SKETCHES FROM CAMBRIDGE.

BY

A DON.

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SKETCHES FROM CAMBRIDGE.

I.

INTRODUCTORY.

The world may be divided into the two classes of those who have and those who have not received a University education. With regard to the latter, I can only repeat the remark said to have been originally applied to the small colleges by a member of Trinity College, Cambridge—"They, too, are God's creatures." I think it is a pity that more rays do not emanate from the great focus of intellectual life in England to clear up some of the dark places of the land. Because—perhaps from no fault of theirs—
they have not sat at the feast, is that a reason for grudging them the crumbs that fall from our table? Undignified as it may appear, I would rather invite them to come and be edified. I would lift a corner of the veil which hangs over our venerable courts, and covers from the profane eye the sacred mysteries of the learned. I would admit the outside barbarians, as our Chinese friends call us, at least to the gallery, though they are excluded from the stage where we act our parts in life. Something, I know, has been done. Tom Brown has given us a glimpse of Oxford as seen from the undergraduate’s point of view. Cuthbert Bede has set forth in Verdant Green certain caricatures which represent, I suppose, the current popular myths of student life. But neither these, nor other more ambitious attempts, give the whole truth; they miss many characteristic features of one of the most characteristic products of English society; our Universities have grown with our growth; they reflect our present peculiarities, and with them they mingle strangely traditions and customs brought unimpaired from long past centuries; they are typified by their own habitations;
not spick and span new edifices, fresh from the builder's hand, and neatly adapted to the wants of the passing generation, but ancient and historic buildings, with fragments from the days of the Edwards, additions made under Elizabeth, and restorations and adaptations under Victoria; awkward and inconvenient in some details, but incomparably picturesque, and perhaps still more solid than their mushroom rivals. They cannot be summed up in half-a-dozen plans and elevations, but present continually fresh points of view for the traveller, new nooks and corners for the inquiring antiquary, and an infinite variety of beautiful effects for the painter. Perhaps, then, I am not presumptuous in trying to catch some aspects which have escaped others, and if not to correct, at least to supplement their descriptions.

I am not about to present any credentials of my fitness for the task. I would rather escape notice as a man must do who would reveal masonic secrets; I have no fancy for being torn to pieces by "a hideous rout" of infuriate heads of houses. Were it possible, I would not even say whether I lived on the
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banks of the Cam, where the greasy stream stagnates under the quaint old bridges and past lovely gardens, like a worthless print set in a golden frame, or where the Isis sweeps in graceful curves past Christchurch meadows, and reflects the most beautiful of all distant views of an English town. Such concealment would be useless. The initiated would at once determine the point. I shall not, however, hint at the special benefactor to whose pious foundation in past years I owe my pleasant retreat.

It is enough to say that our college has all that is essential to the ideal of a college. There is the ancient corner of building, half merged in more modern structures, which our founder acquired or did not acquire, together with an adjacent field, from certain monks. There is the less venerable court, which affords a perfect example of Elizabethan architecture. There is the atrocius pile of obtrusive ugliness which some sixty years ago repaired the ravages of a fire. We have of course a hall, which has been restored to show the old oak roof, and a chapel, which causes me to live in daily fear of another restoration and another liberal subscription.
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Of course, too, we are "bosomed deep in tufted trees," though, in spite of University commissioners, no beauty lies as yet beneath our towers and battlements. We have a lawn of velvet turf, hitherto devoted to the orthodox game of bowls, but threatened by an invasion of croquet, for female influence is slowly but surely invading our cloisters. Whether, like the ivy that gathers upon our ancient walls, it may ultimately be fatal to their stability, remains yet to be seen.

It has not, however, penetrated to the rooms in which I now snatch a few moments from my meditated edition of a certain ancient classical author. I do not mention the gentleman's name, because, as every resident Fellow with no other definite occupation appropriates one pet author for his labours, the learned would identify me as easily as a racing man would recognize a person described as the owner of Breadalbane or of Gladiateur. In old times, a man was allowed professedly to confine his labours to the consumption of port. It was a sufficient and a creditable occupation. But if you wish at once to do nothing and to be respectable now-a-days, the best pretext is to be at
work on some profound study; it is not necessary that your performance should ever get beyond a publisher's list. As a cocked hat, without other costume, gives to the Haytian nigger an air of full dress, so an intention to write a book on classics or on theology makes a don fancy himself, and be supposed by others, to be hard at work. But theology is dangerous, even as an object in the dim background. It is difficult to touch it in the most delicate way without receiving some sectarian tinge. I am, therefore, collecting materials with a view to beginning, at some future day, to set about concocting a new edition of a not very favourite author. This occupation allows me leisure to contemplate the busy life around me; I lounge at my window to hear "in college flashes the storm their high-built organs make." I see the surpliced congregation gathering to form the picture which suggested to Tennyson his "six hundred maidens clad in purest white" (I can't say that that is precisely what they suggest to me), and I listen daily to "the thunder of the halls," and the fainter murmur that proceeds from the lecture-rooms. I breathe an atmosphere of youthful frolics and youth-
ful studies, of old bachelors prosing, and of all the varied life that swarms in a University town.

My occupation, or my pretence of an occupation, leaves me sufficient leisure to speculate upon the surrounding throng. I have not dropped all relations to the junior members of the University. I can still condescend to give our boat a shout when it makes a bump, and to play an occasional innings at a cricket-match. At the same time, I am painfully conscious that that awful being, the head of our college, is beginning to recognize me as a man and a brother; he shakes hands with me quite as if I was a fellow-creature. From this middle position, between heaven and earth, I can cast an impartial eye upon all that bear office in this our body, as well as upon those who bear none. I am a University man, and no part of the University is alien from me. Certainly, there is no part for which I do not feel an affection.

By the outside world the University is supposed to consist of a body of students and their teachers. The instruction of undergraduates is considered to be the final cause of our existence. In compliance with this prevailing superstition, I will attempt to sketch
our undergraduate life, but I enter a protest against it in passing. Crambe, in *Martius Scriblerus*, asserted that he could conceive of a lord mayor not only without his horse, gown, and gold chain, but even without stature, colour, hands, head, feet, or any body; upon which his preceptor informed him that he was a lying rascal. Some persons who think of a University as a mere teaching shop may be inclined to make a similar reply to me when I say that its essence would not be affected by the absence both of teachers and pupils. But they would grievously err. Did not Charles Lamb sing the praises of the University in vacation time, when lectures are not, and even St. Mary's is deserted? Did not an excellent friend of mine remark to me the other day,—

"What a blessed place this would be if there were no undergraduates! Mr. Babbage has been driven wild by organ-grinders; I only wish he would change places with me for a day, and see how he likes an undergraduate learning the cornopean below and a boat's supper raging over-head. I would do away with undergraduates altogether."
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"And what should we be without them?"

"We should be a band of brothers, studying science in courts devoted to peace, praying for our founders' souls, and laying down a cellar of sound port wine; none of your noisy boys to make night hideous and to waste good brains in cramming bad ones."

"What would the public say to that?"

"The public are, as Milton very properly remarked, owls and cuckoos, asses, apes, and dogs."

These views are perhaps not strictly in accordance with the prevalent tone of feeling: our studies will continue to suffer from occasional outbursts of youthful mirth, and our labour be spent upon thrusting knowledge into the youthful mind. Assuming undergraduates to be, if an excrescence, at least a necessary excrescence, let us begin by examining their manners and customs.

Before entering into details, however, I must make the rather obvious remark that a young Englishman at a University is remarkably like a young Englishman anywhere else,—that is to say, he is full of animal spirits, a thoroughly good fellow,
and intensely and incredibly ignorant. It was once said of Lord Castlereagh that he had never read a book. The person to whom it was said remarked that, of course, that was a figure of speech; that his lordship must, for example, have read the Bible or *Pilgrim's Progress*. The reply was that the assertion was literally true, that he had never read any book whatever. Whether the saying was or was not true of Lord Castlereagh, it might certainly be applied to many of the youths whose cultivation has been perfected at some of our public schools. Their knowledge of English literature rarely extends beyond those variegated shilling novels which adorn the stalls of railway booksellers. Of the exceptions I shall speak hereafter. Meanwhile, my readers must imagine, for the raw material which our intellectual machinery works up into such a refined product, the first rough healthy English lad whom he meets, and multiply him by some fourteen or fifteen hundred. I will begin by describing one of the most characteristic forms into which they are developed, though one to which undue prominence has perhaps been given—I mean the rowing man.
II.

THE ROWING MAN.

Late writers upon University affairs have elaborately described one particular phase of University life. Whether it is really the most picturesque phase, or only the most easy to describe, may be doubted. Perhaps the sect of muscular Christians—which derived its chief popularity from the genial eloquence of its reputed founder—has given a temporary prominence to the athletic undergraduate. When Alton Locke visited Cambridge, he regarded it with the stern eye of a chartist tailor. Bloated aristocrats, in the livery of their order, paraded the streets. Words of sacred import, but degraded by their common use as mere names of colleges, were bandied about with improper epithets prefixed to them. On the banks of the
Cam one of these profane scions of nobility rode the unlucky "snob" into the river, and benevolently swore at him for getting in the way. But even Alton Locke, "tailor, chartist, and poet," had a good word for the boat-races. The youths were rather ignorant, very brutal, and incredibly given to tuft-hunting. But, after all, there was good stuff in them. The clenched teeth, starting muscles, and heaving breasts of the racing crews showed something more than mere physical vigour. The blood of the Vikings, the pluck that won the battle of Waterloo—(would that the Vikings and the battle of Waterloo could be buried in one grave together!)—and the various idols by which the muscular Christian is accustomed to swear, all rushed into his mind together. He was thoughtlessly shrieking, "Well rowed, Trinity!" just as the bloated aristocrat tripped him up. Mr. Kingsley was, of course, speaking not his own sentiments, but those which were recommended by dramatic propriety as coming from a chartist tailor. It is for this reason that he has admitted into his spirited description various points that do not satisfy the critical eye: the stroke of the head of the river,
for example, actually smokes a pipe—horresco referens—half an hour before the race. The best of all possible or actual descriptions, however, was given in Tom Brown at Oxford; it is the one passage in the book which is really inimitable, and to it I must refer my readers if they would understand the thrill which causes every nerve in an old oarsman's body to vibrate again when he hears 'the pulse of racing-oars among the willows.' For myself, I feel, but sternly repress, the temptation to attempt the description of a boat-race. I will only say that amongst the many varieties of athletic sport at the Universities—and we have now cricket, fives, racket, foot-races, rifle-shooting, gymnastics, and every game that fills the pages of Bell's Life, except the profoundly mysterious "knur and spell"—boating has a clear pre-eminence, and the boating-man is the purest type of the genuine University athlete. He is to the devotees of other amusements what the game-fowl is to the Dorking, or the carrier-pigeon to the tumbler. He exhibits all the typical characteristic tastes and habits in their most characteristic form. Rowing fulfils all the requisite conditions
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by which an undergraduate's amusements must be fitted to his liking. It goes on all the year round, and interferes with his studies; it requires a great deal of very hard and disagreeable work; it rubs holes in his skin, raises blisters on his hands, and gives him a chance of an occasional ducking; when pursued to excess, it may even injure his health for life; and it gives him an excuse for periodical outbursts of hilarity, which, if skilfully managed, may lead into scrapes with the authorities. To these charms it adds another which is especially attractive to Englishmen. An Englishman is greedy of enjoyment; he likes to cram into a few minutes what a foreigner would spread over hours; if he means to get drunk, he indulges in strong drinks; he despises the feeble liquids by which the desired goal may be gradually and circuitously approached. A German student, it is credibly reported, has been known to intoxicate himself with Bavarian beer, a liquid which might be expected to produce more risk of bursting than of drunkenness. An English student would as soon think of drowning himself in the great tun of Heidelberg: if he does get drunk, he does it with
a will, probably by a rapid internal combination of champagne and milk punch. Now rowing has an analogous charm; the whole interest and suspense is crowded into some five minutes of desperate excitement. The two minutes during which the Derby is decided are sufficiently trying to a man who has thousands on the race; but the youthful enthusiasm of the oarsman probably almost balances the pecuniary interest of the betting-man. Even the speculator on the turf scarcely knows a keener agony of suspense when the favourite is challenged in his last few strides, than the lad who shrieks himself hoarse on the bank, as the nose of his college boat buries itself in the foam from their antagonist’s rudder.

One glorious hour of crowded strife
Is worth an age without a name,

according to Sir Walter Scott; and the sentiment, if not quite orthodox, meets with the hearty sympathy of the true boating-man.

Rowing is fortunately not a chronic complaint. After leaving the University few men keep it up. A man may play cricket after he has added a cubit
to his girth. He may practice rifle-shooting and
march in the ranks of the "Devil's Own" till he
has developed into a judge or a cabinet minister.
He may hunt as long as he can be lifted on to his
horse. The infection of mountaineering is not even
cought, as a rule, till late in life, and the disease,
like the measles, is more severe in proportion to
the age of the victim. Fathers of families have
been heard to discuss for hours the comparative
merits of the St. Gervais and Grands Mulets routes
to the summit of Mont Blanc, long after advancing
years should have confined their ambition to Prim-
rose Hill. But the rowing man after three or four
years of mental aberration generally recovers his
perfect sanity. He can't "get forward" as he used.
A certain protuberance of figure, strongly suggestive
of Mr. Banting, impedes the freedom of his action.
The modern style seems short and snatchy; it has
not the long majestic sweep of former days. A
crew of enthusiastic dons, known familiarly as the
"Ancient Mariners," sometimes revisit the scene
of their youthful sports. As we swing gracefully
round a corner, I hear some irreverent youngster
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inquire with a half-suppressed chuckle, "Who's the fat duffer rowing four?" and I fancy that my form must have lost some of its earlier grace. When the crew of Ulysses obeyed his invitation to step in, "and sitting well in order, smite the sounding furrows," they probably did not excite the admiration of the youth of Ithaca. Ulysses' own sentiment, that they were not then what in old times they had been, doubtless met with hearty concurrence from the bank. They must have caught a good many crabs before reaching the Happy Isles. We recover from the fever of our youth, but its vehemence is proved by enduring traces left behind. Who can forget the time when the fate of cabinets and armies, the expulsion of Pio Nono or the accession of Napoleon III., seemed to him of infinitely less importance than the decision of the University boat-race? An exciting election or an important vote in the Senate sometimes fills our streets with a crowd of rarely-seen barristers and country parsons. Amongst them you recognize a pair of broad shoulders and a jovial red face; your friend is as big as ever round the chest and a good deal bigger round the waist; his black
coat and white tie, and an indefinable air of clerical gravity, have not effectually disguised him. He tries to persuade you that he has come to save the Church, or to secure the adoption of a petition against the abolition of church-rates, or of a scheme for theological education. But, after half a sentence of due wisdom, he inquires,—

"How about the University boat?"

He scarcely knows whether he says placet or non placet to the inquisitive proctor, who demands his vote; and half-an-hour later you find him puffing gallantly along the towing-path in a crowd of undergraduates, and panting out that nobody now can row such a stroke as Jones of Trinity. He puts aside your feeble efforts to amuse him by a congenial discussion on Hebrew roots or the National Society, and plunges with amazing avidity into half-forgotten details of boating "shop." He rows his old races over again, and gives you prescriptions for restoring Cambridge to its old pre-eminence on the river, till you suspect him of being the gentleman who writes as "Argonaut" in the Field. The fact is, that the associations connected with his old haunts have caused
The Rowing Man.

a temporary relapse into his old disease. To-morrow he will be again a domestic parson, teaching a Sunday school. To-day he has got back into his old life. He resided at the University for, say, 800 days, excluding Sundays and vacations. Of those, he passed 790 on the river, and during nine of the remainder he was laid up with a strain caused by his exertions. The remaining day, which he wasted in lionizing his mother and sisters, he will regret as long as he lives. Years afterwards he will date events by the University races of the time. The Crimean war, he will say, broke out in the year of "the eighteen-inch race," i.e. the race when Oxford beat Cambridge at Henley by that distance. That race was in fact the most prevailing topic of his meditations during the year. It was the culminating event of a series of which the year was made up. Every morning, at that period, he was up at seven o'clock, and took his tub after half-an-hour's trot. His breakfast, according to a superstition not yet extinct, was raw beefsteak. His supper was oatmeal porridge. He measured his wine (except on occasional jollifications) with the careful eye of a gaoler distributing
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an allowance. He did not smoke for fear of injuring his wind. The only ornaments in his rooms were cups or "pewters" won on the river. His dress always included the colours of his club. His library consisted chiefly of the Boating Almanack and back numbers of Bell's Life. He bitterly grudged the hour which he daily devoted to the process of being "crammed" for his degree, and was only partially pacified when he had to solve the small arithmetical puzzles in which examples are taken from the river; for a boating man always loves a small joke. His conversation only varied by referring at one season of the year to the sculls, and at another to the fours; and he always had a party of friends like-minded with himself to discuss such matters over a glass of wine.

After all, this is not an exaggerated account of a certain not uncommon type of undergraduates. Their sphere of thought is somewhat limited; but they are very good fellows, and are excellent raw material for country parsons, or for any other profession where much thinking power is not required.