

## “GROW OLD ALONG WITH ME”

W. HARVEY-JELLIE

“**WOULD** you be young again?”—The question came like a bombshell, giving one seriously to pause amid the rush of the years; yet we are prepared to answer with a negative—perhaps a qualified negative, but none the less an emphatic one, with ample reasons appended. The question has something of fascination about it; for so much has been said in praise of youth that it is high time for an apologist of old age to raise his voice. Indeed, one cannot help wondering why, over against the countless enthusiasts who are for ever chanting the glories of youth, there have been so few eminent bards and authors who have dared to strike a note of triumph when telling of maturer years and hoary old age.

Time was when, for all of us, the very name of old age had something sepulchral, almost ghastly, about it. It made us think of coffins and undertakers and funereal plumes. But the years have sped onward with their ever-increasing acceleration till we have reached the last lap of the race, the confines of the “undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns”, and we do not find the border-line quite so grim and cold as we once feared it would be. In fact it seems more like a harvest-field than a wintry waste. Not that we undervalue the zest, the vigor, the exuberance of the days when we were younger and all the world lay before us; but with the years there has come a new sense of values, and we have learned to appreciate more highly those reaping-times which complement the arduous days of seed-sowing. So, for the nonce, we are pledged to forego the listful retrospect to the days that never can return, and sound a note of encouragement for those who are going down-hill and with slower step are approaching the last scene of life’s eventful drama.

Yet, stay a moment!—We shall fail to be just in our comparisons if we do not first call to mind what it was that gave so rich a glamour to those halcyon early days. All the world was young when we started on the long trail; ambitions were lighted with optimism, strength sustained courage. The records of youth in other days fired our imagination; we were well aware that the world had been dazzled by its infant-prodigies and its super-men of genius, its Alexanders who wept at three and

thirty that there were no more worlds to conquer, its Napoleons who held Europe in their sway at the dawn of manhood. Was it not at the cryptic age of twenty-three that Newton revolutionised the world of pure mathematics, and Descartes amazed all thinkers with his philosophic system? At that same age William Pitt entered on a career of unparalleled brilliance as England's Premier. Keats had given to the world his witching verse before twenty-six, and Shelley and Byron ran close competitors. In his three and thirtieth year the Genius of the religious world launched out on its world-conquering mission the Christian Church with His victory of the Cross. No wonder that with such examples, easily multiplied at leisure, we are proud of the achievements of youth and refuse to be niggardly in assessing its value. There were days—we care not to say how long ago—when we ourselves delighted to mingle with the old-time students of Strassburg University and sing at the top of our voice *Gaudeamus igitur, Juvenes dum sumus*; today, however, while thinking less contemptuously of age than the author of the students' song, we sing it with less gusto, not so sure that youth has it all its own way in a world where every man must stand or fall according to his individual merits. We have not lost the glow of admiration for the raw recruit who expects victory to come with the morrow; but we take off our hats to the veterans who return from many campaigns with the scars of battle on them.

Enough, however, to indicate that we still delight to pay our tribute to the young and strong, and have no wish to qualify our praise of youth; but you may as well once and for all rule out any sympathy with the familiar cry of "too old at forty". That was the slogan with which in days past the mob of immature and incapable have tried to rush the field and sweep the smaller group of elder rivals from posts of influence and power. It will never do. Fortunately that cuckoo-cry is not so frequently heard now-a-days. Fascinating as a catch-word, perhaps; but it simply does not work when we have to deal with the grave concerns of public life and national destiny. Its implications are so fallacious that it may be doubted whether any thinking classes would now treat grown and disciplined manhood with contempt, or would refuse to concede due respect to age.

Why, indeed, should we bald or grey-headed men meekly submit to be elbowed out of court, when condescendingly ignored, when pityingly tolerated and when prematurely placed on the lists of the superannuated? Such meek modesty may accord

with the quality of “push”—modern substitute for character as the prime condition of success. Surely it is high time we claimed our rights and made out a good case for our plea for consideration. If we are to be “liquidated”, we shall scarcely make the plea for death which is said to grace the loyalty of Soviet “saboteurs”. Old age is coming into its own, and we may lift up our heads in confidence. We still have our part to play in the hectic life of the peoples, and are resolved to march with the ranks of progress. We are, indeed, cheered in our resolve to win new laurels even yet by the fact that our detractors are recruited mainly from the ranks of loud-mouthed agitators and hollow demagogues. Certain factors which have come to the front in modern life make it evident that those who despise maturity and age will not get our scalps so easily as they assume. Is it not an admitted fact that the proportion of elderly men to younger men is steadily changing today in favour of the grave and reverend seniors? Take the most conspicuous case, that of the United States with its declining birth-rate in the cultural classes and its increase amongst the lower classes; and let the fact sink in, that while there is a declining birth-rate on the whole, there is a continuous increase in the average length of life through the application of temperance and hygienics. The extension of longevity with the falling off in births means that you will have to set a new value upon your elder men, conserving your forces, preserving your assets. Here you have a serious problem, which can be solved only by a revolution in the social life of the country, with a rectification of the primal instincts that govern the birth-rate. Whether one like it or not, we shall soon be compelled to give greater heed to our increasing numbers of men who have been trained and disciplined in public life, precisely as the wise general would deal with his seasoned troops when it is difficult to secure new recruits. We no longer live in the Middle Ages when fifty years was considered a long life; a man should look forward to his seventies, unless he transgress the limits of self-control or defy the warnings of medicine and reason.

Believe me, my dear old comrade, the majority of assertive youths who are so impatient to see us relegated to the rear are drawn from the ranks of the whipper-snappers of our academies and from the fledglings of our colleges, who loudly proclaim their ability to govern better than the long tried veterans of the political world. Just consider for a moment those academic institutions with which you may be familiar; and you will admit

that it is true. Do you not notice in them a tendency to "liquidate" to the retired list men who are still in the prime of life and at the height of their intellectual ability, enriched by the discipline of long academic experience and by years of comingling with the thinkers of the world? These are the men who are being dismissed by the harsh guillotine application of laws and bye-laws of the institutions of learning, to be replaced by raw youths who are supposed to be endowed with the freshness of young thought and the flashiness of audacious theories of economics. It sounds somewhat curious; but what is true of the academic world is equally true of many another sphere of life and public service. Some of us cannot help viewing with grave concern this scrapping of our finest man-power and brain energy. Our chairs in the college are being occupied by self-confident teachers whom we would shrink from permitting to indoctrinate our sons and daughters in the science of history and politics and economics. But what is to be done?—The emotional and uncritical crowd still runs after blatant upstarts with gaping mouths and clapping hands, little recking that wisdom comes only with experience. Calmer reflexion carries the conviction that the sterling qualities of a less sensational and self-assertive manhood, tempered by stern discipline and welded by the contacts of the years, are very much worth while in the public interest during these tense and strenuous times. While we hold no brief to defend the professional staffs, we have very vividly in mind the amused indignation aroused in a Canadian university quite recently, when a group of freshmen issued a manifesto demanding a revolution in the curriculum of studies and threatening something of the nature of a strike unless they were permitted to dictate what subjects should be compulsory and what should be optional. "Brainy fledglings!", was the comment on the campus; for the more serious student simply went on his way equipping himself for proficiency, heedless of the loud speakers of bumptious incapacity. Everyone felt that what the agitators in this instance lacked was experience and balance. They did not know the greatest educator of all—LIFE; and as the English laureate so ably sang—

Life is not as idle ore,  
But iron dug from central gloom  
And heated hot with burning fears  
And plunged in baths of hissing tears  
And battered with the shocks of doom  
For shape and use.

There are things regarding age which need oft repeating, even if they have been well said before. “Cursed be the man who thinks my thoughts before me!”—even if the imprecation should fall on the revered head of wise old Cicero. But long ago Rome’s premier orator and author eloquently voiced the dignity of old age; and when we begin to feel the heavy hand of the years upon us, we still reach up to our book shelves and take from its place the *De Senectute*. In its well-thumbed pages we find that two millenniums ago a veteran of war and a doyen of political conflict could write with genuine content of the pleasures of old age that brought with it the larger leisure, laden with honour and respect, accompanied by the pleasing retrospect and the calm forward glance. For Cicero the end held nothing grim or terrifying. The old heathen scholar looked for a reunion with the great men of antiquity, and a wider existence beyond the confines of life. For him, too, there was a rich happiness in the increased opportunities for social intercourse and the indulgence in horticultural hobbies.

We may do well, then,—indeed, circumstances may yet compel us—to assign a new value to maturity, and lengthen the terms accorded for active service in many spheres of social and public life. We dare not forget that the world’s greatest law-givers, the Dracos and Solons and Moses, were men of years, that Da Vinci and Tintoretto gave us their masterpieces when hoary with age, that the great philosophers of ancient Greece were no raw youths, that America has selected her Presidents from men dignified by long apprenticeship to national affairs. The greatest thinker of the religious was such a one as “Paul the aged.” Turn where you will, search all the annals of professional and economic life, you will still find that qualities of sound judgment and strong action grow with the years. No need to hang the grey head! Time that we elder men stood erect and faced the demands of modern life, confident of ability to contribute to the fighting forces of the nation’s progress and democracy.

But we seem now and then to catch the echo of the disparaging term “dotard”!—and the word is lightly bandied to and fro, as though it were finally settling the question. In the end it becomes a cover for a criminally ignorant contempt of age. Dotard, forsooth!—when modern life has no greater asset than hearty and hale old age, when in the fierce campaign waged today for stability and progress in social systems, in moral order, in personal welfare, there is a dire need of every ounce of experi-

ence and disciplined ability we possess. What is most needed today, and what youth is least qualified to supply, is character—that chiefest credential for high posts of trust; and character is neither hereditary nor acquirable in the class room—it comes through the slow and painful methods of experience. *Per ardua ad astra*, as our gallant air-men declare in their watchword. And has not Emerson taught us that the greatness of a nation is not expressed in terms of the figures of the census—it is measured solely by character—that monopoly of the years.

There is no conceivable reason why the usefulness, the enjoyment, the energy of manhood should decline like the ebbing tide when physical forces flag. Given due regard for one's physical condition, there need be no such thing as senile decay. As the Christian apostle put it, "Though our outward man is decaying, yet our inner man is renewed day by day". It is not always easy to say when what is flippantly designated senile decay actually sets in; its symptoms may even appear before the early threshold of manhood is passed. In a very real sense no man is old until he feels old; and there is abundant truth in the inspiring picture which Tennyson draws of the aged Ulysses refusing to relinquish his quest of knowledge, resolving in spite of advancing years to "do and dare" until the final sunset. Meanwhile, as the end slowly approaches, there is ample compensation even for those who are aware of lessening physical force. It is no small thing to be recognised as an equal by men of eminence, to be consulted on matters of public enterprise, to hold a place on boards and committees, to be listened to when expressing an opinion. Although in the rough and tumble of life we may not have amassed a fortune, there is the possession of the inalienable wealth of heart and mind; and, if a wise statesmanship would seriously take in hand the elusive matter of adequate pensions, there need be no shrinking from closing years.

Probably most young people are disquieted by the thought of death. Not so the aged! As we allow our thoughts to travel again the long vista of the years, we are conscious of possessing the Wordsworthian "philosophic mind" which sees through death. We have learned to view with greater complacency the mingling of the hard and easy, the stormy and the calm of past days; and thereby we are enabled to look ahead without fear. Beyond the setting sun we discern, with a clearness impossible while the noonday heat conjured up the mists, the shores of the land beyond the distant West. A certain glad content

settles upon the soul. With the chiefest apologist for old age amid the poets we exclaim:—

Grow old along with me.  
The best is yet to be  
The last of life for which the first was planned.

Yes! things are best as they are; we stand calmly prepared for the soul's last brave venture into the unsunned spaces. We would not crave to tread again the long trail of life. Nature's order has nothing in it we can quarrel with. We are proud of our splendid young people, and find our greatest pleasure in watching their first assays in the arena of life; but we are not envious. We would not, if we could, pass through it all again. We would not be young again.