SOME FAMOUS CENTENARIANS

BY J. V. NASH

OF all the untold millions of men and women who have lived on this earth, who has survived the longest? There have been many claimants for the honor, but of the various well authenticated cases of extreme longevity in modern times that of Thomas Parr is in many ways the most noteworthy. Recently the Long Life Society of London has been reviving the memory of "Old Parr" in its campaign to lengthen the span of human life by means of simple living.

Incredible as "Old Parr's" age was reputed to be, it seems to be a well established historical fact. At any rate, it won for this humble English farm laborer the distinction of interment in Westminster Abbey, with the most illustrious of England's dead. There a tablet may still be seen, recalling that he was born in 1483—nine years before the discovery of America, and lived under ten English sovereigns, until the year of 1635—five years after the settlement of Boston in New England, and nearly twenty years after the death of Shakespeare.

The son of humble peasants, "Old Parr" worked as a laborer on a farm for well over a century. At 152 he was still going strong, and might, indeed, have lived many years longer, had he not been taken to London for an extended visit. There he was plunged into a round of feasting, late hours, and general excitement which brought about his death.

The case of "Old Parr" aroused widespread interest at the time, and he was the subject of many essays and sketches. One of the most curious of these was a pamphlet by John Taylor, known as "the Water Poet," published in 1635 and entitled: "The Olde, Olde, Very Olde Man; or, The Age, and Long Life of Thomas Parr, the Sonne of John Parr, of Winnington, in the Parish of Alberbury, in the county of Salopp (Shropshire), who was born in the reign of

King Edward the IVth, and is now living in the Strand, being aged 152 years and odd monthes. His manner of life and conversation in so long a pilgrimage; his marriages, and his bringing up to London about the end of September last, 1635."

This quaint old book, which is now very scarce, tells us the circumstances of the discovery of this celebrated centenarian, as follows:

"The right honourable Thomas Earl of Arundell and Surrey, earl marshall of England &c., being lately in Shropshire to visit some lands and manors, which his lordship holds in that county; or, for some other occasions of importance, the report of this aged man was certified to his honour; who hearing of so remarkable a piece of antiquity, his lordship was pleased to see him, and in his innate noble and Christian piety, he took him into his charitable tuition and protection; commanding a litter and two horses (for the more easy carriage of a man so enfeebled and worn with age) to be provided for him; also, that a daughter-in-law of his, named Lucye, should likewise attend him, and have a horse for her own riding with him; and to cheere up the olde man, and make him merry, there was an antique-faced fellow, called Jacke, or John the Foole, ... that had also a horse for his carriage.

"These all were to be brought out of the country to London, by easie journies, the charges being allowed by his lordship; and likewise one of his honour's own servants, named Brian Kelly, to ride on horseback with them, and to attend and defray all manner of reckonings and expenses; all of which was done accordingly as followeth.

"Winnington is a hamlet in the parish of Alberbury near a place called the Welsh Poole, eight miles from Shrewsbury, from whence he was carried to Wim, a towne of the earle's aforesaid; and the next day to Sheffhall, a mannour house of his lordship's, where they likewise staied one night; from Sheffhall they came to Woolverhampton, and the next day to Brimicham, from thence to Coventry, and although Master Kelley had much to do to keepe the people off that pressed upon him, in all places where he came, yet at Coventry he was most opprest; for they came in such multitudes to see the olde man, that those who defended him were almost quite tyred and spent, and the aged man in danger to have been stifled; and in a word, the rabble was so unruly, that Brian was in doubt he should

bring his charge no further: so greedy are the vulgar to hearken to or to gaze after novelties.

"The trouble being over, the next day they passed to Daventry, to Stony Stratford, to Redburn, and so to London, where he is well entertained and accomodated with all things, having all the aforesaid attendants, at the sole charge and cost of his lordship."

The author then proceeds to relate in verse the story of "Old Parr's" life of more than a century and a half. It was a certain John Parr, he explains, who:

"Begot this Thomas Parr, and born was hee
The yeare of fourteen hundred, eighty-three.
And as his father's living and his trade,
Was plough and cart, scithe, sickle, bill, and spade,
The harrow, mattock, flayle, rake, fork and goad,
And whip, and how to load and to unload,
Old Tom hath shew'd himself the son of John,
And from his father's function has not gone."

We are further informed of the following facts of the patriarch's life:

"Tom Parr hath liv'd, as by record appeares,
Nine monthes, one hundred and fifty and two yeares.
For by records, and true certificate,
From Shropshire late, relations doth relate,
That hee liv'd seventeen yeares with John his father,
And eighteen with a master, which I gather
To be full thirty-five; his sire's decease
Left him four yeares possession of a lease;
Which past, Lewis Porter, gentleman, did then
For twenty-one yeares grant his lease agen;
That lease expir'd, the son of Lewis, called John,
Let him the like lease, and that time, being done,
Then Hugh, the son of John (last nam'd before)
For one and twenty years, sold one lease more.
And lastly, he hath held from John, Hugh's son,
A lease for's life these fifty years outrun;
And till olde Thomas Parr, to earth again
Returne, the last lease must his own remaine."

"Old Parr" was twice married, but had attained the age of eighty

years before he led his first blushing bride to the altar. Parr's two romances are described by our poet thus:

"A tedious time a batchelour hee tarried,
Full eighty years of age before he married—
. . . . . .
At th' age aforesaid hee first married was
To Jane, John Taylor's daughter; and 'tis said,
That shee (before hee had her) was a mayd.
With her he liv'd yeares three times ten and two,
And then shee dy'd (as all good wives will do).
Shee dead, hee ten yeares did a widdower stay,
Then once more ventred in the wedlock way: ,
And in affection to his first wife Jane,
He took another of that name againe—
(With whom hee now doth live,) she was a widow
To one nam'd Anthonk (and surnam'd Adda).
She was (as by report it doth appeare)
Of Gilsett's parish, in Montgom'ry-shiere,
The daughter of John Floyde (corruptly Flood)
Of ancient house, and gentle Cambrian blood."

Descending again into prose, our author goes on to say: "Hee hath had two children by his first wife, a son and a daughter; the boye's name was John, and lived but ten weekes, the girle was named Joan, and she lived but three weekes."

Granger's *Biographical History of England* says "At a hundred and twenty he married Catharine Milton his second wife, who had a child to him; and was, after that aera of his life, employed in threshing and other husbandry work. When he was about an hundred and fifty-two years of age, he was brought up to London, by Thomas, Earl of Arundel, and carried to court. The king (Charles I.) said to him: 'You have lived longer than other men; what have you done more than other men? He replied: I did penance when I was an hundred years old'."

Parr's physical appearance at the age of 152 is described in verse by Taylor:

" . . . . His limbs their strength have left,
His teeth all gone (but one), his sight bereft,
His sinews shrunk, his blood most chill and cold,

Small solace, imperfections manifold;
Yet still his sp'rits possesse his mortall trunke,
Nor are his senses in his ruines shrunk;
But that his hearing's quick, his stomacks good,
Hee'll feed well, sleep well, well digest his food.
Hee will speak heartily, laugh and be merry;
Drink ale, and now and then a cup of sherry;
Loves company, and understanding talke,
And, on both sides held up, will sometimes walk.
And, though old age his face with wrinkles fill,
Hee hath been handsome, and is comely still:
Well fac'd; and though his beard not oft corrected,
Yet neate it grows, not like a beard neglected."

It was stated that "Old Parr" had outlived three whole generations of people in the community where he resided. An eye-witness described in the following couplet:

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

The fame of "Old Parr" was quickly noised abroad, and throngs came to look at him in his London lodgings. As already suggested, the excitement and high living into which he was thrown at such an unparalleled age, were doubtless the cause of his sudden taking off, which occurred on November 15, 1635. The death of Voltaire, a century and a half later, was superinduced by quite similar circumstances, following his triumphal return to Paris at the age of eighty-four after having lived for a generation in the quiet of the country.

After Parr's death, the famous scientist Harvey made a post-mortem examination of the body, and could discover no organic disease. The cartileges of the ribs were found not ossifying and were as elastic as those of a young man. The brain, however, had hardened, and the blood vessels were thickened and dry.

Extraordinary as was the length of life to which Parr attained, there are other cases on record, though probably not so well authenticated, of equal or even greater longevity.

Metchnikoff, who made a special study of the subject, cites numerous instances of lives that have stretched far beyond the century mark. A Russian newspaper of October 8, 1904, he says, carried an item regarding an old woman, one Thense Abalva, re-

siding in the village of Sba, in the Caucasus, who was reported to be about 180 years old, yet who was able to walk about and look after her household duties. The item went on to state: "Thense has never taken alcoholic liquors. She rises early in the morning and her chief food is barley-bread and buttermilk, taken after the churning of the cream."

He quotes the French writer Chemin, another inquirer on this subject, as authority for the case of one Marie Priou, who died in 1838, at the age of 158 years, and who had lived for a number of years entirely on cheese and goat's milk.

Another case cited by Metchnikoff is that of Drakenberg, who was born in Norway in 1626 and who died in 1772, at the age of 146. He was known as "the Old Man of the North." He was in active service as a sailor for ninety-one years, and he was the subject of much scientific interest in his day.

The longest record of all was that claimed for a certain Hungarian farmer, one Peter Zortay, said to have been born in 1539, and dying in 1724, at the age of 185.

Several years ago the newspapers of the United States called attention to an interesting case of extreme longevity in the mountain district of Kentucky. The individual in question—John Shell—was said to be about 131 years of age. There were some, however, who raised a doubt as to the genuineness of the age as claimed, and Shell's death ended public interest in the case.

It appears that a slightly larger number of women live beyond the century mark than that of men. Strangely enough, there are instances of seriously crippled persons reaching a great age. Such was the case of Nicoline Marc, a diminutive cripple, who died in France in 1760 at the age of 110, and of a Scotch-woman, Elspeth Wilson, a dwarf scarcely more than two feet high, who reached the age of 115.

Longevity also appears to be hereditary. A son of Thomas Parr is said to have died in 1761, at 127, in full possession of his faculties.

There seems to be no set rule that will insure longevity. Most of the cases noted, to be sure, have been those of persons in humble circumstances, and yet there have been wealthy centenarians, such as Sir Moses Montefiore, the Jewish philanthropist of London, who died in 1885, after having rounded out a century.

It is true also that most centenarians have lived a frugal, sober, hard-working life, but on the other hand some have led lives which

were a violation of nearly every law of health. Metchnikoff mentions the case of a centenarian named Politiman, born in 1685 and surviving until 1825, who, we are informed, was an habitual drunkard for over a hundred years. Then there was Elisabeth Durieux of Savoy, who attained the age of 114. It is said that she lived mainly on coffee, of which she consumed forty small cups a day. She is described as having been "genial and a boon table companion," whose coffee pot was always on the fire. Among smokers there was the widow Lazennec of LaCarrière, who lived to be 104, and had smoked a pipe since early youth.

Newspaper dispatches of Feb. 4, 1926, reported the death, at the age of one hundred and thirty-eight, of a Russian peasant named Ivan Tretva, residing near Rostov. He had been married three times, on the last occasion when in his one hundredth year. It is said that he was the father of twenty-four children, the oldest being a daughter aged one hundred and one. Ivan had never left the soil, had never been ill, and held his hair and teeth to the end. He asserted that he had fought in every war in which Russia was involved during a period of one hundred and eighteen years. If this statement is true, he was probably the last survivor of the Napoleonic wars.

Other newspaper items recently have told of a Turkish porter in Constantinople who is still earning his living by laborious work at the age of one hundred and fifty.

A well-known German physiologist, Pflager, held the opinion that the deciding factor in longevity is something "intrinsic in the constitution," which cannot be definitely explained and must be credited to heredity.

It was noted, however, that in the Balkan regions there was a surprisingly large number of centenarians. A check-up in 1896 showed that there were living in Serbia, Bulgaria, and Roumania, 5, 545 persons over 100 years of age. The diet of the simple folk in this part of the world was known to consist largely of buttermilk

Professor Metchnikoff, who was a noted bacteriologist, Nobel prize winner, and associate director of the Pasteur Institute at Paris, reached the conclusion that it should not be uncommon for men and women to live to the age of 150 without loss of faculties. His researches in anatomy convinced him that the human mechanism was certainly calculated to last far longer than is usually the case.

Metchnikoff found that putrefaction in the intestines was one of the chief causes of premature bodily decay and death. This putre-

faction, he pointed out, could be prevented by lactic acid, an ingredient of sour milk, and he recommended the consumption of this sour milk, in which lactic acid had been produced by pure cultures of the Bulgarian bacillus. He advised, too, a life of general sobriety and "habits conforming to the rules of rational hygiene."