

THE BARGES AT OXFORD.

COMMEMORATION WEEK AT OXFORD: REMINISCENCES OF THE SHELDONIAN THEATRE.

By R. E. S. HART.



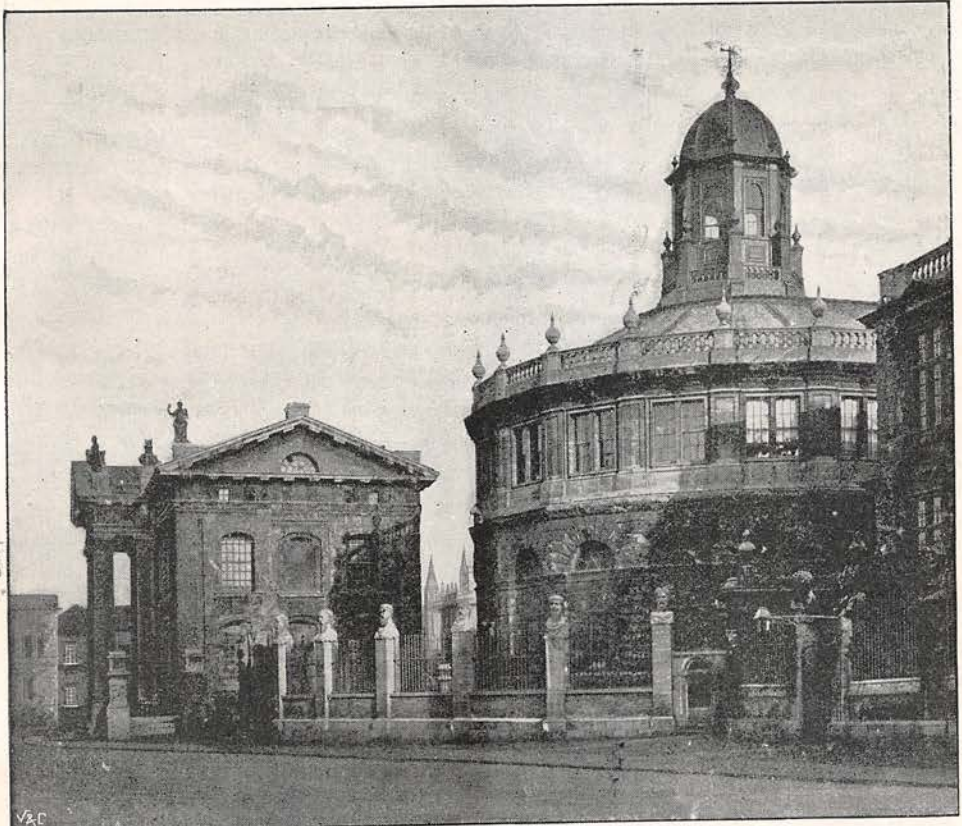
COMMEMORATION week at Oxford has a fine joyous ring in it, with its associations of balls, of picnics, of luncheon parties, of charming ladies and lobster-salad (both delicacies which are apt to cloy in time). Dance follows dance and jaunt jaunt with such a successive similarity of resembling college halls, sitting-out rooms, Japanese-lanterned gardens, smiling partners and river banks, that the details of the week's vision melt away into the twinkling perspective, and all the remembrance a fair visitor can bear away to excogitate in after years is that big blur of pleasant sensations expressed in the almost classic sigh and shake of the head, while one murmurs generally, but regretfully, "What a jolly time that was!" But perhaps one scene may stand out somewhat more prominently than the rest by reason of its strong contrast to the usual surroundings in which the British mind seeks its pleasures, an old-world scene, steeped in associations of the past, both in the functions there performed, the curious garbs worn, the unknown tongue used, with its occasional touches of half-familiar phrases, and the very buildings where all takes place. This is the Oxford Encænia, and the spot is the Sheldonian Theatre.

Not the new theatre: mark well the difference, ye prospective undergraduates, or haply, when luckless freshmen, your friends may send you thither for tickets for one of Gilbert and Sullivan's comic operas, and you may wander about the Bodleian precincts and ask for information from crusty Bodleian officials. No; the Sheldonian is a strictly University building, and its scholastic character is easily recognised if you enter from the Broad and front the frowning heads of the first twelve Cæsars, impaled there among the intervening spikes like the heads of decapitated criminals. The analogy might be carried farther. The Cæsars, if history is to be believed, were bad; but surely never did twelve human beings possess such diabolical countenances of bearded ferocity. Tradition has its say in the matter. It is whispered that not Roman medallions, but seventeenth-century English dons served as the models; and just as certain King's fellows are to be found among the company on the left hand, in a painting of the "Last Judgment" in King's College Chapel at Cambridge, so some of Oxford's worthy children frighten us now under the guise of Nero or Domitian. The night before one Encænia it is said that some Trinity undergraduates once crept forth, and when the visitors next morning came flocking to see the show, these

murderers of Christians glowered out upon them under an emblematic covering of bright vermilion paint. Even without such ornamentation the Cæsars are hideous enough.

Passing amid the Cæsars you enter the Sheldonian itself, a semicircular, ugly building, with its stage fronting you, on which sits the vice-chancellor, or chancellor, to confer the honorary degrees, the rostrum on the left, where the public orator delivers his address, in the body of the hall the seats for

father of our Encænïa. This function, so called because it was the occasion when the "Acts" or exercises were finished qualifying students to "commence" as bachelors of arts, had hitherto taken place in St. Mary's Church, and as it included the performances of the *terre filius*, or chartered "Universitie Buffoone"—so Evelyn calls him—whose comical speech, often very scurrilous, was the lineal ancestor of the licence of the undergraduate of to-day, the good bishop may have had grounds for his scruples.



From a photo by]

THE SHELDONIAN THEATRE, OXFORD.

[W. H. Wheeler, Oxford.

the doctors, the heads of houses, and the masters of arts, and the galleries running almost all the way round, partly occupied on Encænïa days by undergraduates—the gods of the University theatre.

The Sheldonian takes its name from a certain Bishop Sheldon, who provided the funds to build a theatre, in the interests of morality and decency (the first time perhaps the erection of a theatre has had such an end in view), for the holding of the Public Act or Commencement, the fore-

On July 9th, 1667, the Sheldonian was first used. A letter from Mr. John Wallis to Hon. R. Boyle gives an account of the proceedings, which lasted over several days. "After a vote of thanks to the bishop the public orator made an oration, consisting of satire, against Cromwell, fanatics, the Royal Society" (then just founded) "and the new philosophy; of encomiastics of the archbishop, the theatre, the architect, and lastly of execrations against poor fanatics, against conventicles, etc., damning them *ad inferos*

ad gehennam." After this little exhibition of University sycophancy and jealousy some honorary degrees were conferred. In the afternoon panegyric and execratory verses in the same strain were recited by several undergraduates. The whole action began and ended with the noise of trumpets, and twice there were musical interludes. On the two following days, after the exercises pertaining to the Act, the *terre filii* distinguished themselves. They were more abominably scurrilous than usual, writes the



From a photo by [W. H. Wheeler, Oxford.]
HEAD OF A CÆSAR.

respectable and horrified Wallis, and met with no check at all from the authorities, all or most of the heads of houses and eminent persons in the University, with their relatives, being represented as fools and dunces. John Evelyn entered a solemn protest with the Vice, who (being himself one of the butts) was quite of the same way of thinking.

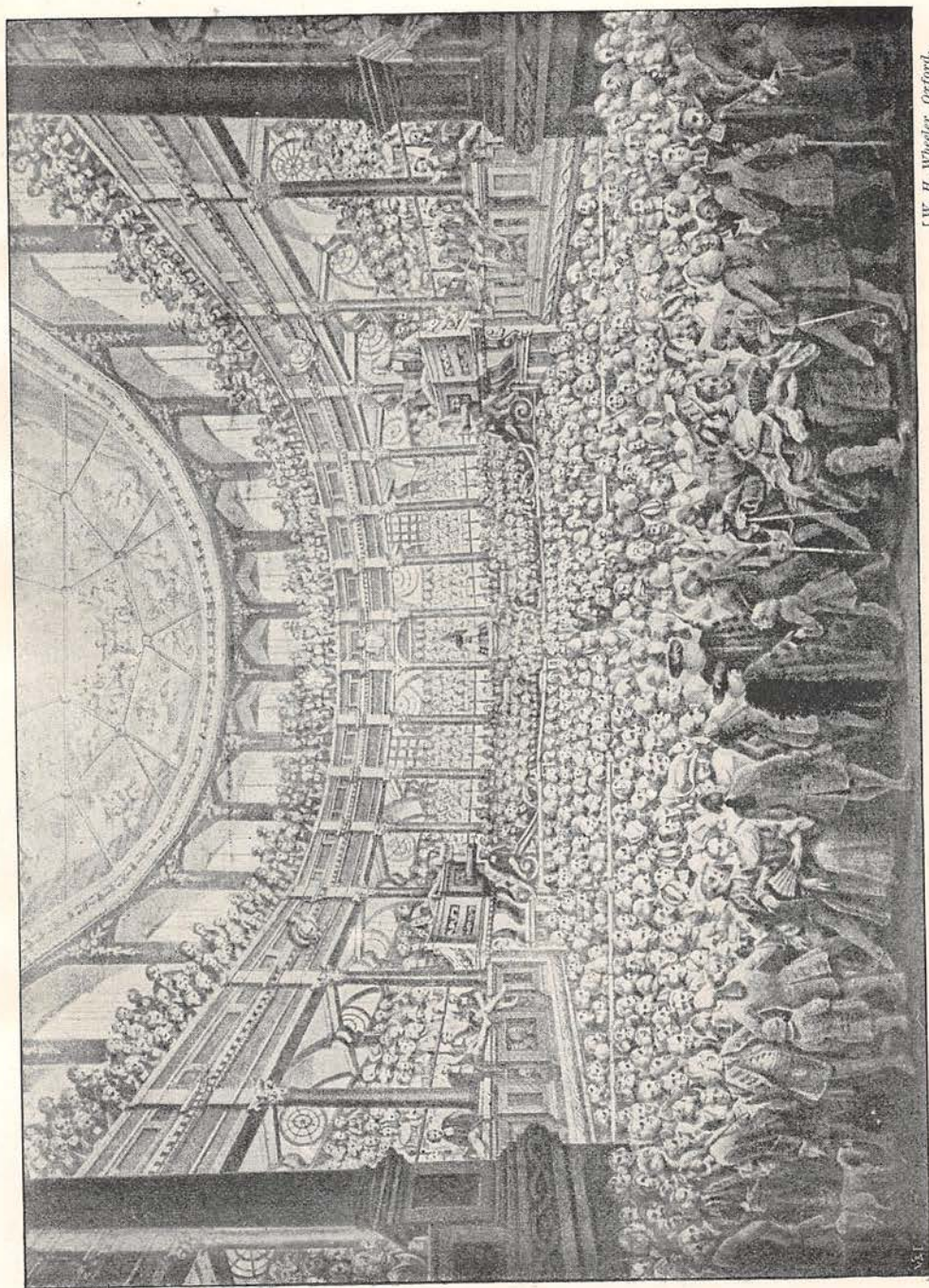
These exhibitions of the *terre filius*, who held a semi-statutory position, were apparently the great feature of interest in the Act, and drew large audiences to Oxford, including ladies and others, attracted, perhaps, by the hopes of a row. In 1655, the Act being then held in St. Mary's, the students and the parliamentary soldiers actually came to blows in the church. In 1681 Moore of Merton got himself a good cudgelling in the Roebuck backyard at the hands of one of the victims of his ribaldry. In 1713 the

speech of the *terre filius* was burnt in the theatre yard by the common hangman. In the reign of Charles II, as might be expected, the jovial manners of the Court were introduced into the University assemblage, and the obscenities of a Sedley and a Rochester became the model for the *terre filius*. The learned president of St. John's, a notorious gambler, was insulted by cries of "Jacta est alea. Doctor, seven's the main." In 1733 the speech of the *terre filius* was again suppressed. Considering the following expressions contained in it the authorities can hardly be blamed. The Bishop of Oxford was apostrophised as a "mitred hog"; "barrel-gutted fellows of Trinity" is a choice witticism; "Lincoln," it is said, "always was, and always will be, under the devil's inspection"—the devil being perhaps John Wesley; "In Worcester there cannot be found a parson who can read prayers in English, much less in Latin"; St. John's boasts its "Jacobite toppers"; "Brazenose engrosses good livings and brews ale that flies to the head even of a seasoned Essex squire."

Though Evelyn and others might be disgusted at this "licentious lyeing and railing," the majority of Englishmen were delighted at the chance of seeing this bear-baiting of authorities, and the performances were held before crowded audiences, though envious Cambridge declared—

For at Oxford last year this is certainly matter of fact,
That the sight of the ladies and music made the best part of their Act.

The dons however, whether out of genuine disgust or from interested motives we cannot say, agreed entirely with respectable protestants. There is in the Hogarth collection of prints a picture of the interior of the Sheldonian with the *terre filius* struggling in the grasp of infuriated doctors and heads of houses, who are tearing off his cap and gown, while the spectators look on delightedly, and a dog barks at the uproar. The length of the proceedings, taking up three whole days, also must have seemed tedious, and the obscenity of the *terre filius* himself was a strong argument against him. Accordingly, by the end of the eighteenth century, he has disappeared, his last appearance being in 1763, and the old, long Public Act has yielded to the modern *Encaenia*, lasting a single morning, and consisting of honorary degrees, public orator's speech, prize recitations, and musical interludes.



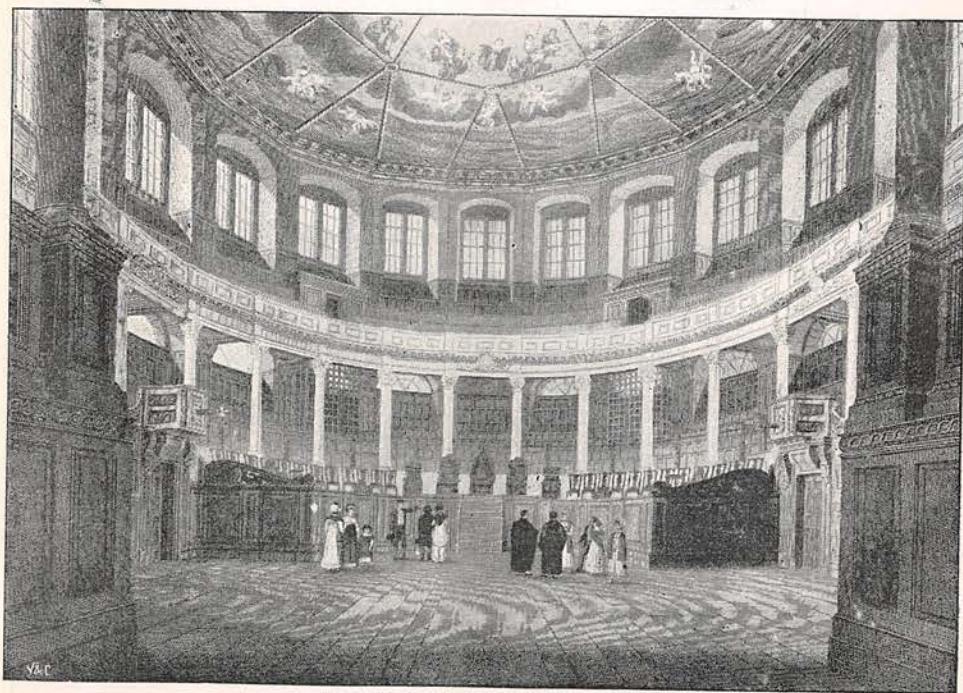
[W. H. Wheeler, Oxford.]

THE PUBLIC ACT.

From a photo by]

But though the *terre filius* was himself a thing of the past, the chartered licence he had embodied, and the spirit of revolt against authority, were passed on to his residuary legatees the undergraduates. The *Encænna* was still a kind of University saturnalia, when shafts of ridicule were aimed from the undergraduates' gallery against all the occupants of the body of the theatre impartially. Vice-chancellor, doctors, heads of houses, proctors, especially if unpopular, visitors, and even the recipients of the honorary degree, came in for their share of jests, and woe be to the man who could not take them good-naturedly.

stiffing that the undergraduates smashed all the windows within reach—which had been nailed down by the professor for the sake of musical effect—with their hats. Amid the hoots of the undergraduates, the crash of falling glass and the cries of distressed relatives over their fainting friends, a comic touch was given by the fat old professor, who, turning towards the galleries, implored the men to desist with a cry of agony: "For God's sake, gentlemen, for mercy's sake, for music's sake, for my sake, don't ruin me!" In 1814 the Allied Sovereigns visited Oxford with the Prince Regent, who had however grown too corpulent to enjoy himself much,



THE SHELDONIAN THEATRE EIGHTY YEARS AGO.

In 1810 Sheridan, whose name had been withdrawn from the list of the intended honorary degrees in consequence of threatened blackballs, was recognised by his jolly red face and coarse figure in the theatre and voted by acclamation to the doctor's seat, and the uproar could not be allayed till the curators conducted him thither, *though without a degree*. In 1793 a very queer scene took place at the installation of the Duke of Portland as chancellor. An ode, specially written for the occasion by the professor of poetry, and set to music by the professor of music, Dr. Hayes, was about to be performed, when the heat became so

Show Sunday promenade in the Broad walk especially distressing him. The undergraduates, with their usual discrimination, chose "old Blucher" as the hero of the hour. He was almost pulled to pieces on leaving the theatre, and was heard to declare "it was the hottest struggle he had ever been in." As he was driving to Christ Church, where he lodged, accompanied by crowds of hero-worshipping enthusiasts, an impudent shoemaker threw a pair of boots into his carriage and thenceforward announced himself as "Bootmaker to General Prince Blucher." The proctors, the chief maintainers of University discipline, were

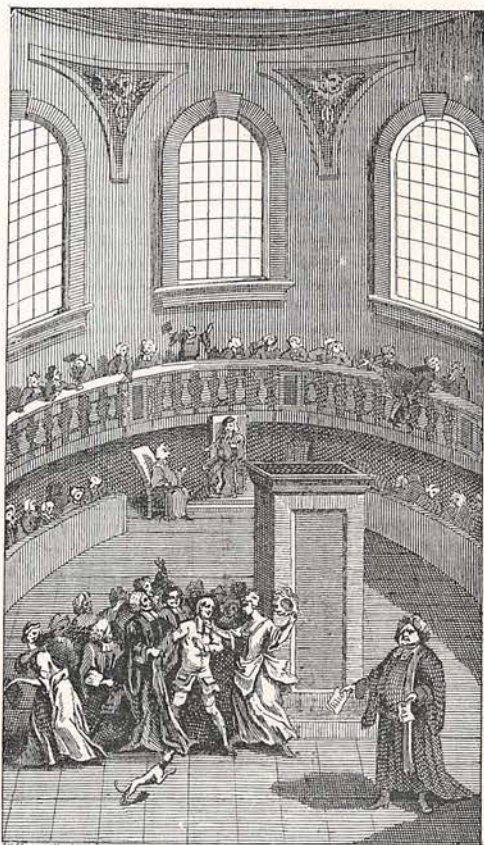
very often the object of the hoots and hisses from the undergraduates' gallery.

In 1834 the Duke of Wellington was elected chancellor of the University—as unfit a personage to represent that learned body as could well be imagined. Among the witticisms called forth by this selection was that of Archbishop Whately, who called straightway on Lord Wellesley (the Viceroy) and demanded a troop of horse. "For whom," said the marquis. "For myself," said the archbishop. But the undergraduates of course were uproarious in their welcome to the hero, whose obvious ignorance of the Latin tongue and numerous false quantities drew from them no rebuke. At the installation, the chancellor of Oxford University, when conferring the honorary degrees, had to be repeatedly prompted by the vice-chancellor, and there was not lacking an occasional allusion to the grotesque contiguity of black gowns and red coats. Not many years later the junior proctor, who had made himself very unpopular, was paid off with such a storm of hooting and hissing that the honorary degrees were conferred in dumb show—a Unitarian (and therefore heretic) American getting his without protest in the riot; not a word of the Crewian oration could be heard, and the vice-chancellor was obliged to dissolve the assembly.

For a time, in order to remedy this, undergraduates were only admitted by ticket, and the next year Commemoration was peaceful. But in 1848 the undergraduates were as bad as ever. Poor Mr. Gladstone, who had just voted for the admission of Jews to Parliament, was most unfavourably received, and not a word of his presentation address could be heard, while, as if to point the insult, Guizot (who had just fled from France with Louis Philippe) was invited by acclamation to sit with the doctors. A few years after, Disraeli (spite of his descent from Abraham) received quite an ovation.

But the patience of even the most conservative of dons was rapidly wearing out. If the proceedings had been enlivened by some real wit, the intermittent uproar might have been tolerated; but spite of the asseverations of middle-aged gentlemen, who, looking back through the rose-coloured mist of years, declare that Encænica in their time was something worth seeing, and lament over their degenerate descendants, the exhibition of comic genius seems to have been most often limited to asinine bellowings. In 1875, after the past Encænica

had been more than usually bad, *Punch* published a skit with the ominous quotation from "Hamlet" for heading, "Reform it altogether." The scene was the Hebdomadal Council Board. Dr. Sobersides, among others, arose and said: "The theatre on Commemoration Day had become of late years a perfect bear garden. (Applause.) The cheers for the 'ladies in blue' and the counter-cheers for the 'ladies in pink' were calculated to cause a great deal of unseemly



TERRÆ FILIUS.

(Hogarth's picture of the Sheldonian Theatre.)

rivalry between the persons thus singled out for unofficial recognition. But this was not all. On one occasion, he was told, three groans had been given for the 'old woman in black.' He was informed that these words masked an allusion to the authorities of the University. (Shame.)

At the present time only such undergraduates as have relatives up at the Encænica can get tickets of admission. The dons congratulate themselves on the success of this ruse; the undergraduates have a different

story. According to them, when proctors, vice-chancellors, and all the officials had proved helpless, and even the sour looks and disgusted mien of old lady visitors were futile, young ladies were admitted to the undergraduates' gallery, and they soon kept the men quiet. Certain it is that the proceedings are now somewhat tedious, the possession of relatives being little guarantee for the possession of wit. Now and again an undergraduate wag comes out with something more than usually worth recording, as happened, for instance, on the occasion of the late Lord Tennyson being presented with an honorary degree. When the gifted poet's well-known form was seen advancing up the theatre, a voice from the "gods" was distinctly heard asking—

Did your mother call you early,
Call you early, Alfred, dear?

This sally was received with a roar of laughter, in which the vice-chancellor, dons, proctors, and even Tennyson himself heartily joined.

The genial public orator (Dr. Merry), the author of many a Spoonerism, brightens things up now and again with his witticisms, or a proctor of the name of Maude is a godsend, inducing callow undergraduate wit to call him into the garden. At the last Encænïa Dr. Mavor, the famous Juvenalian, was invited to tell some story from his rather broadly-satirical poet, and the *Oxford Magazine* represents him as murmuring to himself in answer the lines—

Semper ego auditor tantum nunquamne reponam
Vexatus toties.*—*Juv. Sat.*

But on the whole the Encænïa is as decorous as a church service.

Perhaps the most interesting scene the Sheldonian has witnessed of late years was the Romanes lecture given by Mr. Gladstone in 1892. There is a story about the reason for the disgraceful crush and fights for seats among undergraduates which, whether authentic or not, was at least credited by many Oxford men. The curators, it is said, were observed sitting in the small novel-room at the Oxford Union talking in the loud tones dons often affect in front of the chilling notice posted up in big letters,

* Must I always sit listening? May I never retaliate for all this baiting?

"Silence." The M.A.'s were to enter at such and such a gate, it was arranged, the visitors who had secured tickets at another. "But what of the undergraduates?" said one gentleman, as an afterthought. "Oh, hang the undergraduates; they've fought before, let them fight again," returned the other, and all laughed boisterously. Accordingly at an early hour the Broad was blocked by undergraduates, and the Cæsars scowled upon black-gowned crowds. Hansoms and carts, after vainly striving to pierce the mass, were obliged to turn back and make a détour amid derisive hissing. At last, a short time before the commencement of the lecture, two burly policemen opened the big gates a few inches, somewhat recalling the simile of the camel and the eye of a needle, and there was a rush, many being crushed against the railings by the impetus of those behind. Then followed an escalade; some climbed boldly over the spikes, others secured a footing on the heads, noses, or beards of the Cæsars, all at the obvious risk of being impaled. One unfortunate man was spiked through the hand, another through the button-hole of his coat and hung suspended, and as finally the few victors ramméd themselves triumphantly into the tiny space allotted, a long file of the wounded were being handed out by the opposite gate.

After all, the chief reminiscences of the occasion borne away by those who succeeded in the struggle, were the sight of the Grand Old Man gazing intrepidly down the throats of two bell-mouthed blunderbusses of ear-trumpets belonging to Canon Christopher, and two jingling verses called forth by the coincidence of George I. having sent a troop of horse to Jacobite Oxford at the same time as he made a gift of books to Whig Cambridge. They are, as far as I can remember, as follows. That of Cambridge—

The King to Oxford sent a troop of horse—
For Tories own no argument but force;
To Cambridge then a gift of books he sent—
For Whigs do own the force of argument.

Oxford replied (I will not vouch for the exact words)—

A gift of horse to Oxford came from royalty—
For that most learned body wanted loyalty;
To Cambridge, books—George craftily discerning
That that most loyal body wanted learning.