

Some Curious Public School Customs.

BY THOMAS STAVELEY OLDHAM.



ETON is admittedly the chief rowing school in England, as anyone can tell who scans the lists of the oarsmen who have taken part in the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Races. But at Eton it is by no means a matter of course that a new arrival may start on his aquatic career without the authorities knowing all about it. No boy is allowed to go on the river till he has learned to swim, and it is necessary to pass a regular examination before two masters, who are very particular in requiring a good "header," as well as plenty of swimming power.

A punt full of naked candidates is moored, near Cuckoo Weir, about 25yds. from a pole planted to serve as a goal, and in presence of the two "passing masters," and generally also a crowd of spectators, each boy in turn has to swim to and from the pole, to turn on his back, and show that he knows how to float. A boy who makes a bad dive, and falls flat on the water, is always turned back.

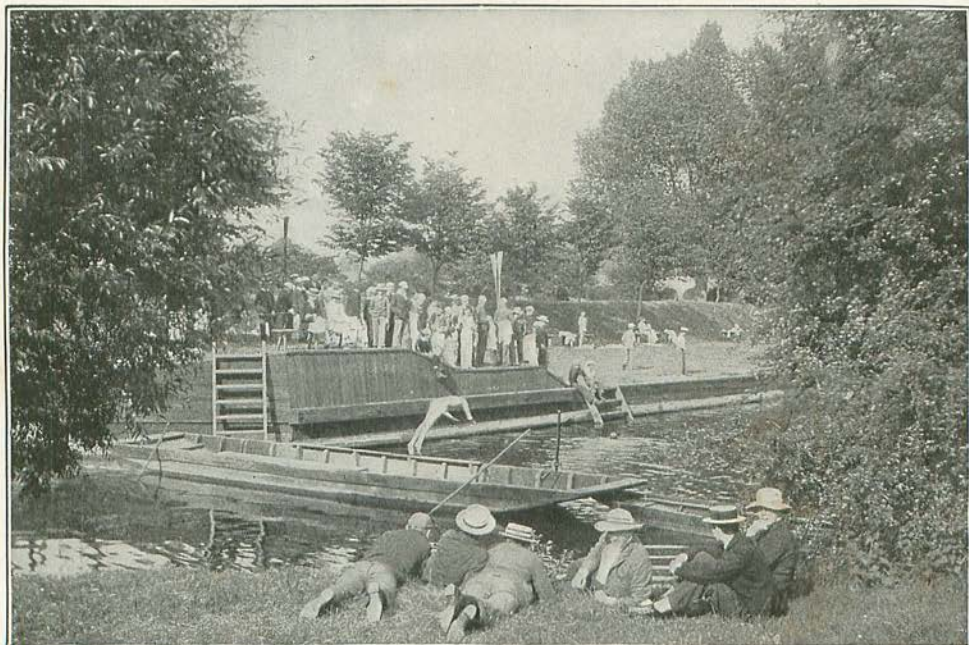
This custom of "passing" in swimming dates from 1839 or 1840, when a boy was drowned by being thrown out of his boat by a barge rope nearly opposite the Eton College Boat Club, formerly Tolladays. The accident

happened on a Saturday, and before Monday morning the late Bishop of New Zealand, G. Selwyn, and Mr. Evans, two of the masters, drew up, at Dr. Hawtreys request, the rules for "passing," which have continued in force ever since.

Speaking of the river at Eton reminds us of a very curious and absurd custom which formerly prevailed at the school, called "shirking." Boys were allowed to boat on the Thames, but all the approaches to it were "out of bounds," and so were the streets of Windsor leading to the Castle terrace, although it was quite lawful to walk on the said terrace. So that if you wanted to have your hair cut, or cash a money order at the post-office, or go to the tailor for a new coat, for which your tutor had given you an order, you had to go "out of bounds."

College boundary was marked by what was known as the "shirking stone," let into the wall on the Eton side of Barnes Pool Bridge, of which we give an illustration on the next page.

This contradictory system led to "shirking," which meant that if when you were out of bounds you met a master, you promptly popped into the nearest shop, and the master thereupon pretended not to see you and



From a Photo. by]

"PASSING"—ETON.

[Hills & Saunders.

passed on. Or, if boys were hurrying back to college and a master chanced to be in front of them, they would not dare to pass him, and although he might be perfectly well aware of their presence, etiquette forbade him to look round. This ridiculous and humiliating state of affairs was abolished by Dr. Goodford in 1860.

One of the best known of Eton customs is the celebration on the 4th of June, a very pretty scene being afforded by a procession of the school boats rowing up to Surly. It used to be the practice before outriggers came into vogue, and when the long boats were "tubs," for each boat to carry a "sitter" to dine with the crews at Surly. The "sitters" were generally well-known old Etonians or distinguished strangers. It is recorded that George Canning, the famous Prime Minister, went up as "sitter" in the *Monarch* 10-oar, in the year 1824, and, great and powerful statesman as he was, he was somewhat alarmed at the press of boats, which is some-

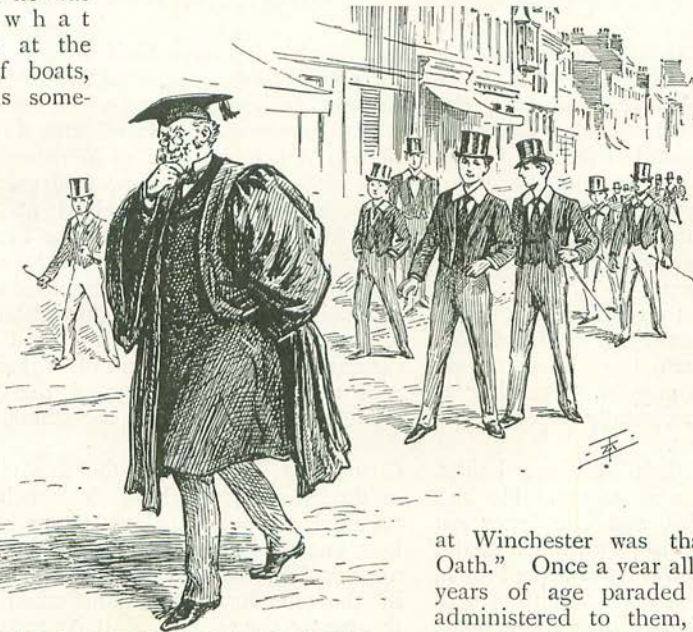


"SHIRKING-STONE"—ETON.

Winchester, he used always to be the unwilling subject of a number of more or less playful customs. For instance, when young Greenhorn makes his first appearance, some wag asks him, in the kindest way, if he has a certain book, without which he is assured it will be impossible to get through his lessons. Of course, Greenhorn does not possess this imaginary volume, but his tormentor offers the use of his own, which he has lent to Smith, to whom Greenhorn accordingly goes. Smith has lent it to Jones, so Greenhorn goes to him, only to find that the invaluable work in question is in the sick house, whence he is again sent back to school, and after a peregrination of this sort round the entire precincts, he is ultimately referred to one of the masters, who gently acquaints him with the fact that he has been made a fool of.

Another proceeding with a new boy is to ask him if he is of "founder's kin," *i.e.*, of the family of William of Wykeham, the illustrious founder of the college in the fourteenth century; and whatever the reply, its accuracy is put to the test by the investigator trying to break a plate over the victim's head, the theory being that if the plate breaks first his ancestry is clearly proved.

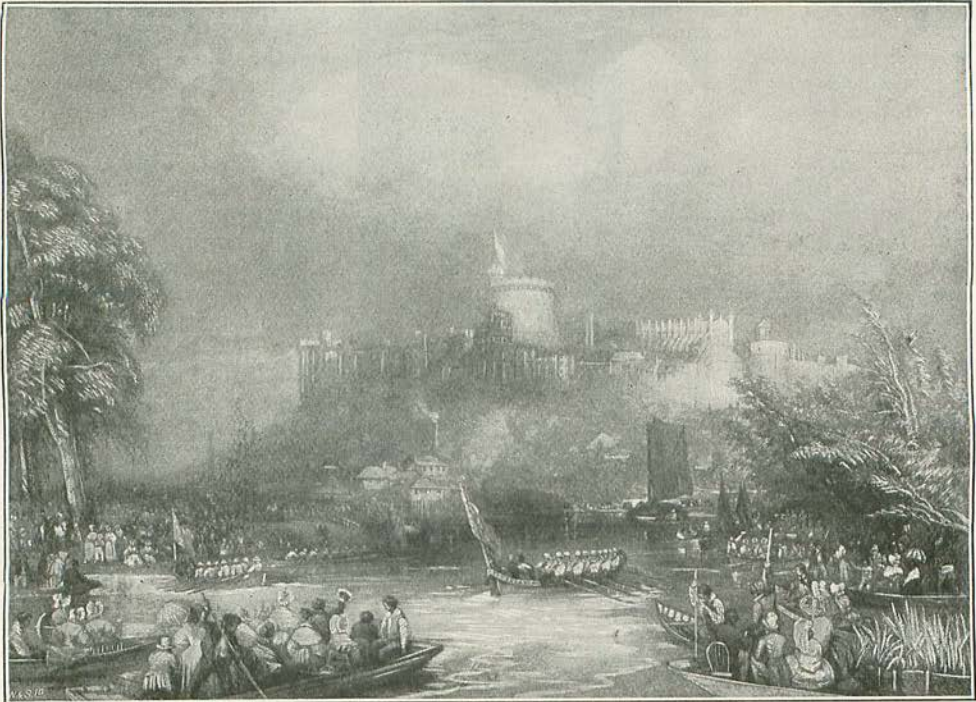
Another peculiar custom (now done away with) at Winchester was that of "Taking the Oath." Once a year all the boys over fifteen years of age paraded in chapel and had administered to them, in Latin, a solemn oath, to the effect that they would defend and befriend the college through good and evil report. In connection with this, it is interesting to record that, according to an old and well-authenticated tradition, Oliver Cromwell, in his high-handed way, had resolved on the destruction and disestablish-



"ETIQUETTE FORBADE HIM TO LOOK ROUND"—ETON.

times tremendous, as they row round the eyot near Windsor Bridge, when the fireworks are let off in the evening.

WHEN a boy made a start in school-life at



From the Picture by]

FOURTH OF JUNE CELEBRATION—ETON.

[William Evans, painted in 1837.

ment of the college, but was turned from his purpose by the strenuous representations of two of his officers, Colonel Nathaniel Fiennes and Colonel Nicholas Love, who, being old Wykehamists and mindful of their oath, succeeded in saving the school from the fate to which it had been decreed by the Lord High Protector of the Commonwealth, and which would certainly have overtaken it but for their timely intervention.

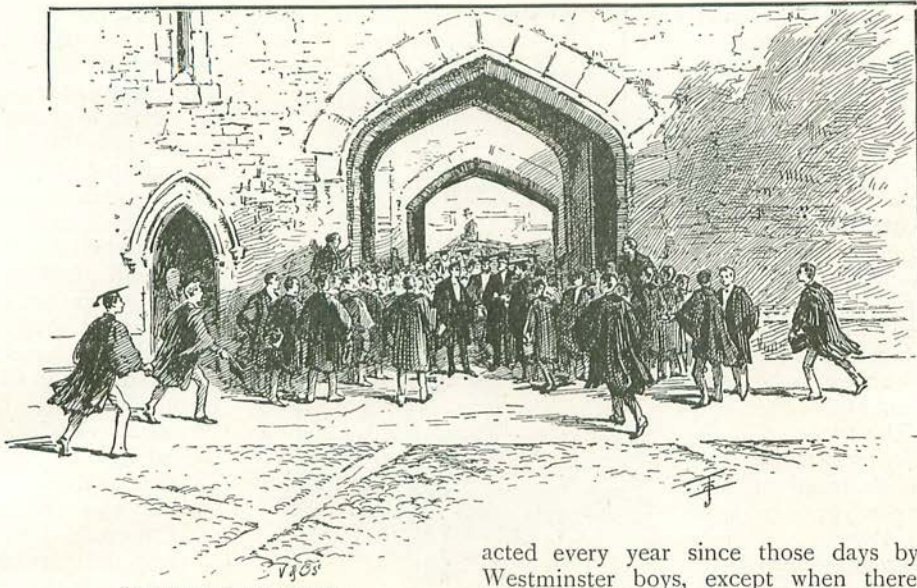
"Standing-up" was an annual institution by which boys were tested in their knowledge of the Greek and Latin lines learnt during the preceding twelve months. One boy is recorded to have successfully repeated no fewer than 10,000 lines.

Another boy, of less studious habits, escaped disgrace by a stratagem. He and his brother were twins, and the latter got through his "standing-up" with much credit, but, on coming away from the school-room, met his brother, who was wholly unprepared. The boy who had already gone through the ordeal undertook, in a truly fraternal spirit, to do it again, and having altered his hair a little and stuck a piece of plaster on his nose, by way of varying the family likeness, he presently appeared again before the unsuspecting master, and triumphantly represented his scapegrace of a brother. The

last week of Long Half was known as "Election Week," when the Warden and two Fellows of New College, Oxford, came down for the examination of candidates for admission to Winchester and of Winchester boys who wished to go to New College. These high dignitaries were received at Middle Gate by the boys, headed by the Præfect of Hall, who addressed them with a Latin oration (*ad portas*). A representation of this solemnity is given on the following page. It saw the beginning and the end of the careers of two generations of Wykehamists, and was naturally a day of the greatest interest and excitement in the school.

COMING to Westminster, the third in order on the list of great schools dealt with in the "Public Schools Act, 1864," perhaps the best known custom is that of the "Westminster Play," which is given once a year in the old dormitory, transformed into a theatre for the occasion. It is probable that these performances began in the reign of Henry VIII. ; but it is quite certain that very soon after Queen Elizabeth came to the throne Latin plays were acted by the boys. We give a translation of one of Her Majesty's statutes relating to this ancient custom :—

In order that young people may spend Christmas



"AD PORTAS"—WINCHESTER.

time more profitably, we enact that every year within 12 days after Christmas, or subsequently at the Dean's discretion, the Head Master and the Under Master shall jointly see that one play in Latin is acted. If they fail in this duty a fine of 10s. is to be imposed on the party at fault.

And accordingly a play in Latin has been

acted every year since those days by the Westminster boys, except when there has been a death in the Royal Family during the year. When the Prince of Wales was so dangerously ill in December, 1871, fags were sent from time to time to bring to the school copies of the bulletins, which were placed during the day and night at Storey's Gate, so that the elaborate preparations for the play



From a Photo. by

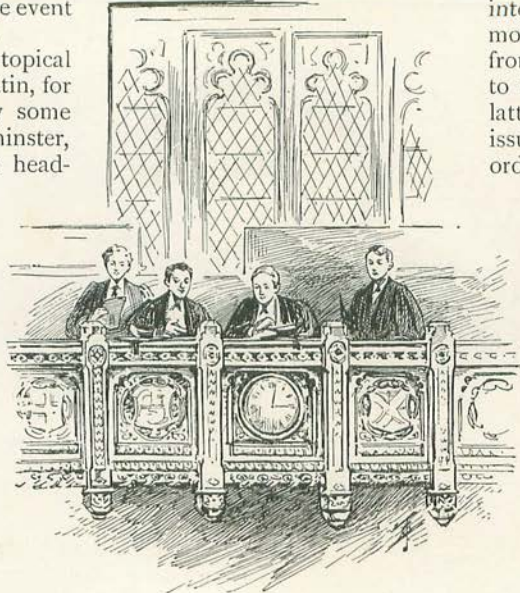
"WESTMINSTER PLAY."
(Cast of the "Andria," of Terence.)

[W. & A. H. Fry, Brighton,

might be stopped in the event of the Prince's death.

The "Prologue," a topical effusion, written in Latin, for the current year, by some classical Old Westminster, or sometimes by the head-master, is always delivered, before the play commences, by the captain of the school, faultlessly arrayed in knee-breeches, silk stockings, shoes with buckles, and white tie. The scenes of the play used to be kept in the triforium in the north transept of the Abbey.

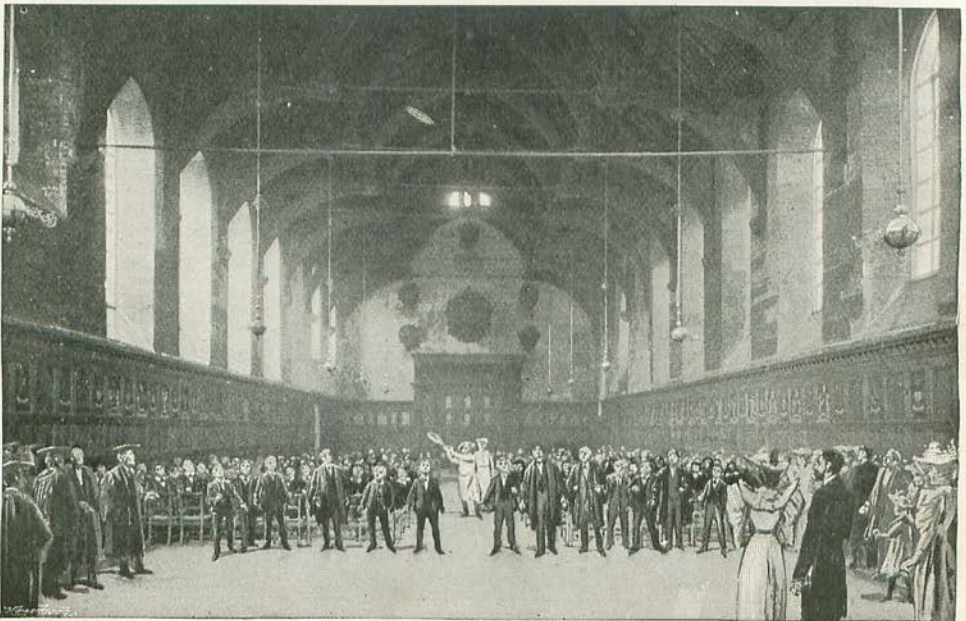
Westminster boys, if duly attired in cap and gown, have the privilege of attending debates in either House of Parliament. No balloting or other formality is required, but an arrangement is made by which seats are retained for a certain number of boys up to a specified time. This is one of the most jealously-prized customs of the place, and some years ago, when some little difficulty arose about the boys going



"ATTENDING THE DEBATES."
From a Sketch by a Westminster Boy.

into the House of Commons, a communication from the then head-master to Mr. Speaker led to the latter exalted personage issuing fresh and stringent orders in confirmation of the ancient usage. Westminsters, also, have the long-established privilege of being present at Coronations. In ancient and mediæval times the Coronation Rite contained elements of a democratic nature, such as the election of the Roman Emperors by the Imperial Guard, and the old German usage of popular election; such also as the taking by the

Sovereign of an oath to observe the rights of the subject. The oath, of course, remains now, and it is perhaps not wholly a fanciful parallel to follow Dean Stanley, and to assert that the assent of the people of England to the election of the Sovereign has found its voice, in modern days, through the shouts of



From a Photo. by]

"TOSSING THE PANCAKE"—WESTMINSTER.

[W. & A. H. Fry, Brighton.

the Westminster scholars "from their recognised seats in the Abbey" ("Memorials of Westminster Abbey").

At Westminster there is a famous bar across the great school-room, from which used to hang a curtain dividing the upper school from the lower. Over this bar the annual "pancake tossing" takes place. Always on Shrove Tuesday the college cook appears in white apron and with his frying-pan, on which rests a specially made pancake, which he throws over the bar to be scrambled for by the boys. Whoever secures it in fair fight carries it in triumph to the Dean, who in conformity with long tradition rewards the successful champion with a guinea. In 1864, the cook, who had failed for several years to elevate the pancake right over the bar, so exasperated the boys by again depriving them of their fun—for there was no scramble if the pancake did not go over the bar—that they hurled at his head a shower of books, dictionaries, as being heaviest, by preference. He retaliated by flinging his frying-pan into the midst of the boys—and, in fact, there was a pretty quarrel, which was eventually adjusted by the Dean, with judicial impartiality, and to the satisfaction of all concerned.

"Epigrams" at Westminster are recited at school on a certain day every year on subjects duly announced beforehand by the head-master. Boys are allowed to write their epigrams in any language—Latin, Greek, French, or English—and the reward, consisting of Queen's Maundy money, specially furnished from the Mint for the purpose, is then and there bestowed by the head-master, according to merit of each particular production.

Cowper, the poet, himself an "Old Westminster," thus refers to this custom:—

At Westminster, where
little poets strive
To set a distich upon
six and five,
Where discipline helps
opening buds of
sense,
And makes his pupils
proud with silver
pence,
I was a poet, too.

In the case of a school so old as Harrow it is remarkable that there are few, if any, ancient school customs, but there is much quaint local colour in the

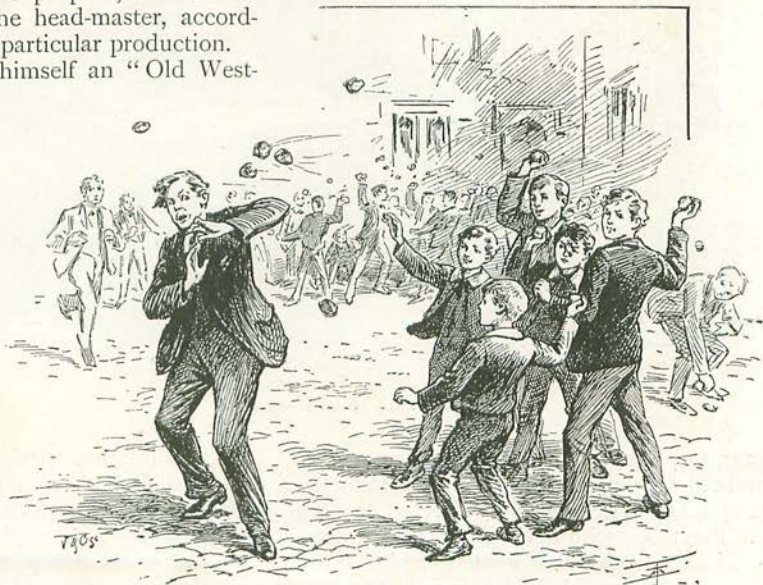
life of the boys in the different Houses. There lies before the writer a memorandum drawn up and signed by the authorities of one of the Houses, which is so curious in its detail that we think it may be interesting to give a few extracts; for instance:—

Only those who have been three years in the House may

1. Wear any but the regulation school dress (except blue flannel coats in the summer term).
2. Come into Hall, or Lock-up, Supper, etc., by the door next the Pantry.
3. Stand or loiter near the House door within or without.
4. Wear white waistcoats or have their umbrellas rolled up.
5. Wear a cap or fez in the House courts.
6. Whistle or sing in the House or in the courts.
7. Cut or carve their name anywhere in or about the House.

These regulations were evidently framed with a view to keeping new boys in their proper place, and petty and absurd as they seem, they doubtless were effective as a sort of discipline for unruly spirits.

At Harrow one of the great features is what is known there as "house singing," in the evenings of the Christmas and Easter term. The greatest zest is shown in the house glee competitions—a most admirable institution, the example of which has been well followed by a more modern school, Clifton, where a similar custom prevails. The school songs of Harrow have done, and continue to do, much to engender that love of the old place which, to say the least of it, is no less marked in Old Harrovians than in other public school men.

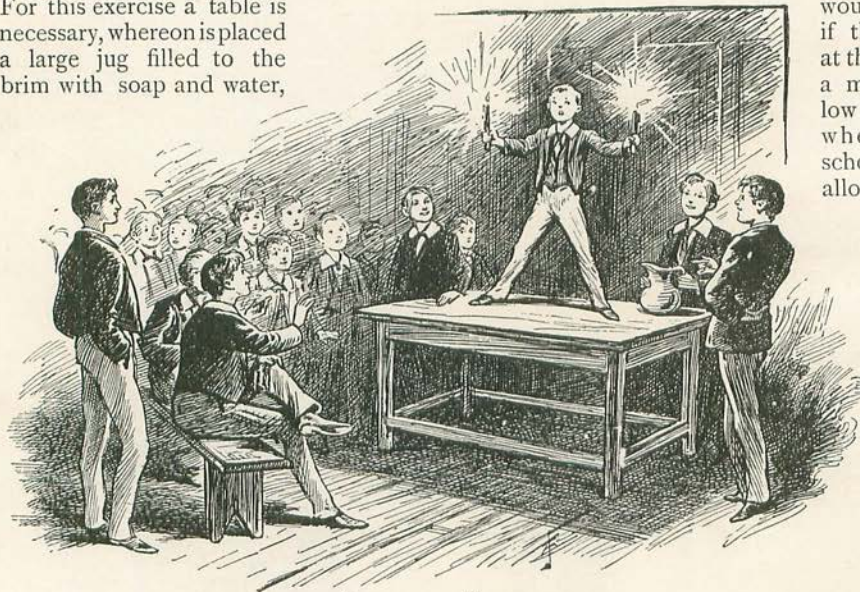


"LEMON FIGHT"—CHARTERHOUSE.

At Charterhouse, Shrove Tuesday, as at Westminster, brings its annual excitement in the shape of an institution known as the "lemon fight." Each boy at dinner is provided with half a lemon, wherewith to flavour the customary pancake; but it is a point of honour not to use the lemon for this very ordinary purpose, but to save it up for the spirited warfare which follows. "Gown Boys" range themselves against "The Rest," and each side pelts the other with a vigour and persistency which leave little to be desired. It is a good opportunity to pay off old scores, and an unpopular bully has often found to his cost that his day of reckoning has come at last.

At old Charterhouse the bell rang daily for chapel, and always sounded just so many strokes as there were pensioners in the establishment. The first announcement of a death has sometimes been conveyed by the striking of one sound less than the number on the previous day.

At Rugby, as elsewhere, great attention is paid to the "new boy." "Hall Singing" is a pleasing ceremony to which his due introduction is not long delayed. For this exercise a table is necessary, whereon is placed a large jug filled to the brim with soap and water,



"HALL SINGING"—RUGBY.

beer, tea, sugar, salt, mustard, pepper, milk, and other appetizing ingredients too numerous to specify. The novice is directed to stand on the table with his legs as wide apart as possible, and to hold a lighted candle in each hand. Thus established, he is invited to sing

a song. In most cases he does manage to carol forth some sort of song, the penalty of non-compliance with this ancient custom being the necessity—promptly enforced—of taking a good gulp of the mixture just described.

But at Rugby *the* great thing is football; and when a boy receives a polite note from the captain of his House fifteen saying he may "take his cap," he is, or ought to be, happy for the rest of his school career. And when that career is ended his interest in Rugby and in football by no means ceases, for there are no fewer than three annual matches in which it is the regular custom for past members of the school to take part. The matches are:—

Sixth Match, *i.e.*, VIth Form *v.* the School.
Old Rug. Match, *i.e.*, Past *v.* Present.
Two Cock Houses *v.* School.

The attendance of old Rugbeians at these matches is not specially arranged for by any organization in London, though post-cards are sent out to some old "Rugs" by the heads of House fifteens, to remind them of the dates. The peculiarity in the matter is that all old "Rugs" in these matches play on that side

for which they would do battle if they were still at the school, *e.g.*, a man who was low down in form when he left school has no allowance made for any accession of learning that may have come with later years. He may be a Senior Wrangler, or have won the Ireland or the Craven, but he nevertheless may not join the sacred band of the

VI., and must perforce take side with the "school." In the same way, he plays for the House he formerly belonged to. A well-known Rugby player, in his day a member of H. Vassall's famous Oxford XV., to whom we are indebted for these parti-



A "BIG-SIDE" AT RUGBY SCHOOL.

From a Photo. kindly lent by Mr. A. G. Guillemard, ex-President of the Rugby Football Union.

culars, tells us that he has seen as many as forty or fifty old "Rugs" come down to join these great yearly festivals.

A curious regulation prevails at Rugby, forbidding boys, unless they are "swells," from walking about more than three in a group, and also compelling such groups to walk arm-in-arm. Swells, such as the "caps" and the VIth, may walk about four or forty in a party if they like, and are not obliged to take arms. The "Holder of School Bags" is, of course, a swell, being generally the winner of the "Crick," *i.e.*, the cross-country run from school gates round Crick Church and back. Theoretically, he is supposed to carry the bags of torn-up paper used as "scent," but practically his duties are to generally arrange and supervise all matters relating to the cross-country runs, which have always been such a feature at Rugby.

At Wellington, so called after the Great Duke, which is, of course, quite a modern establishment, all the dormitories are named, as is fitting in a military school, in memory of great commanders, such as Anglesey, Blücher, Orange (William III.), Hopetoun, Hill, Lynedoch, Murray. Here there has not yet grown up any specially curious custom, but one peculiarity in connection with the place which we may mention is the great gathering of the boys for singing on the night before the school breaks up. It is quite an unwritten rule, but by some mysterious influence, as

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the customary hour approaches, every boy finds his way to the foot of the "Hopetoun" stairs—always the same place—where every variety of youthful voice may be heard at its best.

At Marlborough it is the custom for every boy each term to have an order for a cushion. What a boy wants with such an article, a thin cushion about $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft. long, it is difficult for an ordinary outsider to see, but it seems they are carried about by the boys almost wherever they go, and are used to sit on in class or when watching a cricket match, to wrap round books, as weapons of offence or defence, or in a variety of ways as occasion requires. Sometimes a dandy would bring a cushion from home, beautifully embroidered, but this was considered effeminate, and has never become a popular habit.

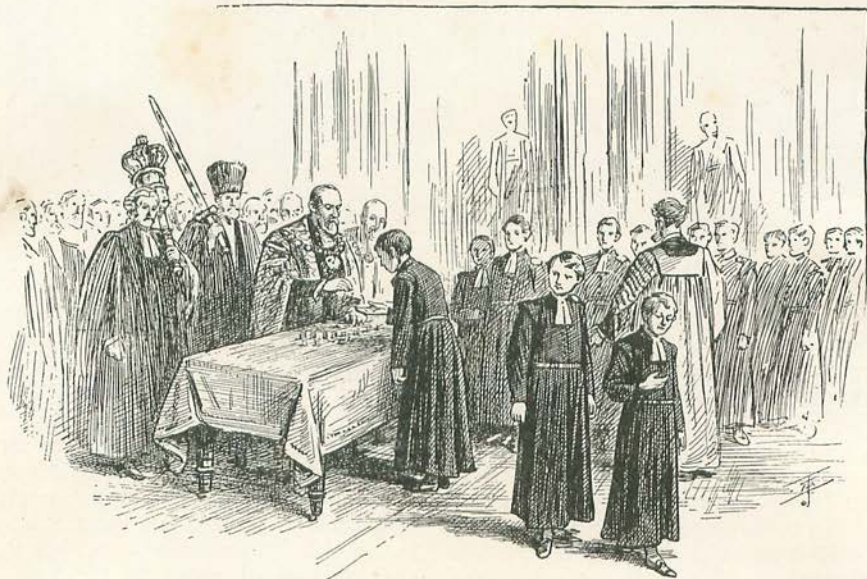


"THE MARLBOROUGH CUSHION."

WITH regard to the picturesque dress worn at Christ's Hospital, we may explain that the coat is blue with bright metal buttons, and the stockings yellow. The waist is encircled by—not a belt, no Blue Coat calls it that—but by a girdle, *i.e.*, a plain leathern strap

Thursdays in Lent in the Great Hall, and the public are admitted to the ceremony, which always begins with prayer, and is presided over by the Lord Mayor or one of the Sheriffs of London.

In the first quarter of the present century the



CHRIST'S HOSPITAL—"EASTER BOBS" AT THE MANSION HOUSE.

with a buckle, the breadth and embellishment of which depend on the boy's position in the school. They wear no head-dress of any sort now, though formerly a cloth cap was used. The result of this regulation, strange to say, seems to be that "Blues" are by no means liable to colds in the head, and never seem to feel cold weather.

Of old customs still observed we may refer to the going to the Mansion House for the "Easter Bobs" (as the boys call it), and the Public or Lenten Suppers. The former ceremony annually attracts a good deal of public attention, as the boys march "in fours" through the streets of the City to the Mansion House, where they are forthwith regaled with two buns apiece. Thus fortified, they file before the Lord Mayor, who, from sundry piles of new money on the table before him, presents each "Grecian" with a sovereign, and all the other boys, according to their standing, with coins of lesser value. Before they retire the boys have a glass of lemonade, and we are sure it will be news to some to hear that at one time the alternative of sherry was permitted. This form of "local option," however, has now been abolished.

The public suppers are held on four

boys were not allowed to go out of the gates without a "ticket of leave"—a small brass tablet attached by a string to a button of the coat—and it was generally understood that any person seeing a boy out without a ticket would receive a reward on bringing him back.



REV. J. H. SKRINE.

(The present "Gru" at Glenalmond.)
From a Photo. by Elliott & Fry.

WE may mention an interesting feature at Glenalmond, the well-known Scotch public school, whose youthful riflemen, in their kilts, make such a picturesque figure at the great annual rifle shooting gathering at Bisley. The Warden of Glenalmond, whether or not he has any personal peculiarities, is always christened and known as "Gru"—just as every king of ancient Egypt was called Pharaoh. It appears that one of the early Wardens once put a question to the sixth form to which no one was able to give any answer whatever, and, disappointed at the silence of his scholars, he was heard to mutter in Greek, "ὄμδὲ γρῦ," not even a grunt. The "Gru" was fastened on by the boys, and has remained as a sort of dynastic title ever since.

AT Shrewsbury it is the custom, on a given day, for the head of the school to ask the

Julianum Simula. I 785 ἕτε βαντο εὐδ τρεο

Vos iuga, vos Colles vos languida flumina rivi.
 Omnia quae turris despicit alta ducis,
 Sint silvas vrida vobis, floreatque Colore
 Pupilio, et semper sordibus uada vacet.
 A "CROSS"—SHREWSBURY.

head-master for a half-holiday for the sixth form, basing his appeal on the number of exercises which have been given the highest mark during the week.

The highest mark is called "a cross" and the second "a tail." These marks were originally merely developments of the number 20, as explained in the accompanying facsimile of original exercises supplied to us by one of the school authorities. Thus, when marking an exercise with 20, a tick was added when there was special occasion for satisfaction, and when a composition seemed absolutely flawless the sign of *plus* was added to the number. These curious marks date from the time of Dr. Butler, 1797—1836,

How many men women would do such a message?

ἢ τίς ποτ' ἄλλη τῶντ' ἐν ἀγγέλοις γυνή,
 φῦρῶν δύστηνε Πρωτῆ καὶ οὐ γὰρ θρησκῆς ἐκεῖ,
 παύσης βοήθη δῆθ' ὅτι εἶναι λυκοῦ
 φῖ φῖ κῆρῶν ταλαινῆς πρὸς τὴ γὰρ τὸν ἐκ φρεσῶν
 παρ' οὐδὲν ἐξισότης τῶν σκεκτῶν πάλιν,
 εἰ

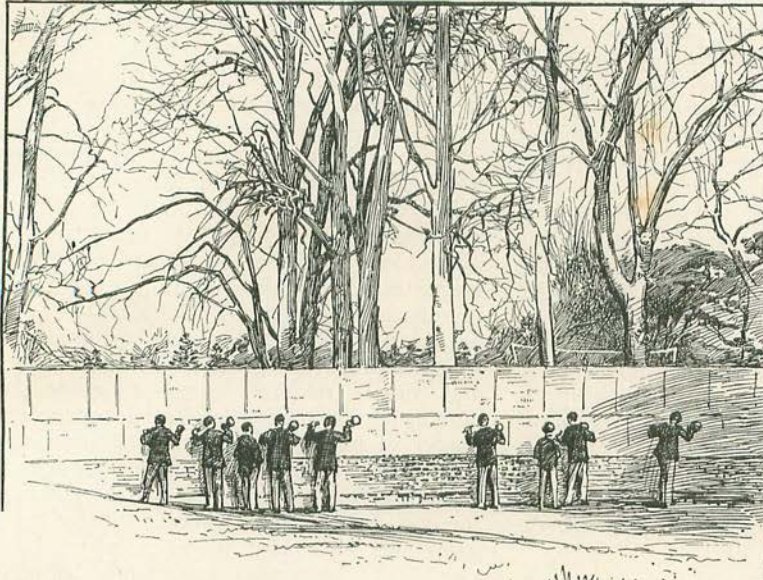
A "TAIL"—SHREWSBURY.

and having gradually become recognised symbols, have continued to be used till the present day.

The occasion on which a sixth form boy gains his first "cross" is always looked upon as a red-letter day in his school career.

When University, Parliamentary, or other honours are gained by old Salopians, a half-holiday is usually asked for, and also whenever a bishop or a judge can be discovered in the town. On the two latter occasions a Latin letter is addressed to the dignitary in question by the head of the school, asking that the head-master may be applied to for the desired indulgence. In this ingenious and simple manner respect alike for the episcopal and the judicial Bench becomes a matter of habit with all but the most ungrateful of Salopian youth. When the school left its old habitation it brought away bodily the old boundary-wall between the Castle gates and what used to be called "School Gardens." This relic now stands between the Fives Court and the bath, near the cricket ground. It bears many names of old Salopians, but space having become doubly precious, it has been enacted that in future names are not to be of more than a certain limited size, and must be cut by the boys themselves, and not, as was formerly allowed, by a professional stone-cutter. On a fine afternoon, towards the end of the summer term, it is not unusual to see a line of boys, each with hammer and chisel, occupied in recording their names for the benefit and example of future generations. We are much indebted for the courtesy which enables us to give a photograph of this interesting mural survival, known to Salopians as "School Wall."

On the general question of fights, we would remark that if man is a fighting animal so also is a boy; and it always used to be the practice for boys at the public schools to settle their differences by a regular stand-up battle, conducted with due solemnity under the authority of properly selected "seconds" to see fair play. At most schools a particular spot was always held sacred for these youthful contests. At Westminster, in olden days, it was



"RECORDING THEIR NAMES"—
SHREWSBURY.

a recognised privilege that the boys might fight in the cloisters. The late Earl of Albemarle relates in his book, "Fifty Years of my Life," that the Princess Charlotte, who had driven down to Westminster to take him out on a half-holiday, found him forming one of the ring at a fight between John Erskine, afterwards Earl of Mar, and another boy. Her Royal Highness had to wait till the battle was over before her young friend could be brought away. At Eton a particular corner of the playing fields called "Sixpenny" was used. On this spot both the great Duke of Wellington and the poet Shelley had fought as boys, and long after those days it was the custom to challenge a schoolfellow by saying, "Will you fight me in Sixpenny?"

We do not propose to offer a disquisition on the vexed question of "fagging," but it may be permissible to remark that most men who have been brought up under the system of authorized "fagging" speak well of it as, on the whole, a good working arrangement.

At Charterhouse, the juniors had to fetch and carry water, and then go for their superiors' clean linen across an open court in the early mornings, which was not any particular joke in winter, when it was pitch dark, and perhaps a snowstorm or a torrent of hail and rain was coming down.

At Westminster the fellows in the sixth form had book fags, whose duty it was to keep a list

of the dictionaries, lexicons, and books generally which their particular seniors required "up school," and woe betide a defaulter who failed to bring up the right books at the right time.

Cricket fagging, of course, is common to many schools, and consists chiefly in being told off to "field out" when the fellows in the first eleven are practising batting.

At Harrow, the cricket fagging is managed by functionaries known

as "slave-drivers," three or four boys specially appointed to carry out these important duties.

"Watching out" at football is also a form of fagging common to many schools. "Kicking in" it is called at Winchester.

At Glenalmond the term is "keeping terrace," which an old Glenalmond boy thus explains. The football ground was bounded by a gravel terrace, beyond which came a steep bank, sloping down to the River Almond. An iron railing runs along the top of the bank, but this is hardly enough to prevent an erratic football from finding a short cut to the river level, and it is to obviate this possibility that the "small game" boys, when big matches were being played, had to "keep terrace," *i.e.*, to look out for the ball and send it back to the players if it came towards the bank. The youngsters turn out in great coats and Highland capes of every description, as in the immediate vicinity of the Grampians in mid-winter it is cold work standing about. If the ball did go right over and down the bank, of course it went into the river, and into the river, ice or no ice, it had to be followed by some unlucky fag, who contrived to dry and warm himself as best he could on his return. An unpleasant interview with a monitor, as a matter of course, awaited any junior who cut "terrace keeping" without leave.