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### THE ADVENTURE OF OLD AGE

My critical - and younger - friends hearing me couple adventure with old age tell me the words are discordant, irreconcilable. Adventure, say they, means anticipation, fresh experience, zest, enjoyment. Old age is void of all these; it is a sterile and hopeless period, running into a blank wall - an impasse.

I believe them to be wrong and I speak as one  
is  
who now five years past the dead line of seventy where for our purpose here we will suppose old age to begin. I think they are wrong and besides I insist that this thinking is not as they intimate, <sup>- that - I am</sup> keeping up my courage by pulling on my boot straps.

Why are we so at odds? I suspect that the difference between us is that I see old age as a period with experiences, qualities, advantages peculiar to itself. My friends see in it a period with no possibilities of its own, at best a camouflaged middle age, a period of pathetic,

sometimes ludicrous imitations. They are right if one's last years must be patterned after years gone before. Imitation can never be adventure.

The first step in settling the question is to challenge the accepted notions of old age - divest your mind of the bug-a-boos, the taboos, the fears, the bad name generally that has followed old age through the centuries. Poets and philosophers, even Holy Writ, itself, has draped this final period of life with mourning weeds, put doleful slogans into its mouth. From childhood on there is built up in the minds of most of us a dread of this final period of life as something inherently miserable, that is, we come to that last period handicapped by the notions of the past. It was a clever old man who said that his friends were trying to force him to live as if it were "a rehearsal for a funeral."

To begin with it is not so. Look about you in any community and where will you find a man of seventy such as Shakespeare pictures him - "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." We have come to laugh at the description.

In contrast one finds everywhere those who have stood out against the conventional notions of what old age should be. You find them in all ranks of life.

~~country and apparently doing a good job. They are~~ all about us if we look. For instance there is a dear neighbor of mine in the country. "Going on eighty-four," she will tell you. Living alone, not afraid to face the possibility of a blizzard like that of 1888 which she went through and which has been one of her favorite methods of flooring us all when we talk<sup>ed</sup> about a bad storm. She experienced 1888 and she has lived through this blizzard of 1934, snowed in and alone, and is gaily telling the story.

But how does she put in her time? Drop in on her some afternoon as I always do in the country <sup>as I</sup> did when the thermometer was way below zero this winter. I found her snug beside her ever-burning coal stove - a charming Martha Washington table set up in front of her and on it a braided rug in progress of development. The table was piled with gay strips. She was selecting with great care the colors she wanted to combine, braiding them and then painstakingly sewing them around the rug which already had taken on goodly proportions. Her delight was in her workmanship, the harmonious <sup>arrangement</sup> matching of colors, the smoothness of the braiding, the firmness and invisibility of stitches. It was a work, a creation, and she was enjoying it to the full. And beside her a radio was delivering an address on the New Deal!

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She is interested in the New Deal. It is her President that is pulling it off. All her life she has been an impassioned Democrat. She gasps a little to see the tariff sidetracked; she is bewildered by what has happened to the gold standard, but after you have seen changes for eighty years you are a little more flexible in accepting them, particularly when it is your party that is making the change. So she is loyal and interested and excited. Old age to this woman is a real and living adventure.

How does she and how do the hundreds of others that we find all about us do it - how do they defy so successfully this judgment of the centuries that old age brings only more labor and sorrow?

If it is to be an adventure you must make ready for it. If you are revolutionist enough to defy a creaking world you must be explorer enough to make sure just what is back of the creaking. There is never smoke without fire. What resources have you for fighting the fires which threaten old age? There would be none of these warnings of pitfalls if there were no pitfalls. What do you know about them? What is your equipment for avoiding them?

It comes down to a question of the equipment, resources, that you have laid up in earlier years. You must

not expect to accumulate fresh reserves after seventy, but you can know what you have in stock and use intelligently and cheerfully the accumulation. How are you off physically? That every sensible person should know thoroughly. The body grows no better after seventy, that is sure, but it is quite possible to handle it more sensibly than you have ever done before. If you cannot buy new organs - they are not for sale in the best of hospitals - you can take care of the organs you have, know how much wear there is in them, what to avoid, what to expect. If you do not already know that any sensible physician will help you to find out.

The central thing to understand - by understanding I mean to admit frankly and never refuse to remember - is that however strong the sense of well-being after seventy no organ has the same power of resistance that it had in middle life. You may have sound organs functioning regularly and normally - watch them and you are certain to see that they tire more easily than when you were fifty. There is the heart. Suppose that you have been a good walker and that perhaps you have been keen on climbing. It was a surprise to me when I began to puff on a steep hill, not that I had ever been a Mountain climber, but I had always had a certain ambition to be a Mountain climber and when opportunity offered

had done my little stunt. I even went as high once as the Grand Mulets on Mount Blanc - ten thousand feet, and did it early in August when the snow was beginning to soften and the work was the harder for that. But it would not be possible for me to make that climb now. At least I would have the sense not to try it - I hope.

But if you cannot climb you can walk, or should. Suppose you are a bit stiff, find it hard sometimes to rise, cannot touch the floor with your finger tips let alone the palms of your hands, there is the more reason you should stretch your muscles daily, keep your joints oiled and pliable by exercise.

I know a woman of seventy-seven who if she had not been of indomitable spirit and profound common sense would have been years ago bed-ridden. Some kind of serious knee handicap was the trouble. But walk she would and walk she does. She loves the outdoors, the fields, the woods; they are her chief refreshment of spirit, the thing that brings her back to normal courage more quickly than anything else.

This woman of whom I speak has taken her daily tramps when the pain must have sometimes brought tears

to her eyes. But what is the result? She still walks instead of sitting in a wheel chair; she still has her hour of solitude and communion out of doors.

There comes a choice then. Are you going to defy what you know is beyond your resistance or are you going to admit that you have no right to try yourself and fit your exertion to your capacity?

It is a nice task this judging of the capacity of legs, lungs, liver at seventy, what they will and will not stand without protest, asking no more of them but asking all they are fit for, keeping them going. That is the physical problem of old age to keep your organs acting rythmically according to their strength and acting in harmony - that precious harmony which means well-being.

Agreed that you cannot skip about as you did at twenty, at forty, and even at sixty, but is there not something very pleasant in taking it a little easier? If your mind is an active one you will relish this letting down. Indeed, I think <sup>it</sup> one of the real satisfactions of years. It is hard at fifty, sixty, to justify yourself in your own eyes, as well as those of your friends, in dropping out of things - committees - extra activities - letting down in

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the active life you have made for yourself, a family, a profession, a business, a trade whatever it may be. Ambition, self-respect, obligation, all have forced you to as complete and continuous activity as within your powers. You may know at times you have deliberately overstrained, but you have realized that the come-back was not difficult. Over-work for a week when a pressure was on and two days of quiet in the country brought you back again. I have watched one of the most interesting men of our times - Owen D. Young - carrying grilling responsibilities day on day and when that was over picking up and going to his farm which is his refuge; sleeping it off; walking it off; talking it off with neighbors and friends and coming back fresh to the same grilling thing. But Mr. Young is still in his fifties. When he passes the sixties, enters his seventies, the come-back will not be so quick, and wise as he is that he will know.

If you have the reverence you ought for the body in which you live you will know that now the strains take it out of you more than they did. It means more than a week end in the country to bring you back fresh and in a fighting mood.

It is part of the art and adventure of growing old to move at a more leisurely pace, lie a little longer in the morning; sit a little longer in the sun; go to bed when you want. That is one of the advantages of years, one of the joys I should say. Up to now when the body has cried out for a little more sleep, the mind for a little more leisure to think over things, the spirit <sup>to</sup> an hour to commune with itself, you have denied them, but now you can with good conscience yield to their pleas and will, if you have made up your mind to get the most out of this new territory into which you have entered. The ease in itself is an adventure to one who has always been driven.

This letting down gives an opportunity for one of the rarest privileges of old age, making an inventory of mental resources. You can take up now things that you left behind years ago because work, responsibilities, drove them out.

I suspect that there are very few people of active life that have not in the back of their mind or in the back of their experience, some interest that they picked up in youth, middle age, grew excited in learning about and then were forced to drop. . . Now here is the time for it and no compulsion upon you to do anything more with this

interest than to enjoy it.

There is a deep satisfaction in an activity which is free from the utilitarian - the competitive - the commercial - which is followed because you find pleasure in it, because it satisfies something in you until now unfulfilled. I once entertained a brief passion for pottery, went so far as to negotiate for a little wheel, talked to the potters at Rockwood, the Longworth place in Cincinnati, about the possibility of learning to use it. I have today a pitcher turned out for me by one of them while I watched. It bears my initials and date - I. M. T. December 17, 1889, a souvenir of an unsatisfied desire! It was the feel of the thing, a queer tingling in my hands, which to a less degree I have today, which drew me. I never wanted to paint a portrait, mould a form, but I always wanted to turn out pots, and if other things fail I may try it, at least it is refreshing to know the old desire is not extinct.

It is a grand period for books - all those books you have sighed to read and never had time - all those you are longing to re-read.

I have known people who rubbed their hands with glee at the thought that "after seventy" they would

dare give themselves time to "go over" their old favorites, test them by the new, re-examine the foundations of their thinking and feeling. I hardly know anything more pathetic than a case like that of President Doumergue of France, that is, he is the President at this writing - March 1934. There may be a half-a dozen before this article is printed, so do they come and go in France. Here is a man who had been so busy in public life that for years he had not been able to read the books he wanted to read and at seventy he retired promising to "catch up." But hardly was he comfortably installed than he was dragged out to take part in that chronic political process called saving the country and he had to put aside his books. However few of us need fear such interruptions.

Nothing save the natural life about you - growing things - the seasons - the sky - give the same sense of endless wealth that books do. Nothing so proves how full the world is of things to interest men and women. Open your dictionary and take the first word your eye lights on. River is what I see. No life is long enough to finish up the books on Rivers. Could you in the years remaining read all

that has been written about the Amazon since it was discovered four hundred and thirty three years ago? I doubt it, but if the Amazon gave out then there are the Thames, the Po, the Danube, the Nile, the Mississippi. I defy you to live long enough to finish them. I confess I happened on a prolific word, but all words are prolific if you are willing to dig into their roots, follow their ramifications, learn their history and their human relations.

And while we are still talking about books there is one which every one who really feels adventure in the air after seventy should read or re-read. It is the one and only great tract on old age, two thousand years old but written with a gusto and a wealth of human interest which edited for today would qualify it for a place in a popular magazine under the head of inspirational - Cicero's essay on Old Age. He began it to console a friend

and himself for the burden of years "weighing upon or at least approaching" them and became so interested and excited over his findings that he ended by declaring that his investigations not only had wiped out all annoyance at old age but had made him feel that the time was one of ease and delight!

It is an essay rammèd with the observation of a man who all his life had known people, people of power, people of talent, the best of his world - and a great world it was. And looking about him what does he find? Enough to make him pooh-pooh at the charges he always had heard made against years, the charges that they take you out of active life, away from affairs, that they enfeeble, incapacitate you, that they take away all pleasures and end in death. Cicero refuted these charges by a wealth of experience. Take you out of active life? And then he goes on to tell of this or that great General, seventy or more, who was fighting and carrying on campaigns with brilliant success, this or that politician who had downed his enemies, this or that orator whose voice was never so powerful, whose logic was never so sound.

As for enfeebled bodies, well of course these men would not be doing the things they were doing, winning battles and campaigns and elections, upsetting their enemies, if their bodies were enfeebled.

As for pleasure, what do you mean by pleasure - wantonness, excess? That is not pleasure; that is the vice, the handicap of youth. Look at so and so. See him in his garden from morning until night, see him happy over his books and games. Beauty of life, beauty of the world, that is what you have time for when you are old.

As for death - how natural it is. Simply Nature which put us together taking us apart. With Socrates Cicero believes in immortality and he looks forward eagerly, so he declares, to what is waiting. But suppose he goes on that, he is wrong that once dead he no longer has consciousness, "as some narrow-minded philosophers imagine." Well at least he will not be irritated by the dead philosophers ridiculing his delusion!

Certainly nobody who is "around seventy" should overlook Cicero on Old Age, so backed up it is by knowledge of people and life, such a ring of sincerity and eloquence and joy does it carry. A grand essay!

One of the rewarding discoveries of one's later years, if he has not already made it, is the value of the past - your past - the world's past. It gives you a basis of comparison, it demonstrates again and again that all the excited hullabaloo in which we live is only history repeating itself. It suggests that if we took it more calmly, took time to see why this or that tried so often before failed or fell far short of its goal we might get ahead more surely, more rapidly. True, this attitude of mind is hateful to youth. Why? I heard a wise man of India tell this story:-

A seer sat under a tree with his disciple. An occidental <sup>rushed</sup> walked by.

"Why," asked the disciple, "does the man from the West always hurry?"

"Because," said the seer, "he thinks there is an end to the road. We do not hurry because we know there is no end."

It is hard for youth to know what the man from India was talking about. Why should youth know? It is handicapped by coming into the world with no knowledge of the condition under which it must live. It must by cruel experience learn not to stick its finger into the fire,

eat dirt, cry for the moon. It must make the disconcerting discovery that it is not the center of the universe, that men lived before it and will live after it. All hard lessons and lucky is the man who has learned them by the time he crosses the seventy year line.

However wise and reasonable we may be about the use of body and mind after seventy the zest and refreshment, the adventure of our living will depend on the spirit which we bring to our undertaking. That is, there must be an inventory and a discipline of spiritual resources as of bodily and mental.

Resentment at declining powers, <sup>self</sup> atrophy what remains of those powers.

Jealousy of those who are taking the place we once filled; dry up the sense of the possibilities which it is up to us to develop in our new situation.

Blindness to the value of what is within reach, the new riches waiting to replace the old, leave us groping.

Fear of the end - of ~~Death~~ - congeals life at its very source.

A spirit which cannot control these hateful expressions will never develop the imagination, the humor, the courage necessary for real adventure of any kind at any age.

Certain things then seem quite clear to me as an explorer and an experimenter in this ~~malignant~~, <sup>malignant</sup>

and suspected territory, if it is to be as I am convinced  
it may be - an adventure.

You must  
/make your own appraisal<sup>al</sup> of your resources  
after wiping your mind free of all old wives' tales about  
age, ridding yourself of the imagined ills and grievances  
with which most of us load ourselves and which in later life  
are sheer dead weight, however they may have been justified  
in earlier days - clean them out, forget them.

You must  
/take stock of what you are - what you  
have and play your game with the cards in your hand. Nobody  
is going to give you a new deal. It may mean a far simpler  
mode of life than you have ever known; it may mean walking  
a half mile when you once walked ten; it may mean no tea or  
coffee, only an hour's reading when it once was five; it  
may mean watching your life-long political, philosophic and  
social ideas shelled ruthlessly by those whose wisdom you  
doubt and knowing you have no ammunition to return fire.  
It may mean, and this is the hardest sorrow which can come,  
separation from life-long companions, those you have loved  
best. It may mean living alone, apparently forgotten by all.

But whatever the limitations it is only by  
living cheerfully within them that you will find adventure,

escape mere repetition of past experiences. I am inclined to think this insisting <sup>ance</sup> on repeating oneself, on having and doing what you have always done, is the worst mistake we can make.

Free the spirit; give it time to feel things, to meditate, to meditate on the last scene of this final act of life - the time of passing on for the next adventure in the mystery of life.

Strange, is it not, that this one and only sure thing about life, that it ends sooner or later as far as the earth goes, should so universally terrify us, or if it does not terrify, forces us to ignore, ~~its inevitableness,~~ ~~lead us to ignore it as a personal awaiting experience?~~

I know of no surer way of conquering the fear of death, of breaking down the wall we build in front of the thought than taking old age as an adventure. The freeing of the spirit which that involves, letting it loose to examine whatever concerns us, encouraging it to be honest about what it finds, deciding what ~~it~~ <sup>is</sup> worth, ~~saving~~ <sup>saving</sup> what must be discarded - that freedom makes death a natural thing, gives it something of the splendid proportion of the mystery it is. Certainly whatever it may be it can be no

more uncertain than life itself which we have lived  
and to which we cling. Death is simply the next logical  
step - the next adventure.