IF YOU ARE GOING TO SCHOOL IN ENGLAND ....

VOCABULARY: First of all, you have to get your terms right: in England a Preparatory School is preparatory to a Public School, not to a College. A Public School is an Independent Secondary School, almost invariably a boarding school, the very antithesis of a public school in America.

TO GET INTO A PUBLIC SCHOOL: Two things are required if you are English: First, that the school is willing to accept your name for the year you are eligible to enter (i.e., the year you are 13); the lists for this particular year may close as early as ten years before the entry year, so once you are born you have no time to lose. Second, that when the time arrives you can pass the Common Entrance Examination (common to almost all Public Schools), with not less than the minimum mark your chosen school demands.

In other words, entry is deliberately non-competitive in most Public Schools. This ensures a wide range of every type of pupil and makes all possible allowances for the late bloomer. No boy is eligible to enter after his fourteenth birthday, and there are no provisions normally made for transfer from or to other schools at a later date. Once there you are there for keeps.

AND TO STAY THERE: How well you do in the Common Entrance will affect the level at which you enter the School. There is no four-year program as here. You may be placed in any one of several basic forms and in different sets for maths. (not math.) and languages, depending entirely on your ability. If you show you are up to it, you are likely to be promoted during the year, sometimes more than once. On the other hand, there is no automatic promotion. (Winston Churchill provides the classic case of the boy who stayed for three years in the same class he had been placed on entering Harrow School.)

EXAMINATIONS: The British equivalent of a national examination, the General Certificate of Education, comes in two separate steps.

The first stage, known as the Ordinary (O) Level, is taken two or three years after entering Public School and usually covers a very wide range of subjects. Each paper lasts three hours and is made up of essay questions. A clever boy may take as many as a dozen subjects at O Level. Where it is possible to make some measurement of the knowledge required for this examination, as in subjects such as mathematics or languages, then the requirements would roughly correspond to the basic requirement for graduation from secondary school here. In other words, by the age of 15 or 16 the average English boy has covered the same ground as a 17 or 18-year old in the United States. It may take some of the sting out of this to realize that in England you start school at five instead of six, and the school year is slightly longer.

Once the O Levels are behind him, then the student moves into the Sixth Form and starts some measure of specialization, with the objective of learning the techniques of study in depth. He drops the subjects that interest him least and concentrates on not more than two or three subjects, which will probably be in the same general field. Two years later he will take the second G.C.E. step -- the Advanced (A) Level examination - in his chosen subjects only.

If he wants to go on to a University, the odds are that he will stay another term or two and take university scholarship papers. In theory six Os and two As are roughly all the requirement for university entrance, but with the competition what it is today a good deal more than that is needed in practice. (There is no graduation ceremony, by the way. You stay at school as long as seems useful or necessary and leave without fanfare when that time is up.)

GOING TO COLIEGE: It has to be born in mind that in England there has until recently been no such place as a Liberal Arts College, and most young people only go to a University if they specifically need a degree for their chosen career. In other words, an intending doctor will go to the University to read medicine, a lawyer to read law (which is called jurisprudence at Oxford). This is much more the equivalent of post-graduate study in this country, and perhaps only a third of the boys in however good a Public School will continue their education past the A Level stage. In business or industry many firms actually prefer to take young men straight from Secondary School and to their own training. There is no feeling in England that you must have a degree to prove you are educated and therefore capable of handling a responsible job.

THE AMERICAN SIXTH-FORMER: The American student who has been graduated from secondary school before going to England will normally be fitted into a second-year Sixth Form, with his own age group and will probably concentrate on one or two main subjects, with A Levels as his objective at the end of the year.

The odds are that he will find his work cut out for him, for in mathematics and the sciences especially the British boy may already have covered a good deal more ground than he has done. The easiest transition is for a boy who wishes to reinforce his English and history, for instance, where maturity and general reading are as important as the examination syllabus itself. In this case it is not a bad idea to get from the School before the summer a list of the set books being read currently by boys in the class that you expect to join in midstream, and read them for yourself during the long hot days.

American boys usually comment enthusiastically on the fact that there is more work done in class in an English school and less homework given. Also there are few tests. It is left to each individual to take his work as seriously or otherwise as he wishes; the results will be plain when examination time comes around.

By the way, a pass-mark in a British exam usually lies between 40 and 50. It might be as well to warn your parents that, however brilliant, you are seldom likely to earn a mark much over 70 in any subject. No doubt they will take this as a typical example of British understatement.

So much for the academic side of school life.

THE ATHLETIC PROGRAM (KNOWN AS GAMES): Games, as played in most of these schools, are usually a source of considerable enjoyment to American students, who take very easily to the casual, relaxed approach. Each school has its own official game for each term of the year, and you will probably have to play this particular game once or twice a week willy nilly during the season. At other times - and there are times set aside almost every day for taking exercise - you will probably play it again if you are picked for a team (there is no "going out" for a sport), or you can choose your own form of exercise and do something else if you prefer. The result of this is often that you play purely for fun.

OTHER ACTIVITIES: In the same way as there is a time for playing games, there is also a time for listening to a sonata or turning a lathe or tying a fly or setting up type, or any one of a dozen different hobbies and interests you want to pursue. There seems to be more leisure for these at school in England than in America, and whatever you choose will receive any amount of official encouragement. Music particularly plays a major part in most school life nowadays: One school formerly known for the fierceness of its rugby football (rugger) team now boasts of the fact that more than half the boys in the school play some instrument and there are three orchestras.

Your Headmaster, who has had to turn away some small Englishman to make a place for you in his school, hopes you will take part in as many activities as you possibly can, so that your American-ness can be spread throughout as many departments as possible and given the maximum exposure.

THE HOUSE SYSTEM: Every Public School is divided into Houses, each usually consisting of 50 to 60 boys. It is consistently being fed from below by an intake of small 13-year olds, who remain in the same House, with the same Housemaster, the whole of their school lives.

Inevitably everyone's first loyalty is to the House. The Houses compete in every conceivable activity - in all games, in music, in drama, in debate and so on , so that each boy gets to represent his House in one way or another.

As an American visitor, one of the pleasant advantages of the House system is that it is a good deal easier to make friends quickly when you are living with only a dozen or so of your own age group rather than with a hundred. And you will be very welcome on arrival; the House holding this year's American is always the envy of the rest of the School.

PHYSICAL DISCOMFORTS: Living conditions, physically, are liable to be extremely uncomfortable; buildings are cold and draughty; the British conception of central heating is laughable; you may sleep in a bed that is one of a long row of similar beds, twenty to a room perhaps; you will most probably hate the food; bedtime is ten o'clock and the lights will go out half an hour later.

In case it helps to know, after the first few days complaints are never heard about the cold; bedrooms are for sleeping only, living being done in studies, which are snug and friendly and shared and the focal point of school life. The food, however, strange at first, tends to improve as it becomes more familiar and in any case you can always augment it in the privacy of your study, where you will probably have a gas ring handy; and your mother, at least, will be glad to know you are going to get enough sleep.

PUBLIC SCHOOL DISCIPLINE: Most American boys will find that the social patterns in an English school are as strange as the academic patterns. In the classroom, for instance, the master will control the situation, but outside class, in the House, in the School, in the nearby town, matters are left in the hands of the boys themselves, and the Prefects, or Monitors, are a good deal stricter and less tolerant than the faculty might be. What is more, the teen-age boy is a passionate traditionalist and he is the last person to suggest scrapping some rule just because it is obsolete. As a result, most Schools are ridden with conventions or petty restrictions that may have been introduced for some valid reason a hundred or three hundred years ago, but today seem like pure lunacy, yet are enforced with loving enthusiasm by each successive generation of boys as they grow up to exercise authority in their turn.

Not that every senior boy is necessarily a Prefect. After living for three years or so in the comparatively small community of a House, everyone has a pretty good idea of what each boy is made of, and only the boy who has shown he is up to it will be made a Prefect, with the responsibilities and privileges that go therewith. House Prefects are usually chosen by the Housemaster, and School Prefects by the Headmaster, after consultation with the boys who are Prefects already.

THE FAGGING SYSTEM: In some schools, where there is a fagging system, these privileges are more considerable than in others. Fags are, to all intents and purposes, indentured servants to the powers that be, and during their new-boy year the small freshmen will run errands and make beds and cook sausages at the bidding of the Prefects and perform the dozens of chores that are a bore and would otherwise be shared by young and old alike. In these Schools being a Prefect rewards you with something in the nature of a personal slave.

THE AMERICAN SIXTH FORMER (In the House): No one is going to expect an American, entering the School at the Sixth Form level, to do any fagging. But nor will he automatically be made a Prefect, although his Housemaster will be anxious to elevate him to this position as soon as circumstances allow.

As a result, when you first arrive you may find yourself being ordered about, in a way you have never been spoken to in your life before, by boys who are no older and may even be younger than you are -- and expected to obey their orders without argument or question. Since the whole system is built on the theory that no one shall be put in a position of giving orders until he has shown that he knows how to take them, this method is quite deliberate, and it is up to each individual to carry himself during this testing period in such a manner that it lasts the shortest possible time. It is not easy to keep your temper, to accept a rebuke without sulking, to behave at all times with grace when what you are ordered to do may seem futile and even childish, unless you can remember that no argument is going to change the situation and that no one stands to lose but yourself and - more important in the long run - the reputation of the United States of America.

ON BEING AN AMERICAN: The United States, in fact, stands to lose or gain more than you have any idea of as a result of your behavior. In the House you will be in contact much of the time with boys a good deal younger than yourself, boys at their most impressionable age, many of whom have almost certainly never got a close look at an American before. You will find their ideas about the United States quite unnerving, acquired as they are through T.V. or the movies, with an occasional comic strip thrown in. And as the first real live American they have ever seen close up, your behavior and your views and your reactions will probably color their opinion of the United States for many years to come. Whether you like it or not, you are going to represent your country 24 hours a day, under close observation by keen critics. If it is important to you that the British think well of Americans, then you had better act like your own ideal; if it is of no importance, then you should have stayed home.

VALEDICTORY: You are going to be asked a million questions about the United States - how the wheels go round and why - so that it is not a bad idea to arm yourself with an Almanac as well as a sound knowledge of the Constitution before you leave. And of course you are going to undergo a certain amount of needling, the main object of which will be to make you rise. This is frankly very difficult not to do.

If it is of any help at all, bear in mind the word "different". Then when some arrogant Limey boasts of how much better things are in England, and you are naturally tempted to grind his miserable face in the mud while you explain the infinite superiority of the American way of life, if you can instead count ten and make a careful statement that in the United States things are certainly "different" but that they don't have to be "better" in either place, then you may have struck a major blow for your country, for peace on earth and ultimately goodwill among men.

Good luck.

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