

Godley Alfred Denis

# Aspects of Modern Oxford, by a Mere Don



Alfred Godley

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# Godley A. D. Alfred Denis

## Aspects of Modern Oxford, by a Mere Don

### I-OF DONS AND COLLEGES

'We ain't no thin red heroes, nor we ain't no blackguards too,  
But single men in barracks, most remarkable like you.'

*Rudyard Kipling.*

Fellows of Colleges who travel on the continent of Europe have, from time to time, experienced the almost insuperable difficulty of explaining to the more or less intelligent foreigner their own reason of existence, and that of the establishment to which they are privileged to belong. It is all the worse if your neighbour at the *table d'hôte* is acquainted with the Universities of his own country, for these offer no parallel at all, and to attempt to illustrate by means of them is not only futile but misleading. Define any college according to the general scheme indicated by its founder; when you have made the situation as intelligible as a limited knowledge of French or German will allow, the inquirer will conclude that '*also* it is a monastic institution,' and that you are wearing a hair shirt under your tourist tweeds. Try to disabuse him of this impression by pointing out that colleges do not compel to celibacy, and are intended mainly for the instruction of youth, and your Continental will go away with the conviction that an English University is composed of a conglomeration of public schools. If he tries to get further information from the conversation of a casual undergraduate, it will appear that a *Ruderverein* on the Danube offers most points of comparison.

Fellows themselves fare no better, and are left in an-if possible-darker obscurity. That they are in some way connected with education is tolerably obvious, but the particular nature of the connexion is unexplained. Having thoroughly confused the subject by showing inconclusively that you are neither a monk, nor a schoolmaster, nor a *Privat Dozent*, you probably acquiesce from sheer weariness in the title of *Professor*, which, perhaps, is as convenient as any other; and, after all, *Professoren* are very different from Professors. But all this does nothing to elucidate the nature of a College. To do this abroad is nearly as hard as to define the function of a University in England.

For even at home the general uneducated public, taking but a passing interest in educational details, is apt to be hopelessly at sea as to the mutual relation of Colleges and Universities. In the public mind the College probably represents the University: an Oxonian will be sometimes spoken of as 'at College;' University officials are confused with heads of houses, and Collections with University examinations. That foundation which is consecrated to the education of Welsh Oxonians is generally referred to in the remote fastnesses of the Cymru as Oxford College. As usual, a concrete material object, palpable and visible, is preferred before a cold abstraction like the University. Explain to the lay mind that a University is an aggregate of Colleges: it is not, of course, but the definition will serve sometimes. Then how about the London University, which is an examining body? And how does it happen that there is a University College in Oxford, not to mention another in Gower Street? and that Trinity College across the water is often called Dublin University? All these problems are calculated to leave the inquirer very much where he was at first, and in him who tries to explain them to shake the firm foundations of Reason.

It may be a truism, but it is nevertheless true-according to a phrase which has done duty in the Schools ere now-that the history of the University is, and has been for the last five hundred years, the history of its Colleges; and it is also true that the interweaving of Collegiate with University life has very much complicated the question of the student's reason of existence. We do not, of course,

know what may have been the various motives which prompted the bold baron, or squire, or yeoman of the twelfth or thirteenth century to send the most clerkly or least muscular of his sons to herd with his fellows in the crowded streets or the mean hostelries of pre-collegiate Oxford; nor have we very definite data as to the kind of life which the scholar of the family lived when he got there. Perhaps he resided in a 'hall;' according to some authorities there were as many as three hundred halls in the days of Edward I.; perhaps he was master of his own destinies, like the free and independent unattached student of modern days-minus a Censor to watch over the use of his liberties. But what is tolerably certain is that he did not then come to Oxford so much with the intention of 'having a good time' as with the desire of improving his mind, or, at least, in some way or other taking part in the intellectual life of the period, which then centred in the University. It might be that among the throngs of boys and young men who crowded the straitened limits of mediaeval Oxford, there were many who supported the obscure tenets of their particular Doctor Perspicuus against their opponents' Doctor Inexplicabilis rather with bills and bows than with disputations in the Schools; but every Oxonian was in some way vowed to the advancement of learning-at least, it is hard to see what other inducement there was to face what must have been, even with all due allowance made, the exceptional hardships of a student's life. Then came the Colleges-University dating from unknown antiquity, although the legend which connects its foundation with Alfred has now shared the fate of most legends; Balliol and Merton, at the end of the thirteenth century; and the succeeding centuries were fruitful in the establishment of many other now venerable foundations, taking example and encouragement from the success and reputation of their earlier compeers. In their original form colleges were probably intended to be places of quiet retirement and study, where the earnest scholar might peacefully pursue his researches without fear of disturbance by the wilder spirits who roamed the streets and carried on the traditional feuds of Town and Gown or of North and South.

By a curious reverse of circumstances the collegian and the '*scholaris nulli collegio vel aulae ascriptus*' of modern days seem to have changed characters. For I have heard it said by those who have to do with college discipline that their *alumni* are no longer invariably distinguished by 'a gentle nature and studious habits'-qualities for which, as the Warden of Merton says, colleges were originally intended to provide a welcome haven of rest, and which are now the especial and gratifying characteristics of that whilom roisterer and boon companion, the Unattached Student.

We have it on the authority of historians that the original collegiate design was, properly speaking, a kind of model lodging-house; an improved, enlarged, and strictly supervised edition of the many hostels where the primitive undergraduate did mostly congregate. Fellows and scholars alike were to be studious and discreet persons; the seniors were to devote themselves to research, and to stand in a quasi-parental or elder-brotherly relation to the juniors who had not yet attained to the grade of a Baccalaureus. Very strict rules-probably based on those of monastic institutions-governed the whole body: rules, however, which are not unnecessarily severe when we consider the fashion of the age and the comparative youth of both fellows and scholars. Many scholars must have been little more than children, and the junior don of the fifteenth century may often have been young enough to receive that corporal punishment which our rude forefathers inflicted even on the gentler sex.

'Solomon said, in accents mild,  
Spare the rod and spoil the child;  
Be they man or be they maid,  
Whip 'em and wallop 'em, Solomon said'

-and the sage's advice was certainly followed in the case of scholars, who were birched for offences which in these latter days would call down a 'gate,' a fine, or an imposition. Authorities tell us that the early fellow might even in certain cases be mulcted of his dress, a penalty which is now reserved for Irish patriots in gaol; and it would seem that his consumption of beer was limited by

regulations which would now be intolerable to his scout. Some of the details respecting crime and punishment, which have been preserved in ancient records, are of the most remarkable description. A former Fellow of Corpus (so we are informed by Dr. Fowler's History of that College) who had been proved guilty of an over-susceptibility to the charms of beauty, was condemned as a penance to preach eight sermons in the Church of St. Peter-in-the-East. Such was the inscrutable wisdom of a bygone age.

Details have altered since then, but the general scheme of college discipline remains much the same. Even in the days when practice was slackest, theory retained its ancient stringency. When Mr. Gibbon of Magdalen absented himself from his lectures, his excuses were received 'with an indulgent smile;' when he desired to leave Oxford for a few days, he appears to have done so without let or hindrance; but both residence and attendance at lectures were theoretically necessary. The compromise was hardly satisfactory, but as the scholars' age increased and the disciplinary rule meant for fourteen had to be applied to eighteen, what was to be done? So, too, we are informed that in the days of our fathers undergraduates endured a Procrustean tyranny. So many chapel services you must attend; so many lectures you must hear, connected or not with your particular studies; and there was no relaxation of the rule; no excuse even of 'urgent business' would serve the pale student who wanted to follow the hounds or play in a cricket match. Things, in fact, would have been at a deadlock had not the authorities recognised the superiority of expediency to mere morality, and invariably accepted without question the plea of ill-health. To 'put on an *aeger*' when in the enjoyment of robust health was after all as justifiable a fiction as the 'not at home' of ordinary society. You announced yourself as too ill to go to a lecture, and then rode with the Bicester or played cricket to your heart's content. This remarkable system is now practically obsolete; perhaps we are more moral.

Modern collegiate discipline is a parlous matter. There are still the old problems to be faced-the difficulty of adapting old rules to new conditions-the danger on the one hand of treating boys too much like men, and on the other of treating men too much like boys. Hence college authorities generally fall back on some system of more or less ingenious compromise-a course which is no doubt prudent in the long run, and shows a laudable desire for the attainment of the Aristotelian 'mean,' but which, like most compromises, manages to secure the disapproval alike of all shades of outside opinion. We live with the fear of the evening papers before our eyes, and an erring undergraduate who has been sent down may quite possibly be avenged by a newspaper column reflecting on college discipline in general, and the dons who sent him down in particular. Every day martinets tell us that the University is going to the dogs from excess of leniency; while critics of the 'Boys-will-be-boys' school point out the extreme danger of sitting permanently on the safety valve, and dancing on the edge of an active volcano.

In recent years most of the 'Halls' have been practically extinguished, and thereby certain eccentricities of administration removed from our midst. It was perhaps as well; some of these ancient and honourable establishments having during the present century rather fallen from their former reputation, from their readiness to receive into the fold incapables or minor criminals to whom the moral or intellectual atmosphere of a college was uncongenial. This was a very convenient system for colleges, who could thus get rid of an idle or stupid man without the responsibility of blighting his University career and his prospects in general; but the Halls, which were thus turned into a kind of sink, became rather curious and undesirable abiding-places in consequence. They were inhabited by grave and reverend seniors who couldn't, and by distinguished athletes who wouldn't, pass Smalls, much less Mods. At one time 'Charsley's' was said to be able to play the 'Varsity Eleven. These mixed multitudes appear to have been governed on very various and remarkable principles. At one establishment it was considered a breach of courtesy if you did not, when going to London, give the authorities some idea of the *probable* length of your absence. 'The way to govern a college,' the venerated head of this institution is reported to have said, 'is this-*to keep one eye shut*,' presumably the optic on the side of the offender. Yet it is curious that while most of the Halls appear to have

been ruled rather by the *gant de velours* than the *main de fer*, one of them is currently reported to have been the scene of an attempt to inflict corporal punishment. This heroic endeavour to restore the customs of the ancients was not crowned with immediate success, and he who should have been beaten with stripes fled for justice to the Vice-Chancellor's Court.

Casual visitors to Oxford who are acquainted with the statutes of the University will no doubt have observed that it has been found unnecessary to insist on exact obedience to all the rules which were framed for the student of four hundred years ago. For instance, boots are generally worn; undergraduates are not prohibited from riding horses, nor even from carrying lethal weapons; the *herba nicotiana sive Tobacco* is in common use; and, especially in summer, garments are not so 'subfusc' as the strict letter of the law requires. Perhaps, too, the wearing of the academic cap and gown is not so universally necessary as it was heretofore. All these are matters for the jurisdiction of the Proctors, who rightly lay more stress on the real order and good behaviour of their realm. And whatever evils civilisation may bring in the train, there can be no doubt that the task of these officials is far less dangerous than of old, as their subjects are less turbulent. They have no longer to interfere in the faction fights of Northern and Southern students. It is unusual for a Proctor to carry a pole-axe, even when he is 'drawing' the most dangerous of billiard-rooms. The Town and Gown rows which used to provide so attractive a picture for the novelist-where the hero used to stand pale and determined, defying a crowd of infuriated bargemen-are extinct and forgotten these last ten years. Altogether the streets are quieter; models, in fact, of peace and good order: when the anarchical element is loose it seems to prefer the interior of Colleges. Various reasons might be assigned for this: sometimes the presence of too easily defied authority gives a piquancy to crime; or it is the place itself which is the incentive. The open space of a quadrangle is found to be a convenient stage for the performance of the midnight reveller. He is watched from the windows by a ring of admiring friends, and the surrounding walls are a kind of sounding-board which enhances the natural beauty of 'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay' (with an accompaniment of tea-tray and poker*obbligato*). Every one has his own ideal of an enjoyable evening.



## II-OF UNDERGRADUATES

'In the sad and sodden street  
To and fro  
Flit the feverstricken feet  
Of the Freshers, as they meet,  
Come and go.'

### Q

Whatever the theory of their founders, it is at no late period in the history of colleges that we begin to trace the development of the modern undergraduate. It was only natural that the 'gentle natures and studious habits' of a select band of learners should undergo some modification as college after college was founded, and comparative frivolity would from time to time obtain admission to the sacred precincts. The University became the resort of wealth and rank, as well as of mere intellect, and the gradual influx of commoners-still more, of 'gentlemen commoners'-once for all determined the character of colleges as places of serious and uninterrupted study. Probably the Civil War, bringing the Court to Oxford, was a potent factor in relaxation of the older academic discipline; deans or sub-wardens of the period doubtless finding some difficulty in adapting their rules to the requirements of undergraduates who might from time to time absent themselves from chapel or lecture in order to raid a Parliamentary outpost.

But perhaps the most instructive picture of the seventeenth-century undergraduate is to be found in the account-book of one Wilding, of Wadham (published by the Oxford Historical Society), apparently a reading man and a scholar of his college, destined for Holy Orders. The number of his books (he gives a list of them) shows him to have been something of a student, while repeated entries of large sums paid for 'Wiggs' (on one occasion as much as 14\*s\*-more than his 'Battles' for the quarter!) would seem to suggest something of the habits of the 'gay young sparks' alluded to by Hearne in the next century. On the whole, Master Wilding appears to have been a virtuous and studious young gentleman. Now and then the natural man asserts himself, and he treats his friends to wine or 'coffea,' or even makes an excursion to 'Abbingdon' (4\*s.\*!). Towards the end of his career a 'gaudy' costs 2\*s.\* 6\*d.\*, after which comes the too-suggestive entry, 'For a purge, 1\*s.\*' Then comes the close: outstanding bills are paid to the alarming extent of 7\*s.\* 8\*d.\*; a 'wigg,' which originally cost 14\*s.\*, is disposed of at a ruinous reduction for 6\*s.\*-the prudent man does not give it away to his scout-and J. Wilding, B.A., e. Coll., Wadh., retires to his country parsonage-having first invested sixpence in a sermon. Evidently a person of methodical habits and punctual payments; that had two wigs, and everything handsome about him; and that probably grumbled quite as much at the 10\*s.\* fee for his tutor as his modern successor does at his 8\*l.\* 6\*s.\* 8\*d.\* But, on the whole, collegiate and university fees seem to have been small.

After this description of the *vie intime* of an undergraduate at Wadham, history is reserved on the subject of the junior members of the University; which is the more disappointing, as the historic Muse is not only garrulous, but exceedingly scandalous in recounting the virtues and the aberrations of eighteenth-century dons. Here and there we find an occasional notice of the ways of undergraduates-here a private memoir, there an academic *brochure*. We learn, incidentally, how Mr. John Potenger, of New College, made 'theams in prose and verse,' and eventually 'came to a tollerable proficiency in colloquial Latin;' how Mr. Meadowcourt, of Merton, got into serious trouble-was prevented, in fact, from taking his degree-for drinking the health of His Majesty King George the First; and how Mr. Carty, of University College, suffered a similar fate 'for prophaning, with mad intemperance, that day, on which he ought, with sober chearfulness, to have commemorated the restoration of King

Charles the Second' (this was in 1716); how Mr. Shenstone found, at Pembroke College, both sober men 'who amused themselves in the evening with reading Greek and drinking water,' and also 'a set of jolly sprightly young fellows ... who drank ale, smoked tobacco,' and even 'punned;' and how Lord Shelburne had a 'narrow-minded tutor.' From which we may gather, that University life was not so very different from what it is now: our forefathers were more exercised about politics, for which we have now substituted a perhaps extreme devotion to athletics. But for the most part, the undergraduate is not prominent in history-seeming, in fact, to be regarded as the least important element in the University. On the other hand, his successor of the present century-the era of the Examination Schools-occupies so prominent a place in the eyes of the public that it is difficult to speak of him, lest haply one should be accused of frivolity or want of reverence for the *raison d'être* of all academic institutions.

His own reason of existence is not so obvious. It was, as we have said, tolerably clear that the mediaeval student came to Oxford primarily for the love of learning something, at any rate; but the student *fin de siècle* is one of the most labyrinthine parts of a complex civilisation. Of the hundreds of boys who are shot on the G.W.R. platform every October to be caressed or kicked by Alma Mater, and returned in due time full or empty, it is only an insignificant minority who come up with the ostensible purpose of learning. Their reasons are as many as the colours of their portmanteaus. Brown has come up because he is in the sixth form at school, and was sent in for a scholarship by a head-master desiring an advertisement; Jones, because it is thought by his friends that he might get into the 'Varsity eleven; Robinson, because his father considers a University career to be a stepping-stone to the professions-which it fortunately is not as yet. Mr. Sangazur is, going to St. Boniface because his father was there; and Mr. J. Sangazur Smith-well, probably because *his* father wasn't. Altogether they are a motley crew, and it is not the least achievement of the University that she does somehow or other manage to impress a certain stamp on so many different kinds of metal. But in this she is only an instrument in the hands of modern civilisation, which is always extinguishing eccentricities and abnormal types; and even Oxford, while her sons are getting rid of those interesting individualities which used to distinguish them from each other, is fast losing many of the peculiarities which used to distinguish it from the rest of the world. It is an age of monotony. Even the Freshman, that delightful creation of a bygone age, is not by any means what he was. He is still young, but no longer innocent; the bloom is off his credulity; you cannot play practical jokes upon him any more. Now and then a young man will present himself to his college authorities in a gown of which the superfluous dimensions and unusual embroidery betray the handiwork of the provincial tailor; two or three neophytes may annually be seen perambulating the High in academic dress with a walking-stick; but these are only survivals. Senior men have no longer their old privileges of 'ragging' the freshman. In ancient times, as we are informed by the historian of Merton College, 'Freshmen were expected to sit on a form, and make jokes for the amusement of their companions, on pain of being "tucked," or scarified by the thumb-nail applied under the lip. The first Earl of Shaftesbury describes in detail this rather barbarous jest as practised at Exeter College, and relates how, aided by some freshmen of unusual size and strength, he himself headed a mutiny which led to the eventual abolition of 'tucking.' Again, on Candlemas Day every freshman received notice to prepare a speech to be delivered on the following Shrove Tuesday, when they were compelled to declaim in undress from a form placed on the high table, being rewarded with "cawdel" if the performances were good, with cawdel and salted drink if it were indifferent, and with salted drink and "tucks" if it were dull. This is what American students call 'hazing,' and the German *Fuchs* is subjected to similar ordeals. But we have changed all that, and treat the 'fresher' now with the respect he deserves.

Possibly the undergraduate of fiction and the drama may have been once a living reality. But he is so no more, and modern realistic novelists will have to imagine some hero less crude in colouring and more in harmony with the compromises and neutral tints of the latter half of the nineteenth

century. The young Oxonian or Cantab of fifty years back, as represented by contemporary or nearly contemporary writers, was always in extremes: -

'When he was good he was very, very good;  
But when he was bad he was horrid,'

like the little girl of the poet. He was either an inimitable example of improbable virtue, or abnormally vicious. The bad undergraduate defied the Ten Commandments, all and severally, with the ease and success of the villain of transpontine melodrama. Nothing came amiss to him, from forgery to screwing up the Dean and letting it be understood that some one else had done it; but retribution generally came at last, and this compound of manifold vices was detected and rusticated; and it was understood that from rustication to the gallows was the shortest and easiest of transitions. The virtuous undergraduate wore trousers too short for him and supported his relations. He did not generally join in any athletic pastimes, but when the stroke of his college eight fainted from excitement just before the start, the neglected sizar threw off his threadbare coat, leapt into the vacant seat, and won his crew at once the proud position of head of the river by the simple process of making four bumps on the same night, explaining afterwards that he had practised in a dingey and saw how it could be done. Then there was the Admirable Crichton of University life, perhaps the commonest type among these heroes of romance. He was invariably at Christ Church, and very often had a background of more or less tragic memories from the far-away days of his *jeunesse orageuse*. Nevertheless he unbent so far as to do nothing much during the first three and a half years of his academic career, except to go to a good many wine parties, where he always wore his cap and gown (especially in female fiction), and drank more than any one else. Then, when every one supposed he must be ploughed in Greats, he sat up so late for a week, and wore so many wet towels, that eventually he was announced at the Encaenia, amid the plaudits of his friends and the approving smiles of the Vice-Chancellor, as the winner of a Double-First, several University prizes, and a Fellowship; after which it was only right and natural that the recipient of so many coveted distinctions should lead the heroine of the piece to the altar.

Possibly the Oxford of a bygone generation may have furnished models for these brilliantly coloured pictures; or, as is more probable, they were created by the licence of fiction. At any rate the 'man' of modern times is a far less picturesque person-unpicturesque even to the verge of becoming ordinary. He is seldom eccentric or *outré* in externals. His manners are such as he has learnt at school, and his customs those of the world he lives in. His dress would excite no remark in Piccadilly. The gorgeous waistcoats of Leech's pencil and Calverley's '*crurum non enarrabile tegmen*' belong to ancient history. He is, on the whole, inexpensive in his habits, as it is now the fashion to be poor; he no longer orders in a tailor's whole shop, and his clubs are generally managed with economy and prudence. If, however, the undergraduate occasionally displays the virtues of maturer age, there are certain indications that he is less of a grown-up person than he was in the brave days of old. It takes him a long time to forget his school-days. Only exceptionally untrammelled spirits regard independent reading as more important than the ministrations of their tutor. Pass-men have been known to speak of their work for the schools as 'lessons,' and, in their first term, to call the head of the College the head-master. Naturally, too, school-life has imbued both Pass and Class men with an enduring passion for games-probably rather a good thing in itself, although inadequate as the be-all and end-all of youthful energy. Even those who do not play them can talk about them. Cricket and football are always as prolific a topic as the weather, and nearly as interesting, as many a perfunctory 'Fresher's breakfast' can testify.

The undergraduate, in these as in other things, is like the young of his species, with whom, after all, he has a good deal in common. Take, in short, the ordinary provincial young man; add a dash of the schoolboy and just a touch of the *Bursch*, and you have what Mr. Hardy calls the 'Normal Undergraduate.'

It used to be the custom to draw a very hard-and-fast line of demarcation between the rowing and the reading man-rowing being taken as a type of athletics in general, and indeed being the only form of physical exercise which possessed a regular organization. Rumour has it that a certain tutor (now defunct) laid so much emphasis on this distinction that men whose circumstances permitted them to be idle were regarded with disfavour if they took to reading. He docketed freshmen as reading or non-reading men, and would not allow either kind to stray into the domain of the other. However, the general fusion of classes and professions has levelled these boundaries now. The rowing man reads to a certain extent, and the reading man has very often pretensions to athletic eminence; it is in fact highly desirable that he should, now that a 'Varsity 'blue' provides an assistant master in a school with at least as good a salary as does a brilliant degree. Yet, although the great majority of men belong to the intermediate class of those who take life as they find it, and make no one occupation the object of their exclusive devotion, it is hardly necessary to say that there are still extremes-the Brutal Athlete at one end of the line and the bookish recluse (often, though wrongly, identified with the 'Smug') at the other. The existence of the first is encouraged by the modern tendency to professionalism in athletics. Mere amateurs who regard games as an amusement can never hope to do anything; a thing must be taken seriously. Every schoolboy who wishes to obtain renown in the columns of sporting papers has his 'record,' and comes up to Oxford with the express intention of 'cutting' somebody else's, and the athletic authorities of the University know all about Jones's bowling average at Eton, or Brown's form as three-quarter-back at Rugby, long before these distinguished persons have matriculated. Nor is it only cricket, football, and rowing that are the objects of our worship. Even so staid and contemplative a pastime as golf ranks among 'athletics;' and perhaps in time the authorities will be asked to give a 'Blue' for croquet. These things being so, on the whole, perhaps, we should be grateful to the eminent athlete for the comparative affability of his demeanour, so long as he is not seriously contradicted. He is great, but he is generally merciful.

Thews and sinews have probably as much admiration as is good for them, and nearly as much as they want. On the other hand, the practice of reading has undoubtedly been popularised. It is no longer a clique of students who seek honours; public opinion in and outside the University demands of an increasing majority of men that they should appear to be improving their minds. The Pass-man pure and simple diminishes in numbers annually; no doubt in time he will be a kind of pariah. Colleges compete with each other in the Schools. Evening papers prove by statistics the immorality of an establishment where a scholar who obtains a second is allowed to remain in residence. The stress and strain of the system would be hardly bearable were it not decidedly less difficult to obtain a class in honours than it used to be-not, perhaps, a First, or even a Second; but certainly the lower grades are easier of attainment. Then the variety of subjects is such as to appeal to every one: history, law, theology, natural science (in all its branches), mathematics, all invite the ambitious student whose relations wish him to take honours, and will be quite satisfied with a Fourth; and eminent specialists compete for the privilege of instructing him. The tutor who complained to the undergraduate that he had sixteen pupils was met by the just retort that the undergraduate had sixteen tutors.

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