

THE PROCTOR AND HIS "BULLDOGS."

1884

BY AN OXFORD GRADUATE.



PICTURE to yourself a gentleman between thirty and fifty years of age, dressed in a black gown, with ample velvet sleeves edged with wasp-colour, and white bands (such as clergymen were wont to wear) depending from his throat, and you will have some idea of the external appearance of an Oxford Proctor.

His dress is symbolic. The black gown represents the public ceremonies in which he takes part; the white bands denote the solemnity of his office; while the velvet sleeves express the softness of his manners, and the wasp-coloured border suggests the sting that lurks beneath.

In dignity he ranks next only to the Vice-Chancellor; he walks second in the procession of magnates which files into St. Mary's Church every Sunday to hear the University sermon; he receives the names and fees of candidates for the public examinations, and plays a conspicuous and highly amusing part in the ceremony of conferring degrees. After each batch of new-made graduates have had a Latin incantation mumbled over them by the Vice-Chancellor, two Proctors—in the presence not only of University officials and students, but also of any outsider who chooses to look on—sheepishly stride up the long room and back again without saying or doing anything. At first there is an attempt at solemnity in their gait, but after the senseless exercise has been repeated two or three times they look, as they doubtless feel, thoroughly wretched; the effort to appear dignified, and the desire to get it over as soon as possible, combine to produce one of the most comical effects ever seen.

The reason for this absurd performance is not far to seek. In ancient days any tradesman who had money owing him from an undergraduate might arrest the Proctor's course by plucking his sleeve, and so prevent the defaulter from taking his degree till his debt had been discharged. Few people know that this is the real origin of the term "plucked" as applied to failure in examination.

But this is by no means the only occasion on which the Proctor has to go on duty. It is a sad fact that this splendid dignitary, with his velvet sleeves and snow-white bands, is compelled to prowl about the streets by night, fulfilling the functions of a policeman. He is supported by three stalwart fellows in plain clothes, whose official title is "Proctor's men," but who are popularly known as "bulldogs."

At about eight o'clock every night one of the Proctors, with his attendant "bulldogs," sallies forth into the streets, hotels, and billiard-rooms of Oxford, collecting fines for the University chest. As the penalty for being out after dusk without cap and gown is five shillings, and the practice is almost universal, a rich

harvest is reaped from this field of labour. An additional five shillings is charged if the offence is aggravated by smoking.

There are occasions of course when it is impossible to avoid being "Proctorised," but the student soon becomes accustomed to certain signs which infallibly denote a Proctor's approach, and takes steps to elude him. The following are the ordinary symptoms. The street is abnormally empty; a quick and steady tramp is heard in the distance (this is most suspicious, as it is the fashion for undergraduates to lounge very slowly); three men appear marching close together, and at some distance behind them a cap and gown are discernible. Then it is time to be off.

When a capture is made the victim is treated with elaborate politeness. It takes place somewhat after this fashion. Jones is returning from a concert, and has nearly reached his College-gates, when suddenly, turning a sharp corner, he runs straight into the arms of a "bulldog."

The man touches his hat. "If you please, sir, the Proctor wishes to speak to you."

Before Jones has recovered from the shock, that functionary advances, raises his cap with a bow, and inquires:—

"Are you a member of this University, sir?"

"Yes," says Jones.

"What is your name and College, sir?"

"Jones of St. Boniface."

"Will you please call on Mr. Hunter of All Saints at nine o'clock to-morrow morning? Good night, sir." And again raising his cap he sails away, leaving Jones sick at the thought of having been caught within twenty yards of his own rooms.

But he rises next morning determined not to yield without a struggle, and presents himself at All Saints with all the courage of conscious innocence. He is shown into an ante-room now occupied by at least a dozen other men bent on the same errand, all looking excessively bored, and one decidedly wretched; for the Proctor takes cognisance of graver questions than that of dress.

With just that degree of nervous excitement which a brave man feels on the eve of a great crisis, Jones watches his fellow-victims pass in and out in order of capture, and at last hears his own name called by the attendant "bulldog."

He is ushered into the Proctorial presence, and is amazed to see no longer the solemn functionary of last night, but a good-natured man in slippers and shooting-coat, standing with his back to the fire and his hands crossed under his coat-tails.

"Well, Mr. Jones, have you anything to say for yourself?"

"Well, sir, I was just coming home from the concert at the Town Hall, and I couldn't have gone with a gown over my dress-clothes."



WAITING FOR THE PROCTOR.

"Why not?"

"Well, sir, it wouldn't have been quite the thing. No one ever does."

"Pardon me, the Vice-Chancellor always appears in his academicals."

"Ah! sir, but it's a very different thing for the Vice-Chancellor. His robes mark him out for honour, mine would have had just the reverse effect."

The Proctor smiles as he glances at the miserable rag which does duty for an Oxford undergraduate's gown, and says—

"Very well, Mr. Jones, I will not dispute that point. However, as you have enjoyed the privilege of escaping ridicule you must be content to pay for it; I must trouble you for five shillings."

One term Jones's father came up to Oxford to see him, and invited him to dine at the Roderick Hotel, bringing a few of his friends. They had finished dinner, lit their cigars, and had just begun a game of pool, when the door softly opened, and a Proctor entered. After the customary civilities, he took down their names, and requested them to call upon him at nine o'clock next morning, Jones senior staring all the time in blank astonishment. When the official had disappeared, and he was informed that this visit meant a fine of ten shillings apiece, his amazement turned to hot indignation.

"Do you mean to tell me that—that—that fellow is at liberty to invade a private billiard-room in which I am entertaining my friends, and insult me by fining them all round?"

"Yes; it's a shame, isn't it?"

"Shame!—it's abominable! it's monstrous! I shall write to the Commissioners as soon as I get back to town."

Whether the old gentleman fulfilled his threat is uncertain; presumably not, for things remain unaltered to this day.

As might be expected, countless legends have gathered round the portly figure of the Proctor. The two following rest on more than usually good authority.

A certain undergraduate, who held an open scholarship at a hard-working College, and for whom a brilliant career was predicted, had the misfortune to be detected in a billiard-room after nine o'clock at night. Now it happened that the Proctor knew his captive as a student of great promise, and was unwilling to subject him to the degradation of a fine; on the other hand, he could not consent to defraud the University. After a few minutes' reflection a delicate compromise suggested itself. He conversed affably for some time, and then inquired, with much apparent interest—

"By the way, Mr. Princeps, have you subscribed to the Charity Organisation Society?"

"No, I have not."

"Well, let me recommend you to do so. I am a member of the Committee, and shall be happy to receive your subscription at once, if it is convenient to you."

"May I ask what is the usual donation?"

"Ten shillings—I am much obliged to you. Good morning, Mr. Princeps."

The other legend runs as follows:—

A famous young orator was returning one night from the Union Debating Society, and solacing himself with a pipe on his way home. Meeting a Proctor within a few yards of the Union, and suspecting that uncompromising zeal had led his foe to lie in ambush till the close of the debate—an unpardonable atrocity in the eyes of undergraduates—he determined to be even with him. So having given up his name and College, and made the usual morning appointment, he spent the rest of the evening in making a round of the public-houses, and returned to his rooms with his pockets nearly bursting, and a smile of triumph on his brow.

Next morning he called upon his captor, bearing in his hand a fat calico bag tied up with red tape.

"Mr. Spouter, I think?"

Spouter bows assent.

"Ah! you were smoking in the Corn Market last night, Mr. Spouter. I must trouble you for ten shillings."

Spouter unties his bag, and out rushes a torrent of halfpence.

"Will you oblige me by counting them, sir? I can only make two hundred and thirty-nine."

Spouter left Oxford next morning, and did not return till the following term.

But the serious question arises: Are the Proctors worth their salt?—Most decidedly, yes! Granted that the fine of five shillings for neglecting to wear cap and gown after dusk is an undignified extortion since the authorities could enforce their being worn, without the least trouble if they pleased; granted that there is a lot of solemn absurdity mixed up with the Proctorial office, as there is with offices far more important; it yet remains that these censors are of very real service.

It must be borne in mind that the so-called University "men" are mere lads just loosed from the bonds of school, overflowing with animal spirits, and having often excessive sums of money at their disposal; men in their notions, boys in their rashness, self-indulgence, and ignorance of the world. It is certain that were it not for some such restraint as the Proctors exercise, Oxford would be a bear-garden.

