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An Old Book on Old Age.

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CICERO'S "De Senectute" has been described as a book that gives the reader "an appetite for growing old." Some readers of the CHURCHMAN may like to revive their recollections of this book on old age, while others may welcome an introduction to a work well worth knowing.¹ And it may be of use to compare or contrast its teaching with that of the "Old Book" *par excellence*.

I.

When he wrote the book the great orator and statesman had not much experience of old age, for he was not more than sixty. But he was destined to live only three or four years; and as he felt how the years were slipping away, he thought out the whole subject of old age. The result was the "De Senectute." It appears to belong to the year 44 B.C., the year in which Julius Cæsar was assassinated.

The work is in the form of a dialogue. The principal speaker is Cato, the famous old Roman who lived a century before Cicero, and who was renowned for his singularly active and honourable and pleasant old age. Two young Romans, Scipio and Lælius, are represented as asking Cato to let them into the secret of his activity and vitality; and Cato, who is supposed to have now passed his eighty-fourth birthday, gladly agrees. The bulk of the work accordingly consists of Cato's opinions on old age, the words put into his lips being Cicero's expression of his own views.

II.

Cato begins by denying the suggestion that old age is necessarily a miserable time of life. This he does by giving examples

¹ I must acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. J. S. Reid's admirable edition of the "De Senectute."

of people who have had a happy old age—Fabius Maximus the soldier, Plato the philosopher, Ennius the poet, and so on. Cato himself was a wonderful example. At an advanced age he continued to take an active part in public affairs. He was an entertaining companion. And he had the courage, at that time of life, to begin the study of music, as Socrates did before him when quite an old man.

If we turn from Cicero to our Bibles, we find many life-stories which show that old age may be, in the best sense, "venerable"; and we think of Abraham, and Joseph, and Moses—whose eye was not dim nor his natural force abated—and Joshua, and Samuel, and St. John the Evangelist, and many more. Probably all of us have known quite elderly people whom it was a pleasure to know. Their hearts were young, though their shoulders were bent and their brows furrowed. They had a cheery view of the world that could put younger folk to shame.

III.

Cato proceeds to answer four principal—and partly overlapping—objections to old age :

(i.) *Old Age unfits Men for Business.*—Cato urges that old men are not, as such, unfitted for active life. There need be only a change of activity, not a cessation of it. The old man may be weaker in body, but wiser in mind, than the young; and he can be useful as a guiding and restraining force. On board ship, he says, you do not consider the pilot idle as he sits quietly at the helm. He is really doing more work than many of the younger sailors, who hop, skip, and jump about their various tasks below or above, forward or aft.

Another illustration he uses is the derivation of the word "senate." The *Senatus* at Rome was, theoretically, the assembly of the elders. A senator might be young in years, but he bore a title suggesting that old age is naturally associated with wisdom and judgment. Precisely the same idea is conveyed by our word "alderman"—"elder man"; and "presbyter" is Greek for the same term.

Alluding to the restraining influence of old age, Cato says that "the greatest States have been overthrown by young men, and supported or restored by the old." The story of Rehoboam occurs to the mind. He followed the advice of the young, rejecting that of the older men; and disruption of the kingdom followed.

Another topic touched on is Memory. A failing memory is a disqualification for public life. Cato says that in his experience old folks can always remember as much as they wish to remember. He has never come across any old gentleman who had forgotten where he kept his money! And where there is no constitutional defect, memory is a gift that can be trained and exercised.

Probably all of us, older or younger, are too apt to forget one thing—God's claim upon our gratitude and our obedience. And perhaps a remembrance of the bright spots in our life's record is no insignificant factor in old-age cheerfulness.

Cato alludes to the impressions of old people that they are superfluous. He did not himself share that feeling. He assumed, and quite correctly, that his society was as agreeable to Scipio and Lælius as theirs was to him. But he touches on a real danger here, both in public and in domestic life. As regards the latter, let no son or daughter who is reading this paper ever do or say anything to cause such a feeling in the mind of an aged father or mother. Be loyal to "the old folks at home." Let them never think they are neglected or ignored.

(ii.) The second objection discussed is that *old age weakens the bodily powers*. Cato admits that it does. But he says this is nothing to cry about. When he was young he did not grumble because he had not the vigour of an elephant; and now that he is old he is not going to worry because he is not so strong as in days gone by. He tells his hearers of Milo of Crotona. Milo was a professional "strong man," who could carry a bullock on his back right round a racecourse. As an old man Milo was one day watching some athletic sports. Lamenting the loss of his strength, he stretched out his arms,

exclaiming, "Alas! these arms are dead!" Cato thinks such repining is contemptible; and his words suggest that after all there is no particular gratification bestowed, nor honour conferred, by being able to walk about the town with a bullock on your back.

Milo presents a striking contrast to the Apostle who in ill-health and anxiety could say, "Though our outward man is decaying, our inward man is being renewed day by day."

Cato goes on to point out three things worth noting as to this kind of drawback. (1) Young men should be temperate in their habits. Those who grumble when they are old are not seldom people who have misused their youth. As a modern writer has put it: "The excesses of youth are drafts payable with interest about thirty years after date." St. Paul's words are true of this life as well as of the future: "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." (2) The community makes no demand upon the declining strength of old men. The aged are not called out as reserves, for example. The trend of modern legislation in Christendom is all in this direction, increasingly and happily so. (3) In old age due care is to be exercised. Some evils are due, not to old age as such, but to ill-health. Cato therefore urges moderation in food and drink. One thinks of another "grand old man," in the Victorian days, who subjected each morsel of food to "thirty-two separate acts of mastication," and who lived abstemiously.

In the New Testament the general advice of Cato is given with added emphasis. If our bodies are temples of the Holy Ghost, if life has had a Divine origin, if in some way we are in a future state to resume our once mortal tenement, then we ought not to require much urgency in the advice as to a proper care for health, and a due regard for the physical frame wherein our spirit dwells.

(iii.) A third objection to old age is that *it interferes with pleasure*. Here Cato takes a bold line. Pleasure is harmful, and old age does us a good turn in delivering us from its allurements. There is a contrast when we consider the view-

point of Holy Scripture. We are soldiers pledged to fight ever against sin, the world, and the devil. "There is no discharge in that war." Through age as well as youth the conflict goes on. Old foes reappear with new faces, and new foes appear with old faces.

But, after all, of lawful and innocent pleasures old age has a good share. Cato mentions three—social intercourse, literature, and gardening. Here Cicero obviously draws on his own experience. He had good friends; he loved books, making a hobby of rare manuscripts and handsome case-binding; and he was glad to get away from Rome to the country. Such pleasures are available now, for all sorts and conditions of men, as never before in history. The finest museums, art galleries, and libraries, the loveliest parks and open spaces, seashores, towering hills, and peaceful vales are accessible to multitudes. And friendship, good fellowship, and innocent conviviality have the sanction of Christ Himself. There is a fine saying of St. Paul's that gives helpful advice to old and young alike: "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honourable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

(iv.) The last objection to old age discussed by Cato is that *it heralds the approach of death*. The sturdy old Roman says that, as death is natural, it cannot be evil, and that, just as your well-behaved guest leaves the banqueting-hall when the feast is over, so the old man should take his leave of life cheerfully and contentedly. We ought, he says, to aim at living well rather than long; and that if a young man on the battlefield can face death with courage, the old man at home may face it with calmness.

Let our last reference to the "De Senectute" be the remarkable passage in which Cato speaks of the future life, and looks forward to it with glad anticipation. "From this life I depart as from a temporary lodging, not a home. For Nature has

assigned it to us as an inn to sojourn at, not as a place to dwell in."¹

And he speaks of the joy there will be in meeting again his dear son, whom death had taken from him. Under that sore bereavement Cato had borne up bravely, not because he did not feel the blow, but because he knew that the separation would not be for long.² Unfortunately, Cato rather spoils this fine utterance by seeming to apologize almost for his hopes. With him the future life is a hope; but it is not a "sure and certain hope." He may be mistaken, but he will always cherish the belief.³

IV.

A perusal of the "De Senectute" illustrates the justice of Petrarch's opinion that "in reading Cicero you would sometimes think that you are listening not to a pagan philosopher but to a Christian apostle."

But there is an essential point of difference between the Christian position with regard to old age and that of the old book we have been thinking about. Philosophy can give us sound principles and good advice. The Gospel proclaims a bestowal of life—life spiritual and abounding and eternal. If it is a misfortune to be old, then it is a misfortune to be young, or any age at all. Fortified by faith in God as revealed to us in Christ, youth has its own blessings, but age has its special benedictions too. Let us take care of the hours and the days as they pass, and the years—shall we say that the years will take care of themselves? Nay, rather, "With God be the rest."

¹ "Ex vitâ ita discedo tamquam ex hospitio non tamquam e domo. Commorandi enim natura divorsorium nobis non habitandi dedit."

² "Me ipse consolabar existimans non longinquum inter nos digressum et discessum fore."

³ "Quodsi in hoc erro—qui animos hominum immortales esse credam—libenter erro. Nec mihi hunc errorem quo delector dum vivo extorqueri volo."

