

# THE MILLER'S TALE *World famous W.C.*

By JAMES MILLER

*James Miller is a Glendon graduate who boasts a Commonwealth scholarship at Oxford University. This is the first of a monthly series written by Excalibur's foremost international correspondent.*

In 1546 when Henry VIII established Christ Church as a college of Oxford, he probably had no idea that in 1971 Excalibur Publications would establish a branch office on the same site. Well, 400 years have elapsed and here am I — an overseas correspondent at the Oxford branch of Excalibur.

Naturally my identity as a foreign correspondent must be kept a great secret here. If the college officials ever find out that I am writing to such a commie-pinko paper as Excalibur, I should have my tongue chopped off and the words Colonial Insurrectionist branded on my forehead. Despite King Henry's unconservative private life, the college he founded I fear is the very bastion of British conservatism.

Bastion is indeed the word for Christ Church — even in a non-metaphoric sense. The old buildings resemble a fortress, complete with turrets, castellated roofs, unscalable stone walls, and protected quadrangles. The main gate is shut fast at 11:00 pm each night and unwary undergraduates (I am told) must risk life and limb to climb in, should they be locked out. Members of Christ Church affectionately refer to the college as the House although I think the Keep would be more appropriate.

The porter who locks the main gate is the senior college servant — a personage of great dignity. He is generally the first person one meets on arrival and it is his job to offend all new members of the House. This is not done to feed his vanity, of course, but to instill the proper respect and reverence for the good name of the college. My first encounter with the porter was a turbulent experience: loaded with luggage and trembling before His Portership, I couldn't help falling on my knees.

Unfortunately my genuflection was not a reverent one. Instead, I had stumbled on the cobblestones outside the gates and the impetus of my descent forced open my suitcase, scattering their contents everywhere. Now, if there's anything offensive in the eyes of a college porter, it's 20 pairs of Colonial underwear decorating his gateway. With a shake of his Victorian jowls, he snapped —

"What or whom might you be, sir!"  
Desperately gathering my things together, I gave him my name and ex-

plained that I was a new member of the House. This untimely admission brought a cruel gleam to his eye.

"Sir," he said snidely, "have you come here like this to study or to do your laundry?"

"What does it look like?" I rebounded — "I'm majoring in underwear studies and just thought I'd return these overdue briefs to the library."

I fully expected the porter to explode at this bit of insolence but to my great surprise, he smiled obsequiously, gave me the key to my rooms, and ushered me through his gate. And so, after passing the initiation ceremony, I entered life at the House. Lesson One in being a Christ Church gentleman: Always snub the servants if they get uppity. How ludicrous! Every so often I have to remind myself that it's 1971, not 1850.

Not only is the hierarchy of master and servant maintained, but also that between graduate and undergraduate. Nowhere is that more stressed than in the college's Book of Regulations — a mine of hilariously silly rules and guide to college life. For example, this cheery bit of information: "There are bathrooms available for undergraduates..." (p. 19). How very thoughtful. Just out of courtesy, I thought I'd write the authors of this concession and tell them that I'd just as soon hold it until I graduate.

But the Reg book doesn't stop at bathrooms in its efforts to discriminate. As an undergraduate, I am not allowed to have visitors in my rooms before 11 am during the term and no "tradesmen" (rough creatures) may enter without permission. But the best of the lot is this supremely important regulation: "Undergraduates are not permitted to walk on the grass... This rule is relaxed in Trinity Term, when, if the condition of the turf is suitable, walking after dinner may be permitted."

The implications of the lawn rules are curious. Apparently, Oxford graduates must ascend to such celestial heights that their ethereal footsteps could not possibly damage the grass. As Trinity Term doesn't begin for months, the lawn restrictions sometimes get too much for me. One night, in a fit of total abandon, I rushed wildly from my rooms, and tramped for several seconds on the turf.

Such mad passion as that, however, is not condoned by the college officials. In an appropriately mid-Victorian style, two of these officials are called censors — a junior and a senior — although what or whom they censor has not been revealed to me. Perhaps they burn heretics, or worse.

foreign correspondents.

As term hasn't started yet, the college is fairly empty except for the clusters of American tourists who wander in, gape-eyed and gum-chewing, poking their noses everywhere including the residents' private water closets. I was just about to enter the loo one morning when an American tourist and his wife suddenly emerged from it, merrily commenting on "how lovely and antique" it was. Unluckily he spotted my gown and grabbing excitedly at his wife's elbow, shouted: "Gladys, look! There's one!"

I tried to escape but was soon trapped against the lavatory door. Gladys promptly had her picture taken with me, and then I snapped one of them both embracing outside the washroom. They were pleased as punch about it. Gladys remarked that she once had a black negligee that looked just like my Commoners' gown — same material and everything. (This is not really surprising since undergraduate gowns are flimsy, diaphanous, and resemble shrunken maternity shifts. They are locally referred to as bum-freezers.)

At this point, the husband pointed to the water-closet door and asked what the letters W.C. stood for. Gladys remarked that they weren't mentioned at all in the Tourists' Guide to Oxford.

"Oh... it's quite a secret," I said casually, "back in 1909, Winston Churchill carved his initials on that very door. Seems he wanted a bit of privacy in his privy."

This sent them into raves of excitement. They just had to peep inside once more. Consequently, I was persuaded to give them a guided tour of Winston Churchill's private loo. As a matter of fact, Churchill never went to Christ Church but as we examined his private tissue dispenser and ceiling flusher, I didn't have the heart to tell them. The situation became even worse after Gladys asked me about other famous Christ Church graduates.

"Well," I answered, sitting down on Winston's flush, "Many famous men have gone here." Suddenly realizing the equivocation, I managed to mutter something about John Locke and Lewis Carroll before Gladys snapped a photo of the toilet and left reverently with her husband. "There should be a post-card of this" she said just before the door closed.

Musing to myself in the privacy of Churchill's can, I couldn't help thinking how gullible some people can be. Contrary to what most tourists believe, not every famous man went to Christ Church — not even Christ, who, I'm told went to Cambridge.

## And after class - what?

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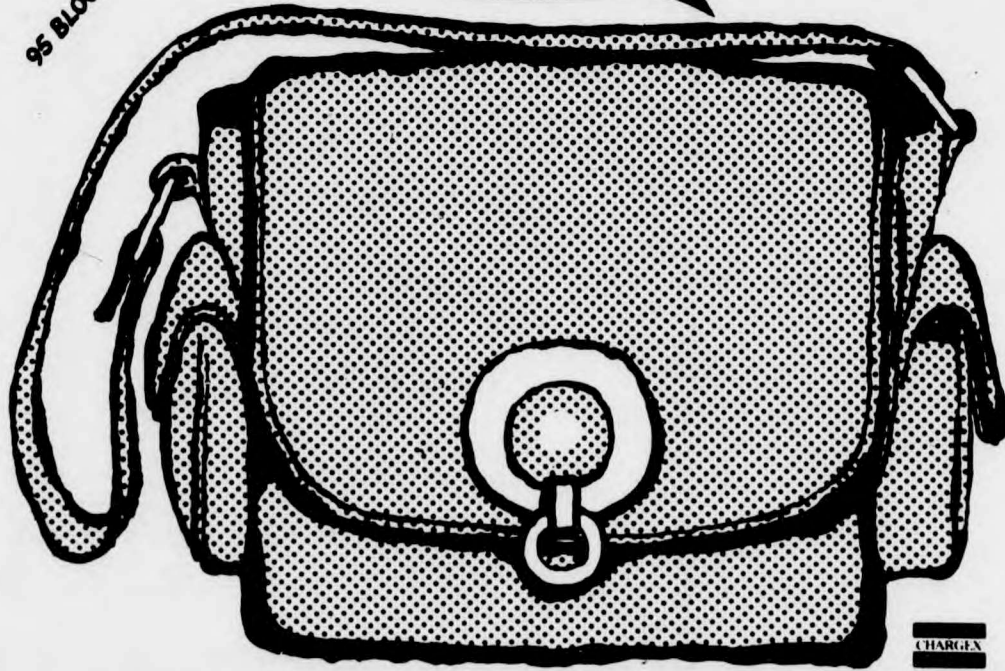
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