

A College Reunion

FIFTEEN years is a long time to come back to one's college. Recently my college celebrated its golden jubilee. We the old students donned our red blazers and went. All of us were not invited though. Probably the Principal didn't have our addresses. Any way where was the difference — one doesn't need a formal invitation to one's own house.

With mixed feelings, we walked in through the college gates. Would the college be the same as when we left it? At least in spirit, if not in the physical environments. Would there be the old friends to talk to? They had better be there, otherwise what was the point in just gazing at the buildings and seeing the football teams for the last 20 years in the Staff gallery. Would we recognise each other? And would Surjit Kaur come? She was a real looker in those days you know. Wonder what she looked like now? And would Santa Singh be still there? I promised to myself that I would have platefuls of samosas at Santa Singh's tuckshop even if I had to miss the presidential address. And I must visit the NCC office, where I had been a cadet. And of course, how could I leave without going to the Hostel and meeting my old friend Sagli. . . the fruitshop manager.

We started off with the presidential address. This I thought was a bore. But I suppose this had to be a must, for after all, the V. I. P., the Principal, the Old Boy's Secretary, the Present Students' Leader and a host of others . . . all had to make their speeches. Somehow, routine, copy book, disinterested heartless speeches infuriate me. Probably I would have even walked out, had I not been sitting near the dias. Of course, frankly I must admit that in reality, I was overawed by the occasion. You know I felt as if I were a student once again, listening to the All India Inter College Declamation contest. How small one can feel in one's alma mater.

The otherwise dull proceedings were enlightened by a very touchy poem composed by an old student, who is today a leading poet of the country. And when an old Principal, now residing in Pakistan, spoke with nostalgia and in near anguish of the days gone by, there was pin-drop silence under the "shaminias" and tears in some eyes. At that time I felt sorry for some of my friends. Here was a man who had come from another country, just to be with the college for a day. But some of my friends, old students mind you, were at this very moment sitting in Chandigarh, probably seeing the Sunday matinee.

Contrary to expectations, there

were very few old class-fellows to meet. Many of them just could not make it, some had just disappeared after leaving college and couldn't be traced, and others were already dead. Suddenly one felt old and restless. Standing next to the cricket pavilion, watching the present students go by without even as much as a look of recognition, one felt ignored and a thing of the past. I saw an old class mate of mine, but he didn't talk to me. He had been such a talkative, overbearing, snooty rouse in those days. So I wondered at his silence. Later on a Professor told me that he was now working as a sales clerk in a small hosiery mill in the town. He shunned his past.

Surjit Kaur was not there either. She had married, and gone off to Canada. Some one told me that she had three daughters now. Was she still good looking and did she have the same graceful figure, I asked? "She weighs a ton now my dear," said my friend, "all Indian women do after marriage." I was hurt. How could Surjit Kaur weigh a ton. Another disillusionment, another dream shattered. I went to the Hostel trying to mind my dream. Sagli had left years back, but his son was there. We had tea together. Sagli's son and I, on the lawns outside the hostel tuckshop. He told me that this was the best college going, and one day like his father he was going to own the college fruitshop.

At the end of the day, they issued us with a copy each of the Golden Jubilee Souvenir. It contained goodwill messages from the Prime Minister, the President, Central and State Ministers and Governors. This amused me greatly. Here were big leaders talking big and showering their bountiful blessings on an institution about which they knew nothing. Probably the same pages could have been better used by printing the addresses of the old students for the last twenty years. Or better still, some news of the old students could have been given. Where was Nadda Singh, the champion wrestler who spent ten years in B.A. drinking up his father's ghee? One missed the brawny Gadda Singh — 'the cart' as he was commonly known. And where were the countless Sardarjees who spent hours at an end before the looking glass, tying their maroon turbans to satisfaction. I think the contents of the magazine would have been richer, had these personalities been included.

We left in the evening, everyone rushing back to his job. The next day the same old problems of sickness, money, and transfers came up. In our hearts we thanked the college for giving us a day off.

—HIMMAT GILL