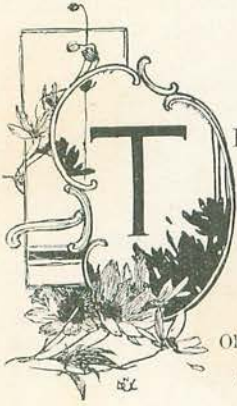


## 'VARSITY TALES.

BY MAX PEMBERTON.

Illustrated by T. S. C. CROWTHER.



HERE is a ballad, well known to all boating men, though not included in any recent Minstrelsy, which asks the pertinent question—

Oh, where and oh, where is the  
little Cam gone,  
Oh, where and oh, where  
can it be?

It's very hard lines on the ocean wave  
If it ever gets down to the sea.

I have no pretence to accurate knowledge in criticising this offensive production, but it has always seemed to me that it must have been written by an Oxford man. Diminutive the Cam is, diminutive and dwindling, and lacking in the altogether superfluous ornament of tree and hill; nevertheless I make bold to say that she is an exceedingly dignified river, well able to defend herself. Indeed when the sun waxes hot in June and the odours of Barnwell are disseminated by the sweet breezes of late spring, there can be no question of the potency of her weapons. Yet who does not love her? Where is the oarsman whose heart does not quicken at the magic word?

It is not my purpose however to defend the Cam from the malignant satirists who have never known the true spirit or been called to the company of the aquatically saved. Should the mere spectator be in doubt as to the importance of this queen of rivers, or labour under the delusion that someone has taken her away in a bucket, you have but to lead him to the 'Varsity boathouse early on an afternoon in May when the eights are getting into their light ships and the spring poet has no feet for earth or sea. The spectacle he will see then might interest even a stockbroker. The flash of garish colour, the blazers of all hues, the graceful shape of the eights, the *mêlée* wherein tubs and pairs and funnies are jumbled as in the press of a regatta, contrive an *ensemble* which no other river in the

world can show. It is true that they have more water at Oxford, but *que voulez-vous?* there is no charm in mere water, else is the Serpentine a finer river than the Isis. Assuredly, however, there is an indisputable fascination in the very shortcomings of the Cam. These compel her children to love her with a great love, to speak of the "ditch" in those hushed tones which witness to a lasting affection. She is an exacting mistress, but tribute is paid willingly.

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There is an historic chestnut often cracked at Cambridge which embodies in a time-honoured narrative the enduring affection of the boating man for his sport. This story tells of an old don whose remoter glory as an oarsman had been long since forgotten. An archdeacon had this worthy man become, performing archidiaconal functions to the spiritual and bodily welfare of a considerable flock. In his younger days he had worn the blue and been captain of his boat, but as years weighed upon him he forgot the pastime and wasted the precious hours upon such mistaken labours as "*Tragoediae et Fragmenta cum Annotatt.*" One day it happened that he was strolling along the river bank at a moment in the Lent term when the races were being held. Quite unconscious of the meaning of the press and noise, absorbed in a perusal of his new edition of Hooker, he permitted the roaring throng of boating men to hustle past him until suddenly the magic word "*Caius—well rowed, Caius!*" struck upon his ear. In that moment the years were bridged. The archdeacon looked up to see the black and blue of his own college conspicuous in a very whirlwind of colour. From a hundred throats, a hundred rattles, a hundred horns, the babble arose. *Caius* were upon the point of bumping Hall, and the spectacle filled the veins of the godly don with the blood of youth. Away went his Hooker, away went his umbrella. "*On to it, stroke!*" he bawled. "*Bow, you're late!*" he screamed. "*Row it*



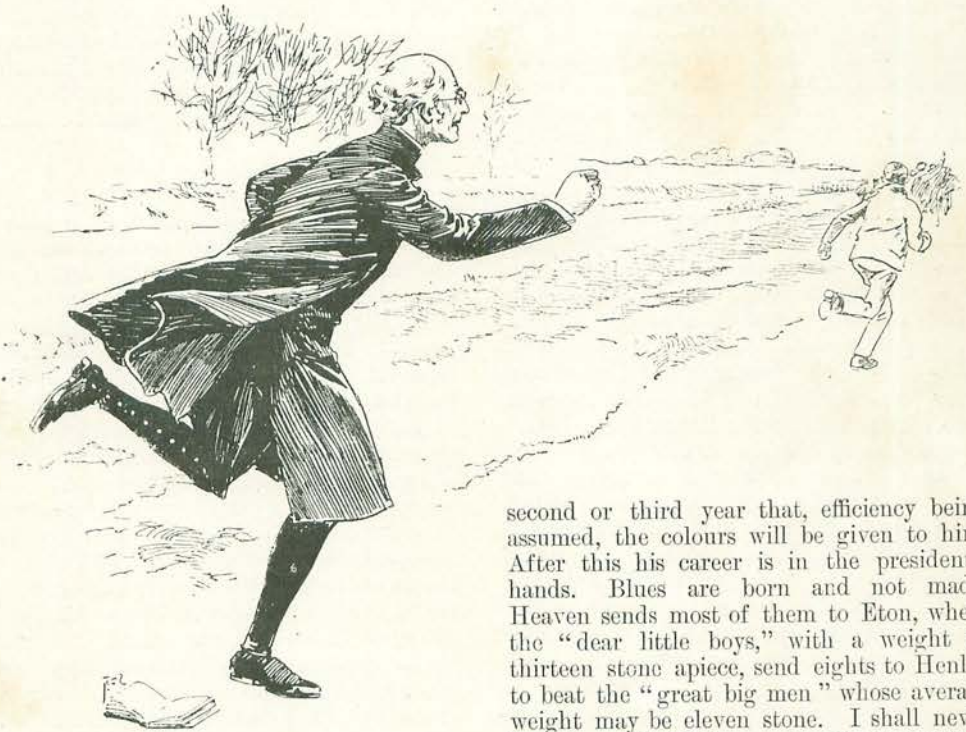
out, seven!" he yelled. Panting, perspiring, stumbling, shouting, he followed the mad crowd. "O seven, get on to it—longer stroke! Bow, you're late—for goodness' sake, bow! Oh, blazes!"

At this moment the archidiaconal instinct prevailed above the aquatic. Stopping suddenly, as though the great pit he spoke of had opened at his feet, the saintly man wiped his brow and begged pity of his hearers.

"Gentlemen," he cried, "where am I—what have I said?"

They did not tell him, but pointing to

career! In his first term he will be tubbed diligently—not with soap and soda as are the elderly ladies of the pantomime, but in a small boat where the superior person in question will reduce him to that fit state of humility beloved of the catechism. By and by he will be put into a college trial, and if he be victorious, will be given a guinea to go out and buy a toy—a pewter mug to wit. This will convince his children and his children's children of the greatness of his youth. It is not until his first May term that he may hope to get a seat in one of the college eights; it will be in his



"Bow, you're late!"

the triumphant eight, they led him back to his Hooker and his umbrella and sent him upon his way rejoicing.

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The career of the boating man begins in his academic infancy. In nine cases out of ten he will be a mere novice, the sport of superior persons and the victim of unnecessary language, when first he goes to Cambridge. As a freshman his boat captain takes immediate possession of him, convincing him that he should never have been born and that suicide is his only

second or third year that, efficiency being assumed, the colours will be given to him. After this his career is in the president's hands. Blues are born and not made. Heaven sends most of them to Eton, where the "dear little boys," with a weight of thirteen stone apiece, send eights to Henley to beat the "great big men" whose average weight may be eleven stone. I shall never forget an old Irish woman who harangued an eight of my own college which was beaten by Eton in the final of the Ladies' Plate some few years ago. The Eton crew was one of the best ever sent up by Dr. Warre. Muttelbury had a seat in it; the others were the men who won Oxford victory in the famous years from '90 onwards. Our men hailing from Cambridge "college" weighed some ten stone odd apiece; the "little lads" from Eton school had an average of thirteen stone odd. When the lads won—as they did—with ease, the elderly Irish lady standing upon the town bridge took her pipe from her mouth and addressed the losers feelingly—



"Houly saints!" she cried, "but it's meself that is glad this day. Would ye be bating the dear chilthren. Shame on ye ye dirty big men for thinkin' it! The Lord be praised if I had a shillelagh in me hand this minut' 'tis on yer heads I'd crack it sure!"

The good woman, I understand, made an attempt to embrace the "dear children" subsequently, but with what success I never learnt

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I have spoken of the possession which is taken by the boat captain of the freshman. If rowing be a sort of polite slavery in the first year of a man's university career, the subsequent terms do little to relieve the bondage. Once an oarsman, always an oarsman is the maxim. Terms roll by, winters and summers are numbered, but still the "wet-bob" is at his oar. Every day for him is as every other day—varied only by those spells of training which precede the Lent and the May recess. In the morning he may spare a few hours for those necessary accomplishments which will seduce ponderous examiners to the belief that he has the knowledge and the scholarship of a fourth form lad. But once he has lunched, the river claims him. Speaking of the type and not of the individual, I should describe him as a heavily-built man, generally clad in covert coat or checks of startling pattern. He walks with a lurch, though his shoulders are square enough; a fox terrier follows obediently at his heels. He is not a man ordinarily of large conversational powers, his salutation being limited to a monosyllabic greeting. Though he has to ride a horse when he is coaching an eight, he is not an accomplished equestrian, and often you may hear him bawling, "Bo-ow-ow, yo-ou-ou're l-a-a-a-t-e," the broken syllables representing the music of the trot to which he is not accustomed. But he is a man of large heart, not infrequently a fair scholar, and commonly one who holds his place in the greater battle of the world. Sometimes, of course, the merely animal is very marked in your man of aquatic fame. I remember one of the most honoured of our blues who never could make two and two anything but five. I was in for the "Little-go" at the same time as this jovial fellow, and his perplexity when they set a paper in Greek Testament before him was distressing. Subsequently he confessed his trouble to me.

"That passage for translation," he said, "was it the disciples going through the corn-fields, or the publican and the sinner in the Temple? I spotted a couple of words and tossed up for it. It came down heads—which meant publican."

I consoled him as gently as possible.

"My dear fellow, it was the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Your halfpenny isn't in luck to-day."

He shook his head sadly, consoling himself with the assurance that Greek is a superegratory study. How he got his degree subsequently, I never learnt. Perhaps the gods smile upon blues. Certainly one of his answers in the science special was unique, for when they asked him to give a list of the better known fossils of the Eocene, he wrote, "These are so common they must be familiar to all."

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A man needs to be but a little time at Cambridge before many stories of the blues are made known to him. The first figure, still mighty and resplendent, of which he will hear is that of old Tom Hockin, of Jesus. Tom Hockin rows in a lifeboat now—at least he did some years ago when he became one of a squirearchy in the South. In his day no brighter sun ever shone upon Cambridge. They say that the fame of Tom was so great that once when he found himself—probably to his exceeding surprise—in the Varsity church a little boy in the gallery was unable to restrain himself, and cried, to the amazement of the select preacher, "Well rowed, 'Ockin!" For nearly a decade the glory of Tom Hockin waxed strong in Cambridge. Then he went off to his lifeboat, and the local fisherman told him that if he wanted to learn to row he'd better "lug his hoar a bit at the hend."

Linked with Hockin's is the name of Rhodes, of Jesus, that great oarsman who, having played all day in a Varsity cricket match, came down one ever to be remembered evening in June and stroked his college crew when it was head of the river. Whether men of this calibre—the Hockins, the Rhodes, the Goldies—were greater wonders than some of their successors is a question this generation may not decide. Unquestionably time has added to their prestige, has made of them, as it were, aquatic models which must serve for many generations. Modern men, perhaps, might contend that we have never seen a finer stroke than West, a finer heavy-weight than Mr.



Muttlebury, but these, great as is their renown, do not yet enjoy the patriarchal distinction of the others. Mr. West I hold to be the prettiest stroke that ever sat in a boat. And he was something of a wit, too. His retort to Moore in the race of 1883, when the Cambridge president remarked to him, "We've got you on toast this time, West," is historic. "Mind the toast is not buttered, and that you don't slip off!" were the words. And the toast was very much buttered. Does not aquatic history relate how that Oxford, against whom the odds of three to one were laid, slipped away at the start, West rowing magnificently, and were never again headed. "We thought we should catch them every minute," said Fox, of Trinity, afterwards; "it was only when the race was lost that we knew we should never catch them." West, it is possible to assume, was of that opinion all the time.

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It is demanded of a great rowing figure that he must never give way to uncontrollable enthusiasm, except it be at a bump supper. All our greatest rowing men have been men of silence, grave, reverend, if slightly blasphemous seigneurs. Even in the face of mundane impertinence or obstruction your rowing man must control his tongue. I heard a story the other day—heaven knows if it be true or false—of this wonderful control as exemplified by Mr. Muttlebury at a recent Henley regatta. He was coaching a coxswainless four at the time, and it befell that a couple of Cockneys out in a "shilling-an-hour" rammed the bows of the four and seriously damaged the ship. Subsequently the Cockneys rowed to shore, and one of them strolled up to argue it out with the famous light blue coach. Did Mr. Muttlebury answer him with angry words? Did he expostulate or reason? Not at all. He picked up the Cockney by the scruff of the neck and threw him into the river. An Oxford blue, leaning, hands in pockets, against the boat-tent, approved the action warmly. "Bravo, Muttle!" he cried, without changing his position, "throw him in again!"

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But a boating man has much to do before he may enjoy a fame like this. Let us assume for the moment that he is merely rowing in his college eight in the merry month of May. To follow him through a day's work at such a season is not without

interest, as showing the typical life of the athlete. He will be up at seven o'clock in the morning unfailingly; or if he be not, his boat captain will be there to remind him with a wet sponge that the cock has crowed on any number of hills since dawn. There is nothing like a wet sponge to help a man to the habit of early rising or to school him to that nice distinction of phrase which befits a well-balanced mind. And once you have your man out of bed the rest is easy. Vanity does not compel him to linger long over his toilet when that toilet consists of a pair of thick flannels, a sweater, and a blazer. Tubbed and well-rubbed down, our man



"Bravo, Muttle!"

passes from his college to the backs, and there runs for a quarter of an hour, oblivious of the beauties of the scene and mindful only of the indecent partiality of aquatic people for early habits. It will be half-past seven or more when this fellow returns to his room, to put on the modest checks and to go to chapel. All boating men go to morning chapel when they are in training, to the delight of the dean, who lives in the hope that one day they will come and hear him preach. And when chapel is done there is breakfast, such a breakfast as might move your town man to all the adjectives of disgust. Porridge—great bowls of it; chops and eggs—piles of them; fish—three for



each man ; bread—loaves of the best, “yesterday’s,” to be consumed with layers of “squish” or fine ripe jam. And tea is the drink, I may say, weak tea, of which you may consume two cups and not a drop more. Small wonder if a man feels slightly pensive and dolorous after a breakfast such as this ; small wonder if his walk be slow and his air dejected.

From breakfast until one or two o’clock the boating man’s time is his own, but he must be a hero if he can devote it to the making of elegiacs or to the niceties of conics. Very possibly, the day being sunny and the town of Cambridge full of “sisters,” he will go for a stroll along King’s Parade, buying things for which he has no earthly use, or inspecting the tobacconist’s store with the greedy eyes of the man who may not smoke. This will give him an appetite for the chop and the half-pint of beer or claret and water he will get at one o’clock. Fortified for the second time, he goes off to the river to grapple with the tremendous work of the day. Were you to offer him a pound a week and his meals to perform this work as a paid servant he would treat your offer with scorn ; but being a servant of honour he thinks nothing of it, going out to let a coach blackguard him in a tub, and rowing subsequently to Baitsbite and back with the air of a man who is enjoying himself. Thereafter he will return to college, though not to afternoon tea, for tea is forbidden ; but his dinner will be worthy of the great eaters of the past, and when that is done, it is ten to one that he will go to sleep in his armchair with an uncut “Apology” open, for the look of the thing, on the reading desk at his side. A month of such slavery fits him for the great race week, and he is ready to make a Cambridge holiday, though he would resent the suggestion. Should he reap victory, his reward is a little bunch of flowers worn in his hat. No pot or medal, or even impossible clock, testifies to his success. They work you like a horse at Cambridge, and for your pains thank you that you permitted them to spring rattles and ring bells, to fire off pistols, and to bawl with mighty lungs.

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I say that no reward awaits the boating man, yet this is a manner of speech. Perhaps the most cherished reward of all is that moment when he learns that training is done, and that he has his liberty once more. No tongue can express the delight of this !

The last race is rowed, the cheers ring out from twenty boathouses ; the banks of the Cam are still bright with the fine raiment of the “sisters” ; the hoarse throats of victors continue to proclaim the victory. But our boating man has no ears for the cries, no eyes for the fine raiment. He is dressing now, dressing with the feverish impatience of a man on his bridal day. Away go “shorts,” away go “longs,” he will not want those for many a month. Garbed once more in the festive checks, he hastens across Jesus Piece to his rooms. Thank heaven, he will light a pipe this night which all Cambridge shall not put out ! And tea, tea with muffins and crumpets and cakes full of currants, and swelling buns—anything so long as it is properly indigestible. There is a sardonic joy in thinking that a boat captain can domineer no longer ; a tremulous pleasure in recalling that month of suffering when the pipe has dried upon the chimney-piece and the cigars have been smoked by heretics who do not row. Better this hour than a hundred pots of german silver. The memory of such a reward will linger many a day, will come again in age bitterly as a vision of the gardens of youth.

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That an apocalypse should have been preached of late years against the bump supper is very fit and proper. Happily we have broken with the drinking traditions of our forefathers ; we measure a man’s worth no longer by the number of bottles he can consume. And while in recent years it would be folly to pretend that strong drink is one of the evils of universities, nevertheless the excitement of a bump supper has intoxicated many a man. I have seen boys who scorned the tippler’s habit as drunk with the mere effort of shouting and bawling—added perhaps to the third of a bottle of champagne—as a sailor fresh from a voyage to the Indies. I have seen a promising fellow with no vice in him sent down to ruin because in a moment of hilarious excitement following upon a bump supper he undressed in the Market Place and insisted on bathing there at midnight. Instances might be multiplied *ad nauseam*. One of the most sedate oarsmen of my day nearly wrecked his career fifteen years ago by a freak of folly so ludicrous that the pen almost hesitates to set it down. A bump supper was the occasion, of course. The good fellow drank a little wine and then fell into a fit of despondency. He crept away from



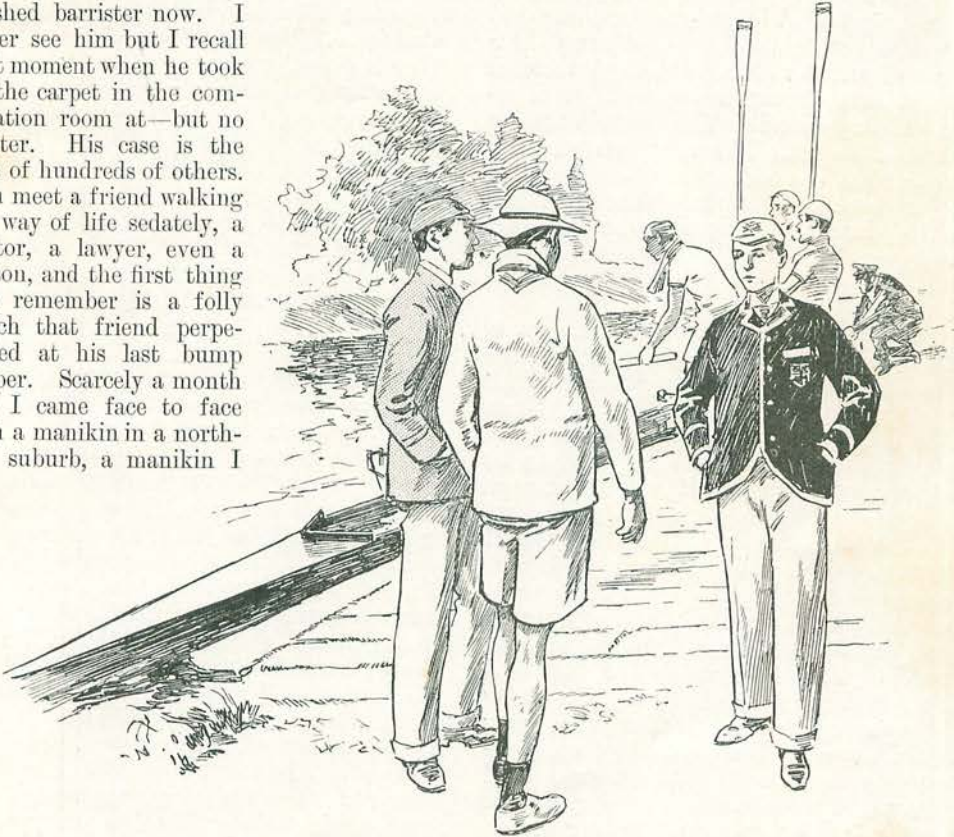
the table; he hid himself, no man knew where. At midnight we set out to search for him. He was found at last quietly taking up the carpet of the combination room. There he sat in the dark room, alone and absorbed. Nail after nail he wrenched from the floor. Remonstrance and persuasion were alike unavailing to drag him from his self-appointed task.

"Go away," he said to the friends who would have put him to bed, "go away, I have my work to do!"

This man is a distinguished barrister now. I never see him but I recall that moment when he took up the carpet in the combination room at—but no matter. His case is the case of hundreds of others. You meet a friend walking the way of life sedately, a doctor, a lawyer, even a parson, and the first thing you remember is a folly which that friend perpetrated at his last bump supper. Scarcely a month ago I came face to face with a manikin in a northern suburb, a manikin I

of the *Hesperus!* Does he remember that night, I wonder; does a thought of it ever occur to him when from the pulpit he proclaims the text, "My brethren, be sober, vigilant and watchful, or your adversary the devil will put you in a piano?" One of life's little ironies assuredly.

Eccentricities such as these have helped not a little to rob the bump supper of its glory. Dons protest that it is better to send a boating man supperless to bed than to have him abroad in the courts of his college



ON THE LANDING-STAGE.

knew fifteen years ago at Cambridge. But how changed from that undergraduate who, in the prime of a lusty youth, had steered our boat so magnificently. Checks no longer adorned his little limbs. He was dressed in the sombre black of the curate. Five ancient ladies hung upon his words. To them, I do not doubt, he points the straight and narrow way. When last I saw him at Cambridge he was inside his own piano, treading on the wires and calling all the world to witness that he was the wreck

seeking, like a ravenous beast, whom he may devour. With such a decision it is impossible to quarrel. In my own college the bump supper received its death-blow when a band of ravaging oarsmen took it into their heads to paint all the statues white. Armed with many buckets of whitewash, masked and wearing slippers of felt, the eight, fresh from the celebration of victory, crept into the great court at midnight and began upon the statue of a famous doctor for whom deans pray devoutly when they remember our



benefactors. This illustrious man shone next morning with the whiteness of snow new fallen. A little devil painted upon his chest might have suggested a *san-benito*; he had red eyes and the suggestion of a Union Jack deftly sketched upon that portion of his body which the schoolboy described as "the place where you don't hit people." Unhappily the venerable doctor was not alone among the historic dead in having his statue desecrated. Elsewhere in the court white deans, white bishops, white mathematicians testified to the exuberant joy of the bump supper. The wanton act damaged irreparably work which had cost many thousands of pounds; while it was deeply resented by the sane among undergraduates, it remained unpunished. The eight wore the masks to the last. The very man who had handled the desecrating brush was assured by the senior tutor that "he could not possibly know anything about so dastardly an outrage."

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Dons are but human. No man likes to think that his statue will be painted white when he has been a "long time dead." Nevertheless this outrage alone might not have killed the bump supper in our place had not it been supplemented a year later by a strange and wholly inexplicable attack upon the plates off which the bump supper was eaten. Prompted by heaven knows what impulse, a dozen silly youths took it into their heads to walk up and down the glass-decked tables of the hall; and afterwards, the hour being midnight, to use the two hundred plates upon which the feast had been served as so many skittles. The leader of the gang, dressed in his shirt and wearing a lamp shade for headgear, called upon the dean at one o'clock in the morning and endeavoured to seduce him to an argument for the Christian religion. Failing in this, the bright idea came to him that he might unscrew the gates of the chapel. Many willing hands were ready to further the notion. At daybreak the chapel gates were safely housed in the rooms of a man who had gone down. Three weeks passed before the dons found them. When the day of discovery came the gentleman who had led the gang was with his friends, enjoying a vacation which has not yet drawn to a close. It began ten years ago.

It would be unfair to ask follies such as these to witness to the life of the boating man. We have come to believe nowadays

that the gospel of muscle may well be preached from the same pulpit as the gospel of mind. No sport has more distinguished children to adorn the moral than the sport of rowing. Judges who once bawled at First Post or at Ditton, now deliver judgments in modulated and dulcet accents. Counsels hammer upon deed-boxes who once hammered upon the necessity of "keeping it long." The greater honours of the river endure to a man's death. "He rowed in the 'Varsity eight of such a year." The introduction is perfect. The eyes of the simpering Miss are aglow with a tender admiration. Her father asks after his young friend's heart, coming to the conclusion ultimately that, diseased though it may be, it has not impaired his appetite or spoilt his palate for "sixty-three" port. And of course the heart of every rowing man is diseased. Ask your local doctor and he will tell you that it must be so. Possibly, as some of the judges have shown us, you may attain the comfortable age of ninety with an organ so imperfect. That is another story.

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Whatever his subsequent physical weakness, the blue remains the light of his university while he is in residence. It is instructive to stand on the banks of the Cam any day in the May term and to watch the honour which is paid to the worn blue coat or the tattered blue cap. All colours come and go, but this alone compels homage. Here is the red and black of Jesus, once potent to awe; there the black and white of the Hall and of the immortal Mr. Trevor Jones; here the dark blue of First; there the scarlet of John's. You pass them by with a critical word. How different it is if, among colours so brilliant, the faded light blue of a 'Varsity oarsman be detected. Men run then that they may watch the great man's blade or listen to the words of wisdom which fall from his lips. Sometimes these words are words of sarcasm. I heard a well-known blue remark the other day to the seven of a college eight, who had momentarily released his hold of the oar during an easy, "Seven, don't forget your oar; you might want it!" The freshman wonders how it would feel to wear such a coat. Will the day ever come for him? He tells himself that it will, and is going on to dream other dreams when the voice of his coach shatters the visions.

"Sit up five! You look like a bag of sawdust!"