## AN ESSAY ON AN "OLD SUBJECT."

BY ALEXANDER SMITH.

THE discovery of a gray hair when you are brushing out your whiskers of a morning—first fallen flake of the coming snows of age—is a disagreeable thing. So is the intimation from your old friend and comrade that his eldest daughter is about to be married. So are flying twinges of gout, shortness of breath on the hill-side, the fact that even the moderate use of your friend's wines at dinner upsets you. These things are disagreeable because they tell you that you are no longer young—that you have passed through youth, are now in middle age, and faring onward to the shadows in which, somewhere, a grave is hid.

Thirty is the age of the gods—and the first gray hair informs you that you are at least ten or twelve years older than that. Apollo is never middle-aged, but you are. Olympus lies several years behind you. You have lived for more than half your natural term; and you know the road which lies before you is very different from that which lies behind. You have yourself changed. In the present man of forty-two you can barely recognize the boy of nineteen that once was. Hope sang on the sunny slope of life's hill as you ascended; she is busily singing the old song in the ears of a new generation—but you have passed out of the reach of her voice. You have tried your strength: you have learned precisely what you can do: you have thrown the hammer so often that you know to an inch how far you *can* throw it—at least you are a great fool if you do not.



The world, too, has been looking on and has made up her mind about you. She has appraised and valued you as an auctioneer appraises and values an estate or the furniture of a house. "Once you served Prince Florizel and wore three pile," but the brave days of campaigning are over. What to you are canzonets and love-songs? The mighty passion is vapid and second-hand. Cupid will never more flutter rosily over your head; at most he will only flutter in an uninspired fashion above the head of your daughter-in-law. You have sailed round the world, seen all its wonders, and come home again, and must adorn your dwelling as best you can with the rare things you have picked up on the way. At life's table you have tasted of every dish except the Covered One, and of that you will have your share by-and-by. The road over which you are fated to march is more than half accomplished, and at every onward stage the scenery is certain to become more sombre, and in due time the twilight will fall. To you, on your onward journey, there will be little to astonish, little to delight. The Interpreter's House is behind where you first read the poets; so is also the House Beautiful with the Three Damsels where you first learned to love. As you pass onward you are attended by your henchman Memory, who may be either the cheerfullest or gloomiest of companions. You have come up out of the sweet-smelling valley-flowers; you are now on the broken granite, seamed and wrinkled, with dried up water-courses; and before you, striking you full in the face, is the broad disk of the solitary setting sun.

One does not like to be an old fogie, and still less perhaps does one like to own to being one. You may remember when you were the youngest person in every company into which you entered; and how it pleased you to think how precociously clever you were, and opulent in Time. You were introduced to the great Mr. Blank—at least twenty years older than yourself—and could not help thinking how much greater you would be than Mr. Blank by the time you

reached his age. But pleasant as it is to be the youngest member of every company, that pleasure does not last for ever. As years pass on you do not quite develop into the genius you expected, and the new generation makes its appearance and pushes you from your stool. You make the disagreeable discovery that there is a younger man of promise in the world than even you; then the one younger man becomes a dozen younger men; then younger men come flowing in like waves, and before you know where you are, by this impertinent younger generation—fellows who were barely breeched when you won your first fame—you are shouldered into Old Fogiedom, and your staid ways are laughed at, perhaps, by the irreverent scoundrels into the bargain. There is nothing more wonderful in youth than this wealth in Time. It is only a Rothschild who can indulge in the amusement of tossing a sovereign to a beggar. It is only a young man who can dream and build castles in the air. What are twenty years to a young fellow of twenty? An ample air-built stage for his pomps and triumphal processions. What are twenty years to a middle-aged man of forty-five? The falling of the curtain, the covering up of the empty boxes, the screwing out of the gas, and the counting of the money taken at the doors, with the notion, perhaps, that the performance was rather a poor thing. It is with a feeling curiously compounded of pity and envy that one listens to young men talking of what they are going to do. They will light their torches at the sun! They will regenerate the world! They will abolish war and hand in the Millennium! What pictures they will paint! What poems they will write! One knows while one listens how it will end. But it is nature's way; she is always sending on her young generations full of hope. The Atlantic roller bursts in harmless foam among the shingle and drift-wood at your feet, but the next, nothing daunted by the fate of its predecessor, comes on with threatening crest, as if to carry everything before it. And so it will be for ever and ever. The



world could not go on else. My experience is of use only to myself. I cannot bequeath it to my son as I can my cash. Every human being must start untrammelled and work out the problem for himself. For a couple of thousand years now the preacher has been crying out *Vanitas vanitatum*, but no young man takes him at his word. The blooming apple must grate in the young man's teeth before he owns that it is dust and ashes. Young people will take nothing on hearsay. I remember when a lad of Todd's *Student's Manual* falling into my hands. I perused therein a solemn warning against novel-reading. Nor did the reverend compiler speak without authority. He stated that he had read the works of Fielding, Smollett, Sir Walter Scott, American Cooper, James, and the rest, and he laid his hand on his heart and assured his young friends that in each of these works, even the best of them, were subtle snares and gilded baits for the soul. These books they were adjured to avoid as they would a pestilence, or a raging fire. It was this alarming passage in the transatlantic Divine's treatise that first made a novel-reader of me. I was not content to accept *his* experience. I must see for myself. Every one must begin at the beginning, and it is just as well. If a new generation were starting with the wisdom of its elders, what would be the consequence? Would there be any fine extravagance? Would there be any lending of money? Would there be any noble friendships such as that of Damon and Pythias, or of David and Jonathan, or even of our own Beaumont and Fletcher, who had purse, wardrobe, and genius in common? It is extremely doubtful. *Vanitas vanitatum* is a bad doctrine to begin life with. For the plant Experience to be of any worth a man must grow it for himself.

The man of forty-five or thereby is compelled to own, if he sits down to think about it, that existence is very different from what it was twenty years previously. His life is more than half spent to begin with. He is like one who has

spent seven hundred and fifty pounds of his original patrimony of a thousand. Then, from his life there has departed that "wild freshness of morning" which Tom Moore sang about. In his onward journey he is not likely to encounter anything absolutely new. He has already conjugated every tense of the verb To Be. He has been in love twice or thrice. He has been married—only once let us trust. In all probability he is the father of a fine family of children. He has been ill and he has recovered; he has experienced triumph and failure; he has known what it is to have money in his purse, and what it is to want money in his purse. Sometimes he has been a debtor, sometimes he has been a creditor. He has stood by the brink of half a dozen graves, and heard the clod falling on the coffin-lid. All this he has experienced; the only new thing before him is death, and even to that he has at various times approximated. Life has lost most of the unexpectedness, its zest, its novelty, and has become like a worn shoe or a thread-bare doublet. To him there is no new thing under the sun. But then this growing old is a gradual process: and zest, sparkle, and novelty are not essential to happiness. The man who has reached five-and-forty has learned what a pleasure there is in customariness and use and wont—in having everything around him familiar, tried, confidential. Life may have become humdrum, but his tastes have become humdrum too. Novelty annoys him, the intrusion of an unfamiliar object puts him out. A pair of newly embroidered slippers would be much more ornamental than the well-worn articles which lie warming for him before the library fire; but then he cannot get his feet into them so easily. He is contented with his old friends—a new friend would break the charm of the old familiar faces. He loves the hedge rows and the fields and the brook and the bridge which he sees every day, and he would not exchange them for Alps and glaciers. By the time a man has reached forty-five he lies as comfortably in his habits as the silk-worm in its cocoon. On the whole I



take it that middle age is a happier period than youth. In the entire circle of the year there are no days so delightful as those of a fine October, when the trees are bare to the mild heavens, and the red leaves bestrew the road, and you can feel the breath of winter morning and evening—no days so calm, so tenderly solemn, and with such a reverent meekness in the air. The lyrical up-burst of the lark at such a time would be incongruous. The only sounds suitable to the season are the rusty caw of the homeward-sliding rook—the creaking of the wain returning empty from the farmyard. There is an "unrest which men miscall delight," and of that "unrest" youth is for the most part composed. From that middle age is free. The setting suns of youth are crimson and gold; the setting suns of middle age

> Do take a sober coloring from an eye
> That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality.

Youth is the slave of beautiful faces, and fine eyes, and silver-sweet voices—they distract, madden, alarm. To middle age they are but the gracefullest statues, the loveliest poems. They delight but hurt not. They awake no passion, they heighten no pulse. And the imaginative man of middle age possesses after a fashion all the passionate turbulence, all the keen delights, of his earlier days. They are not dead—they are dwelling in the antechamber of memory awaiting his call; and when they *are* called they wear an ethereal something which is not their own. The Muses are the daughters of Memory: youth is the time to love, but middle age the period at which the best love-poetry is written. And middle age too—the early period of it, when a man is master of his instruments and knows what he can do—is the best season of intellectual activity. The playful capering flames of a newly-kindled fire is a pretty sight; but not nearly so effective—any housewife will tell you—as when the flames are gone and the whole mass of fuel has become caked into a sober redness that emits a steady glow. There is nothing good in this world which time does not improve.

A silver wedding is better than the voice of the Epithalamium. And the most beautiful face that ever was is made yet more beautiful when there is laid upon it the reverence of silver hairs.

There is a certain even-handed justice in Time; and for what he takes away he gives us something in return. He robs us of elasticity of limb and spirit, and in its place he brings tranquility and repose—the mild autumnal weather of the soul. He takes away Hope, but he gives us Memory. And the settled, unfluctuating atmosphere of middle age is no bad exchange for the stormful emotions, the passionate crises and suspenses, of the earlier day. The constitutional melancholy of the middle-aged man is a dim back-ground on which the pale flowers of life are brought out in the tenderest relief. Youth is the time for action, middle age for thought. In youth we hurriedly crop the herbage; in middle age, in a sheltered place, we chew the ruminative cud. In youth, red-handed, red-ankled, with songs and shoutings, we gather in the grapes; in middle age, under our own fig-tree, or in quiet gossip with a friend, we drink the wine free of all turbid lees. Youth is a lyrical poet, middle age a quiet essayist, fond of recounting experiences and of appending a moral to every incident. In youth the world is strange and unfamiliar, novel and exciting, everything wears the face and garb of a stranger; in middle age the world is covered over with reminiscence as with a garment—it is made homely with usage, it is made sacred with graves. The middle-aged man can go nowhere without treading the mark of his own footsteps. And in middle age, too—provided the man has been a good and an ordinarily happy one—along with his mental tranquility, there comes a corresponding sweetness of the moral atmosphere. He has seen the good and the evil that are in the world, the ups and the downs, the almost general desire of the men and the women therein to do the right thing if they could but see how—and he has learned to be uncensorious, humane; to attribute the



best motives to every action, and to be chary of imputing a sweeping and cruel blame. He has a quiet smile for the vain-glorious boast; a feeling of respect for shabby-genteel virtues; a pity for the thread-bare garments proudly worn, and for the napless hat glazed into more than pristine brilliancy from frequent brushing after rain. He would not be satirical for the world. He has no finger of scorn to point at anything under the sun. He has a hearty "Amen" for every good wish, and in the worst cases he leans to a verdict of Not Proven. And along with this pleasant blandness and charity, a certain grave, serious humor, "a smile on the lip and a tear in the eye," is noticeable frequently in middle-aged persons—a phase of humor peculiar to that period of life, as the chrysanthemum to December. Pity lies at the bottom of it, just as pity lies, unsuspected, at the bottom of love. Perhaps this special quality of humor—with its sadness of tenderness, its mirth with the heart-ache, its gaiety growing out of deepest seriousness, like a crocus on a child's grave—never approaches more closely to perfection than in some passages of Mr. Hawthorne's writings—who was a middle-aged man from earliest boyhood. And although middle-aged persons have lost the actual possession of youth, yet in virtue of this humor they can comprehend it, see all round it, enter imaginatively into every sweet and bitter of it. They wear the key Memory at their girdles, and they can open every door in the chamber of youth. And it is also in virtue of this peculiar humor that—Mr. Dickens's *Little Nell* to the contrary—it is only middle-aged persons who can, either as poets or artists, create for us a child. There is no more beautiful thing on earth than an old man's love for his granddaughter; more beautiful even—from the absence of all suspicion of direct personal bias or interest—than his love for his own daughter; and it is only the meditative, sad-hearted, middle-aged man who can creep into the heart of a child and interpret it, and show forth the new nature to us in the subtle cross lights of contrast

and suggestion. Imaginatively thus, the wrinkles of age become the dimples of infancy. Wordsworth was not a very young man when he held the colloquy with the little maid who insisted, in her childish logic, that she was one of seven. Mr. Hawthorne was not a young man when he painted "Pearl" by the side of the brook in the forest; and he was middle-aged and more when he drew "Pansie," the most exquisite child that lives in English words. And when speaking of middle age, of its peculiar tranquility and humor, why not tell of its peculiar beauty as well? Men and women make their own beauty or their own ugliness. Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton speaks in one of his novels of a man "who was uglier than he had any business to be;" and, if we could but read it, every human being carries his life in his face, and is good-looking or the reverse as that life has been good or evil. On our features the fine chisels of thought and emotion are eternally at work. Beauty is not the monopoly of blooming young men and of white and pink maids. There is a slow-growing beauty which only comes to perfection in old age. Grace belongs to no period of life, and goodness improves the longer it exists. I have seen sweeter smiles on a lip of seventy than I ever saw on a lip of seventeen. There is the beauty of youth, and there is also the beauty of holiness—a beauty much more seldom met; and more frequently found in the arm-chair by the fire, with grandchildren around its knee, than in the ball-room or the promenade. Husband and wife who have fought the world side by side, who have made common stock of joy and sorrow, and aged together, are not unfrequently found curiously alike in personal appearance and in pitch and tone of voice—just as twin pebbles on the beach, exposed to the same tidal influences, are each others *alter ergo*. *He* has gained a feminine something which brings his manhood into full relief. *She* has gained a masculine something which acts as a foil to her womanhood. Beautiful are they in life, these pale winter roses, and in death they will not be



divided. When Death comes, he will pluck not one, but both.

And in any case, to the old man, when the world becomes trite, the triteness arises not so much from a cessation as from a transference of interest. What is taken from this world is given to the next. The glory is in the east in the morning, it is in the west in the afternoon, and when it is dark the splendor is irradiating the realm of the under-world. He would only follow.