

# The Declining Year

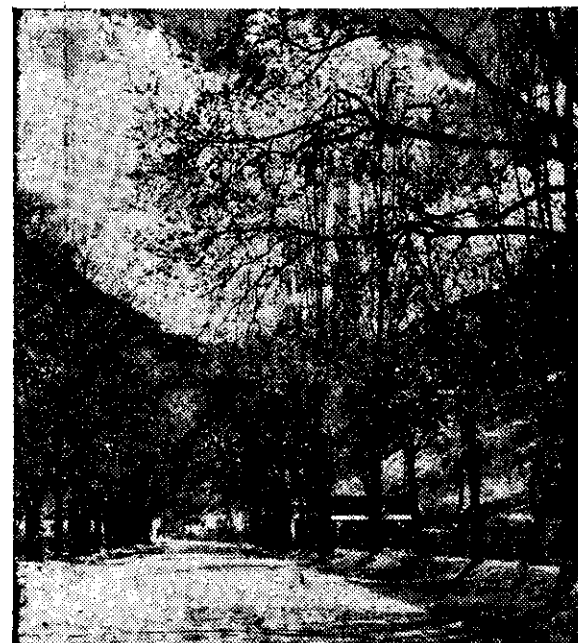
by "SUNDOWNER"

I NEVER know, when Elsie licks my overalls, and tries to lick my hands and face, whether she is showing affection or indulging a morbid appetite. I suspect a search for salt, and get some satisfaction out of the knowledge that however often my overalls are washed I soon impregnate them again with honest sweat. But Elsie herself says nothing. If she loves me, it is an embarrassing way to tell me. If she is salt hungry, I don't know why she neglects the lump in her box. But cows are capricious in their appetites. I read of one in a recent issue of the *Countryman* that could not be trusted near anyone with long hair. Elsie is not quite as bad as that, but she snatches at docks more eagerly than at turnip-tops, cabbage leaves, sow-thistles, or rank cocksfoot, and it takes a harder pull to move her on from a locust tree, with its thorny stems, than from a fresh patch of cow-grass. Tethered cows miss something that trees and woody shrubs give them when they are roaming free, and since Elsie spends one day in three, but never a night, on the end of a chain, I can't complain of her snatch and grab tactics. But what does she get from my overalls that she can't get in more seemly ways? Is it my bones she wants, or the bone dust I will some day provide? Is she telling me not only that I will one day die, but that if I were a real pal I would die soon?

I have a relative who is at once a Scot, an angler, and a sensible man, since he often sleeps between his casts, and never neglects a grassy bank if the sun and the wind are favourable. He has, however, a mortal fear of cattle—though he is a physiologist I am not sure that he knows a cow from a bull at a hundred yards—and one day as he was dozing with his rod on the bank of the Mataura River an inquisitive cow approached and licked his ear. The rest I must give from hearsay, as I was not present, but the story now current among his friends, one of whom did see what happened, is that he leaped blindly into space, landed in deep water, and half swimming and half floundering over boulders, put the whole width of the river behind him, there about forty yards, before he looked back. To retrieve his rod and bag he had to walk about a mile to a bridge, and another half mile to a fence that kept him safe until, the last chain or two. Then he sat down trembling and waited till his tormentor grazed slowly away. Fortunately, cows don't eat fish, and in this case showed no interest in rod, flies, or tackle. But if that brother-in-law does not break off relations after reading this paragraph, I will have to tether and perhaps muzzle Elsie when he next visits me.

I WAS surprised, and a little dashed, when Frank Sargeson asked me if I was a disciple of Donald Culross Peattie. Though we are all, whether we are aware of it or not, followers of somebody at almost every step, I hate to think that so close an observer as Frank Sargeson thought he saw me strutting after Peattie.

APRIL 21 If I must be a disciple I want a life-size prophet to follow and not a masquerader. I have in fact read only one of Peattie's books, *The Road of a Naturalist*, and it left me feeling that I had been walking with a small man wearing a big man's boots. If he is more than this his other qualities escaped me; and until I looked at him again today, to lay this ghost F.S. had started, I could not remember anything in his pages but one sentence that was not his own—an editor's advice to his staff, "To be interesting, and to be damned quick about it."



National Publicity Studios photograph  
"Autumn has beauty, but it is the beauty of age and approaching decay"

Now that I have re-examined Peattie I will not say that he is never interesting. He has taken that editor's advice and applied it with some success to the reporting of natural history; and if he had been content with that all might have been well. But he has been "damned quick," too—far too quick, and far too slick, for either science or literature. He is, I feel, phoney, but ably and sometimes brilliantly phoney. A man who can say of the big trees of California that they are "time made visible . . . the past still standing," has seen and felt them. But when he goes on to say that although you begin by motoring through the redwoods as though they were just another forest, "when the sense of time

begins to creep over you and the hush falls like a shadow . . . you draw to a stop, shut off the motor like a profanity, and get out to go into the wood and worship," you know that his emotion is literary froth.

THE season of mists has not this year been the season of mellow fruitfulness. Whether the fruit came early or the mists late I don't know, since I have not before spent autumn in this valley; but our fruit trees are bare and our potatoes in the bag, we have eaten our corn, and Jim's wheat went weeks ago to make cakes and bread. We still have carrots, parsnips, beet and sal-sify, but frost and not mist is the weather for them, and spring will be here before they are all out of the ground.

APRIL 23 But if the fruit has not held on long enough for the mists the leaves have. I don't remember better autumn colours than we are now losing, and the best effects have been just before sunrise, when elms, poplars, and chestnut trees glow through the hanging mist like dull fire. Yesterday especially, and the morning before, I almost agreed with those who call autumn the best season of the year. But I never quite get to that. Autumn has beauty, but it is the beauty of age and approaching decay; and I don't like being reminded of those things too often. It is enough to know what is ahead, to accept it and be as cheerful as one can about it, without hearing the leaves saying it and the wind whispering it through the dry grass. When I must, I hope I will be able to brace myself for the last surrender. In the meantime, "it is life of which our souls are scant, more life and fuller that we want."

So I find myself turning in autumn to the G. B. Shaws, to the old men who went on growing older, the modern Methuselahs of whom John Burn Bailey wrote in a book published about the year I was born. What pleases me most in that catalogue of "advanced nonagenarians" is not their years only, though they have to be ninety-five or older to qualify for inclusion, but the fact that they achieved old age without making themselves miserable on the way. Some washed and some went dirty, some ate meat and some only vegetables, some drank and some abstained, some married and some remained single, some had long-lived parents and some parents who died young, some exercised vigorously and some sat about, some went to bed early and some turned night into day, some were believers and some stubborn doubters, but from St. Anthony to Titian to Fontenelle to Sir Moses Montefiore, from Martin Joseph Routh, of Oxford, to Miss Catherine Hawthorne, the Maid of Kent, they all lived twenty years longer than our allotted span, and in general found life good to the end. Long life would be a poor exchange for a miserable life, but these cheerful sojourners struck no bargain with time, and none with their doctors and books. They were freaks, no doubt, as poets and great artists are freaks, as far above the rest of us physically as Shakespeare was intellectually. But I like their voices better in autumn than the rustle of dead leaves.

(To be continued)



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