
I—My College Days : a Retrospect

I—My College Days: a Retrospect

WHEN I look back upon the men and things of my college days, and compare them with the college days of those who are now undergraduates, I stand appalled at the contrast.

What strikes me most in looking back to the college life of my time is the extraordinary brilliance, the wonderful mental powers of the students of those days. In my time there were men at college, especially in the years above me, who could easily have discovered, had they cared to, the Newtonian Laws of Motion and the Theory of Light.

This, I think, was particularly noticeable in the very year when I happened to be a freshman. The fourth year, the graduating class, of that moment represented a galaxy of intellectual capacity which was probably unparalleled in the history of the human mind. I state this in

College Days

positive terms because I myself witnessed it. I knew, or, at any rate, I saw and heard, these very men. It will always remain with me as a source of gratification till I die, that it was my lot to enter college at the very time when the fourth year represented an exaltation of the intellect never since equalled.

The deplorable change which has since happened was already, I fear, setting in during my own college days. The third year and the second year men, when they came to graduate, although infinitely in advance of anything I have since known, stood for a range of mentality far below that of the first graduating class that I remember. More than that, I am compelled to admit that the classes which followed immediately upon my own year were composed of the very dregs of the human intelligence, and betokened an outlook and a point of view more fitted for the nursery than the classroom.

Nor is the change that I observe only in the students. The professors whom I see about me to-day, ordinary, quiet men, with the resigned tranquillity that betrays the pathos of intellectual

My College Days: a Retrospect

failure—how can I compare them with the intellectual giants to whom I owe everything that I have forgotten. The professors of my college days were scholars,—vast reservoirs of learning, into whose depths one might drop the rope and bucket of curiosity to bring it up full to the brim with the limpid waters of truth. Plumb them? You couldn't. Measure their learning? Impossible. It defied it. They acknowledged it themselves. They taught,—not for mere pecuniary emolument—they despised it—but for the sheer love of learning. And now when I look about me at their successors, I half suspect (it is a hideous thought) that there is a connection between their work and their salaries.

Nor is it only a change in the students and the professors. The old place itself—my Alma Mater—how it has altered. Is this the great campus that I remember so well from my freshman days? What was it?—half a mile long I think, and broader even than its length. That football goal that stood some fifty or sixty feet in the air, has it shrunk to these poor sticks? These simple trees, can they be the great elms

College Days

that reared themselves up to the autumn sky?
And was the Tower no higher than this?

Nay Fate, that hath given me so much, that
hath brought to me my lettered degrees, and my
academic standing with its comfortable licence to
forget,—wilt thou not take it all back again and
give me in return by some witchery of recollec-
tion—one hour of the Brave Old Days Beyond
Recall.