

A Plea for Literary Societies

(By W. R. Dunlop)

A plea may be more than a statement of case and may be for less than an ideal. In *Virginibus Puerisque* Robert Louis Stevenson made a plea for gas lamps. Not a very illuminating subject in the essay sense, you may say. Yet it grips the reader—perhaps because R. L. S. wrote it. Perhaps also because it points the value of a common thing.

The Literary Society in the Church, apart from the social function it may fulfil, has too often been regarded with a passive complacency by the majority of Church members; and partly for this reason it has not fully realised its usefulness. Yet it deserves practical recognition. If not a brilliant electric light it is at least a lamp; and its members, like Stevenson's lamplighter, are helping to "knock a luminous hole in the dusk." Though the average society does not reach the limits of the intellectual improvement which is its usual formula it fosters the bent towards literary study and, perhaps more important, the ability to speak with force and gracefulness. Under its comparative seclusion young speakers who stumble may stumble into excellence, knowing that many public men of to-day look back with gratitude to the literary society of other years. It is, besides, an influence for good and a healthy antidote for ennui and idle evenings, especially in the case of strangers to the community; which suggests that the condition of membership need not be direct Church association. The latter though not a condition may be a result. Community of interest is among the most powerful factors in cementing relationships—whether it be in the family, the club, the society, the larger plane of civic or political organization, the common love of the flag or, in the ultimate, the feeling of a common destiny of the race; and the encouragement of friendly rivalry in competition is a kin and worthy aim.

The Literary Society, whatever its individual place in the scale of excellence, acquires a new status when affiliated with a collective body. During the winter literary society work in the city has had an incentive to intellectual effort and social fellowship, both in and out of Presbyterianism, by the contests arranged through the Vancouver Debating League. These contests have been conducted with spirit; and the meetings of societies on a purely secular basis and those having church auspices have helped to broaden sympathies and to increase the sense of brotherhood. And though, of necessity, only a few of the members of such societies can take an active part in these debates—even by varying the teams, if necessary—they all can take a pro-