

SCIENCE

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THE POSITION OF THE CHEMIST IN THE
COMMONWEALTH¹

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THE honor conferred upon the chairman by his associates carries with it a responsibility that is not to be regarded lightly. Aside from the duties, which are well defined, of looking after the welfare of the section, presiding over its meetings, which are to be made as interesting, attractive and instructive as possible, the responsibility presents an opportunity. The present chairman of this, the first section of the society to be organized, and the largest, a section containing over ten per cent. of the entire membership and twice as many members as the parent society claimed when he first began enjoying its influence and privileges, welcomes the opportunity with pleasure. I shall give the section my best service.

Among other things my conception of the office of chairman calls for a frank presentation of such problems, general or local, which appear needful of solution and may be best solved by democratic discussion. Every member of the society should give those matters which have to do with the society's interests the most careful consideration and such subjects should be thoroughly discussed by every section that the course followed by its councilors may be in a measure representative of that section's opinion. I furthermore feel that members of the council from sections should give an accounting of their service that the section may decide if it wishes to

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¹ Address of the chairman of the New York Section of the American Chemical Society, delivered October 7, 1910.

continue such representation. On such a basis, and such a basis alone, do I think local representation in the council should be placed. The New York Section by its large representation in the council, honorary and elective, must have great influence in solving any problems to the society.

I wish to ask your attention to two matters this evening. The first has to do with the American Chemical Society in general.

The most serious problem that the American Chemical Society is now facing is that of increasing its efficiency. At present the society maintains five different offices in places as far separated as New Hampshire, New York, Ohio and Illinois, with inadequate salary and other accounts at each place. No criticism of any individual or any one of these offices is intended or must be inferred. We are grateful for the excellent services generously rendered, but it is not good business. I would substitute a concentration of organized efficiency for a segregated unity of intent. This proposed centralization of labor may be accomplished without destroying the democratic representation and has amply good precedent; and it will be made the easier of accomplishment by the early completion of our splendid new club house, the American Chemists' Home. There suitable office space may be secured for the right man, who should receive a substantial honorarium and be provided with associates and a sufficient clerical force to care for the library, the society's publications, and to quickly dispatch all matters of business. The desirability of this will become more apparent as soon as the entire library of the Chemical Society may be placed upon the shelves, but especially when the circulating Perkin and Chandler libraries become available for the chemists throughout the country.

Second, as for the New York Section in

particular. The more I study, in my professorial capacity, the social and economic conditions of this great city—this the second city of the world, having within its 327 square miles more people than the states of Massachusetts, Maine and Vermont combined, with their 47,000 square miles; having within its actual city limits more people than were in the entire United States when our government took shape—the more convinced I am that New York's greatest material need at present is the chemist. To be sure, one who keeps posted knows that Chandler worked valiantly on the board of health for eleven years, that Metz sought to put the purchasing power of the city's money on a par with that of any private corporation, that Lederle is decreasing the death rate in our municipality; but these are sporadic cases and the influence exerted, however valuable and striking at the time, is more or less evanescent by virtue of the method of appointment and limiting term of office. To be sure, an expert chemist controls the quality of illuminating and fuel gas in the city. A chemist, nominated by this section, sits as a member of the municipal explosives commission. But, it seems strange to me that a municipal sewerage commission should be in existence with no chemist as a member. The sewage problem confronting us is undoubtedly a most serious one, and one which we shall soon have to solve at an expense even greater than the cost of the magnificent new water system that is now being installed. Advice obtained from an adequate soil survey would help relieve the distressing conditions of our parks at present. It will be cruel if the public service commission allows the construction of any more subways without stipulating that the trains going in opposite directions be placed in separate tubes or tunnels. The various devices for im-

proving the ventilation of the subways, which we observe being tried out from time to time, are at best mere palliatives and not actual preventives. No chemist is a member of this commission. Not long ago a vacancy occurred in a most important commission due to the resignation of the chemist member of the board. A petition signed by half a hundred prominent chemists was sent to the governor requesting the appointment of a chemist who was recognized as one of the world's authorities and regarded the most eminent among his colleagues in that particular field. A courteous acknowledgment was returned, but the private secretary received the appointment.

These matters are not referred to in a spirit of peevish criticism, and are not true of New York alone, but are mentioned in order to emphasize the importance of the part the chemists should play in the public weal and how that happiness can be enhanced. For it is a fact that the chemist does not measure up to his full value and importance in the summation of municipal and communal affairs. We can not always blame some political party in this matter. Sometimes they are not guilty, and even if they were, I feel that it is not right for us to shift the blame. Rather let us assume the entire responsibility, for, in truth, we, the chemists, are guilty.

Now, how are we to remedy this state of affairs? Can it be remedied? To the latter, I say "yes." In answer to the former question, I will say that conditions can be helped, not fundamentally, perhaps, but specifically, by the Section taking up some one matter at a time—for example, the establishment of a dignified advisory scientific commission, untrammelled by political, official, religious or social associations, which shall hold itself in readiness for consideration of every serious problem presented to it, and exert such a power in

public opinion that its advice must be taken. I will go further; if the Section take this matter up, and, having settled upon a policy, present it with sufficient strength to the proper authorities, it is not improbable that a clause establishing such a commission may be inserted in a revised charter of the city. The study of and a frank discussion of local problems must become the policy of the Section, however, if anything of real value is to be accomplished, for chairmen come and chairmen go, but a principle lives on. And this principle shall be established.

We can strike at the root of the failure of the chemist to occupy his proper place in the body politic through our educational institutions. In this, the Section can be helpful in advising with the various teachers. Twenty years' experience has convinced me that no man or woman, whatever may be his or her calling, has a right to an academic degree unless the training laid out for such an acquirement involves one course in chemistry. In that general course the relation of the individual to the community, the chemist and the commonwealth as it were, should be brought out and hammered home. In this manner a few generations of graduates, not themselves chemists, but men of education in fact, who have learned the value of the chemist in the community, will make the principle felt. For college men will more than ever rule our country. In the meantime, the universities and technical schools must see to it that their graduate chemists, chemical engineers or engineer-chemists, have not only acquired superior professional proficiency, but a broad culture which fits them to deal with these great problems with tactful force. We may be but tillers of the soil now, but the harvest to be reaped will repay the labor spent.

CHARLES BASKERVILLE

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