

HOMER B. SPRAGUE'S ANSWER

To Prof. Beers—How English Should Be Taught.

To the Editor of YALE ALUMNI WEEKLY:

Sir:—In the open letter of Prof. Beers, which was written some weeks ago, but which I have seen this evening for the first time, he brings my name unpleasantly into the controversy between himself and Hon. D. H. Chamberlain, as follows:

"That the Emily Sanford chair is still vacant, is not the fault of the Faculty. It has been offered in turn to three gentlemen, any one of whom would have been an ornament to the College, and has been declined by all of them. Mr. Chamberlain . . . was asked by one correspondent to suggest a candidate. He nominated his own brother, the Rev. Leander Chamberlain, and Col. Homer B. Sprague. I have heard it hinted by the wicked that Mr. Chamberlain's real candidate was some one even more nearly related to himself."

In reference to the foregoing permit me to say:—

1. I am reluctantly forced to construe this statement of Prof. Beers as a disparagement, perhaps unintentional, of the Chamberlains and myself, in contrast with the three "gentlemen" who declined to be "ornaments."

2. Nevertheless, I am thankful for the honor he does me in publicly connecting my name with those of the distinguished brothers. Rev. Dr. Leander T. Chamberlain, valedictorian at Yale, Class of Sixty-Three, I knew long ago; a man of high scholarship, vigorous intellect, powerful eloquence, and most exemplary character. Governor Chamberlain, too, I have long known. For many months it was my duty to observe his career as a teacher. As such he was remarkably and deservedly successful. The world recognizes him today, not only as a thorough scholar and an accomplished public speaker, but as a statesman. His career in South Carolina, his courage and sagacity there, his arduous services in behalf of the humblest citizens; his heroic efforts, masterly speeches, and patriotic sacrifices in the cause of equal rights,—these are fittingly recorded by your gifted townsman, Mr. Walter Allen, in his book entitled "Governor Chamberlain's Administration in South Carolina." That record demonstrates that in the most trying circumstances he was uniformly conscientious, far-seeing, magnetic, manly, and brave. Either of the two Chamberlains would have made an ideal professor at Yale.

3. Before Prof. Beers stated the fact in his open letter, I was not aware that Mr. Chamberlain had named me in connection with the vacancy at Yale. If the statement is correct, I thank the ex-Governor. Such a nomination from such a source is a high compliment. Yet it is proper for me to say that no such position, nor any recognition of any kind, was ever sought by me from Yale; nor do I think that I would have accepted such a professorship, had it been tendered me at any time during the last fifteen or twenty years. I should not like to pose as an "ornament." We have too many ornaments and too few teachers.

4. And this brings me to the main issue, college instruction in the English language and literature. My views on this subject have been published elsewhere. I can barely state a few principles here.

A. The study of rhetoric and of the English language should be incidental to the study of English literature, and combined with it in daily, semi-weekly, or weekly exercises through the college course.

B. The study of English literature should be mainly a study of the greatest works of the greatest authors, and it should be required of all.

C. As in all collegiate education, and in all high art, the ultimate object aimed at by each professor of English should be twofold: first, and in general, moral elevation and inspiration; and secondly, in particular, the formation and maintenance of the highest ideals of life.

D. The masterpieces of literary art should be selected with the utmost care with a view to the inculcation of right principles, the fostering of lofty sentiment, the progressive development of high character—in a word, growth in spiritual grace and in soul power. These studies, if wisely chosen and zealously pursued, present better ideals, and af-

ford tenfold more stimulus to honorable conduct than many if not all of the ordinary college studies combined.

E. Among the choice literary productions that should occupy the student's attention, three stand preëminent; those of Shakespeare, Milton, and above all, the Bible. Of Shakespeare and Milton, as furnishing material for study, I need say nothing. But the greatest work or compilation of works in English literature, is the Bible, As mere specimens of art, literary masterpieces, many portions of it are unsurpassed. From the panorama of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, introduced by the flash which lit up the primeval Chaos—God said, "Let light be, and light was!"—on to the Apocalypse, that "majestic image of a high and stately tragedy . . . with its sevenfold chorus of hallelujahs and harping symphonies"—including what is perhaps the most beautiful story ever told, the story of Joseph; including also the earliest and grandest of the world's martial hymns, the "Song of Moses;" the book of Job; too, "epic of the inner life;" so skillfully treated by Daniel H. Chamberlain in his magazine article some years ago, and recently pronounced by Dr. Richard G. Moulton "the greatest poem in the world's great literatures;" then the exquisite drama of the "Song of Solomon;" and other compositions of rare artistic excellence;—to say nothing of that central New Testament story, in comparison with whose sublimity all the "Light of Asia," all

the glory that was Greece
And the grandeur that was Rome

pale into nothingness;—here in these sixty-six books of our English Bible is a literature of which it is a shame to be ignorant; a literature, which to know thoroughly is a joy forever.

F. The most vital need of any college, so far as the study of English literature is concerned, is a sufficient instructor. "The teacher," says Milton, "should have art and proper eloquence, but chiefly by his own example should gain his pupils to an incredible diligence and courage, infusing into their young breasts such an ingenuous and noble ardor as could not fail to make many of them renowned and matchless men." "The main skill and ground work," Milton adds, "should be to temper them such lectures and explanations upon every opportunity as should lead and draw them in willing obedience, inflamed with the study of learning and the admiration of virtue, stirred up with high hopes of living to be brave men and worthy patriots, dear to God and famous to all ages." The teacher, then, must conceive more vividly, feel more keenly, share more fully, express with the living voice more gracefully and strongly than most men can, the truth, the imagery, the sentiment, the emotion, the *inspiration* of the author. If he has not by nature the oratorical instinct, he must acquire it, lest he make the finest literary genius appear to talk like a fool, a sick man, or a somnambulistic Dundreary.

G. How is English literature taught at Yale?

1. Prof. Beers's attitude in reference to entrance examinations augurs ill. Alone it would seem, of all college professors in America, he takes this stand. In his published letter, dated Nov. 23, 1896, he writes:

"I am opposed to any entrance requirements in English. The vote establishing such requirement at Yale was passed over my head, and I have had nothing to do with the examination, which I consider (*sic*) useless."

2. Still more unfavorable is the inference naturally drawn from his textbook, though we trust that his practice is better than his theory. His book, "An Outline Sketch of English Literature," published ten or twelve years ago, is a fair compilation, though not original, nor by any means the best. It would be an ungracious task to criticize its occasionally bad grammar and questionable rhetoric; but among its graver defects is his ignoring of the English Bible, classing it (page 20) among those writings that "cannot be said to have much importance as mere literature." This suggests the inquiry, Can a student graduate from Yale without the slightest acquaintance with this, the grandest literature of power the world has ever seen? We hope not.

3. Most unfavorable of all is the conclusion one might draw from actual inspection of a class exercise in English literature conducted by Prof. Beers. I was present. I shall not forget the scene. Most of the students were in a recumbent posture. Two of them lay at full length flat on their backs nearly

the whole time. But for an explanatory word or two at long intervals, or the calling up of individual members in turn to read, there was little or nothing to disturb the all-pervading somnolency. As Principal, Professor, and President, in high school, academy, normal school, college, and university, it has been my duty to watch many hundreds of class exercises, but never elsewhere have I seen one like this.

I asked myself, Can this be Yale? Where is the keen enjoyment of great thoughts? Where the contagious enthusiasm for lofty sentiment and splendid imagery? Where the thirst for refreshing, uplifting, energizing knowledge? Alas! professor and students alike seemed to illustrate Poe's lines—

I have drunk of a water that quenches all thirst—
Of a water that flows with a lullaby sound,
From a spring but a very few feet under ground,—
From a cavern not very far down under ground.

Sadly, I know I am shorn of my strength,
And no muscle I move as I lie at full length;
But no matter!—I feel I am better at length!

And I rest so composedly now in my bed,
That any beholder might fancy me dead,—
Might start at beholding me, thinking me dead!

I sincerely trust that this case which came under my own observation some years ago, was an exception. I have kept the matter to myself for the most part, not willing to have my Alma Mater lowered in public esteem. My sole reason for speaking now is the duty I feel of contributing to produce a better state of things. He is Yale's true friend who in the right spirit points out her faults and the remedy. He is no friend, who shuts his eyes to possible improvements, and opens his mouth in vociferous glorification of all she does, right or wrong.

HOMER B. SPRAGUE,
Department of Oratory, Drew Theological Seminary, New Jersey, Mar. 5, 1898.

Yale-Princeton Judges.

The judges of the Yale-Princeton debate, to be held at Princeton on March 25, are: President W. L. Wilson of Washington and Lee College, Professor J. F. Jameson of Brown University and Mr. Everett P. Wheeler of New York City. Ex-President Grover Cleveland will preside.

University Lawn Tennis.

A meeting of the University Lawn Tennis Association was held Friday, March 11. The secretary and treasurer's report was read and accepted, and it was voted that a hundred dollars from the surplus on hand be contributed toward the Intercollegiate Tennis Cup which is now being offered by all colleges to be contested for at New Haven this Spring.

The officers elected for 1898-99 are: President, C. P. Dodge, '99; Vice-President, A. W. Botkin, '99 S.; Secretary and Treasurer, H. H. Hackett, 1900.

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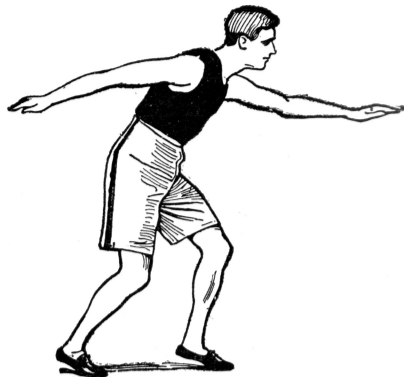
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