

## 'VARSITY TALES.

BY MAX PEMBERTON.

*Illustrated by T. S. C. CROWTHER*

### VI.—IN THE LATER HOURS.



VID counsels the wise man to take rest, reminding him that the field which has lain fallow will bring forth a goodly crop. I have known many undergraduates who respected this worthy man and took lengthened periods of rest, but I cannot remember the subsequent crop, nor its abundance. The path of the intellectual comet is usually a short one at Cambridge. Examiners have the knack of spying upon the mass and pronouncing it nothing but vapour. Your Admirable Crichton sometimes gets ploughed for his "Little-go"; even blues have found examiners so little alive to aquatic glory as to reject the rowing star of the first magnitude. Yet what a tragedy it is when a man has lived his three or four years merrily, and must go hence with no degree, possibly no future!

I saw in the Strand, not many days ago, a Crichton who was one of the lights of Cambridge in my time. We used to consider him nothing less than a genius, so many were his accomplishments. One of the prettiest scullers that ever sat in a boat, he had won the medal of the skating association, was good enough for his tennis "blue," played the piano like an untaught angel, sang the best of comic songs, could keep twenty diners laughing at his talk. Intellect in a large measure he possessed, but application he despised. He used to tell us in his saner moments that any man could get a degree by reading for an hour a day during his last year. I do not think he attended

half a dozen lectures the whole time he was in Cambridge. And yet his buoyancy never flagged. He went into the senate house for his final examination as merry as a lad going to a fair; he came out again still smiling. The thought that he could be ploughed never entered his head. I shall not readily forget the day when, upon the publication of the lists, we went to the senate house door together and searched for his name. It was not there, though many minutes passed before he was convinced of its omission. I had thought him until that time to be a rich man who cared nothing for diplomas, but when I saw him stagger down the steps of the senate house I knew that my supposition was untrue. Ten days ago the same man passed me in the Strand. He wore an old pair of tennis shoes tied with string; he had a ragged brown paper parcel under his arm; he was smoking a clay pipe, and his coat was out at elbow. All the tragedy of defeat was written upon his face. There was the same look there I had seen years ago when first he realised the falsity of his theory; it was as though that look had lingered upon his face since the moment when he had searched for his name upon the senate house door and had not found it.

\* \* \* \*

It is a common opinion outside Cambridge that every man who goes up to the University quits it with some sort of a degree. That this is erroneous it is scarcely necessary to say. I should hazard a rough guess that

of sixty men who went up with me, fifteen came down unhonoured and unsung. The most curious part of the business was that several really able men were ploughed. In



"All the tragedy of defeat was written upon his face."

one case at least a keenness about rowing accounted for the inexplicable rejection of a man who is now a doctor in a good practice. During his last year this good fellow closed

his books and corked up his "stinks" bottles that he might exhort the college boat to righteousness. When the science tripos was on he went gaily enough to the senate house, assuring himself that he would get at least a third. But, like Alan Breck, his memory for forgetting was extraordinary. They ploughed him ruthlessly; and when the lists went up, and his name was not to be found, he only laughed a great guffaw and bore his unblushing honours with equanimity. Very different was the case of another man with whom I renewed acquaintance about this time—a man who had been sent up to Oxford from a city public school, and there had gained scholarships innumerable. For the first year the scholar carried all before him; but after that, the seven devils of ease took possession of the house which a public schoolmaster had garnished so beautifully. The brilliant scholar began to play billiards at night, being quite sure that his verses were better than those of anyone else in the 'Varsity, and that he would get nothing by tinkering at them. From billiards he passed to clubs for the anticipation of life's success—mutual admiration societies, where you drank a good deal of wine and talked a good deal of twaddle. There he muddled his head with port, "old in bottle," or sherry, "a good useful wine." I saw him for a few days in his third year at Oxford, and was informed by him that he was certain of a first. I did not see him again until he was ploughed.

So far as my memory goes, this man came to my rooms in Cambridge in the last week of our May term. I was alone, having just returned from the meeting of a literary society, when a feeble knock upon my oak spoke of a visit of no ordinary kind. Your common man does not knock feebly upon his friend's oak when he wishes to come in and smoke a pipe before going to bed. If he do not roar like a bull, he smites the door until the panels shiver. But that knock was gentle as a woman's rap. I opened the door quickly and saw my old schoolfellow, hollow-eyed, haggard, splashed from head to foot with mud. He entered my room without greeting. I thought at the first that he had lost his wits, but presently he spoke in a low and feeble voice—

"It's all right, old man," he said with a silly laugh, "I'm ploughed!"

"Ploughed?" I ejaculated. "What rot!—you?"

He nodded his head and began to stare about the room with a wandering and un-resting glance.

"I left Oxford two days ago," he continued. "Where I have been since, heaven knows. I remember walking about the fields for a long time after I read the list, then somehow I got to Bletchley, and thought I would come over here. I can't tell my people. I couldn't face *them*."

The man was a wreck, mentally and physically. He slept in Cambridge that night, but nothing would persuade him to return to his friends in London. I believe it was a month before he went home, and then his father would not see him. He is now in Australia teaching in a fifth-rate school. He might have been a fellow—the "might have been" is ever the tragedy!

\* \* \* \*

But Cambridge buries her ploughed quickly. She is a moving river of life, and has no creeks or havens for the derelict of letters. Success may win the applause of the day, but even the successful man soon turns to his serious career and makes room for him who would be successful. In a few cases, possibly, the undergraduate, who is told that he is senior wrangler, or senior classic, or senior jurist, does feel inclined to let off fireworks; but rare is the day when he makes his joy public. The most brilliant classic of my day, a braw Scotchman with a face emotional as a paving-stone, walked to the senate house to hear the result of the tripos with the expression of a man who is burying his aunt. The same expression distinguished him when they told him he was senior. Slowly he had walked out of his college; slowly he returned to it. They said that he shut himself up all day and read Aristotle. Possibly he did; but what a reading that must have been! how tremulous the hand which turned the familiar pages! Contrast with such a man the senior jurist of the Hall, who was in bed when the glorious tidings of his success were brought to him. Six men, one after the other, came running headlong into his bedroom, and the jurist was patient with them. He met the seventh with his bath sponge heavily charged with cold water. But the seventh chanced to be a law tutor of his college, eager to congratulate him.

\* \* \* \*

When you wish to read at Cambridge you sport your oak and turn your arm-chair so that your eyes cannot see what is going on in the street or court. Should Tompkins come presently and play a sonata upon your door

with his stick you sit as still as a mouse, and the spirit of all the heroic virtues fires you. You have a reading desk, of course, cunningly contrived to swing across your knee, and when the *De Corona* is open and your pipe draws, and Tompkins has gone away to knock upon someone else's door, the thing begins. There will be interruptions, of course; a dun will steal up, "with halting step and slow," and having knocked three times and looked through your keyhole, and possibly consumed the leg of a fowl in your gyp room, will sigh and return to that place whence he came. Or your eye, roving from the text, will discover the morning paper still unopened, and you will just skim it, since no man of mark can afford to be out of the movement. It is your misfortune if a big cricket match chance to be reported, or a duke has eloped with a chorus girl; but you get over this in time, and are in the act of mastering a superb passage when your pipe goes out and you discover that the matches are on the piano. Once drawn to this weary instrument, the devil of indolence whispers, "Play me the 'Amorous Goldfish,'" and you do not see your way to refuse him. By-and-bye, you hear Jenkins bawling up to you from the court below, and another devil of self-indulgence hints that it is the intention of Jenkins to ask you to lunch. You feel that it would not be polite to keep such a man waiting, so you open your window, and a dialogue ensues.

"Halloa, old chap!"

"Halloa!"

"Are you up yet?"

"Up, great Scott! I've read ten lines of the *De Corona*."

"Get out! I don't believe you're dressed!"

You are naturally indignant at this and go down into the court to convince Jenkins that you are not still in your *robe de nuit*. He tells you his woes.

"Beastly shame, old chap! I had to breakfast with the dean this morning. Whenever the dean has his knife into you he asks you to breakfast at eight. That gets you up the night before, or you'd never wake. I shall have to go and eat Smith's ham to console myself. You heard that Smith had a ham sent him from Yorkshire yesterday. We're all going to eat it at half-past one—you'd better come."

You protest that really you could not intrude upon Smith; and being angry with Jenkins because he is a humbug, you return to your chair and read for an hour with angry persistence. When one o'clock strikes

that ham comes dancing before your imagination, to your intellectual loss. You feel convinced that it must be a good ham, or Jenkins would not go and eat it. Possibly you wind up by patronising Smith, whose audit bribes your conscience to a guilty silence. You are certain that if Jenkins had not bawled up to you at the moment he did you would have done a morning's work worthy of your intentions.

\* \* \* \*

In the later hours of your common day there are other obstacles to the pursuit of that knowledge which, as Dante says, comes of learning well retained. It is aggravating, for instance, to be upon the point of returning to your rooms after dinner and suddenly to discover that Shakspeare is being played at a tin theatre in the town. Luckily the comparatively splendid Theatre Royal, and the excellence of the fare provided there, have banished the tin theatre from Cambridge, but in my time there was no finer entertainment to be had for money than an historic drama performed by a troop of "fit-up" comedians in one of the halls to which drama was then relegated. One performance I had the privilege to attend was a masterpiece. The blank verse used to be accompanied every night by a shower of oranges, apples, paper balls, old boots, and even the homely, if ancient, egg. The Duke of Buckingham, who figured in the strange medley, was our favourite. His accent was beyond price. Who that once heard it could forget the delivery of the famous lines—

"My lud, a messenger hes harrived and seeks hordience of yer grice."

"Hadmit the messenger." (And later.)  
"Speak hon, I ham the dook!"

\* \* \* \*

If dialogue of this kind provoked even the mild man to turbulence and disorder, the advent of a burlesque company to the same hall made him little less than delirious. For pantomimes we had a particular affection. I recollect a famous pantomime at the Guildhall attended by riots serious enough to provoke leaders of protest in the London daily papers. It was, I think, in the year 1882, the disturbance being entirely due to the persistent inanities of a man with a black face and a huge white tie. Indeed the audience was in a most tolerant mood when the curtain went up on the first act of the extravaganza and showed us a pretty shepherdess, who confessed that she had a

number of cows and fine fat calves—a statement received with uproarious applause. By-and-bye the nigger appeared and began to pose in the centre of the stage. A god, provoked to wrath, threw an apple at him, and so excellent was the aim that the fruity bullet found its billet in the very centre of the black man's forehead. Such a decided expression of opinion was powerless to mitigate the fellow's fooleries, and he occupied the stage until the whole house was wound up to the last turn of exasperation. On the following night the Guildhall presented an extraordinary spectacle. Every greengrocer's shop in Cambridge seemed to have been ransacked for missiles. You saw men armed with bags of tangerine oranges, with pomegranates, with plums; others carried horns, whistles, drums; others again peashooters and squirts. As on the previous evening, so on this, the shepherdess who was proud of the calves was received with welcome, the pastoral scene was applauded; but the moment the wretched nigger showed his face the air was darkened by a volley so spontaneous, so heavy, so well directed, that the unhappy man appeared to be a catharine wheel revolving in a halo of vegetables. In vain the proctors rushed hither and thither. For a moment the stream of the green-stuffs turned away from the stage and was directed upon the proctor himself. The gas lamps lit up an arena above which carrots twirled and oranges spun and rotten plums burst. The music of the band was drowned by a discordant concatenation of the shrill notes of fifes, flutes, penny whistles, mouth organs, drums. The curtain descended at length upon a scene worthy of the best traditions of Fiddle-de-dee.

\* \* \* \*

We owe it to the Royal Theatre that scenes such as these are to be recorded against Cambridge no more. Yet even the undergraduate of to-day is quick to resent bad acting, and is often witty at its expense. On quite a recent occasion a tragedy had been dragging heavily through two acts when a burly tragedian struck an attitude before the footlights and appealed in heaven's name to the ceiling, asking what he should do in his despair. "Ay," he bawled, "what shall I say? What shall I do?" "Take Beecham's pills," roared an unmannerly athlete, to the immense satisfaction of the gallery, who christened the man on the spot and advised the remedy each time he appeared. I remember a

night, too, at the Guildhall when Mr. Corney Grain came down, and his entertainment was heralded by a little comedy which bored the men exceedingly. They sat out the first act of it patiently, but when, on the curtain rising for the second act, a youth rushed into the empty room and bawled "uncle," a wicked student gave the piece its death-blow. It was at the moment when the actor had advanced to the footlights and was asking again, "Where is my uncle?" "Here," roared the undergraduate from his place at the back of the hall, and the unexpected sally set the house roaring. As for the boy-actor, he never recovered that unexpected answer, and for some minutes he stood dumb. Later on, in the same comedy, a doddering old man confessed to us that he was about to go home and die, whereupon another boating celebrity cried out in a dreadful falsetto, "Yes, do go home and die!" a request vigorously seconded by a bored house. It was not until Corney Grain himself took the stage that order was restored and a certain measure of vengeance enacted. Mr. Grain never neglected an opportunity, when at Cambridge, of satirising the follies of youth. I think he wrote his song, "I'm a chappie," purposely for a university audience. It was imitable to hear him, after an A.D.C. supper, reply to the long-winded toasts of boys who thought themselves orators. I remember one speaker who proposed his health in an oration abounding with stories which the narrator delivered as his own experiences. When Corney Grain rose to answer he thanked the proposer for reminding him of "those dear old stories he heard thirty years ago." On the stage he spared no one; the man with the tremendous collar, the man with the tremendous stick, the youth who can roar a chorus in three keys and remain unaware of his modulations, the boy whose vocabulary of polite affirmative is limited to "Aw, yes"—Mr. Grain knew them all. And they knew him, and applauded their loudest when the stick fell upon their shoulders.

\* \* \* \*

In the later hours, and to be numbered among your interruptions, are those excellent societies wherein you discuss Ibsen and bimetalism, the political crimes of Lord Salisbury or Sir William Harcourt, and the niceties of transcendentalism. I refer to the various reading and debating clubs which are a feature of every college. These are always

interesting—are frequently amusing. It is pleasant to smoke your cigar and drink your coffee and imbibe Culture (with a capital C) at no expense, unless you be provoked to make a bad speech and to break down at your firstly. It used to be a business in my time to get all the most jovial and oratorically incapable boating men on their legs and to set them discussing a subject about which they knew less than the college porter. I shall never forget an excellent captain of one of our lower boats for whom we wrote a speech on an occasion when the debate was, "That Mr. Gladstone is no longer worthy of the confidence of this house." We persuaded the great hulking athlete to stand up at the appointed time, but thereafter he disappointed us. He stood giggling like a school-girl; his hands were in his pockets, and his face was crimson. We saw that he had forgotten the eloquent phrases set down for him, and we trembled for his success.

"Sir," he said at last, after a terrible pause, and then he repeated the word, laughing, "ho, ho!" in a thundering bass laugh, which showed he was very much amused. There was an interval upon this, but suddenly a freshet of courage poured upon him and he closed with his simile—

"Sir, the British constitution is—aw—ho, ho!—like an old oak tree." (Tremendous applause.) "Its roots are—er—ho, ho!—its roots are—no, I'm hanged if I do!"

After this extraordinary oration he sat down suddenly while the house yelled with delight. *Mirabile dictu!* he is a barrister now, and they told me the other day a singular story of his first case, in which the old bad habit of using forcible expressions seems to have returned to him. It chanced that he had to cross-examine a witness in a Midland town, and having gained a little more confidence of the years, he began gaily enough, reading his questions from his brief.

"Er—now, sir—er—aw, you are a butcher, I believe?"

"No, I ain't," said the witness.

The boating barrister looked at his brief and tried again.

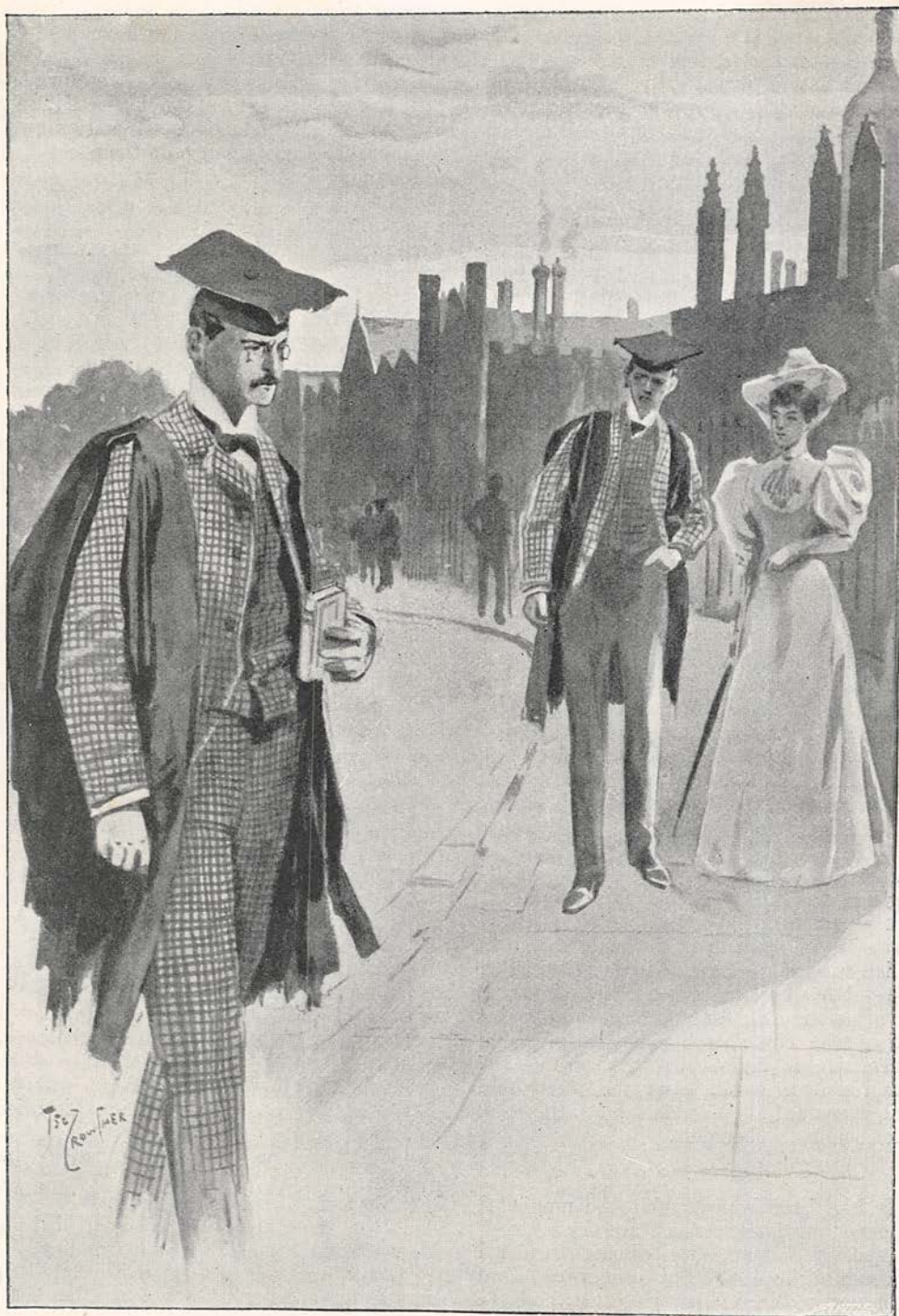
"Well," said he, "you—er—must be—aw—a baker, then?"

"No, I ain't," said the witness.

At this the counsel deliberately folded up his brief and grappled with the situation.

"Look here!" cried he brusquely, "it does not matter a hang what you are, but let's have your beastly name!"

I am told that the judge's expression when this remarkable request was uttered is not to



“He can wear twenty-four blazers—lucky dog!”

be set down by pen or pencil. Our boating friend has made no second appearance in court. He confines himself to chamber work now.

\* \* \* \*

These debating societies lead obviously to much high thinking, if they do not promote plain living. They are useful at the same time, inasmuch as they permit a man to add to the number of his blazers. I know not why it is, but there are few reading clubs in Cambridge which have not their Joseph's coats. Men who love to collect these blazers will form clubs for the purpose. Thus you may have the "United Friars," whose colours will be light green with a crimson stripe; or the "Once-a-Fortnight's," whose blazer is of purple, yellow and black. I remember two or three incurable collectors who formed a new club every month simply for the purpose of buying new and gaudy jackets. Each society consisted of three or four members, who divided the honours of president, vice-president, secretary and committee between them, so that all were happy—none more so than the tailor who supplied the fancy things in flannel. The chief business of these clubs was to wear the blazers and drink the port wine of the members. Here and there you met men who took the thing seriously, reading so much Shakspeare between the coffee and the port, or delivering themselves of papers, deep, incomprehensible, and always learned. For the most part, however, the opportunity to wear a blazer of a new colour was the *raison d'être* of the fellowship. Happy that man whose wardrobe groaned under the press of the flannel. Every finger in his college would be eager to point at him and cry "*Hic est!*" Men would whisper it in the ears of pretty cousins or of other fellows' sisters: "Look! that man in the big checks, he can wear twenty-four blazers—lucky dog!" Verily fame is an easy mistress to those who know how to court her.

\* \* \* \*

But your later hours are in the main part hours of gravity. Three years of 'Varsity life have mortified your earlier aspirations. Even an exuberant scholar may feel no longer the desire to drive a hansom-cab down King's Parade in the small hours, or to pour bottled beer upon the head of any proctor who passes beneath his window. The third-year man is one who takes things as they come. He knows by this time what

his place in the honour list will be; he knows how many of his cigars are stolen by his gyp and what is the just tare per box; he knows his bed-maker's taste in game and her powers for consuming college ale. If he have contended for the honours of the river or the playing fields, he will reap in this, his last year, or may never hope to reap. He is a patriarch of the place now, and freshmen look at him with admiring eyes if he be a first-boat man or one of the eleven. It may be that he is also president of the debate and is privileged to occupy a chair with arms, while the debaters sit on window sills or on each other's



The hood.

laps. His tutor knows him and signs his *exam* when he wishes to go to town, needing no lie about his sick aunt. The excitement of the novelties does not trouble him; no longer has he an ambition to let off squibs under the nose of the dean. It is a hardship that he has made his rooms so comfortable, for the bird of time is on the wing and has but a little while to flutter. By-and-bye another will occupy that arm-chair, another will provide cold chickens for the bed-maker to steal. The friends our type has made will set out upon new roads; not upon his road, unless chance be very kind. Should he return to Cambridge in

three or four years' time, he will hardly see a familiar face or touch a friendly hand. A new generation will people the courts he loves. It may not even know his name; his fame is a mist hovering above a shallow pool which the sun of time will dry up presently. He was Jones of Trinity; he is—heaven knows what! perhaps the poor devil of a barrister about whom no one cares a straw!

These things must be—they are the penalties of the years. For the mere pass-man degree day is a gloomy function—the end of things familiar, the beginning of the unknown. His last term has gone all too quickly. Though it has been May he, nevertheless, has spent his mornings in a bold attempt to cheat the mysteries of Greek irregular verbs and to put himself on nodding terms with Hamblin Smith. Night after night a "coach," hired to rub him down with the rough towels of knowledge, has been giving him "tips"—telling him of those passages which examiners love, working out for him the "three men and a boy" who run to Edinburgh. When the fateful morning comes he is honest enough to scorn those mean devices whereby you write formulæ on your cuff or carry the apostle's speech neatly done on paper which fits your watch-case. His hand trembles perhaps when he takes the paper from the examiner; but oh, the joy if his coach's tips come off, and he recognise the passages and the problems he has slaved at so diligently. There they are—he can do them all—the second orist of ἀρίστημι, the authorship of the book of Acts, the three men and a boy, the formula for thermometers! How he writes during those days of trial! The rabbit-skin hood seems already on his back; he knows that he will pass.

\* \* \* \*

Nowadays your pass-man is not the ignoramus he might have been twenty or thirty years ago; he has, at least, the foundations of an education, the groundwork of a necessary knowledge. His examinations are,

in their way, thorough, and unquestionably honest. I can recall no case where a man has been sent down from Cambridge for cribbing, though I remember the neat way in which a proctor of my own year defeated an attempt to crib during the general examination in the Guildhall. From his place in the gallery he detected a man who had a book on his knees and was using it diligently. Descending to the hall swiftly the proctor suddenly seated himself by the undergraduate, who, to hide the book, was compelled to press his knees vigorously against the under-side of the desk and to remain in that cramped position for two hours. The agonies of dread the fellow must have suffered, to say nothing of the muscular torture implied in the act of keeping the knees glued to the desk, is easy to be imagined. He was ploughed, of course, but the don who detected him was generous enough to make no report and to give him another chance. He could scarcely have punished him more severely than he did.

\* \* \* \*

But our typical man would scorn this ready-reckoning system, and being possessed of a fair intelligence, we may assume that he passes and is called in due course to the senate house to be made a bachelor. He is an undergraduate no more. The gown he has worn so long will be stolen by his bed-maker presently; a freshman will flaunt it by-and-bye in the courts of his college. His luxurious couch, his insurpassable arm-chair, his cupboard, wherein you put black-berry jam and Sophocles, will be sold to a rascally furniture dealer. He dons the hood, knowing that the end had come. Henceforth he must make new friends, tread new paths. He will never spend three years so full of careless pleasure as the three he has numbered at Cambridge; his youth has lost its keen edge, his energy is a little winded in the race; but whatever befall, the days will continue to be the best of his memories, the richest fruits of the morning of his life!

