secret of the preparation of the pills was obtained from one of Old Parr's descendants.

And so to-day, in the burial chamber of Britain's great, lies an old man—the Old, Old, Very Old Man—who rests quietly, despite wars and tumult, beside such venerable bones as those of Chaucer, Beaumont, Drayton, Hakluyt, Dickens, Thackeray, Macaulay, Dryden, Tennyson, Browning, O Rare Ben Jonson, and countless others, including scores of conquering kings and titled queens. Old Parr awaits the trumpet call, and his fame is a curious one. Certainly he has not been forgotten; and, as long as Scotch remains a drink, so long will Old Parr's name be remembered.