

FOR FRESHMAN SOCIETIES.

A Discussion of the Underclass Society System.

To the Editor of YALE ALUMNI WEEKLY:

The Society system in the Academic Department at Yale is unique. So far as I know, no other college or university has anything closely resembling it.

From time to time and particularly within the last two or three years, some unfavorable criticism has been made upon it. Sometimes the critic goes to the extent of demanding as a remedy for real or fancied evils connected with it, the entire abolition of secret societies. A demand for so drastic a remedy may be dismissed with the statement that the system is so completely bound up with Yale's history and traditions as to make this difficult, if not impossible.

But, if practicable, would such a course be desirable? I have closely observed the system for four years as an undergraduate and for more than twenty-five years as an alumnus, during which time I have visited New Haven on an average three or four times a year, and have been to some extent thrown with members of almost every class graduated within that time. Such observation leads me to think that there is very much that is good about the system, although there are unquestionably some imperfections which ought to be remedied. These are not so much in the theory underlying the system as in the practical application of it.

Yale's societies should be a means to an end, and that end the welfare of the University. There never need be any antagonism between devotion to the Society and devotion to the University. Each society man ought to be a more devoted Yale man just because he is a society man. If he is not, he is injuring the welfare of both.

THE IDEAL RULE.

The rule of the Yale society system should be that exemplified in the most perfect Civil Service laws, namely: "Promotion based on merit and fitness." An election to a Senior society is deservedly one of the most laudable objects of undergraduate ambition. In the college world and in the outside world, where Yale's traditions are known, it is concededly the highest honor of its kind that can be attained. Every undergraduate ought to feel that it is possible for him to attain this honor if he fulfills the conditions of merit and fitness as determined by fair competition.

Each society ought to realize that its welfare, even its life, depends upon the adoption of this standard of selection and no other. Just in this direction the sharpest criticism is made. It is claimed that the large preparatory schools sending as they do to each Freshman class a considerable body of men previously acquainted, and who naturally act together until they come to know their classmates who are fitted either at smaller schools or by special instructors, exercise an unfair advantage in behalf of their graduates.

THE DIFFICULTY OF ACQUAINTANCE.

Owing to the size of the classes at the present time, the difficulty of making acquaintance through the class is largely increased. It follows that the men in each class do not come to know each other as they did twenty-five years ago, and not a few eminently worthy men in each class fail to be justly appreciated, because, in part through their modesty, they are not well known.

As a consequence when elections are given to Sophomore societies (the first society honor bestowed at Yale), these elections are largely controlled by cliques composed of the men graduated from these large preparatory schools. These societies, taking as they do only a small number from the entire class, tend to make the line of cleavage more sharply defined. Those in the societies are naturally drawn more closely together and become an organized force of great power and influence. Those without are disorganized and by force of circumstances, jealousy tends to foster hostility toward the Sophomore society men.

Although the Junior societies take in a somewhat larger number of men, the dominating influence of the Sophomore societies seems to lose little of its force, but it extends through the year, so that it is even claimed that elections to Senior societies are largely controlled

by these same societies, as they are in turn controlled by the large preparatory schools.

By reason of this powerful influence, a feeling has arisen that a man outside of this circle does not obtain a fair show and that "college politics" and not merit and fitness of the candidates enters altogether too largely into the choice of men for society honors.

I think I have stated fairly the only reasonable criticism made to my knowledge upon the society system at Yale, even by its bitterest critics.

I have within the past two or three years discussed the subject with some of Yale's most prominent graduates, most of them members of societies, up to and including Senior year, and with a considerable number of undergraduates some of whom have been members of the Sophomore societies. Quite a large majority of them felt so strongly upon the subject that they have advocated the entire abolition of Sophomore societies, if necessary for the welfare of the University at large.

A DIFFERENT BASIS.

I venture to suggest reform on a somewhat different line. Society honors at Yale should be according to a regular graduation starting with Freshman year, when every member of the class who desires to be, should be a member of a society, and proceeding by a gradual process of elimination in each year (the number being smaller and as a consequence the honor being greater) until Senior year is reached.

Twenty-five years ago every member of the Freshman class was a member of one or other of the Freshman societies. The competition between the societies was in the first instance to obtain the largest number of members of the Freshman class.

Quantity, not quality, was the test. The result was that every man was a society man.

The societies did good literary work in the line of essays and debates, and the second field of competition between them was in this direction, and the societies were active rivals in securing through their members as many literary and scholastic as well as athletic honors as possible. Their existence tended to make the men of each Freshman class better acquainted with his classmates, for a man soon came to know those of his own society and then naturally sought the acquaintance of the men of other societies to ascertain whom he had to measure up against. As a result, by the end of the second term of Freshman year, every man in the class knew all of his classmates fairly well.

It might take a little longer now, but the same result would follow.

I would advocate the organization of at least six Freshman societies of say fifty men each, but sufficiently large to include the whole class. These societies would afford not only social advantages, and by making the men generally acquainted tend to break up "cliques," but the advantage of training in debate which Yale so much needs and which is now sought for in other ways.

In the Sophomore year I would advocate either increasing the number of Sophomore societies or their average membership, or both, so that at least one hundred and fifty men should be members of these societies. The natural process of elimination founded on actual acquaintance of and experience with the entire Freshman class, would result in the selection of the better men of the class for these societies. In Junior year the process of selection might be still further carried on and a somewhat smaller number chosen, and the same in Senior year. By this repeated process of elimination, as a rule the best men would be chosen to the societies. Of course, in every class there are men who develop later than others, and there would occasionally be found men who did not make a Sophomore or even a Junior society, who by the end of Junior year would be entirely worthy even of Senior society honors. There would be nothing to stand in the way of their choice. But they would be the exceptions. The rule would be as above stated.

A PRACTICAL STEP.

There is nothing impractical in these suggestions. The class of 1903 within a month after their entrance, if they choose to do so, can organize a number of societies which shall include every member of the class. It may be urged that opposition will be made to the plan

by the Sophomore societies, who would not be willing to sacrifice their influence by increasing their membership or consenting to addition to their numbers.

If it is for the interests of the University to make the change, I do not believe that any member of those societies would deliberately sacrifice that interest to any selfish purpose. In no place is sound public opinion of greater weight than at Yale, and if a general public sentiment were once aroused that the good of the University demanded a change, the Sophomore societies would have to yield. If in the face of such sentiment well founded, they attempted to and did successfully resist it, it is time to consider whether they should be wiped out of existence, even if it becomes necessary to invoke the power of the Faculty to accomplish this. Yale's undergraduates and Yale's graduates must get together in the interests of the University at large. Every spirit of factionalism and jealousy must be destroyed. Her past reputation in every field of activity can only be sustained by the hardest kind of hard work. It has been the boast of Yale men up to this time that all that they asked was a fair field and no favors; that every man should have as good a chance as every other man. It will be the beginning of the end of our boasted Yale democracy if any other spirit permanently dominates her society system.

JOSEPH A. BURR, '71.

Brooklyn, N. Y., Sept. 12, 1899.

Dr. Brown's Lectures in Yale Divinity School.

Rev. John Brown, D.D., of Bedford, England, Author of "The Pilgrim Fathers of New England," "Life of John Bunyan," and other writings of great interest and value, will give the first lecture of the Lyman Beecher Course on Preaching, in the Marquand Chapel, on Wednesday, October 11, at 3 o'clock, p. m. The general subject of the course is "Puritan Preaching in England."

The topics of the several lectures of Dr. Brown, with the dates on which it is expected that they will be delivered, are as follows:

Lecture I, Oct. 11—Introductory. The Preaching of the Friars.

Lecture II, Oct. 12—John Colet and the Preachers of the Reformation.

Lecture III, Oct. 13—The Cambridge Puritans.

Lecture IV, Oct. 17—Thomas Goodwin and the Cambridge Platonists.

Lecture V, Oct. 19—John Bunyan as a Life Study for Preachers.

Lecture VI, Oct. 20—Richard Baxter the Kidderminster Pastor.

Lecture VII, Oct. 25—Representative Preachers of Modern Puritanism, (1) Thomas Binney and C. H. Spurgeon.

Lecture VIII, Oct. 26—Representative Preachers of Modern Puritanism, (2) R. W. Dale of Birmingham.

Lecture IX, Oct. 27—Representative Preachers of Modern Puritanism, (3) Alexander Maclaren, of Manchester.

Opening of College.

All departments of the University, except the Medical School, opened according to the schedule, with nearly full attendance. The Medical School term begins Thursday, Oct. 5.

The Phillips Brooks building at Harvard, which is the new home of the religious and philanthropic societies of the University, has been completed and is ready for occupancy. The building is of brick and granite, three stories high, and cost in the neighborhood of \$50,000.

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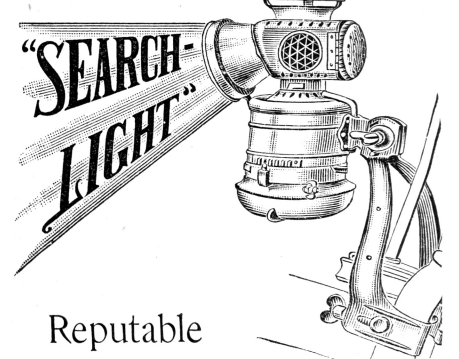
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