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THE CONVERSAZIONE IN DAYS OF OLD.

"And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended."

WHEN the editor of THE VARSITY asked me to give some account of the conversazione in my undergraduate days I scarcely realized what an effort of the historical imagination it would require to carry out my promise. But the study of Anglo-Saxon, whatever be its difficulties, has certainly the merits of stimulating the historical sense and increasing our interest in the centuries now past.

It was once a matter of pride to speak of the days "when I was an undergraduate." These days are so long past that they have now become historically interesting to the modern student to whom they may well appear an antediluvian age.

Our deluge was a fire. The famous conflagration of St. Valentine's Day, 1890, now in all the encyclopedias as one of the notable events in the history of Toronto, was due to an unfortunate accident in connection with the preparations for the conversazione. It was certainly the most brilliant entertainment ever offered by any university to its guests, and was witnessed not only by some hundreds in evening dress, but by many thousands in various garbs who were enabled to enjoy the finest and costliest exhibition in the history of our city. For many months thereafter Toronto also enjoyed the privilege of exhibiting to the stranger within her gates the finest specimen of a mediæval ruin that America ever produced. When, after a year and a half, the restored building rose in almost startling freshness the recollection of the ruined pile became one of memory's possessions forever. Few of our present undergraduates can share in this recollection, but the conversazione of which I would tell lies as far behind the fire as the fire antedates our time. As a half-way house on this progress from the present to the past, let me pause at another conversazione, the most famous before the fire, that of 1884. On this occasion the brilliance was wholly intellectual. The two greatest living masters of English prose, one of them a master poet as well, sat together on the dais in Convocation Hall. In Queen's College, Oxford, the room was formerly shown where Prince Hal lived as a student. So at some future day visitors to University College may read in the Dean's house the inscription: "Here Goldwin Smith and Matthew Arnold were entertained by a Fellow of Merton." What the apostle of the doctrine of the remnant thought of the English in Canada may be read in

his letters; * how great an impression he made upon us, lives in the memory of those who heard him. His presence, with that of his old friend, lent a distinction to that particular University function, which it retained till the great fire swept the Hall itself away, with all its distinctions, into oblivion.

During my course as a student, the conversazione was the one social function that University College boasted. The word "function" had not yet come into use, nor had that system of co-education which is so largely responsible for the growth of this social element in college life during recent years. The entertainment was given by the College Literary and Scientific Society, to which, in those days, every student belonged. It was the undergraduates themselves who entertained; they invited the guests, including the Faculty, which numbered a baker's dozen, and it was well understood in the social circles of Toronto of Old that this was the students' opportunity of returning such courtesies and kindness as the townspeople and the Faculty had shown them. For, in that simpler era, when both Faculty and student body were comparatively small and when salaries were relatively much larger, there was more effort made by the members of the Faculty to entertain the students in their homes, Dr. Wilson and Professor Young being especially noted for their hospitality.

Owing to the limited number of students (about 150), it was customary for each one to get five tickets in return for the subscription fee of one dollar which he was expected to contribute. In addition, there were many complimentary tickets, and there was even a tradition that any graduate could gain entrance by appearing in the academic costume of cap and gown. Then a number of tickets were scattered around town in return for the loan of flags and other decorations, the result being a most variegated and democratic assembly, in which even the U. C. College third-form boy was able to make his presence felt.

With so limited an amount of money, it may be supposed there was no very great display. On the contrary, the æsthetic effects were, beyond all comparison, superior to anything possible at the present time. This was due to the beauty of the old building and to the fact that it united under one roof all the various activities of college life, from Library and Museum to Reading Room and Residence. Most important of all, the

* He did not tax us, like Mr. Chamberlain, with Provincialism, but he called us "Philistines, and Philistines of a hard type." However, that was a way he had, just as Thackeray thought every man a snob.