


Oxford at Home.

BY HAROLD GEORGE.

"LL their life was spent not in laws, statutes, or rules, but according to their own free will and pleasure," wrote Rabelais of the Thelemites. If three exceptions be allowed, the modern Oxford undergraduate will be able to draw a fairly close parallel between his Alma Mater and Gargantua's great foundation. Leave out examinations, Dons, and a certain paucity of feminine society, then "*Fay ce que voudras*" is his not inappropriate motto.

Our pious benefactors called the University into being for the promotion of what in these latter days we term "Higher Education." A generous-minded nineteenth century has permitted athletics to go hand in hand with scholarship. Both these sides of University life have often been discussed, but there exists another aspect of Oxford which in comparison is virgin soil: I mean the relation of the undergraduate to matters social.

Now, man is by nature a gregarious animal. Civilization develops this tendency by means of clubs and societies; and, since it is pretty generally known that the Universe has been civilized by Oxford, I need scarcely mention that social organizations have sprung up there in shoals. The "Union" is not the beginning and end of our club life, as some outsiders would have the world believe; in the present day that body has no *raison d'être* except for purposes of debate. "Vincent's"—the meeting-place of Blues—and the "Grid," both close corporations, though nominally open to the whole University, are conducted after the manner of the ordinary social club. Some of the colleges possess lilliputian establishments of the same type—very select these; while dining clubs, wine clubs, political clubs, musical clubs, essay societies,

debating societies, theological societies, are to be discovered in every corner both of University and college. I say nothing of athletic institutions—such matters are beyond my present scope; and, moreover, from what has already been said, it will be seen that the organized channels of social intercourse 'twixt man and man at Oxford are not insignificant.

Of course, the Freshman does not jump into this all at once. His first experiences of social life are of a somewhat formal nature. He receives calls and returns them. Next come invitations to all sorts of things. At most of the colleges it is the custom of the Head to invite all his Freshmen to some meal. Such an invitation—like that of Cæsar Borgia—is virtually a command. So on the appointed day the guest goes, and returns, thankful to find that the entertainment was deadly only in its slowness.

The first meal is generally a breakfast; but as one advances in terms, and perchance finds favour with the college authorities, the promotion to lunch or even dinner is reached—happy indeed is that undergraduate who sips his nectar at the table of his Head! In days gone by the Head of a certain college made a point of inviting all his Freshmen to dinner. In the old orthodox style he would take wine with each guest. This was charmingly polite of the great man, though somewhat embarrassing to the shy fledglings straight from school. Indeed, it was most unfortunate that for his health's sake the host affected a peculiar medicated wine, unpleasant to the ordinary palate, and allowed no other beverage in which his visitors might drink their part of the pledge.

Another anecdote of "Dondom," for Oxford delights in such. A "Fellow and Tutor" had during the



A SPEAKER AT THE "UNION."

vacation taken unto himself a wife. Early in the term he chanced to give one of his rightly famous breakfast parties. The morning was bright, and in marked contrast to the long spell of rain which had preceded it. Hard up for conversation, the host fell back on the ordinary English topic.

"Is it not charming that we've got a little sun this morning?"

The reply from his right-hand neighbour was unexpected, possibly *mal-à-propos*.

The undergraduate rose in his place, and stretching out a hand, exclaimed effusively:—

"My dear sir, allow me to congratulate you. I hope Mrs. — is doing well."

As a little piece of candid confession on the part of another college Head, perhaps the following is worthy of record. Upon the occasion of his entertaining some undergraduates to breakfast, the conversation grew more exciting than usual, for somehow or other the subject of temperance at the University had cropped up. In this sort did the great man deliver himself thereon: "For my part, I fancy that every undergraduate at Oxford becomes intoxicated upon some one occasion in the course of his career. In my own case I recollect that one evening several of us grew very convivial, and, what with drinking a little of this, and a little of that, I am bound to confess that in the end I could not stand straight, and had to be carried to bed."

Perhaps the learned gentleman exaggerated in laying down a rule so very stringently, but readers will agree when I suggest how venial it is to slightly exceed the limits of discretion just for once at a merry gathering. We do not take too much wine as a matter of course.

But let me now introduce the reader to a so-called "Wine." The time is about half-past eight in the evening; the scene, a man's rooms, in which is set out an elaborate dessert, with decanters containing appropriate liquids. Boxes of cigars and cigarettes help to adorn the tables. A piano stands open in a prominent position; lamps and candles illuminate the scene. When the guests have all arrived, the company numbers some five-and-twenty. A modicum of fruit is quickly disposed of, and as the cigar-boxes empty, a dense fog arises. For a time there is a perfect Babel: everybody talks at the same time; and then the host remarks "Order, order!" so that he may announce that Mr. — will sing "The Man that Broke the Bank." The song is a success because of the chorus, which is roared out in stentorian tones regardless of time or key. Next, "the 'ossiest man afoot," who possesses a mild, harmless voice, essays a hunting song, which once more is saved by a swinging chorus. The banjoist and the reciter are both present and perform. Nor is the topical song absent, for a writer and composer is there, and himself sings of his



"SLOSH"



"SMVG"

trials with "Those Troublesome Dons," the refrain running after this style :—

And I may as well acknowledge
There exists a certain tension
'Twixt some members of the college—
Whose names I need not mention—
And myself : for it's the old refrain,
"Ploughed ! ploughed ! ploughed again !"

And so the entertainment goes on until the festive assembly disperses. Not so very wicked after all, was it ?

Still I dare not venture to show another scene, in which pasteboard holds the chief position ; suffice it to say that "Nap" and "Loo," "Bank" and "Poker," are not unknown in the home of learning. Nor need the undergraduate go so far afield as the Riviera to be initiated into the game, abhorred by Deans and Proctors, called "Roulette." However, these sports of varied chance and skill have spent their attractions for many after the first year. There is a certain man still "up," who, as a "Fresher," went the whole "hog" in these wicked pursuits. Now he is a reformed character ; one of those intellectual people beloved of Dons, clever without a doubt. If you wish to offend, remind him of the frivolities of his first year ! As it is, he will probably get a "First" in the schools and settle down into the staid, sober Fellow of a college.

I spoke of Proctors a moment ago, and am thereby reminded of a little episode connected with one of those University "policemen." It was on the occasion of some Home Rule meeting somewhere in the city—with one of the Irish leaders for chief speaker—that an ardent Unionist, from the windows of his lodgings, endeavoured to raise a counter demonstration. The "Undergrad" succeeded in attracting a small knot of curious spectators, and then began : "Men of Oxford ! In your thousands are you assembled"—but his eloquence was rudely interrupted by the myrmidons of the law, and next morning the incident was valued by the Proctor at £2 sterling.

To assist at a "Bump Supper" is not the lot of every undergraduate, but if you would see a whole college in a state of wild excitement, choose such an occasion. One of the college boats has pre-eminently distinguished itself in the "Eights," or "Torpids" ; the victory must be fitly celebrated, and, the Dons being propitious, a supper is held in Hall after the conclusion of the races. The feast consists chiefly of champagne, speeches, and smoke. The Head, if he be a sportsman, will preside ; if not, some other Fellow. But the proceedings in Hall by no means comprise the entire function. About

twelve o'clock an adjournment is made to one of the quads, where a huge pile of coal, timber, and fagots has been erected. At this time the wary man changes his dress suit for the oldest garments he can find. Amid great cheering the bonfire is lighted, fireworks are produced from all kinds of hiding-places, and ignited regardless of life, limb, or property. In some mysterious way you find a Roman candle in your hand, approach the fire, light the torch tenderly, and, when it is fairly ablaze, hurl it, for choice, at a group of men ; they scatter, yet no one is hurt. Truly the narrow escapes are many and marvellous.

At one of these festivals a college servant, quite *non compos*, was intrusted for a few moments with certain fireworks. Without a thought he dropped a cracker into the chimney of a lighted paraffin lamp. Naturally, the glass was blown to atoms ; but the experimentalist, in no way disconcerted, proceeded to lay another cracker across the flame, and caused several explosions before his hand was stayed. Strangely enough, he had not even set fire to the room.

Another droll sight was afforded by a big man apostrophizing the stars to his utmost satisfaction ; this one had discarded the dress suit for a rowing attire, and his bare legs were a great feature. So, at all events, thought a mild little chap under the influence of



champagne. Softly the little one lit a squib, stole behind his bulky compatriot, and applied the fire to his calf.

It is very seldom that any unpleasantness occurs between Don and undergraduate upon these occasions. Yet it is not entirely unknown. At one "Bump Supper" enthusiasm passed all reasonable limits even while the supper proper was in progress. Several pieces of glass and china were ruined irrevocably, two or three chairs and tables were smashed. The college authorities felt bound to take official cognizance of the matter, and summoned the suspected delinquents to a meeting of the "Head" and Fellows next day. One of the suspects denied all knowledge of the affair; "he had left the Hall before any riotous proceedings took place." The Head was not satisfied with the explanation, and proceeded to cross-examine:—

"But, Mr. —, at what time did you go out of Hall?"

"I regret I am unable to state the exact moment by the clock."

"Can you not give us any approximate idea of the time?"

"No; I can only say I was not there when this happened."

"Well, even some incident that would give us a notion of the hour you left?"

"Then, if you must know, I went out just as your health was being proposed."

Events of this sort, exciting while they last, are none of them the *beau idéal* of the undergraduate. Walter Vivian was perfectly right when he

Swore he long'd at college,
only long'd,
All else was well, for she-
society!

We are nothing if not sentimental, and since it is given but to few to be on intimate terms with residents at Oxford, or with the fair denizens of Somerville and Lady Margaret—(the latter place has, by the irreverent, been called the "Tricolour," the building being half white and half red; *verb. sap.*)—we hail with glee the advent of the "Eights" and "Com-

mems." The reason we delight so much in these festivals is that here we meet those charming beings—"somebody else's sisters!"

The "Eights" week—it happens towards the end of May—brings the first invasion of the gentler sex. Breakfasts, lunches, dinners, afternoon teas are given in their honour. Just for the sake of the thing, they are shown the races, which last for a few minutes, twice every afternoon. Two in a Canadian canoe on the well-shaded Cher is far more interesting than watching a procession of boats in the blazing sun.

Far preferable to the "Eights" is Commemoration. The standing order about being "in" by twelve is then suspended. Schools are dead and done with; the immediate future holds only the "Long Vac." And this is how we spend our time, in order that for a few days each June we may properly bear in mind the benefits conferred upon us by pious benefactors of old.

On Saturday the arrivals take place: strange faces begin to haunt the "High"; but as yet we have not the chance of gauging the charms of the daughters or the dispositions of the chaperons. Sunday—once "Show Sunday," before the Broad Walk and the Meadows were thrown open to Dick, Tom, and Harry—can scarcely now be counted a festival day; it is Monday that sees the *fête* begin. The morning is employed

in showing the "lions," the afternoon is taken up partly perhaps by a concert at the "Sheldonian," and most certainly by numerous tea parties; but the evening eclipses these little things, for then comes the first ball.

Commemoration dances at Oxford are themselves all alike in method, but there are none like them elsewhere in the world. Nobody goes as a duty; everybody is intent on enjoyment. The invitations mention 9.30 as the opening hour, but the dance seldom begins before ten o'clock. For the occasion, the college—if it is a college ball—has been transformed. In the Hall a



spring floor has been laid over the ordinary hard oak boards. Some colleges, indeed, go so far as to build a huge temporary room in one of the quads for dancing, but the Hall is the usual place. Supper is laid in a special marquee; the whole of the college is available for sitting out; the gardens are lit up by fairy lamps and lanterns; many luxurious chairs are scattered about, two by two, in sequestered nooks; in fact, nothing is easier than for two people to get lost at an Oxford dance if they so please. The committee and stewards wear sashes of the college colours. The music is invariably drawn from a crack military band, such as the Marine Light Infantry, the Coldstreams, or the Royal Artillery. Everything, indeed, is as near perfection as possible so far as preparations go, and, better still, the results generally coincide with the arrangements. Day has dawned before anyone dreams of going home, and it is half-past four before our fair partners are all gone. But the men are still left behind; they return to the supper room, and now the hungry ones may eat without fear of detaining a partner. Healths are proposed and drunk: the health of the committee and secretary; the health of the band—for they are usually present now; the health of any Don who is there; and so forth. The toasts are responded to, but speeches are brief at such an hour. Next the word goes round that the photographers have come. All stand up, and arms are linked for "Auld Lang Syne." Then they go out, group themselves under the direction of the "artist," and in dress clothes have their pictures taken, between five and six on a summer morning.

The photograph is the last act of the ball, although many have not yet finished their exertions. A sunny morning suggests a bathe, so off we go to our lodgings, to put on flannels; then to "Parson's Pleasure," where we swim away to our hearts' content. At the conclusion of one such dance I agreed with two others to go and "have a dip." We were to return home, discard the dress suit for flannels, and meet again. I carried out my part of the bargain, but the other twain never arrived. When next I saw them I discovered that they reached my abode some time after I had started for the river. They had no knowledge of the whereabouts of my room, but that seemed of small consequence. They went upstairs and, opening a door at haphazard, came upon an old lady in bed, who squealed. Thereupon the invaders retreated; but, on reaching the



street, .. occurred to one that they had never apologized for their stupid mistake. Back they went, once more opened the door, and solemnly begged the old lady's pardon for their former intrusion.

The remaining three nights of Commemoration are spent in the way that I have described. There are one or two balls at the Corn Exchange, but a dance there is scarcely comparable to one in college. Tuesday is, par excellence, the day for picnics. Steam launches to Nuneham; lunch on board; getting lost in somebody's company in the woods; home again in time to dress for the ball.

Wednesday, of course, is the day of the "Encænian," or formal ceremony of commemorating the founders and benefactors. There may be a flower show in the afternoon; the evening is like the others. Thursday sees the last of the gaieties, and Friday is devoted to sorrowful leave-takings. The "Vac" has commenced.

Now, Oxford being made for the undergraduate, in our absence the city is as the Dead Sea. Nought will live in it, and there is nothing to be caught. In term time, since the place swarms with our species, it would

seem as though the society of Oxford in general were largely dependent thereon. Yet the party-going undergraduates form a very small part of the whole number, and, owing to the demand for them, these social members are in great request. It is even possible for a man to gain a bubble reputation for his social qualities. When the boy arrives, fresh from school, *ipso facto* he becomes a man. He feels himself his own master to such an unaccustomed extent that he rejoices in doing that which he ought not to do, and in escaping from the trammels of ordinary society. Therefore he is content to herd swine with other undergraduates: there is so much to be done that is entirely new, and he hastens to attempt it all at once. So for awhile the foolish boy thinks it a waste of time to indulge in afternoon tea and ladies' society.

His first experience of the latter is probably at the feast of some married Don. If the lady of the house be not patronizing, the Freshman is soon at his ease. He can talk his own "shop" and air his latest ideas without being snubbed. He can even be appreciated for his modern notions. But, alas! in some instances the better half is worse than her husband. This was well exemplified very recently. The wife scorned the ordinary undergraduate. She would allow him to swallow an uncomfortable breakfast, and directly the meal was over would say, "But, Mr. So-and-so, we really must not keep you: you are sure to have a lecture to attend." A tactless and rude hint of this sort is completely out of place, especially when the guests are fairly certain to make themselves very scarce upon the earliest opportunity.

The wives of some Dons are, quite unconsciously, possessed of some humour. There was one such lady who greatly prided herself upon a knowledge of the athletic distinctions of individual men in the college with which her husband was connected. She invited a number of undergraduates to dine, and the place of honour

at her right hand fell to the "'Varsity stroke." To him the hostess turned, and, by way of starting a conversation, inquired, "Do you row, Mr. —?"

Should the Don to whose feast the undergraduate is bidden be unmarried, the intellectual fare will not improbably consist of the host's prosy reminiscences of old school days and old 'Varsity life. This, though uninteresting, would be tolerable did it go no farther. But a senior member of the University is given to posing, all unconsciously, as a *laudator temporis acti*, and his recollections may be supplemented by invidious comparisons between past and present—much to the detriment of the latter.

Or, perchance, the older man abhors the sight of a petticoat, just as did the Head of one college. Of him it is related that, expressing a certain approval of the practice of public speakers rehearsing in private to a friend or two, he wound up by saying: "And should I ever enter into the bonds of matrimony—though I trust no such misfortune may befall me—I conceive a wife might be useful in that capacity."

When fortune throws the Oxford residents (as distinct from Dons) across our undergraduate path, they are really kind to us. They ask us to all sorts of nice things: tea parties, picnics, dinners, at times even dances. The resident ladies, perhaps because of their greater age, deem themselves very superior to their youthful guests, and will not allow them to enjoy themselves in their own way. They give the undergraduate no chance of looking after himself, but take for granted a want of *savoir faire* on his part. Therefore, when the hostesses think to amuse, they often bore. After dinner, for instance, they inveigle us into playing harmless but unnecessary games; cards perhaps, in the mildest form, and puzzles of all kinds; or it may be "hunt the thimble"—what *man* ever shone at "hunt the thimble"?—or that milk and water "pitch-and-toss," which consists in throwing cards into a hat.



The undergraduates are not expected to do much in return for all this hospitality. They have a few rather formal tea parties to attend, and are expected to drop the requisite amount of pasteboard. But at Oxford there is always something better to do than walk half a mile and drink tepid tea for half an hour. Therefore, we are detestably ungracious over this slight recognition of other people's efforts on our behalf. We are conscious of this, and of late some enterprising spirits have been wiping off their deficit of "calls" in a novel manner. They requite hospitality by giving miniature dances, to which they invite those who have entertained them, and thus do the right thing well, once and for all. Yet dances in Oxford, whether given by residents or undergraduates, are a rarity, and men who dance reserve their best energies for Commemoration.

Should the junior man stay up in vacation, he may have a really pleasant time all round. For once he finds himself treated as a gentleman, and discovers that the most severe Don can so conduct himself if he chooses. The younger Fellows, married or single, are very charming in ordinary life out of term time, when there is a lull in their crusade against the vile undergraduate. But although, as he grows old in terms and nears the end of his tether, the undergraduate

may tardily recognise a certain reason for the existence of Dons, yet as pastors and masters these are at the most allowed the title of "fellow creatures." It is very hard to pierce the *robur et aes triplex* of pedantry and high living. I myself, favoured undergraduate, have dined with Dons, and vividly recall how kindly one of them tried to put me at my ease. He commenced by talking of that "wretched animal," "the pass schools man"; which happy phrase he supplemented by saying that almost all undergraduates, fresh from a public school, were either "utterly immoral" or else were "prigs." I was just fresh from a public school, but I forgave him. He himself had never graced such an institution with his presence. Was it with such a person in his mind that the undergraduate first supplemented the New College motto, "Manners makyth Man," by the addition "the want of them the Fellow"?

I have sketched several types of Dons, but would not have my readers think there are no exceptions. No one can appreciate kindness and courtesy more than the Oxford undergraduate; no one can return it better. The spot that is his home for three or four years he worships with an intense affection, and we all know how disconsolately he realizes the approach of his final departure from the great Alma Mater.

DONS

