

VARSITY TALES: UNDERGRADUATES I HAVE KNOWN.

BY MAX PEMBERTON.

Illustrated by T. S. C. CROWTHER.



IT is growing dark when the freshman puts on his gown for the first time and steals forth timidly from his rooms in the Market Place to dinner in the great hall of his college at Cambridge. There are lights in the streets of the old town then; chapel bells are ringing, cooks' men are busy by roaring fires, undergraduates of all years and sizes are strolling toward the oak-panelled chamber, wherein so many generations of the forgotten dead have dined—where so many generations of the centuries to come will dine in their turn, and in their turn be forgotten also. But the freshman thinks of none of these. And who shall blame him for his lack of imagination? Yesterday he was a boy, a school-boy perchance, wearing the fetters which habit puts upon the school-boy's life; to-day he is a man, the master of an attic, the victim of an allowance—beyond all, the wearer of a gown.

He wears it lightly, that gown—yet like a burden it rests upon his shoulders. To be unconscious of it, to ignore the rim of the tasselled hat, to assume, as though of long acquaintance, the right to be at ease in it is work enough for this night, and for nights to come. Yet even such a task may not blind his eyes altogether to the new scenes, the new shapes, the new life about him. Small indeed must his mind be if these

great buildings, these darkening cloisters, these flitting figures of deans and dons and lesser dignitaries awake no ambitions, stir no impulses. Pitiful indeed his imagination if he forget that mighty roll of dead from Bacon to Byron—of dead who trod these silent avenues and thought within those looming walls. Who can wonder if he stand a moment spell-bound and entranced; who can wonder if an exclamation is drawn at last from his lips as another of his kind greets him: "Let us have a bitters at the 'Pig,'" he says. Oh, wonderful youth! Oh, beloved *alma mater*!

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I have known many freshmen, but the memory of one is strong in my mind. "The Lurcher" was the name in which we baptized him; and I remember now that he stood six feet four in his shoes, and that his voice was six feet four when at Ditton many a time he abandoned all hope of salvation for the crew he coached. In all things he was a man, even to his argument; which, discarding the nicer shades of antithesis or indirect inference, was limited to the plain proposition, "Get out!" Carry to this good fellow what news you would, speak to him of fame or fortune, flatter him or dispute with him, he would assume that bland smile and invite you to "get out." It is recorded that such a habit of speech made him a stranger for ever to the

friendship of Corcoran, the little tutor of Paul's, who, when Lurcher was a freshman, took to himself the unnecessary task of lecturing upon Seneca. Corcoran, who was the smallest and the most conceited man in the 'Varsity, loved to linger upon the line, "An avenging God closely follows the haughty." He had repeated it three times on one October morning when the Lurcher intervened. "Get out!" said he unconsciously. The two were strangers from that moment.

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Longfellow, when writing "Hyperion," was



"The master of an attic."

moved to raptures upon the vocal powers of man. "Oh, how wonderful is the human voice!" he says. I never read this line but I recall the voice of the Lurcher when first I heard it in the court of Paul's college. We were coming out of Hall, two hundred coffeeless men, when we espied this giant freshman high above the throng of an admiring circle of his kind. We did not wish to intrude upon his privacy or to listen to his words; but we could not help ourselves, for his voice was sonorous, penetrating, and to be

heard at the Pitt Press a quarter of a mile away.

"You fellows," he roared, addressing two or three of his intimates, "come to my rooms in Green Street and have some coffee!"

Ten minutes later the tramp of a mighty army awakened Green Street. The two hundred who had heard this invitation bawled in stentorian tones, marched as one man for the coffee of the freshman. They filled the street, they filled the house, they sat on the kerb, on the roof, on the lanterns of the street lamps. "Coffee!" they roared. And the man only smiled blandly. "Get out!" he said.

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The Lurcher's voice had many moods—now like a siren deep above the baying of a storm, now dulcet like a flageolet into which a hurricane breathes, or again merely questioning, like the hail of one skipper to another. They tell you that when little Batt, the Dean of Univ., was lecturing upon the Gospel of St. John in the hall of King's, the clock was not more regular in its bells than Lurcher in his attendance. Silent, absorbed, with his eyes on the table before him, he sat in the dim religious light of the hall. He and his three companions were indeed conspicuous in that chamber, for Batt was not a waking lecturer, and many a fool slept the eighth hour while John was expounded. One such occasion is fresh in my mind—nor ever to be forgotten. It was an occasion when Batt, aware suddenly that his flock had strayed from the paths of attention, paused awfully in a question and glared upon the slumbering sheep.

"And what," he asked with terrible emphasis, "and what is the answer of the Evangelist to the question I have put to you?"

"Trumped, by thunder!" was the answering whisper of the Lurcher from his dark corner by the buttery door.

But Batt knew nothing of the mysteries of halfpenny nap, and he couldn't see why other men should play it during his lectures upon John.

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October is the month sacred to the freshman, and the practised eye will soon pick him out, be it in the street or on the river. His gown is so new, his checks are so big, his attitude is so humble. It was not so, perhaps, when a faithful tutor carried him to the brink of the great 'Varsity sea and pushed him off, well equipped in word and grammar and quantity for the voyage before him.

He had fine notions then of the dash he would cut and the deeds he would do. But kind and generous friends sent him, on his very first day in Cambridge, to breakfast with the dean—who had not asked him—and afterwards to church at the Pitt Press on the Sabbath, and that chilled his fervour of self. He has come to think that the shape of the Pitt building should be altered at once,

so that confiding freshmen may not shiver on its doorstep in their surplices for an hour on Sunday mornings, in the belief that it is a church (as that gay dog Solomon told them), and that the University requires their attendance there. I remember well how Solomon tried this trick on my giant friend—a little to Solomon's cost, for when he returned to his room at midnight on the day of the hoax he found his sheets and blankets, and other requisites for the toilet of the night, fluttering in the breeze a hundred feet above the pavement.

The Lurcher had climbed from his attic with the treasures, and there had roped them to the highest chimney. "You sent me to church at the Pitt Press," he wrote in apology, "so I've sent your linen to the wash!"

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And this reminds me. It is curious and not to be explained, and beyond understanding, that of every hundred freshmen coming

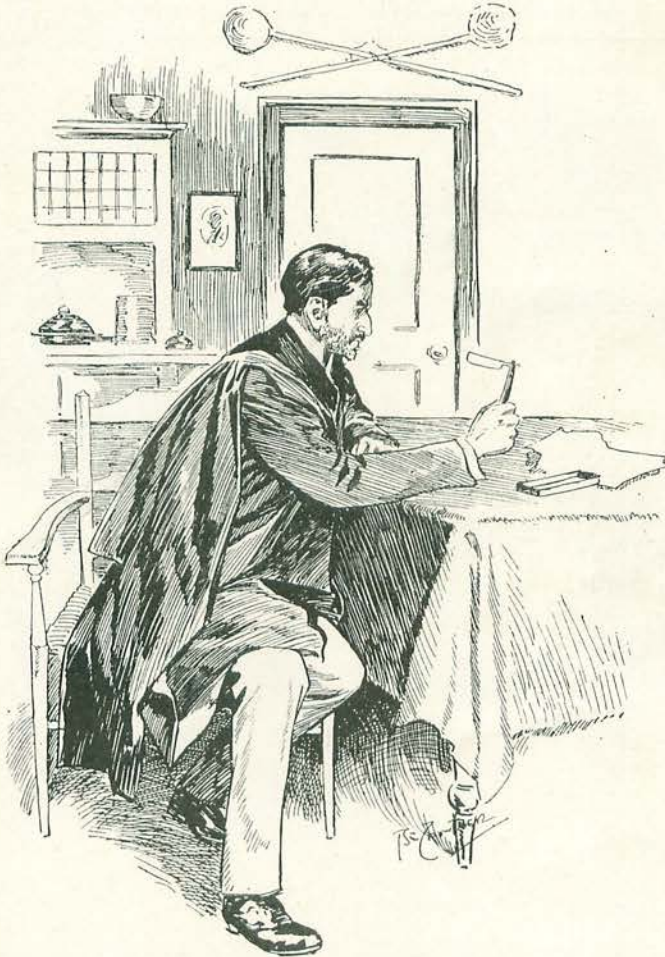
up in the October term one at least will awake in the minds of his brethren doubts as to the regularity of his ablutions. I can recollect in my own year that this most unjust assumption destroyed for ever the chances which a Scotchman—whom we styled MacDougal—seemed to possess when first he came among us. A rough-haired, grim and fierce-looking man he was, who heard the

music of the sweetest song in the rhythm of *r* to the *nth*, and asked of life nothing more than a system in which *x* and his own name should go thundering down the ages. MacDougal came from Edinburgh, and had been with us only three days when it was obvious that he was about to grow a beard. We sent him shilling razors by parcels post and atoms of soap so delicately adorned with ribbons that the heart even of the strong man might have been led to woo them. But MacDougal went on his way unwon,

unwooed; day by day we watched the advance of that harvest of bristles for which our razors yearned with the yearning of youths for a maid. One night these feelings carried us away. We shaved MacDougal with the hoop of a barrel and a bucketful of soft soap. And then only peace came unto Israel.

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I have referred above to the number of private tutors who accompany freshmen to



"We sent him shilling razors by parcels post."

Cambridge. Prone, we may assume, to exclaim with Claudianus. "Teneris, heu, lubrica moribus aetas," the Spaldings from many a rectory come up in the first days of October to point out to their charges the dangers with which even the straight and narrow way is hedged about. For two or three days these worthies adorn King's Parade and the Market Place, accompanied always by interested lads who listen to tutorial tales of "my time," and are taught that tailors are the very devil. Later on Master Spalding,

able dean of my own college, rightly anxious to maintain the dignity of deanhood before the awestruck freshman. The dialogue which ensued was much like this :—

Private Tutor : "Oh, my friend, this is indeed a glad day, to stand in the old courts again, to enter the old rooms, and to see the old faces ! Dear me, dear me ! do you remember those three young ladies who used to live ——"

Dean (horrified) : "Hush, my dear sir !"



"Arm-chairs, deep and sleep-giving."

splendid in the master's gown, will stretch his legs under the high table and survey from that lofty situation the "seats of his youth," and recall the days when "every sport could please." Sometimes, of course, his recollections are a little painful to the dons *in esse*, who are ever careful to hide from impulsive boyhood history of a time when even a dean could paint the town a mild red and shout like an Indian at First Post corner. I recollect well the meeting in the court of Paul's between the private tutor of my friend Solomon and the vener-

Private Tutor (in a melancholy voice) : "Yes, I never had any chance there. Let me see, what was the name of the one you were —— ?"

Dean (aghast) : "The one I —— !"

Private Tutor (mournfully) : "Yes ; we used to call her 'The Rosebush.' Dear me ! do you remember that Sunday when her father —— ?"

(*Hurried exit of the Dean, who has an appointment.*)

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But let us have a look at the daily life of

the freshman when at last he is left alone and the tutor has gone back, with his recollections, to the unwelcome obscurity of his village. The new life has much to charm, bringing as it does a sense of manhood new found and of freedom from the narrower control of home and people. It is possible that our freshman will not be in college during his first year, but will have rooms found for him in one of the registered lodging-houses near by. In college or out, however, the régime is the same, the furniture of his apartment unchanged. A chimney-piece laden with pipes, and the pictures of leading ladies nicely clothed in gilt frames; two arm-chairs, deep and sleep-giving, a sofa of like excellence; a mysterious bookcase, with cupboards for jam on either side of it, so that you may find Alcestis with marmalade on her back; a piano, from whose worn heart "The Gay Tomtit" will be wrung forty times a day; a pedestal table, not yet littered with bills; a few photographs of school teams or school eights; a few pots won upon playing-fields; a little row of the classics or the mathematics, according to the taste and fancy of the student. In this den the first of the merry three years to come will be spent; here friendships, to end with death perchance, or perchance to be broken at the outset of the sterner life, will be begun; here many a rattling breakfast will be given; here awful voices will bawl in unutterable crescendoes the terrible history of Abdul-a-Bulbul Ameer. Yet few there are to whom the memory of these rooms is not an affectionate one, enduring beyond and through the turmoil of the after-battle for success.

The freshman has not been long a member of the University before the daily curriculum becomes familiar to him. He is quick to learn that the buttery of his college sends every morning to his rooms an allowance of milk, and bread and butter, ample for the needs of the common day. Excellent bread it is, and succulent butter nicely cut in inches, whereof two of a similar diameter are the daily allowance in many colleges. Beyond this simple fare you get so much as you will from the kitchens of your own college, or of any college nearest to your rooms, paying the cook at the end of the term, or sooner, if your tutor arrives one day at the conclusion that you are going it. Wonderful men are these cooks, the husbanders of wonderful fortunes. Ours at Paul's would drive up to the kitchens regularly in a carriage and pair. Every voice was stilled as he came, every

head was bent. "Hush, there is the cook!" was the cry.

You can breakfast in Cambridge of many things cheap and dear. Sausages hot from the kitchens were 2*d.* each in Paul's in my time; porridge cost no more; two cutlets were 10*d.*; soles à la maître were 1*s.* 4*d.* You made your own coffee, of course, and might acquire a reputation in the art. Indeed Solomon, our little one-eyed friend, who at nineteen was as old in the cult of Bohemia as many a man of forty, owed all his supremacy and his brilliant career to his skill in manipulating the coffee-pot and in warming Burgundy to a nice temperature. Criticise him as you would, complain that he could talk about nothing but French novels, abuse him for swinging out of the boat at bow—your fellow gossip would answer always, "Yes; but he *can* make coffee!" With this reputation he went forth to fight the world. The last I heard of him was from Homburg, where, at the ripe age of twenty-eight, he was being wheeled in a chair to the water cure.

Breakfast being done, even a boating "fresher" may pause a moment to remember that he was sent to Cambridge with other than purely aquatic ideas. He may, over his morning paper and his pipe, recall the fact that his senior tutor—who with his junior and the dean practically governs the college—will shortly lecture upon the Second Book of the *Aeneid*, and that afterwards a person, big in mathematics, is to trouble himself needlessly about the exertions of two men and a boy who, for some reason best known to the author of the "Arithmetic," are about to run from London to Yarmouth. Our freshman is young yet and too timid to cut lectures. Reluctantly he puts on his boots and goes over to Hall, where he nods his head awhile, or draws upon the paper before him a picture of Dido at the moment when *Aeneas* had spoken his last farewell. He will label it, "Now we shan't be long," and pass it round for the delectation of other freshmen, while the lecturer is perspiring in a surpassing effort to catch the niceties of "Atque signant ora discordia sono." Such exertions as these call for a hearty lunch of chops and steaks, and old beer foaming from the buttery barrels; and scarce is this swallowed when the river makes good her claims, and off goes our freshman to the terrors of the "tub" and the anger of a pitiless coach.

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A decade ago or more, during a burlesque in the Theatre Royal, a Hall man sang a

boating song which always seemed to me very typical of the freshman's sorrows during his first days upon the "ditch," as the Cam is ever called in the town which bridges it. Writing from memory, the verse went something like this:—

Freshman : Now when I was a freshman
and an addle-headed cub,

Chorus : Oh, poor young fellow !

Freshman : I found myself in no time on the
river in a tub !

Chorus : Oh, poor young fellow !

Freshman : At the sweetly-scented water I
made a fearful grab—

Chorus : Oh, poor young fellow !

Freshman : But I found I'd caught in no
time what boating people call
a crab !

Chorus : Oh, poor young fellow !

Freshman : And the man within the boat
shouted from his lusty throat :

Bow, you're hurrying ! bow, you're late !

Bow, you're bucketing ! bow, swing straight !

Bow, you're back's out ever so far !

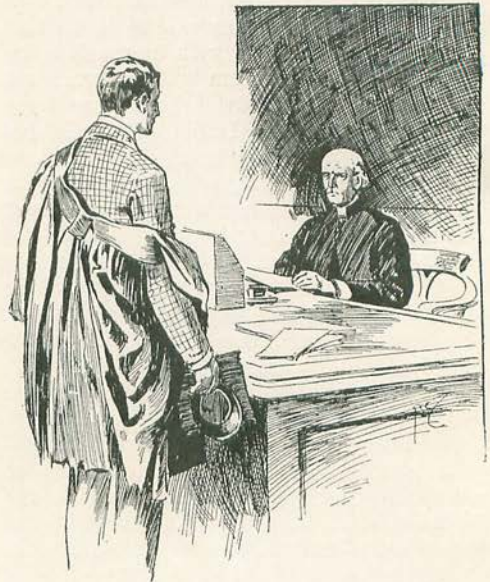
Hang it, what a consummated crock you are !

The scene upon the Cam in the early days of October is, despite the mental and bodily agony of the freshman, altogether a pleasing one. For this is the season of the cockswainless four, when dashing crews from the Hall and Third, and Caius and First flash by on their way to Baitsbite ; and coaches on nags, which a guinea might buy, roar objurgations with the lusty vigour of Saleh's camel ; and trial eights crash into other trial eights ; and the dusky face of the river is lighted with the scarlet and the purple and the blue of many blazers.

Wet or shine, as the bills say, the scene is unchanged. I have rowed when the water has frozen on the blade of the oar ; I have started from the hard of the boathouse with fingers so benumbed that I could scarce bend them ; I have rowed in hail, sleet, and hurricanes ; yet, let the weather be what it would, the cold shower when the work was over was ever an exquisite moment. Nor do I wonder that a "fresher," standing on the balcony of his boathouse, is fired at the very outset with that strange and inexplicable devotion which the "ditch" enacts from all her children.

But it is my hope to speak of boating more fully in another place. For the moment we shall do well to follow the freshman back at the dusk of evening to his cosy rooms, where the kettle is singing and

the fire is blazing, and his "pots" catch the glow of the red light, and his piano awaits the "Tomtit," whose footsteps are soon to be heard lumbering up the stairs. In the unlikely case that our subject is a reading man, he may spend the hour between tea and chapel in the composition of ungrammatical prose or the production of uninspired verse. But if he be as the common man, sinful and postponing, he will linger long over the steaming cup and the exceedingly indigestible "fruit cake," or Genoa, which rascally grocers are prepared to supply recklessly upon the three years' system. When he rises at last it is to exchange the music of "The Geisha" for the more solemn tones of the



"Oh, for the wings of a twopenny duck !"

psalms and the evening hymn, divinely sung by his choir, if he be a Trinity or King's man—less divinely, but withal well sung at other chapels. Should it be a "white night"—a Saint's day or Sabbath—our young man will wear a surplice, which he will hang upon his back as though it were a sheet upon a line. Otherwise he must to chapel in his gown. There he may sing as loud as Burlybumbo, provided the thing be done in decency and good order. I recollect well our own dean at Paul's gating a man because, as he said, he did not give due heed to what he was singing.

"Sir," said the dean, "I have overlooked for a long time your gross abuse of vocal power, but your behaviour in chapel last night is not to be tolerated."

"Oh," said the man, "I'm very sorry ; but that fellow Jones shouts so, I had to sing him down."

"It is not your shouting," answered the dean solemnly, "though that is distracting enough ; it is your rendering of the anthem, sir."

"My rendering !" exclaimed the man.

"You know what I mean, sir," retorted the dean. "I heard you last night distinctly ; you sang, 'Oh, for the wings of a two-penny duck !' And for that, sir, I am now about to gate you."

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These things are exceptions however ; and it must be said unhesitatingly that the services of college chapels are conducted with a dignity and devotion rarely marred by the exuberance of youthful spirits. When chapel is done our freshman betakes himself to Hall where, for a sum varying between 1s. 11*d.* and 2s. 1*d.*, he gets an excellent plain dinner and washes it down with unrivalled audit from the buttery. Unless he be entertaining friends or the night be a feast, it is not good form for him to drink wine ; but he will adjourn when Hall is done to the rooms of another festive spirit, and there coffee and more potent beverages will convince him of the value of the opportunities now open to him and of the national importance of universities. Wines have their ups and downs of fashion, of course, but in my home we affected port and smacked our lips over, and eyed cunningly, in effective lights, the "old in bottle" which a Jew wine merchant had brought yesterday from Oporto. I recollect a "fresher" from a city public school, awake to the possibilities of this Jew port, carrying to Cambridge with him many cases from his father's cellar and disgracing himself for ever thereby in the eyes of our senior tutor.

"Mr. Smith," exclaimed this tutor, meeting the port-loving youth one morning early in the October term, "and pray how have you spent your first week in Cambridge ?"

"Well," said the freshman, "I've had a high old time hunting up six dozen of '53, which your beastly railway company sent on to Doncaster."

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Over the port and nuts, and before a roaring November fire, the freshman will hear for the first time those historic and sacred stories which fathers hand down to sons and sons to children unto the third generation. And here is the advantage of being in college, for then you may sit over your

books or your cards or your fire until dawn comes and no one will say you nay. But if your rooms be in the town, then must you break up the pleasant party at midnight and pay sixpence even for that privilege. Ten o'clock sees all gates and doors and wickets shut in Cambridge. He who enters after ten must pay twopence to his porter ; he who enters after twelve must go next morning to his tutor and explain what new ailment has affected his maiden aunt that her bedside needs so close an attention. Pianos too must not be played after ten of the clock, so that often a little musical which is very much at home, will witness strange conversations. Let us imagine a room lighted by many candles, a bright red flame of fire leaping in the grate, a table bearing ornament of many bottles and spirit decanters, a group of men gathered about a piano, their occupation that of shrieking with resonant voices the sweet old song, "And her golden hair was hanging down her back !" To this room enters Hawks, the servant of the dean.

"Gentlemen," roars he, bawling to make himself heard, "gentlemen, the dean's compliments —"

Chorus (altogether) : "'Oh, Flo, such a'—I say, you fellows!—Halloa, here's Hawks!—'such a girl you know!'" (Mingled uproar and expostulation, during which the pianist hammers sparks from the wires, and Hawks stands like a statue in the doorway.)

Hawks (for the second time) : "Gentlemen, the dean's compliments, and would you make a little less — ?"

Chorus (altogether) : "'With a naughty little twinkle in her eye!'"

Hawks (bawling) : "A little less noise, please !"

Tenant of the room, alarmed : "I say, you fellows, here's the dean ramping round again."

Various Voices : "Oh, say it's a choir practice—tell the dean you've got bronchitis—say we were playing a hymn quick—give Hawks some Benedictine—ask the dean if he's seen 'The Little Genius,'" etc

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I have said that Cambridge stories are the cherished possessions of the freshman during his first time. Doubtless many of these narratives, if they do not earn Mr. Zangwill's censure by depending upon the pawn-shop for their humour, imply at least an elementary state of intoxication which fails altogether to carry a moral. Thus, for example, the student of Trinity, who is supposed by

tradition to have slept all night under the fountain in the great court waiting for the rain to stop, or that other young man who, going home with the aid of a friendly arm, stumbled and lay in the inch-deep gutter of Andrew's Street while an angry proctor expostulated and threatened.

"Your name and college?" exclaimed the proctor loftily.

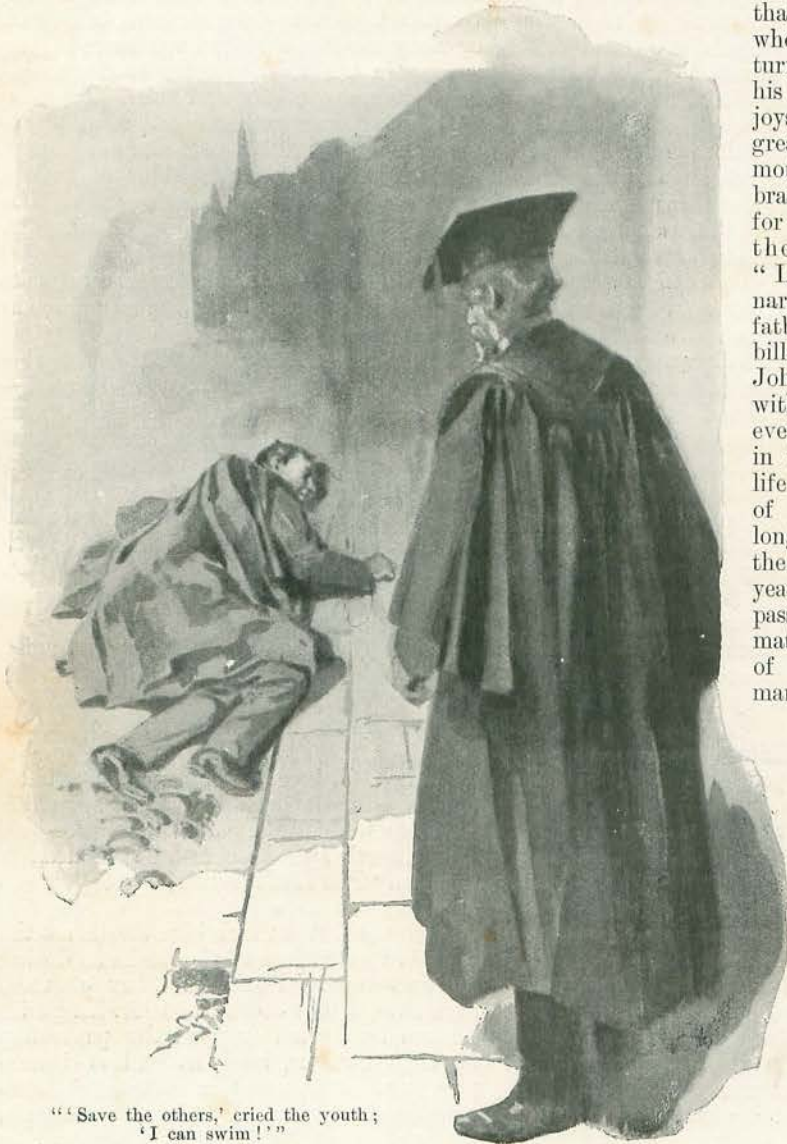
"Save the others," cried the youth; "I can swim!"

Traditions similar to these, I am informed, exist at a teaching institution situated somewhere in Oxfordshire, but that is a point

scarcely worth discussing. Certainly one chapel story is very characteristic of Cambridge. It is the story of the young scholar called upon to read the lessons the morning after bump-supper. Afflicted with a sudden dizziness—to be set down without doubt to the state of the weather—the reader missed his footing at the step of the lectern and put his arms lovingly about the neck of the brass eagle. Then in a very loud voice he exclaimed, "If it hadn't have been for this spring chicken I should have broken my val'able neck!"

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A great day indeed is that of the home-going, when the freshman returns to the bosom of his family and to the joys of Christmas. How great is the anxiety of mother lest her darling's brain should have been for ever exhausted in the racking toils of "Little-go"; how narrowly a less romantic father scans the college bills and the cigars which John has brought back with him. And whatever else he may forget in the years of Varsity life to come, the memory of this first term will long be with him. Of the friends of those years, how many have passed to keep the ultimate term in the valley of the shadow? how many have sickness and failure struck down to poverty and to oblivion? how many has destiny carried to the distant places of the earth, where, in the leisure of emprise they recall the voices for ever still, the hands they nevermore will touch? Well for the freshman that he can put from him this day of the reckonings of affection.



"Save the others," cried the youth;
"I can swim!"