The Centenarian

Fred Jacob

Illustrated by

E. J. Dinsmore

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The Centenarian

In which a master of irony records Petersville's discovery of a hero and the hero's discovery of himself

By Fred Jacob

Illustrated by E. J. Dinsmore

Two months before he died Aaron Dodds celebrated his hundredth birthday. For years he had been telling people in his querulous falsetto, "I'll be ninety come May Day" or "ninety-one come May Day," but no one paid any attention to him. They disliked the sound of his voice cracking and scolding. Then the new editor of the village weekly heard the old man nagging the census taker: "I'll be a hundred come May Day," he said, and Sam Gurney realized that Petersville would shortly number a centenarian among its citizens.

A brief training on a daily in a small city had given Sam Gurney definite ideas on what he described as news values, and he had not yet learned that his subscribers preferred gossip. Everybody knew that Aaron Dodds would soon be a hundred years old. What of it? He was a dirty old man, with a matted beard sometimes chopped one way and sometimes the other, and lived all alone at the edge of the town in a dilapidated house that should have fallen down years ago. A neighbor woman kept an eye on him, and occasionally gave his rooms the once over. But as a citizen he simply did not count.

One afternoon Gurney walked out to Aaron Dodds' house. It stood near a marshy creek that flowed to the river, until dried up by the heat of the summer. A few marigolds gleamed among the brown leaves of last year's rushes.

The building looked more like a centenarian than the old man. The main portion was log, with a frame addition across the front, and if any part of it had ever been painted, no signs of color remained. The logs appeared to be

about ready to crumble into fibre with dry rot, and where the plaster between the ribs had fallen out, there were great dirty wounds.

Few visitors found their way to the home of Aaron Dodds, and he blocked the doorway, eyeing Gurney with suspicion.

"What do you want?" he enquired.

Daunted by the old man's antipathy, Gurney told hesitatingly the object of his visit: he wanted the material for a story of Dodds' hundredth birthday. But he was not invited to enter.

"I was born in this house, and I hope to stay here until I die," was all the information that Dodds offered.

"If you want to know more, there's plenty of folk in this town who'll tell you lots," he added. It seemed to Gurney that the old fellow was seething with resentment; he spoke as though the entire village talked nothing but slander about him. Yet Gurney could not recall having heard his name mentioned. He backed up and the door slammed; it was clearly useless to press the doddering crank.

Two days of questioning among men of the town elicited little information. To the young shopkeepers of Petersville Aaron Dodds was not much more important than a stray cur. Older people hinted that he had been a queer one in his time, but only garbled versions of the scandals of other days remained in their memories: they admitted that the details of the stories were probably wrong. Anyway, it was long since Dodds had done anything except remain alive.

"It is a wonder that he has lived until now, and him so bitter and alone," remarked the postmaster, himself an octogenarian, with his two widowed daughters as his assistants. "His house has been filthy enough to kill an army ever since his girl went off, poor thing."

"And what about her?"

The postmaster shook his head.

Tod Williams, the hotel-keeper, recalled that when he was a boy, Dodds used to ring the town bell four times daily, and that he never missed.

"My father said it was a disgrace for the town to pay money to such an old villain. Then during the Boer War he lost his job. I guess he talked pro-Boer."

Williams grew reminiscent. Dodds had driven to and fro in an old democrat. He always sat with one foot on the dashboard and poked his decrepit nag in the flanks to make it hurry. When the horse died, he never replaced it, but limped to the bell-tower with his stick, the one he still carried. The democrat remained standing in the middle of his yard and after several winters it rotted and fell apart. When visiting Dodds, Gurney had noted pieces of rusty metal and shafts, the remains of the wrecked vehicle.

The banker declared that Dodds was not an object for charity. He had sufficient money to last him for the few years he might hang on, with all his tenacity.

On Thursday, after the paper was distributed, Dodds limped into Gurney's office.

"You never mentioned that I was at the Fenian Raids," he complained. "I fought at Ridgeway."

"But you didn't tell me."

"I suppose they had nothing to say except vile things." The wave of his hand took in the entire village.

Gurney was printing funeral notices, black-edged cards, on a small press, and went quietly on with his work. The old man picked up one of them with a wheezy chuckle.

"Did they say it was long past time you had printed some of these for Aaron Dodds?"

"They said nothing but what was kind." The editor of a country weekly endeavors to offend nobody.

Evidently Dodds did not believe him; he stumped away shaking his head.

The heading of the story in the Petersville paper read:

Lived a Hundred Years in One House

Our Oldest Citizen Establishes Unique Record
in History of Canada.

In the offices of two city dailies the lines caught the eye of the managing editors. Each one hoped that he alone had noticed it, and straightway dispatched a reporter to Petersville with instructions to build a story round Dodds as a link to the country's pioneer days.

On the train, Colin Morgan, a complacent Londoner, given to patronizing any man who had to get along with a colonial—he thought the word but never spoke it—education, met Chic Bradley, a cocky youth, related to a newspaper proprietor and accordingly permitted to splash rather loudly in specials. With their natural antagonisms duly muffled, they agreed to cooperate. Together they would seek out Gurney and ask him to take them to see Dodds. Each man felt confident of his ability to outwrite the other when they had secured sufficient material.

Sam Gurney was greatly excited to have two men, whose names were so familiar to readers of the Sunday papers, adopt him as a brother craftsman. As they walked on either side of him and subjected him to a volley of questions, he began to feel that there was more romance in Aaron Dodds than he had suspected. He explained apologetically that he had only learned by accident, after the publication of his paper, that Dodds was a veteran of the Fenian Raids.

"He has been little more than a tramp for so many years that people appear to have forgotten that he ever was different," he added.

"Because he isn't prosperous, they regard him as dead," said Morgan. He believed that he had uttered an epigram, and Gurney was duly impressed.

Before knocking at the door, both reporters took photographs of Dodds' house. It looked particularly unkempt: rank grass, very green, covered everything, for the spring had been early and sultry.

"What a God-forsaken place to live in for a hundred years," said Chic Bradley airily.

When they mounted the steps, a bony Maltese cat darted from beneath them and disappeared into the woodshed.

"Another centenarian," exclaimed Bradley. The scared animal had startled him.

Gurney was not surprised that the old man gave them a much more affable greeting than when he came alone. Apparently, an enmity, the cause of which was unexplained, perhaps forgotten, existed between him and Petersville; the men from the city represented the outside world that he regarded as his ally.

From an ancient dresser a bottle of Scotch was produced, but the glasses were so unspeakably grimy that the visitors sipped it gingerly.

Dodds took only enough to clear his throat and began to talk about his house. “It is the oldest in the county,” he said combatively; “whatever anybody may tell you.”

Bradley asked him if he remembered the Rebellion of 1837, and Morgan suddenly stopped smoking; he recognized that he was going to be at a disadvantage in a discussion of events in Ontario’s past. Morgan had always taken for granted that all the important incidents in modern history had happened in Europe, with the exception of the capture of Quebec, the American Revolution and the American Civil War.

Aaron shook his head. Then suddenly he began to talk about the bad times of Forty-eight, when the repeal of the Corn Laws in England had sent wheat in the colonies tumbling down to less than a shilling a bushel.

“In those days they all said that there was no future for Upper Canada. That’s when my father made the house larger to show he had confidence. This place was a farm then, not just a dump.”

He hesitated, and pointed with his thumb.

“What have they been telling you? That Aaron Dodds has always been a traitor and a bum? Didn’t they?”

Morgan reassured him.

He tittered to himself.

“They’ll be green with envy, they will. Nobody ever came from the city to ask what they remember, not even old Mathilde Meredith.”

Suddenly he grew angry in a childish way. Could Morgan get justice for him? Could Bradley? He appealed first to one and then to the other. He had made an invention once, when bicycles were just becoming popular —“safeties,” he called them. He had sent it to a wealthy firm, but they were not honest. In every country under the sun they had used his invention without paying him a cent for it. His rage choked him, and he sat back in his chair wheezing loudly.

The reporters looked at Gurney, raised their eyebrows and shook their heads, and he shook his head to them in confirmation of the implied query. Among the old folk in these villages stolen inventions were almost as common as fortunes in chancery.

They attempted to lead him back to the days of the Fenian Raids, but his mind was fastened on his wrongs: he would talk of nothing else.

At last Morgan tried a grievance of the more immediate past.

"You were town bell-ringer for more than a quarter of a century. When did you stop?"

The malignity deepened in Dodds' pale eyes.

"Old Mathilde Meredith will be glad to tell you about that," he said.

He grew more perverse and mixed, and they realized that it was useless to question him further.

They stood at the gate to admire the giant elms, turning pale green with budding leaf, and Morgan enquired: "Who is Mrs. Meredith?"

"She is the big noise in all the female activities of the village," Gurney replied; he would have spoken less flippantly in the hearing of a Petersvillian. "I suppose you might call her son our leading citizen. His mills keep the town alive."

"Dodds seems to hate her."

"Remember that he is a bit senile. What can you expect at a hundred?"

"I think we had better call on her," suggested Bradley, and Gurney advised them to go alone; he stood a little in awe of Mrs. Meredith.

They found Mrs. Meredith at home. She was a stout woman, trimly encased in impressive clothes, and she constantly wore a chairwoman's smile, as though she spent her entire life conducting a meeting. She greeted the two men graciously.

"So you are interested in our quaint old citizen," she said. "I wonder if any other Canadian, even in the Province of Quebec, ever lived in one house for a hundred years."

"It struck us that the people here hardly appreciate him, and that they have neglected the old man rather shamefully," Morgan remarked. It always gave him a pleasurable thrill to be able to rebuke the natives of his adopted country.

Mrs. Meredith never permitted herself to be ruffled, except when she intended to administer a snub. She spoke suavely: "So many of our leading men and women have only been here a few years. They could hardly be

expected to realize that Aaron Dodds is a unique link with the past. And he is rather a difficult old man."

Bradley enquired why Dodds gave up ringing the town bell.

Before replying, Mrs. Meredith took a moment to think.

"It was very regrettable," she said, "but for many years Dodds has taken the unpopular side of every question. It may seem unimportant now, but patriotic people found his pro-Boer utterances unbearable. They acted for the best."

"That fixes the date of his dismissal," commented Morgan.

"Hadn't he fought against the Fenians?" asked Bradley.

"Oh yes, but he was quite young then, and he altered greatly after he married."

Morgan seized upon the domestic reference.

"Can you tell us something about his marriage?"

Again Mrs. Meredith replied with care.

"His wife was an English immigrant. He had one daughter, but both have been dead these many years. His daughter was rather a heart-break to him."

She intended the last sentence as a hint that the wife and daughter had better be ignored, but Morgan was not to be guided to one side. He felt certain that the personal story of Aaron Dodds would be much more interesting than all the vague talk about colonial days which sounded like so much blather to him.

Mrs. Meredith's smile dried up, and she spoke with her best air of genteel authority: "After forty years, don't you think that such things are better forgotten?"

Bradley smiled triumphantly; he enjoyed seeing his friend snubbed.

On the train, returning to the city, the newspaper men damned Petersville.

"I'd like to make the town the villain of the piece, smug and without imagination," Morgan declared.

"In this country, all towns the size of Petersville are the same," his companion informed him. Having lived from childhood in a city, Bradley

believed firmly that no community of less than thirty thousand was capable of a decent impulse.

"In spite of the grime, the old fellow is romantic. Imagine living a hundred years under one roof."

They sat studying their notes and inventing possible developments.

When Henry Meredith was told about his mother's interview, he listened with the blank expression that always irritated her. She represented the reporters as more than a trifle unfriendly in their attitude, and hoped that her son would be sufficiently interested to resent it.

"They appeared to think that the town had neglected him," she said. "We must do something at once to make his old age comfortable."

"It is none of our business," he objected.

"But there will be a lot of publicity, and the people outside of Petersville may not understand."

"Did you tell them that Aaron Dodds was the village unbeliever in the days when that sort of thing really mattered?"

"Certainly not."

"I suppose," observed Henry bluntly, "you informed them that you were instrumental in having Dodds fired from his last steady job."

"I felt it to be my patriotic duty then," she said sharply. "How could we know so long ago that he would live to be a hundred years old?"

"And now you feel it to be your Christian duty to mess about with old Dodds, so that Petersville will not be given a black eye in the city papers."

"Doesn't it matter to you?"

"Why should we bother about a bunch of sentimentalists?"

"I've got on without you for a century," he defied them, "and I guess I can keep on. Get out of here."

Mrs. Meredith turned from her son to the Women's Club and they were more understanding. Three members called upon Aaron Dodds but their visit was not a success.

"Who is the most important person in Petersville?" he mocked them in a thin quaver. "Now that I'm famous, you want to be friendly, eh?"

In each hand he waved a newspaper at them. Both contained pages telling a life story that was supposed to be his. He had read them laboriously many times and demurred at the correctness of none of the incidents; he merely felt he was recalling events that he had forgotten for many years.

"I've got on without you for a century," he defied them, "and I guess I can keep on. Get out of here."

In the weeks that followed Aaron Dodds' sudden fame, excitement fanned his vitality into a blaze. He haunted the stores and the post-office and the other centres where men gathered, talking about himself, until he began to be a pest. Then suddenly, he collapsed into glowless ashes. The neighbor woman found him in bed one morning and sent for the doctor.

“Nervous exhaustion,” was the verdict. “Too much excitement for a man of his age.”

The doctor suggested that Mary Smithfield should be placed in charge. For thirty years Mary Smithfield had made her living by accompanying the old folk of the town to the gates of death; she arrived at the Dodds’ house in her blue dress, ample of frame and beaming.

In a few hours, with flowers and covers and new bed linen supplied by Mrs. Meredith, the bedroom was fresher than it had been for years, and Aaron Dodds’ disheveled hair spread over the whiteness of a clean pillow-case. Mary Smithfield’s attentions had given him something of the venerableness of a patriarch but when Mrs. Meredith stood at the foot of the bed and asked with her most benevolent smile, “Is there anything that you would like, Mr. Dodds?” he opened his eyes and demanded, “What do you want here, you old cat?”

He turned on Mary when she brought his next meal.

“If Mathilde Meredith sent you here you can go,” he fumed.

“You must not work yourself up,” she replied placidly, “or you will bring on your asthma again.”

She gave him a spoonful of whisky, and he breathed more easily.

Mrs. Meredith consulted with Mary in the back porch. She suggested that it would be just as well if neither of them ever mentioned Aaron’s violence toward her. She was willing to make every allowance, and in future would come only as far as the door.

Because the doctor would not give Aaron a definite name for his complaint, he swore at Mary Smithfield.

“Everybody thinks old age has broken me up,” he complained. “I won’t have it, Mary. Do you hear? Tell them that when they come prying to the door. I can hear you whispering together out there.”

“None of us can hope to be as young as we were a century ago,” she responded.

“Not any of you will see a century. Ill-begotten things, most of you. You can tell them that, too.”

She patted his pillow. “Now, now, you are making yourself cough again.”

"You're broken up, Hilda," he said. "You look worse'n me, and I'm a hundred. It's been in all the papers."

Days passed without any change in his condition. He made no effort to get up, but he badgered Mary for hours at a time to learn what everybody was saying about him now.

Late one afternoon Mrs. Meredith came hurriedly to the back door. She beckoned anxiously to Mary and drew her beyond the porch.

"Some one must have told her he was dying," she whispered. "She's in town."

Mary understood without explanation.

"Probably she has been reading about her father in the papers."

"It is too bad of her to come back now, reminding everybody of things that we are trying to forget."

The rattle of a car coming up the rough roadway interrupted them.

Mrs. Meredith grew excited. "That must be her now." She hastened round the house with Mary following her.

A bereaved-looking automobile, all mud and rust and bedraggled curtains, stood at the gate, and an elderly woman had just alighted. She moved heavily and looked scared.

Mrs. Meredith blocked her path.

"Do you think it is wise, Hilda, to come back after all these years?"

"I wanted to see him," the woman faltered. She was lanky and stooped from much working in the fields, and her hair, drawn back from her shiny forehead, looked like thin, dry straw.

"And so you shall," Mary Smithfield interrupted. She spoke with professional terseness that disposed of Mrs. Meredith. "You remember me, don't you, Hilda?"

If they had met unexpectedly, Mary Smithfield would not have recognized Aaron Dodd's daughter. Her recollection was of a tall young woman, showily dressed and defiant. Once when driving in the dusk of a hot summer evening she had seen Hilda with three farm boys, grouped in an angle of an old snake fence; they were bantering loudly together. It was a little-used side road, and Mr. Smithfield had suddenly hastened his horse without comment. That night came back to her mind as she guided Hilda into the house, leaving Mrs. Meredith stranded.

There was some overdrawn tea on the stove, strong and tepid, and Hilda eagerly accepted the offer of a cup of it. She drank apologetically, and when she had returned the cup to the table she stood there nervously pulling down the skin of her thin cheeks with the fingers of her right hand. She was overawed by the calm, masterful woman who had taken her part.

Mary Smithfield was feeling something like shock in the presence of this broken creature. Fragments of the past kept floating to the top of her memory and they seemed incongruous now.

She had thought Hilda pretty in those days; how unnaturally long her lean arms now seemed.

Hilda wiped her mouth with a soiled handkerchief. “I remember your ma, Mary,” she said. “She was a kind woman. Is she dead?”

Mary replied, “Yes.”

After a pause, Hilda bethought herself to murmur: “I’m sorry to hear it.”

Mary Smithfield made Aaron Dodds understand that his daughter had come to see him, and then retired and left them alone. She was not curious to witness their meeting, but as she prepared tea, their voices came to her in monotone snatches, between long silences. Apparently, they were as embarrassed as strangers.

Aaron Dodds had been alone with his daughter for half an hour before they got away from formalities about his illness, his age and his recent fame.

At last, he turned his head on the pillow and looked at her steadily.

“You’re broken up, Hilda,” he said. “You look worse’n me, and I’m a hundred. It’s been in all the papers.”

“It’s a good many years since you seen me, pa,” she reminded him.

“Things’ll be better for you when I’m gone. You get what I’ve got.”

She told him not to talk of dying, and then sat rubbing the back of her red knuckles tenderly, as though they smarted.

“How’s Springer behaving? Is he drinking much?” he asked.

“He ain’t touched a drop since he hurt his back, and that’s seven years come next New Year’s Eve.”

“I heard your boys set on him.”

She neither denied nor confirmed.

“He’s not so bad,” she said. “He won’t work much, and he used to be exacting on a woman, no matter what my condition was. But he married me with my baby, which weren’t his, and not many would do that.”

“No girl in this county who wasn’t in some fix would have married Springer. They knew his kind too well,” mocked Aaron.

Hilda stared straight in front of her and blurted out:

"And ma. Why wasn't you married to ma? Was it to spite the preachers?"

For a long time he made no answer; he was thinking back sixty years.

"She had a husband, a remittance man," he said. "He got sent to Canada because he married her. He abused her when he was drunk, and talked sarcastic to her when he was sober."

"Springer never talked sarcastic to me."

"She came here when your grandmother was dying. I found her when I got back from the Fenian Raids. And stayed."

"It has made everything bitter hard for me."

"And don't think it wasn't bitter hard for her, with the whole village against her." He turned his face to the wall, and when he spoke again, his voice was less malignant. "Many's the night we walked across the graves in the churchyard before you came. Some one had told her that if she walked over graves, her baby would never breathe. She believed such things."

"And then it was her who got took?"

He nodded.

"Poor ma."

Hilda had started to whimper, but she saw that her father was upset. She realized that it would not do to agitate him, so she changed quickly to a subject that always comforted her.

"Most of my boys is doing pretty good. Bryce too. He's the only one not hard on their pa. Funny, ain't it?"

When the silence in the bedroom became prolonged, Mary Smithfield crept to the door. She met Hilda coming out.

"He has fell off to sleep," she whispered.

The two women sat down together to the waiting meal on the kitchen table. Mary had already grown accustomed to the change in Hilda's appearance, and felt a great pity for her.

"You were a beautiful girl, Hilda," she said. "I used to love your golden hair."

Hilda looked up from her plate with an arch glance that made her grotesquely gawky; she had long forgotten the exhilaration of a compliment.

"You must've thought me a queer one, never to come back to Petersville, but when Mr. Springer took me up country, I told pa I'd never set foot here again."

"And I don't blame you." At such moments Mary Smithfield hated all males.

"I heard they came the next week and made a charivari for pa, and that the toughs tried to tar and feather him, and broke his leg. But I just wouldn't budge from Mr. Springer's place."

Mary smiled; it sounded odd to hear Hilda call her husband "Mr Springer." The smile reassured Hilda, and the two women waxed friendly over the cups of strong tea, made pale with skim milk.

Mary Smithfield was sitting beside Aaron Dodds when the end came. The windows were open, and the sounds of the summer night—frogs, the crawk of a night-hawk, the lonely bark of a dog and the bored whistle of a distant train—drifted in, but the old man refused to sleep. He asked her to read again from the city papers the stories of his hundred years. When she had finished one of them, he stopped her.

"There will be a lot more published when I'm gone?"

"There is sure to be," she assured him. "You're famous now."

"That'll show 'em," he said. "That'll show 'em."

Mary always ignored his bursts of venom.

She started to read again, carefully and distinctly as one reads to children. After fifteen minutes she paused to turn a page. A sudden realization that hers was the only breathing in the room startled her. She leaned over the old man and examined him intently. Then she drew up the sheet and covered his face.

Mary Smithfield straightened herself again, methodically folded the newspaper and placed it with the others. She went to the door, where she could shout across to the neighbor woman, telling her to send her boy at once for the doctor.

At Mrs. Meredith's house they were playing bridge. She had gathered in her daughter-in-law and two other women for a quiet game, and Henry sat behind his wife, quietly sucking at his pipe while he watched her cards.

When dealing, Mrs. Mathilde Meredith had the habit of making announcements or giving pieces of news. She always spoke as one in authority.

Said Mrs. Meredith; "Aaron Dodds cannot last many days. I have been thinking that his property would make an excellent site for the new hospital. It will be for sale cheap, probably by auction. I must call a meeting of the women's committee."

Four hands later, she continued: "It came to me last night that it would be a good idea to call it the Aaron Dodds Hospital."

"Good heavens, mother!" exclaimed Henry. "That old reprobate. Why?"

"Aaron Dodds is a picturesque figure," said Mrs. Meredith sharply. "I shouldn't be surprised if the story of how he lived a hundred years in one house got into the American magazines. It would be a splendid advertisement for Petersville."

"You are forgetting a lot of things about him that you wouldn't want to see in print."

"Most of us have done things that we could wish forgotten." The other ladies applauded the sentiment, though none of them felt conscious of any such lapse.

"Now, mother, don't say that we were entirely to blame because we would not tolerate his irregularities."

As a rule, Henry's sarcasms silenced his mother, but she had made up her mind and would not give way. She stopped passing out the cards while she turned to her son.

"He served his country in his youth, and he gave this community many years of faithful though humble service as bell-ringer." More applause from the ladies. "He is the sort of plain hero that a democracy should cultivate. His story would be an inspiration to the growing youth of this town."

Mrs. Meredith spread her cards with deliberation, and made no trumps with finality.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *The Centenarian* by Fred Jacob]