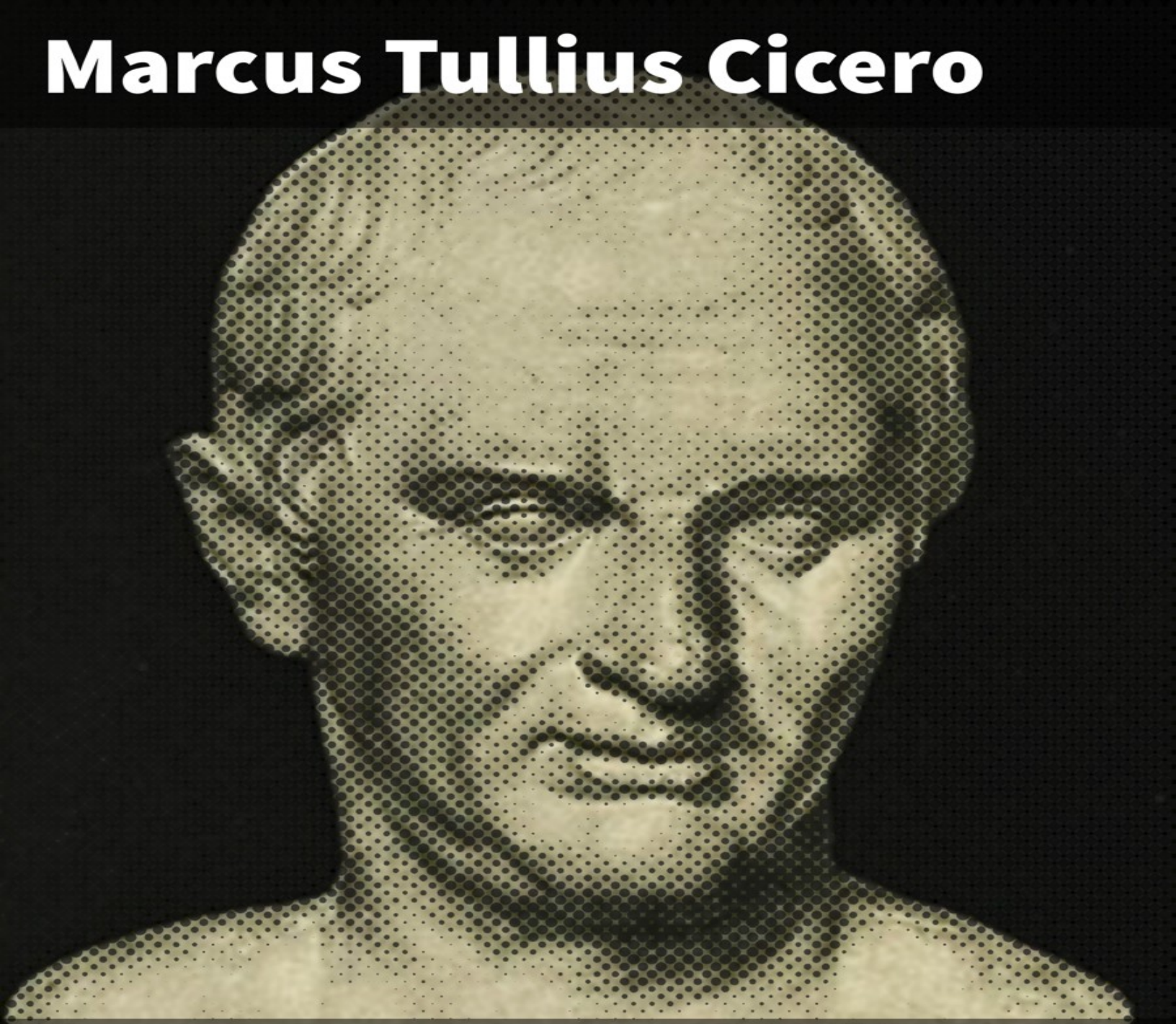
Marcus Tullius Cicero



On Old Age - Cicero de Senectute

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INTRODUCTION.

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AFTER the death of Julius Caesar, and before the conflict with Antony, Cicero spent two years in retirement, principally at his Tusculan villa. It was the most fruitful season of his life, as regards philosophy. To this period (B.C. 45 or 44) the authorship of the *De Senectute* is commonly assigned. In his *De Divinatione*, in enumerating his philosophical works, he speaks of this treatise on Old Age as "lately thrown in among them,"[1] and as meriting a place in the list. In the *De Amicitia*, dedicated also to Atticus, he says: "In the *Cato Major*, the book on Old Age inscribed to you, I introduced the aged Cato as leading in the discussion, because no person seemed better fitted to speak on the subject than one who both had been an old man so long, and in old age had still maintained his preeminence..... In reading that book of mine, I am sometimes so moved that it seems to me as if, not I, but Cato were talking..... I then wrote about old age, as an old man to an old man."[2] Again, Laelius, who is the chief speaker in the *De Amicitia*, is introduced as saying, "Old age is not burdensome, as I remember hearing Cato say in a conversation with me and Scipio, the year before he died." Cicero repeatedly refers to this book in his Letters to Atticus. In the stress of apprehension about Antony's plans and movements he writes: "I ought to read very often the *Cato Major* which I sent to you; for old age is making me more bitter. Everything puts me out of temper." At a later time he writes, "By saying that *O Tite, si quid ego*,[3] delights you more and

more, you increase my readiness to write." And again, "I rejoice that *O Tite*[3] is doing you good."

In his philosophical and ethical writings, Cicero lays no claim to originality; nor, indeed, did the Romans of his age, or even of a much later time, regard themes of this kind as properly their own. Philosophy was an exotic which it was glory enough for them to prize and cultivate. This fame appertains pre-eminently to Cicero, equally for his comprehensive scholarship, for his keenness of critical discernment, and for his generous eclecticism. Were it not for his explicit statement, we might not learn from his writings to what sect he accounted himself as belonging. Though he disclaimed the Stoic school, he evidently felt a strong gravitation toward it, and we could ask for no better expositor of its doctrines than we find in him. Indeed, I can discover no reason for his adherence to the New Academy, except the liberty which it left to its disciples to doubt its own dogmas, and to acknowledge a certain measure of probability in the dogmas of other schools.

In this treatise Cicero doubtless borrowed something from Aristo of Chios, a Stoic, to whose work on Old Age—no longer extant—he refers, and he quotes largely from Xenophon and Plato. At the same time, thick-sown tokens of profound conviction and deep feeling show that the work, if not shaped from his experience, was the genuine utterance of his aspirations. What had been his life was forever closed.[4] He was weary and sad. His home was desolate, and could never again be otherwise. His daughter—dearer to him than any other human being had ever been—had recently died, and he had still more recently repudiated her young step-

mother for lack of sympathy with him in his sorrow. His only son was giving him great solicitude and grief by his waywardness and profligacy. The republic to which he had consecrated his warm devotion and loyal service had ceased to be, and gave faint hope of renewed vitality. The Senate-house, the popular assembly, and the courts were closed for him, and might never be reopened. He had courted publicity, and had delighted in office, leadership, and influence; but there was now little likelihood that any party that might come into power would replace him, where he felt that he had a right to be, among the guiding and controlling spirits of his time.

Old age with him is just beginning, and it may last long. He is conscious of no failure in bodily or mental vigor,—in the capacity of work or of enjoyment. Yet in all that had contributed to his fame and his happiness, he has passed the culminating point; he is on the westward declivity of his life-way; decrease and decline are inevitable. But shall he succumb to the inevitable in sullen despondency, or shall he explore its resources for a contented and enjoyable life, and put them to the test of experience? He chooses the latter alternative, and it is not as the mere rehearsal of what he has read in Greek books, but with the glow of fresh discovery, and in the spirit of one who is mapping out the ground of which he means to take possession, that he describes what old age has been, what it may still be, and what he yearns to make it for himself. He grows strong, cheerful, and hopeful as he writes, and in coming times of distress and peril he unrolls this little volume for his own support and consolation.

In imitation of the Platonic pattern, followed by him in several previous treatises, he adopts the form of dialogue; but after the interchange of a few sentences the dialogue becomes monologue, and Cato talks on without interruption to the end. Cato is chosen as the principal interlocutor, because he was the typical old man of Roman history, having probably retained his foremost place in the public eye, and his oratorical power in the Senate and at the bar, to a later age than any other person on record. In his part in this dialogue there is a singular commingling of fact, truth, and myth. The actual details of his life are gracefully interwreathed with the discussion, and the incidental notices of his elders and coevals are precisely such as might have fallen from his lips had he been of a more genial temperament. There is dramatic truth, too, in Cato's senile way of talking, with the garrulity, repetition, prolixity, and occasional confusion of names, to which old men are liable, and in which Cicero merges his own precision and accuracy in the character which for the time he assumes. But as regards the kindly, the aesthetic, and the spiritual traits that make this work so very charming, its Cato is a mythical creation, utterly unlike the coarse, hard, stern, crabbed ex-Censor, who was guiltless equally of taste and of sentiment.

Cicero's reasoning in this treatise is based, in great part, on what old age may be, rather than on what it generally is; and yet I cannot but believe that, were its cautions heeded, its advice followed, and its spirit inbreathed, the number of those who find in the weight of many years no heavy burden would be largely multiplied. Yet there would remain not a few cases of hopeless inanity and helpless suffering. We are

here told, and with truth, that it is often the follies and sins of early life that embitter the declining years; yet infirmity sometimes overtakes lives that have been blameless and exemplary, nor does the strictest hygienic regimen always arrest the failure of body and of mind. Undoubtedly the worst thing that an old man can do is to cease from labor and to cast off responsibility. The powers suffered to repose lapse from inaction into inability; while they will in most cases continue to meet the drafts made upon them, if those drafts recur with wonted frequency and urgency. Yet there is always danger that, as in the case of the Archbishop in Gil Bias, the old man who insists on doing his full tale of work will be mistaken in thinking that undiminished quantity implies unimpaired quality.

But apart from the continued life-work, Cicero indicates resources of old age which are as genuine and as precious now as they were two thousand years ago. While the zest of highly seasoned convivial enjoyment, especially of such as abuts upon the disputed border-ground between sobriety and excess, is exhaled, there is fully as much to be enjoyed in society as in earlier years. Perhaps even more; for as friends grow few, those that remain are all the dearer, and in the company of those in early or middle life, the old man finds himself an eager learner as to the rapidly fleeting present, and imagines himself a not unwelcome teacher as to what deserves commemoration in the obsolescent and outgrown past. The tokens of deference and honor uniformly rendered in society to old age that has not forfeited its title to respect are a source of pleasure. They are, indeed, in great part, conventional; but for this very reason they only