Without heeding his presence, then, the old man took his seat at the table, lifted the cover, and began his dinner. It consisted, every day, of the same dish. Perhaps there are not many men at ninety-four who can devour every day a full sized steak with potatoes and bread, and can drink with it a whole bottle of port. Yet this is what the recluse did. The descendant for his part made it his business that the port should be of the best and that the steak should be "treated" scientifically, in order to ensure its tenderness and juiciness.

He took his food fast and eagerly. One could have perceived that in earlier days he must have enjoyed a great and noble power of putting away beef. He took his steak with fierceness, he devoured an immense quantity of bread, he drank his wine off in goblets as in the old days he had tossed off the great glasses of beer. He did not sip the generous wine, nor did he roll it about in his glass and hold it up to the light; he drank it, as a child drinks water, unconsciously, and yet eagerly, regardless of the taste and careless of its qualities.

When the bottle was empty and there was nothing more to eat he left the wooden chair and cast his great length into the long easy chair, where he stretched out his legs towards the fire, and, leaning his head upon his hand and his elbow on the arm of the chair, he gazed into the fire, but with eyes which had in them no kind of expression. "Evidently," thought the spectator, "the old man has two senses left; he likes strong meat and drink, the physical comfort that they provide, and he likes the warmth of a fire." Then he rose slowly and stood with his back to the fire, looking down upon his ancestor, and began a remonstrance, which he repeated with variations on every visit.

"Sir," he said, "I come to see you from time to time, as you know. I come to make sure that you are cared for, and that you are well. I come to see if anything can be done for you. On these occasions you never fail to pretend that you do not see me. You make believe that I am not present. You do see me; you know I am here; you know who I am; you know why I am here. Very well. It is, I suppose, your humour to affect silence and solitude. Nothing that I can say will, I suppose, induce you to break this silence."

There was no sign of recognition, no reply, or any change of movement.

"Why you have imposed upon yourself this life long misery I do not know, nor shall I inquire. Perhaps I shall never know. It seems to me a great mistake, whatever the cause. For if it was in consequence of another person's fault, or another person's misfortune, the waste and wreck of your own life would not remove the cause, and if it was any fault of your own such a wreck and waste of life would only be an aggravation of the offence. But as I do not know the cause I have no right to speak on this point. It is too late," he went on, "to make up for all the years you have thrown away, but is it too late for a change? Can you not, even now, at this late hour, go back among your fellow creatures and become human again, if it is only for a year or two? I should say it was harder to continue this life of loneliness and misery than to go back to the life for which you were born."

There was no answer.

"I have been over the house this morning," the young man went on pitilessly. "You have allowed it to fall into a shameful condition. The damp has got into pictures and wall paper; it will use many thousands to restore the place to a condition proper to a gentleman's house. Don't you think you ought to spend that money and live in it as a gentleman of your position ought to?"

There was still no answer. But then the heir expected none.

The old man lifted his head from his hand and dropped it back on the chair. His eyes closed, his hands dropped, his breathing was soft and regular; he was asleep.

His great-grandson still stood over him. This kind of scene affected him but little, because it occurred on every visit. He arrived at eleven or so; he walked across the park; he saw the old man doing his morning tramp; he spent an hour going over the empty, desolate house; he watched the old man taking his walk; he followed him into the library; he watched him taking his food; he stood over him afterwards and addressed his remonstrance. This was always received, as George the Third received the remonstrance of the City of London, in silence discouraging. And always in the midst of the remonstrance the patriarch fell asleep.

The young man waited awhile, watching his great-grandfather of ninety-four. There was very little resemblance between a man of that age and himself at twenty six. Yet there may be some. And no one could look upon that old man without becoming conscious that in early manhood he must have been of singular and wonderful comeliness; full of strength and vigour, of fine proportions, of noble stature, and of remarkable face and head. All these things the descendant possessed as well, but in less marked degree, with more refinement, perhaps, the refinement of scholarship and culture, but with less strength. He had done what he came to do: he had delivered his message; it was a failure, he expected nothing less. He might as well go, there was nothing more to do, or to be obtained, by staying.

But then a very remarkable event happened. He heard, for the first time, the voice of his great-grandfather. He was to hear it once more and only once more. No one, except himself on this occasion, had heard it for nearly seventy years.

The patriarch moved in his sleep, his fingers twitched, his legs jerked, he rolled his head. Then he sat up and clutched the arms of his chair; his face became twisted and distorted, as if under the possession of some evil spirit. He half rose to his feet, still holding to the arms of the chair, and he spoke. His voice was rough and harsh, as if rusted with long disuse. His eyes remained closed, yet his attitude was that of someone whom he saw—with whom he was conversing. What he said was this:

"Yes—I can speak—I can speak—and end it."

Then he sank back. The distortion went out of him. He laid his head upon the chair; calm and peace, as of a child, returned to his face; he was again asleep—if he had been awake.

"A dream," said the looker on. But he remembered the words, which came back to him, and remained with him—why, he could not tell.

He looked about the room. He thought of the strange, solitary, meaningless life, the monotonous life, the useless life, that this patriarch had lived for so many years. Seventy long years! This recluse, during the whole of that time—for seventy long years—had never got outside the walls of his garden; he had seen none of his old friends; only his great-grandson might from time to time visit the place to ascertain if he were still living. He had done no kind of work during that long time; he had not even put a spade into the ground; he had never opened a book or seen a newspaper; he knew nothing that had happened. Why, for him the world was still the world before the Reform Act. There was no railways, there were no telegraph wires; none of the inventions and improvements and new ideas and new customs were known to him, or suspected by him; he asked for nothing, he cared for nothing, he took interest in nothing; he never spoke. Oh, the wretchedness of it! The folly of it! What excuse could there be—what reason—sufficient for this throwing away of a life in which so much might have been done? What defence could a man have for thus deserting from the Army of Humanity?

As long as this young man remembered anything he had heard of this old man; it was always the same story. He was a kind of family bogey; he always lived the same life, taking the same walk in the morning and sleeping in the afternoon. Sometimes his mother would tell him, when he was a boy, scraps of history about the Recluse. Long ago, in the reign of George the Fourth, the gloomy solitary was a handsome, spirited, popular young man; fond of hunting, fond of shooting and fishing and all outdoor sports, yet not a boor or a barbarian; one who had passed through the University with credit, and had learning and cultivation. He had a fine library which he used; he enjoyed conversations with scholars, he had travelled on the Continent, a thing which then was rare; he was thinking of entering the House. He had a fine, though not a large, estate, and a lovely house and stately gardens. No one in the country had greater reason to be satisfied with his lot, no one had a clearer right to look forward to the future with confidence, than Mr Algernon Campaigne. He remembered all this talk.

He now contemplated the sleeping figure with a curious blend or mixture of emotions. There was pity in the blend; there was contempt in it; there was something of the respect or reverence due to an ancestor. One does not often get the chance of paying respect to so remote an ancestor as a great-grandfather. The ancestor lay back in his chair, his head turned a little on one side; his face, perfectly calm, had something of the transparent waxen look that belongs to the newly dead.

The young man went on thinking of what he had heard of this old man, who was at once the pride and the shame of the family. No one can help being proud of having a recluse, an anchorite, in the family—it is uncommon, like a folio Shakespeare; moreover, he was the head of the family, and lived in the place where the family had always lived from time beyond the memory of man.

He remembered his mother, a sad-faced widow, and his grandmother, another sad-faced widow. A certain day came back to him—it was a few weeks after his father's early death, when he was a child of seven—when the two women sat together in sorrow, and wept together, and conversed, in his presence—but the child could not understand—and said things which he recalled at this moment for the first time.

"My dear," said the elder lady, "we are a family of misfortune."

"But why—why?" asked the other. "What have we done?"

The elder lady shook her head. "Things are done," she said, "that are never suspected. Nobody knows, nobody finds out, but the arm of the Lord is stretched out and vengeance falls upon the guilty, upon his children and his grand-children unto the third and fourth generation——"

"The helpless, innocent children? Oh! It is cruel."

"We have Scripture for it."

These words—this conversation—came back suddenly and unexpectedly to the young man. He had never remembered them before.

"Who did what?" he asked. "The guilty person cannot be this venerable patriarch, because this affliction has fallen upon him and still abides with him after seventy years. What misfortunes? But they spoke of something else. Why do these old words come back to me? Ancestor, sleep on."

In the hall he saw the old housekeeper, who stopped to ask after the master.

"He spoke just now," he said.

"Spoke, sir? Spoke? The master spoke?"

"He sat up in his sleep and spoke."

"What in the name o' mercy did he say?"

"He said, quite clearly, 'I can speak and end it.'"

"Say it again."

He said it again.

"Sir," she said, "something dreadful will happen. It is the first time for seventy years that he has spoken one single word."

"It was in his sleep."

"The first time for seventy years! Something dreadful, for sure, something dreadful is going to happen."

(To be continued.)

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