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*Old Willy: A Sketch*

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O Reader! Had you in your mind,  
Such stores as silent thought can bring;  
O Gentle Reader! You would find  
A tale in everything.

*Wordsworth*

Holy and beautiful is age, as the twilight of its day is melting away into the silent night. Long years have shown to it somewhat of life's mystery, and the thousand little charities' and kindly sympathies our being asks have taught a cheerful faith in humanity, and to love "the human heart by which we live." Venerable, too, is age. The shadows of the grave seem lengthened almost to the ground over which it steps so feebly, and its silence to be falling on the voice which speaks to us so gently and tremulous.

Old Willy!- how pleasantly my heart lingers with the sound! Memory is busy with I, and younger days from the younger past come at a bidding. Thou art not lying in the village graveyard, far away: nor have I grown up to wrestle with the world 'till sometimes my heart weighs heavily within me. A blithe boy, I pause this bright spring morning, to return thy kind greeting, as sitting in thy cottage door, thy head resting upon the propping staff, thou art wooing the sunshine of the pleasant May. Ah! 'tis a trick of memory-- I wander.

Reader! I have no tale for your ear. The picture which employs my hand will have little charm of coloring; but should it touch the heart for a moment with the mild light and shade all its own, I shall have succeeded. 'Tis a truthful sketch, and my heart whispers to me that some one who reads it shall say, "I too remember such an one."

Old Willy, as he was called, and he rejoiced in the name, was an old man of my native village. He had lived while well nigh an hundred years had been creeping away to their shadowy homes.

None could tell of his early history, for those who should have remembered the youth of the old man, had long since been gone; and all alone he had strayed down from the paths of younger days. It would doubtless have little to interest, could we tell more of

his history, and I have told you my story is not one of incident. True, Willy himself would sometimes grow garrulous of other days and scenes;-- but his memory was weak and wandering, and always grew wildered in attempting to call up the past. He could gossip much, though, at times to some curious antiquary, carefully searching the village grave-yard with book and pencil, and could tell the births and deaths of many whose names could scarcely be traced on the stones, all mouldered over and sunken in the ground. Innocently, I am sure, must have passed his morning, whose evening gathered so quietly beautiful. No memories of bad deeds could speak to his heart from shadows falling so mellowed around his way.

So long as I remember, he was living in a small decayed cottage, with no companion save the old woman who minded his few household concerns.

He was poor, but his wants were few, and he tilled a small plot of ground, which, with some slight pittance laid by in former years, satisfied his scanty desires. In the summer, when not busied in his garden, he might be seen sitting in front of his home, under the shadow of "his elms," as he delighted to call them. The reason was this. Many years before, at a time none but himself could remember, Willy, together with others who had since dropped around him like their autumn leaves, had brought the trees, younglings then from a near wood, and set them in a row from one end of the street to the other. Methinks all would have loved the old man for this, if for nothing else; for the villagers were ever proud of their beautiful elms, and the traveller often paused to admire their glories. In truth, they were a goodly show, those fine old trees; magnificent in the bravery of their summer greenness, and none he less, when of a winter-night, the snow having fallen on their broad spreading branches, in the morning you might see them bending lovingly with their fleecy burthen, as if the white-winged clouds had been caught in their arms and rested there- or when, as sometimes they were, encased in icy panoply, all glittering in the golden sheen, like a row of stout and steeled knights of the olden time.

Beneath them, as I have said, Willy loved to sit on a summer-day, his hat laid by his side, the light wind lifting the few locks from his temples; and so to look upon the boys so blithe and gamesome in their sports, it made his heart glad to see, and he would smile pleasantly upon them.

And they would leave their games, and gather around him as he thus sat for although as he said, he had never been himself a soldier, yet he had lived through the great wars of the Revolution, and could tell how our good friends the French, so he called them, had once passed through our quiet village, encamping in the church, and in the "Silver Lane"-- so called, from the fancies of the good dames at the great store of the precious coin the French had brought over, *as they thought*. He would speak too of some, the companions of his youth, who left their homes to fight their country's battles, but had never come back to their own firesides; --and many a young heart, I doubt not, throbbed high with its first lesson of patriotism at the old man's reminiscences.

He had stories too for our ears, of the Red men, who, within his memory were yet lingering in the neighboring forest, and by the beautiful stream winding through the green meadows of the village.

How his heart clung to the young! His presence ever brought gladness to the door he entered. He would prattle simply to the babe upon his knee, himself a very child. He would follow every sad train that walked to the quiet resting place of the dead, whether age had fallen like ripe fruit in autumn, or a sweet blossom had dropped in the spring time. He would be with every merry gathering, and had a blessing for the youths and maidens on their wedding festival. In the winter, his favorite place of resort was the little inn, where, in the long evenings, the villagers would gather to gossip innocently of their neighbors, and discuss, in their homely way, things of state. Willy was always nestled in his corner, for none ever robbed him of his chosen nook, with his chin propped upon his staff, mingling in the talk only when something touching the village history in olden time and its departed fathers, might task his memory. He could not trouble himself now to learn what was going on in the great world: -- his own little village was a world to him, turning by itself, while the world went around. He saw the golden grain waving on sunny hill and plain, and when Autumn came on, gathered in with "none to molest or make him afraid;" and when he saw happy face around their winter-firesides, the old man too was glad, rejoicing that he had outlived the troublous time gone by.

So passed his life. Year after year was stepping noiselessly by, and how happily was old Willy treading with them away. It was not well, I doubt, although his neighbors meant kindly to him, when, because they said it would fall in upon him, they won the old man to leave his poor cottage for a new snug home. I do not think he was so happy ever after. His face, always before cheerful, sometimes now grew sad: --and when the old cottage was pulled down, he would go mournfully among the ruins, carefully turning the relics with his staff as if to find something he had lost. Or he would gaze long into the old well; -- his ears had grown to the mouldering stones, the green moss, and sweet waters. He missed too, he would say, the voice of the wind among the loose boards on a stormy night; and we know not of what sounds the old sometimes make music.

He still sat in summer beneath his broad elms; and in the winter clung by the fireside of the village-inn.

One bright spring morning he was found dead in his bed by the old domestic, who had long waited his rising, and venturing in, thought at first he was sleeping, so quietly the old man lay. She had heard no noise or stir through the still night, so gently had he passed to the home of the weary.

And on a lovely afternoon they bore him away to the "silent land;"-- and as the long train walked hushedly beneath the shadows of the tall elms, I thought their branches drooped mournfully to the breeze, stirring their leaves to a strain solemn yet passing sweet.