

OLD PEOPLE AND THE
THINGS THAT PASS

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BY

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PREFACE

SOCRATES. *There is nothing which for my part I like better, Cephalus, than conversing with aged men; for I regard them as travellers who have gone a journey which I too may have to go . . .*

CEPHALUS. *Men of my age flock together . . . and at our meetings the tale of my acquaintance commonly is—I cannot eat, I cannot drink, the pleasures of youth and love are fled away; there was a good time once, but now that is gone, and life is no longer life. Some complain of the slights which are put upon them by relations. . . . But to me, Socrates, these complainers seem to blame that which is not really in fault. . . . Old age has a great sense of calm and freedom; when the passions relax their hold, then, as Sophocles says, we are freed from the grasp not of one mad master only, but of many. . . .*

PLATO, *Republic*, i. 329.

For his greatest novel, one of the greatest novels in any century or language, Couperus has taken no text. It is tempting to offer to his wit and temperamental irony the opinion of the aged Cephalus that "old age has a great sense of calm and freedom."

Old People and the Things that Pass is a study of age in descending degrees from the brittle senility of its heroine, who is ninety-three, and its hero, who is eighty-nine, and the doctor, who has survived long enough to be their only accomplice and confidant, through children, who have found leisure to marry three times or to degenerate by not marrying, to grand-

children, who intrigue in legacy-hunting for great-great-grandchildren. At one end there are fragile anachronisms with tremulous, wandlike fingers, mumbling, toothless lips and waxen skin, waiting for soul and memory to die in bodies already dead; at the other end there are grandchildren, who cannot conceive of a world without these terrific mummies at the centre, and great-grandchildren, who cannot appreciate the difference between twenty-nine and eighty-nine, but know that a special weekly ritual of silence, good-behaviour, dutiful salutations and awesome kisses are demanded of age when it has attained a certain remote tradition and frozen helplessness. Between these come generations which are old by the standard of life-assurance tables, incredibly old to the great-grandchildren, but unaging to the oldest of all, which sees them still as twenty when they are sixty, and cannot understand how they have found time to grow up and marry and have children and quarrel and marry again.

“Calm and freedom” are, sure enough, the first qualities that the casual passer-by would attribute to these Old People. They are in comfortable circumstances and of good social position. They have never forfeited the respect and affection of their straggling families; so long as they live, they will postpone the natural separation and scattering which inevitably overtakes a big family; and their life, with its little routine of getting up and resting, eating and resting, receiving visits and resting, punctually imposed by servants almost as old as their masters, is perfectly adapted to the flagging vitality of great age. It may seem unlikely that man or woman can reach ninety without doing and leaving undone, without losing and suffering much that should mercifully be forgotten; but old age is traditionally merciful, it blunts the susceptibilities and draws a sponge over the memory, leaving only “calm and freedom.” Nature never intended man or