



WILLIAM LYON PHELPS

who has been close to several younger generations in his work at Yale, tells their critics

WHAT HE THINKS OF YOUTH

PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN AT NEW HAVEN BY HAL PHYFE

1930 is to compare it with that of forty years ago. And immediately there appears a difficulty so enormous that it may destroy the value of any generalization.

Forty years ago I knew the younger generation by personal and intimate contact; I was among my peers. Today, although I am with them every day, what do I really know about them? When some one asks me if the young men of today drink more than formerly, I am the very last man to possess the necessary knowledge. That some of them get drunk is certain; but they never come into my classroom drunk, they never call upon me while drunk.

THOSE who believe the present younger generation have bad habits should consider former times. In the eighteenth century, excessive drinking was the rule. Faculty and students got drunk together. Before the Civil War in America, there was an immense amount of drinking. The growth of athletic games has had much to do with the improvement in personal habits. When I was an undergraduate, there was certainly a good deal of drunkenness, though not comparable to the excesses of earlier days.

The younger generation in my time had a narrow and provincial outlook. They were interested mainly in the affairs of their own little world. They were mainly Philistines: they had little respect for scholarship, (Turn to page 38)

I HAVE known six younger generations. I have looked forward, I have looked around, I have looked back. I may add that I have looked back only professionally, in the endeavor to understand the young men whom I teach. Personally, I have looked back very little. When I was a child, I wanted to be a man. When I was a young man, I wanted to be a mature man. And after I had descended into the vale of years, I did not, as apparently many do, look back with longing to the days of my youth. It is always the new experience I am seeking; I am wasting no time in the vain endeavor to recapture the irrecoverable past.

The body grows old, as inevitably as autumn follows summer, and winter follows autumn. This does not disturb my peace. But when does the man himself grow old? I think I can state accurately the exact moment when a person passes into old age. It is the moment when he discovers that in solitude his thoughts regularly turn more to the past than to the present or future. In the matchless Shakespearean phrase, the *stealing steps of age* overtake our slowing bodies; but they can never catch up with an alert mind.

When I was a little boy in the grammar school, the seniors looked to me like demi-gods; no truly great man today can seem to me quite so wonderful as those giants. They were fourteen years old. All I can say of the youngest generation at that time—my own contemporaries—is that they were filthy. I wonder if the small boy today is quite so dirty an animal as he was in my time. Apparently it was so all over the world. The great Russian novelist, Dostoyevsky, said the small boy used language that would make a drunken sailor blush. This is no exaggeration; it was literally true of the boys I knew.

THEN, later, playing in the streets, I looked with envy on the college undergraduates. They were dressed in those days like a modern stage caricature of a professor. They wore frock coats, tall hats, and whiskers, yet they were in the heyday of their youth. Good, bad, and indifferent they were. I shall never forget one degenerate, who offered me an unpardonable insult; and I shall never forget another, who seemed angelic. I lost the ball I was playing with; and seeing my unutterable dismay, he bent down to me, gave me a quarter and told me to go to the nearest store and buy a new ball. In an instant I rose from despair to rapture. I wonder if my benefactor is still alive. I wish I knew his name.

Some of these undergraduates called on my sister, aged twenty. As a "kid brother," I suppose I must have been insufferable. I can plainly remember how uneasy these student callers were, when, out of perversity, I remained in the room. It was clear they wished me elsewhere; wished I were in the grave. But they did not dare to manhandle me, knowing that my sister would not approve. So they resorted to bribery, and, like most small boys, I was venal. In process of time, I became myself a regular member of the younger generation. The only way I can make any appraisal of the younger generation of

Through Dr. Phelps' house in New Haven passes the gallant procession of youth. Portraits of his mother and sister look down on the gatherings in this room where many Yale men have met before dinner



Another portrait, a recent one of Dr. Phelps, painted by Jere Wickwire of Yale, 1906, hangs in the dining-room of this New England homestead, which radiates its owner's fine scholarship and friendliness

