

CHAPTER X

NOTE UPON THE ABUSE AND THE USE OF LITERARY SOCIETIES

As I have been asked, on various occasions, to express an opinion as to the use of literary societies, as well as asked to join some of them, I have been thinking that a short lecture, embodying my beliefs upon the subject, might be of use to you. It is not at all necessary that you should approve my opinions; but I am sure that you will find them worth thinking about, because they are based upon something better than any experience of my own—the experience and the teaching of really wise men. Let me begin, then, by saying that I am strongly opposed to the existence of most literary societies, and that I believe such societies may do very considerable injury to young talents.

There is a general principle, especially insisted upon by Herbert Spencer in his *Sociology*, which applies to the world of literature just as much as it does to the world of political economy, or the world of industrialism. That principle is this: whatever can be done by the individual in the best way possible, is not work for a society to attempt, unless this society can greatly improve the work of the individual. You know that sociologists are never tired of pointing out that, even in the case of private companies and state undertakings, the private companies invariably do the better work. Of course the larger social questions connected with competition, lie outside of my province; I am reminding you of them, but I have no wish to dwell upon them. Only remember that the general principle is applicable to all forms of human work and effort. Co-operation is valuable only when it can accomplish what is beyond the

power of the individual. When it cannot accomplish this, it is much more likely to make mischief or to act as a check than to do any good. One reason for this is very simple—co-operation is unfavourable to personal freedom of thought or action. If you work with a crowd, you must try to obey the opinions of the majority; you must act in harmony with those about you. How very unfavourable to literary originality such a condition would prove, we shall presently have reason to see.

But first let me observe that all kinds of literary societies are not to be indiscriminately condemned. Some literary societies are very useful, and have accomplished great services to literature, by doing for literature what no individual could possibly do. For example, in England societies have been formed for the editing and publishing of valuable old texts. The Early English Text Society is an example, one of perhaps a score. No one man could have done the work of this society, nor the work of the Percy Text Society, nor the work of a dozen others of which you have undoubtedly heard. Such work requires a great deal of money, such as very few even rich men could spare, and it requires a vast amount of labour, beyond the capacity of any single person. Now in these cases hundreds of people contribute money to support the work, and dozens of scholars are thus enabled to concentrate their efforts in a single direction. It would be folly to say that societies of this kind are not of the very highest value. But they are valuable only because they do what individual effort could not do.

Again, societies formed in colleges and in universities, for the purpose of encouraging literary effort, or debating, or any other beginnings in the great arts of composition or of eloquence, are certainly to be recommended. They are to be recommended because they stimulate the novice to do many things which he might not have self-confidence to attempt without encouragement. How many a student must have first discovered his own abilities in the direction of oratory or poetry or fiction, through the stimulus that his

college society first gave him. He thought that he could not make a speech, but one day, much against his will, he found that the opinion of his fellow students compelled him to make a speech, and the result was that he proved to be better qualified than others to do what he had imagined impossible. So with the first efforts in many directions. The majority forces us to make them; and in such instances the influence of the majority is to develop individual power. But I will still say that here the value of such societies begins and ends. There are wonderful societies of this kind in all the great colleges and universities of the world; and they help to develop the first budding of talent, the first literary and artistic ambition. But the best of them never produce anything great. They work with raw material; the very best things published by students of the great English universities, for example, are always somewhat immature. If we acknowledge that some stimulus of a healthy kind is given to literary ambition by this form of co-operation, then we grant about all that can be granted.

Once that the individual mind blossoms and develops, from that moment the influence of societies ceases to be a benefit, and threatens to become an injury. The very same social opinion that compelled and encouraged the first effort would almost certainly oppose itself to further development after a certain fixed degree. The early encouragement might be voiced in some such persuasion as this: "Try to show yourself as clever as the rest of us." But at a later time, the like social opinion would certainly declare, "You must not be eccentric and think so differently from the rest of us. If you do think that way, please do not express your opinions, for they will not be tolerated." I am putting the case rather strongly, of course. But the second form of address just quoted is really that form of address which the world uses to every kind of original talent. The world is not nearly so liberal, generous, appreciative, as the literary societies of colleges and of universities. Public opinion is above all things conservative in almost every

direction in which original talent aims. Instinctively it attempts to block every departure from conventional ways of thought and action. And any mature society of a certain average size is pretty sure to represent public opinion in a strong form. It will therefore be much more likely to act as a strangling power than as a developing power. I would venture to say, however, that the proper conditions of literary independence and mutual encouragement in a literary society must depend very much upon the number of its members. And I should put the number very low—so low that I think you will be rather surprised at the statement. I do not think that a literary society of the sort to which I have referred, should consist at any time of more than two or three persons. Combinations of three have been proved both possible and beneficial. Any large figure, even four, I should think dangerous. And the combination of three should be, I think, a combination of differences, not of similarities. The durability of the brotherhood would depend upon mutual appreciation, not upon unity of idealism or singleness of opinion. But naturally this question comes up, “Can we call a fraternity of three persons a literary society?” Perhaps not; yet I firmly believe that any larger combination of individuals for a literary purpose would not accomplish any good, and should not be formed, except for such purposes as that of giving financial aid. Now I shall try to explain why.

Experience among professional men of letters tends to show that there is but one way, one influence, through which they can really assist each other toward the realization of higher things—that is, friendship and sympathy. Friendship, real friendship, admits of perfect freedom between mind and mind, perfect frankness, perfect understanding, and therefore complete sympathy. But the conditions of human nature are such that, even among common minds, perfect friendship can seldom extend to any considerable number of persons. So there is a Spanish proverb on the subject, which is worth quoting:

Compañía de uno, compañía ninguno ;
Compañía de dos, compañía de Dios,
Compañía de tres, compañía es ;
Compañía de cuatro, compañía de Diablo.

Which is to say, one is no company ; two is God's company ; three is company ; but four is the Devil's company. Now though it may seem funny, this proverb is really wise, as most Spanish proverbs are ; for it signifies that a perfect friendship of more than three has been found very difficult. When four make the company, a division of opinion or feeling is almost certain to result ; for two will be apt to unite against one or both of the others, when some vexed question arises. I believe that you must have known this to be true in your own experience. At all events, a literary association made for real and serious literary objects of a high class, can only be beneficial and enduring if built upon friendship and sympathy ; and friendship and sympathy of the quality needed cannot be expected from a combination of more than three.

Perhaps you will think of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and other societies. But now that we have full details about these societies, we find that they were societies in name rather than in fact. The Pre-Raphaelite society existed only by groups of three, and these groups touched each other only at long intervals. Moreover, the only thing that kept the threes affiliated even by the thinnest of threads, was a certain business necessity. I believe you will find in the history of English literature that nearly all great men have been solitary workers, and have had remarkably few friends. Certainly this has been the case in modern times. I cannot think of any way in which a literary combination could be of serious value to a serious literary worker, except in the manner that I have indicated.

You will perhaps remember that in England and in America there are thousands of "literary societies," that almost every country town has a literary society of some

kind; indeed, I might remark that even in Yokohama and in Kobe the foreign merchants have made a "literary society." But it does not at all follow that these societies are literary because they are called literary. Do not be deceived by this fact of the popularity of literary societies in England and elsewhere. Such societies are formed for purposes of which the average student has no idea. They are formed for purely social purposes, to bring young men and women together, to enable parents to marry their daughters, to enable small musicians or small poets or popular journalists to obtain a little social influence. I do not care how big the society may be, that is the real end of it. There is a little music, a little speaking, a commonplace essay. Then there is a great deal of introduction and of social gossip. This is only a commonplace and vulgar playing—it is pretending. And I am speaking to superior men, to educated men. As a university man must take literature seriously, he cannot be interested in nonsense of the sort which I have been describing, and only as nonsense can the thing exist for him. You do not find real men of letters bothering themselves with societies of that kind.

Now, to sum up, I will say that literary societies of a serious character, such as those formed in universities, and sometimes outside of them, have this value—they will help men to rise up to the general level. Now "the general level" means mediocrity; it cannot mean anything else. But young students of either sex, or young persons of sentiment, must begin by rising to mediocrity; they must grow. Therefore I say that such societies give valuable encouragement to young people. But though the societies help you to rise to the general level, they will never help you to rise above it. And therefore I think that the man who has reached his full intellectual strength can derive no benefit from them. Literature, in the true sense, is not what remains at the general level; it is the exceptional, the extraordinary, the powerful, the unexpected, that soars far above the general level. And therefore I think that a university

graduate intending to make literature his profession, should no more hamper himself by belonging to literary societies, than a man intending to climb a mountain should begin by tying a very large stone to the ankle of each foot.

And yet, in spite of what I have said against the serious value of literary societies, I must confess I myself belong to a literary society. But it is really the most sensible society of the kind imaginable. There are no meetings which one is obliged to attend; there is no demand for literary work of any sort; you are not even obliged to know the other members of the society. We make every year a contribution of money; but we must contribute for twenty years and never get anything in return. Then you might ask, "What is the use of such a society?" It is very useful indeed. Thousands of writers belong to it, but very few of them use it. The object of the society is to provide money for the employment of good lawyers to defend the interests of authors against dishonourable publishers. Authors are generally very poor men, and very easy to take advantage of in business. To go to law with a publisher is out of the power of a poor man, in nine cases out of ten. But if a thousand poor men get together, each to contribute every year a small sum in the interests of right and justice, without asking any direct return for it, then a great deal may be done. As it is, the society employs very skilful lawyers and advisors. If any one member of the society be unjustly treated, all the others thus combine to defend him. Now that is an illustration of what a society really should be formed for — only to do for each of its members what the individuals cannot possibly do for themselves. Otherwise there is absolute independence. No man is obliged to give his time or his work to the society at home; there is no literary labour attempted; all the legal work is done by persons hired by the society. I think that a society of that kind formed with the general object of protecting the interests of Japanese authors, and therefore of protecting the growth of future Japanese literature, would be of great

service. But otherwise I can imagine no value to university graduates in a literary society of any sort, containing more than three members.