

Yale Monthly
March, 1906

Things Alive

I am quite ready to take Prof. Phelps' word for it that "there is probably no body of young men in the world more truly conservative than the students of Yale College;" or, if I could think of anything like an exception, it would be in favor of the student bodies of some of the smaller western colleges. It is undoubtedly true, in general, that American college life makes strongly for conservatism; that it disposes a man to take things as they are in preference to trying to make things as they should be; in short, that it tends to acceptivity rather than expressivity.

Modern American college life has in it a good many of the characteristics of old monasticism. The students shut themselves up, for a great part of the time, in their college walls, and find their mental pabulum principally in books and preachments. They have their daily round of duties; there are honors for those who perform these duties most conscientiously. They live largely in an atmosphere of book-congealed minds; minds, it is true, the noblest and greatest of all the times gone by. And they have the advantage of personal contact with many of the greatest and noblest minds of the present day.

From these sources they gain many and valuable theories of doing; but if suddenly forced to do, in a world, in place of a college, manner, most of them would find themselves very awkward about it. Just as a man, who had spent his time in reading and hearing about saws, might find himself considerably embarrassed if suddenly presented with a life-size copy of the real instrument, and told to go to work and saw something. This may explain, in some measure, the mental metamorphosis of the average college man who goes into business; — a metamorphosis probably more complete than any other outside of Ovid.

This state of affairs has its advantages, it is true, but it also has its disadvantages. That the world progresses by the activity of the people and circumstances which compose it, is acknowledged universally; and by the evolutionary definition of things good, the really "good" man is the man who helps along this process of development. Some sort of interest in things at first hand, an aliveness to the realities of present-day living, is a necessary component in the make-up of all good men. It is excellent to know the development of the Greek helot system, but perhaps it is just as important to know the political development, and the present trend of politics, in America.

It is the necessity of having this very aliveness, — this first-hand knowledge of things, and expression of himself in those things, that I should like, above all else, to impress upon the American college student. He does not seem to me to have a true mental grasp of present-day actualities. Sometimes I almost feel like hurling Bernard Shaw's bomb at his head, — that he hasn't a single thought later than Spencer. Now the world has done some little evolution since Spencer's time; and it is evolving — now at about the customary rate; — some of us believe, at a good deal more than the customary rate. Men are dying and worms are eating them from a large variety of causes which did not exist in Shakespeare's time. There are hundreds of new things under the sun; something is always doing at the old stand of the human.

It is very possible to have a brain-understanding of these facts, and still totally disbelieve them; or at least, not really know them for truths. This may be the mental condition of the college student when he is told that about one-tenth of the men, women and children in these United States are starving in a very beastly manner. When he hears that the bodies of many working men in England are dried up for lack of proper nourishment until their skins hang loose upon their frames, he is likely to be amused at the grotesqueness of such a condition rather than shocked by its terribleness. Possibly this is because of the image of the common circus India-rubber man which the description conjures up in his mind; this freak being the only loose-skinned man with whom he is acquainted.

It astonished me considerably, and shocked me a little at first, when a hall full of Harvard men almost laughed me off my feet upon my telling them of some particularly harrowing experiences I have had with *les misérables* of our society. I think their amusement was caused by my relation of the incident of a couple of laborers eating filthy apple-cores, picked up from the gutters of a big city. If the same men had realized, had really appreciated, the meaning of such a diet, I don't think they would have laughed; at least, not so openly and whole-heartedly. They might have shrugged their shoulders, and said *laissez faire*; and a few of them might have snickered fastidiously, — but I don't think their laugh would have been one of such delighted amusement. They were good fellows, clean fellows, noble fellows; but they simply couldn't appreciate what I was talking about. They had no real aliveness to the actuality of such conditions as I was trying to describe.

So it seems to me that one of the things America most needs to-day is the awakening, the vivifying of its college men. They should put out their hands, and feel the pulse of the world; and when they find that that pulse is beating in an unusually feverish and irregular manner, — which they must find, if they find the pulse at all, — much will have been accomplished toward inaugurating a healthier order of things.