

THE NEW MEMBER

I

CHARRINGTON was a popular member of the famous Gridiron Club, and one of the pillars and pillars of the committee. The Grid is a pilling club, but eminent men in many walks of life have testified that it's no disgrace to be pilled. Rank, position, money are shadowy qualifications for membership. One question is put : " Is HE a clubbable fellow ? " At the Grid there are no small tables in the dining-room, no sanctuaries for silence and snooze. All Gridites know and greet each other with the pleasant familiarity of officers in a smart mess. Indeed, the Gridites insist that theirs is the only really clubbable club in London, because pilling happens to be practised very drastically.

Charrington proposed and secured the election of Sir James Pont. Pont's seconder, Dolly Treherne, another popular member, wrote the usual letter to the committee affirming that Pont, in his opinion, would be an asset to the Club. The committee elected Pont unanimously because, with the exception of Charrington, not one of that august body had ever met or heard of Pont. Charrington said to the Chairman : " Jim Pont is one of the best ; he rides straight to hounds ; he's a good shot, a thorough sportsman, and a quick-witted gentleman of the old school."

" And a particular pal of yours, Char ? " asked the Chairman.

" Known dear old Jim all my life."

" Why don't some of us know him ? "

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“Simply because he lives in Cornwall, and does his duty as a many-acre squire.”

That sufficed.

II

The new member presented himself at the Grid shortly after election, and was denied admittance by the vigilant hall-porter, inasmuch as the Club does not open its slightly inhospitable doors till one. The hall-porter added :

“There are no members in the Club, sir ; perhaps you are not aware that strangers are never entertained here.”

“Come off it—I’m a m-m-member.”

The hall-porter winced. He saw before him a big man, wearing a rough frieze overcoat and a soft felt hat. Under the brim of the hat twinkled a pair of eyes. The rest of the face seemed to be covered with hair.

“A n-n-new m-m-member. Here is my c-c-card.”

Cerberus took the card, read what was inscribed upon it, and said in a more friendly tone :

“I beg your pardon, Sir James. It is ten minutes to one. If you will be good enough to step upstairs I will ask the steward to show you the Club.”

The steward, disguising successfully his astonishment, did the honours with practised grace.

The new member surveyed the premises and nodded approvingly.

“C-c-cosy little p-p-pothouse, what ?”

The steward gazed piercingly at the new member. Never in the history of THE CLUB—there was no other like it in his considered judgment—had it been stigmatized as a pothouse ! To mask lacerated feelings, he said stiffly :

“You are lunching here, Sir James ?”

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"Of c-c-course. Did ye think I dropped in to b-b-black my b-h-boots?"

"Shall I order a cocktail?"

"P-P-Please. A gin and vermou—d-d-dry g-gin, and d-dry vermou s-s-slipped through the ice."

A waiter hung the new member's hat and coat upon a peg. He told the man who mixes the best cocktails in clubland that Robinson Crusoe had joined the Grid, adding humorously:

"But where, oh where, is his man—Friday?"

Before the cocktail was mixed, upon the tick of one, a second member, the Chairman, ascended the stairs, and was greeted deferentially by the steward.

"Sir James Pont, my lord, is in the Club."

"Who——"

"Sir James Pont, the new member."

My lord nodded and smiled, as he bespoke a thick steak and fried onions. As an intimate friend of Charrington, he was prepared to welcome handsomely the new member. The Grid possesses one immense room which serves as the dining-room and sitting-room. The grill adjoins it. According to ancient custom all Club servants are addressed as "Fred." When you say "Fred" in a low clear voice, an acolyte is at your elbow in a jiffy.

My lord ejaculated:

"Fred!"

"Yes, my lord?"

Quite forgetting that he was addressing a Club servant, Lord Exminster went on: "The new member is a king beaver!"

"Pardon me, my lord, his beard is not red."

"You are right, as usual. It ought to be red."

"Sir James has a slight impediment of the speech, my lord."

"How can he speak at all—with such whiskers?"

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Sir James, meanwhile, was examining with interest the wine list. He looked up from it to see a middle-aged man, with a kind face, slowly approaching him.

"My name is Exminster. Charrington proposed you, didn't he? We don't introduce here—rule of the Club—but in Charrington's absence you will allow me to congratulate you."

"W-w-what f-f-for?"

"On being a member of this Club."

Sir James nodded. The men shook hands. In a loud, raucous voice the new member exclaimed:

"W-w-waiter!"

A Fred appeared instantly.

"T-t-two c-c-cocktails."

"Very good, Sir James."

"You j-jolly well s-s-see that they are good, my lad."

Lord Exminster coughed. Fred hastened away with a pained expression upon his face.

"You'll j-j-join me in a s-s-splash, Mr. Exminster?"

It is an inviolable rule at the Grid that no member offers another a drink. Exminster, as chairman of the committee, was fussily particular about this, because some of the younger members chafed under it. Accordingly he hesitated. He was about to order a cocktail; he wanted one; it would be churlish to rub into a new member that he had been guilty of a breach of etiquette, and—a determining reason—no other members were present.

"I—I can hardly say—no."

The cocktails were brought and drunk.

"Two more of the s-s-same b-b-brand," roared James.

Exminster held up a thin, protesting hand.

"Forgive me! One hint, as we are alone. In this Club, and in most of the old-established clubs, it is not quite in order for one member to offer a drink to a fellow-member."

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“ R-r-really ? What b-b-bally r-rot ! ”

Exminster explained politely :

“ You see, that—er—sort of thing leads to what is called, I believe, rounds of drinks. And that is not done here.”

Further discussion of a delicate subject was interrupted by the advent of half a dozen members, hungry and thirsty, and bubbling over with talk, the sort of talk that flows easily from men in high places who know that what they say will not be repeated. Each man in turn exchanged salutations with the new member. Exminster sat at the head of the long table and invited Sir James Pont to sit next him. Sir James ordered a dozen oysters and a pint of Montrachet.

As an opening gambit this was promising. The new member was accepted as a *bon vivant*. Was he a *bon garçon* ?

A brilliant dramatist sat opposite to Pont. Exminster asked the new member if he had seen “ Back of Nowhere.”

“ R-r-rotten show ! M-m-muck ! Mixture of p-p-pap and p-p-pep.”

The brilliant dramatist squirmed and tried to look as if he were happy.

Exminster kicked Pont gently.

“ ’Ware c-corns ! ” said Pont lustily. Then, in high good humour with himself, and addressing a distinguished actor, he continued :

“ D-d-don’t often do a play. ’Cos why ? N-no actors. Englishmen on the stage are—s-s-sticks.”

Devastating silence. Certain gentlemen not connected with the British stage smiled. An eminent K.C. turned the talk into another channel :

“ Your place is in Cornwall, I believe, Sir James ? ”

“ B-b-back o’ Nowhere. If the c-chump who wrote

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that play had come to me, I'd have given him the g-g-goods."

"I'm so sorry I didn't," murmured the dramatist.

Unabashed, the new member blinked at him.

"Hey? You w-w-wrote it?"

"Yes."

"Um! W-w-well, I d-didn't like it."

"And I don't care a damn whether you do or not."

Worse—and worse—followed. Sir James, stuttering more than ever, introduced the forbidden subject—politics. Two ex-Cabinet Ministers graced the board. The new member, waxing eloquent, denounced Liberals and Conservatives in scathing terms.

"M-m-missed their opportunities—s-s-slackers and f-f-funks—all of 'em—parcel of old w-w-women—wouldn't surprise me a bit if these new b-b-brooms swept their dirty decks. Hi! Waiter!"

"Sir?"

"Steak and k-k-kidney pie, and a t-t-tankard o' London stout, the s-s-stuff they stick a nigger into the v-v-vat to give the r-right s-s-smack to it."

A dignified member of the Upper House rose and left the room. His half-eaten cutlet and unsipped glass of claret proclaimed unspoken protest. The other members exchanged glances. Escape—unless a man abandoned his luncheon—was impossible. General conversation ceased; members talked to each other in confidential undertones. Pont turned to Exminster.

"Why did that starchy c-c-cove leave his g-g-grub?"

Exminster, a sometime Ambassador, replied blandly:

"I'm sure he'll be happy to tell you when he comes back."

"I've seen his phiz in the c-c-comic p-p-papers. Who is he?"

"He *was* Lord President of the Council."

"S-s-stuffy, what?"

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“ We have not found him so, Sir James.”

The new member attacked his steak and kidney pie. As he ate he talked, “ nicking in ” to the confidential undertones. Three men carried their glasses of port to the other end of the room. Finally Sir James was left in splendid isolation.

He didn't seem to mind this ; he ordered a dock glass of Cockburn, '90, and a double brandy. When he tasted the coffee, he roared across the room at Exminster :

“ I s-say—this is s-s-sheep-wash ! ”

“ Is it ? I—I didn't make it, but you can write the usual complaint on the back of your bill.”

Now the Grid prides itself upon its coffee. Old members glared at the new member, as he grinned at them through his Assyrian beard. Sir James addressed them collectively :

“ I joined this Club because T-Tom Charrington t-told me that the grub and the c-c-company were tip-top. Bar the coffee and the ex-Lord President—no complaints ! I shall always meal here when I'm in town.”

A famous surgeon asked courteously :

“ Are you likely to be in town much ? ”

“ Up f-f-for a m-m-month.”

As he spoke he produced an evil-looking pipe and an immense pouch of the strongest tobacco.

The great surgeon whispered to Exminster :

“ This fellow is insupportable.”

“ Shush-h ! He was supported by Charrington.”

“ You astound me. Couldn't the Club be closed for repairs during the next month ? ”

Sadly, Exminster shook his head.

At this moment the new member finished his brandy, rose from his chair, not too steadily, and exclaimed impressively :

“ H-h-hope to s-s-see all you old b-bucks at d-d-dinner.”

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Puffing volumes of acrid smoke from his pipe, he strode from the room.

Everybody spoke at once, a Babel of curses. When comparative peace was restored, the dramatist put into words the common verdict :

“ We can't stick this chap ; he must resign. Char and Treherne ought to be kicked out, too.”

“ Crucified—before breakfast.”

“ I suggest,” said Exminster, “ that this Cornish gentleman has gone mad since Char and Treherne put him up.”

This was kindly said and accepted in a clubbable spirit. A Die-hard murmured :

“ I feel sorry for Charrington and Treherne.”

“ I must see Charrington at once. Fred !”

“ My lord ? ”

“ Was Major Charrington in the Club yesterday ? ”

“ No, my lord. Major Charrington is, I believe, in Paris.”

“ And Mr. Treherne ? ”

“ Mr. Treherne was in yesterday. As your lordship is aware, Mr. Treherne never lunches here.”

“ Can we lunch or dine till this accursed Cornishman returns to Cornwall ? ”

This question provoked hot debate, and brought to the surface that British backbone which is the envy of all foreigners. Led by Exminster, solemnly exhorted by him, the Gridites refused to abandon the Club. Most of them—all that were able to do so—pledged themselves to return and dine.

The Grid closes at three and reopens at four.

III

Exminster came back at four, much to his inconvenience, but he hoped to meet Treherne, who was in the habit of

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dropping in early. As Chairman of the committee, he told himself that he had not been so upset since 1914. In a sense, this Cornishman had declared war against the cherished traditions and observances of the Grid. In fine, he regarded Sir James Pont as a Hun.

The editor of an important Review entered the Club at the same moment. He had not lunched there. To him Exminster recited the facts.

"I ask you, my dear Sage, what can we do?"

A curt and disconcerting reply:

"Nothing."

To Exminster's relief a dominant personality in and out of the Club treated the subject seriously:

"It would be easier to kick a parson out of his own pulpit. You elected him. So long as he stops short of conduct that would justify expulsion, he can do and say what he likes. I gather from what you tell me that he is just a common or garden bounder."

"Yes; and as unconscious of his bounds as a kangaroo."

The steward approached.

"Mr. Treherne is coming up the stairs, my lord."

"Please tell Mr. Treherne that I wish to speak to him at once upon a matter of pressing importance."

A minute later Treherne appeared.

"Thank the Lord! You're the man we want."

"Is anything wrong?"

Exminster gripped his arm.

"Sir James Pont lunched here to-day."

"Did he? And who is Sir James Pont?"

"Who is he? My God! He's a new member, proposed by Char and seconded by you. You two stuffed him in here. And he's impossible. The fellow has affronted half a dozen members already. Now—what the devil have you got to say about it?"

Treherne looked uneasy. He attempted a bluff.

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"Pont must be all right if Char proposed him. Char asked me to second him. I meet a lot of people, so do you. I accept most of 'em, as you do, upon the valuation of others. Char told me that I'd met Pont shooting somewhere."

Exminster said emphatically :

"I can't believe it. If you'd met this fellow out shooting, you'd have shot him—on sight. Char is in Paris ; you are here. You—you must do something."

"Can't recall him. What's he like ?"

"He's like a gorilla."

Treherne, small, slight, spick-and-span, shrugged his shoulders.

"And you ask me to tell a gorilla that he ought to resign from the Grid because you think him a bounder. I'd sooner resign myself."

"You refuse to take any action ?"

"My dear old Ex, I shall throw myself on the mercy of the committee. *Mea culpa!* I have sinned grievously ; I trusted Char instead of pleading a defective memory. I came here to get my letters. I'm late for an important appointment as it is. Bye-bye."

He vanished.

The editor said, hopefully :

"Charrington may have come back from Paris. Why not ring him up ?"

Exminster rushed to the telephone. He returned joyously.

"Charrington is back. I'm off to his flat as fast as a taxi can take me."

He, too, vanished. The editor smiled, but he had not yet seen Sir James Pont.

IV

As his taxi rolled swiftly along Pall Mall the Chairman of the Gridiron Club underwent a cooling process. If he

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displayed the exasperation which he felt Charrington would be amused, because somehow an ex-Hussar sucked fun out of the lighter woes of others. Charrington might regard the affair as a huge joke.

Exminster, slightly confounded by the warmth of an old friend's greeting, dissembled. Sir James Pont had not been mentioned over the telephone. Exminster was terrified of publicity, and regarded ridicule as the deadliest of weapons.

"I heard you were back from Paris, Char."

"Yes. As we are not at the Grid, may I offer you a whisky and soda? I may. Good."

"Talking of the Grid," said Exminster lightly, "I met your friend Pont there to-day. What a charming fellow!"

"Damn Pont!"

"Why?"

"I wanted to introduce Pont to all you fellows myself. And now he's weighed in without me. Charming, you say?"

"He made a remarkable impression."

"Did he? Jim Pont takes knowing. The better you know him, the more you like him. He doesn't put his big strawberries on top of the basket. But he'll be *persona grata*, because—forgive my saying so—there is too much talk at the Grid. Not enough good listeners. Now Pont, bless him! has the breed and quality of still champagne: I'll bet sixpence you all cottoned to him because, as a new member, he ran mute."

Exminster gulped down his drink.

"Are you pulling my leg?"

"Most emphatically—no."

"Then your friend Pont has gone stark, staring mad! He's blatant—he's offensive—he eats and drinks like a bargee. He looks like an orang-outang. He is in London for a month. Before the week is out your friend Pont

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will have wrecked the Grid. He will lunch and dine there alone."

Charrington rose with dignity and took from the mantel-piece a framed photograph.

"That," he said gravely, "is my friend, Jim Pont. I had a notion to show this to the committee, but I thought that what I said about him would secure his election anyway."

Exminster stared at a thin, sensitive face, crinkled with lines indicating whim and humour, the face of a man who loved horses and children.

"We've been had," he gasped.

"It looks like it. Probably some journalist has secured a lot of copy at our expense. Console yourself with this thought, Ex: you won't see your orang-outang again."

Exminster smiled faintly. Still——! The members of the Grid *featured* in the picture Press—the late Lord President of the Council made a laughing-stock! Horrible!

Charrington, however, was sympathetic; he showed no amusement; he appeared to grasp—as his Chairman did—the issues involved. But when Exminster put his own question: "What can we do?" Charrington answered as the Sage did: "Nothing." He added: "I'll go back with you to the Club, and we'll talk it over. I'm dining out, and must return here to dress."

V

When they reached the Grid many members had assembled. The name Pont was on every lip.

"Gentlemen," said the Chairman, "be prepared for a shock. Sir James Pont has been impersonated by some audacious blackguard, probably connected with the Press. This is Sir James," he held aloft the photograph, "and I

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affirm that on appearance alone he will be heartily welcome in this club."

The brilliant dramatist, abandoning pap for pep, said fiercely :

" But we must find and kill the other fellow."

" To the Tiber with him."

Lord Exminster calmed them :

" Gentlemen, we shall never see his awful face again. If this regrettable incident becomes public, we must laugh with the public."

The distinguished actor hazarded a conjecture :

" The man may be a dramatic critic."

" Or a Socialist."

Exminster summed up the impostor :

" He is a clever cad."

" Did he pay for what he called his grub ? "

The steward was summoned.

" The gentleman who lunched here to-day did not pay for his luncheon because he said that he was returning for dinner."

Charrington murmured :

" I'll pay his bill. Bring it."

Charrington surveyed it when it was presented.

" *Two* cocktails—as a starter."

" One of them was mine," said the Chairman. " I accepted it under protest. I insist upon paying for it."

" Tosh ! " exclaimed Charrington. He settled the bill in full, and instructed the steward not to destroy it.

" An interesting document. This impostor may be all you fellows say, but I hail him as a valiant trencherman."

Exminster, with a glance at the steward's reassuring face, said to him quietly :

" We can—er—rely upon the discretion of the staff ? "

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The steward replied sorrowfully :

“ Oh, my lord, can you doubt our loyalty ? ”

“ I beg your pardon. I shall dine here to-night. Take the chill off a bottle of Chambertin.”

The Sage of Fleet Street whispered to the brilliant dramatist :

“ Shall we split a magnum of Margaux ? ”

“ Certainly.”

Confidence in themselves and in their Club was restored. Charrington took leave of his fellow-members with unaffected regret.

VI

There are two sets of regular diners at the Grid. The distinguished actors are constrained to dine at seven ; the others sit down, more or less punctually, at eight. But there is overlapping. Long before eight-thirty the long table, glittering with old silver—the gifts of the members—exhibits few empty chairs (or glasses).

At eight-fifteen, upon this particular night, the atmosphere of the Club may be described as slightly above normal. By tacit but common consent the regrettable incident was regarded as hermetically sealed. The Gridites ate and drank and made merry.

Suddenly, a resplendent figure, in full evening kit, entered the room, followed tremblingly by three “ Freds.” Simultaneously all the members sprang to their feet.

The impersonator of Sir James Pont had come back to dine.

Exminster, at the head of the table, was sensible that the eyes of his fellow-members turned instinctively from the bearded impostor to him. He, obviously, was expected to deal faithfully with the situation.

None the less, the impostor spoke first.

“ G-g-got r-r-room for a little 'un, hey ? ”

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His voice rang through the welkin, wherever that may be.

The Chairman addressed the steward :

“ Why was this person allowed in here ? ”

“ Three of us, my lord,” panted the steward, “ were unable to keep him out.”

“ I—I b-b-brushed 'em out of my path, old bean, like f-f-flies. S-s-sit down ! I w-w-want my dinner. I—I've h-had no t-t-tea.”

Somebody, feeble of limb, suggested the police. The impostor bellowed :

“ C-c-can't turn me out of this p-p-pot-house.”

“ I think we can,” said Exminster coolly, “ and without calling in the police.”

“ I—I shall b-bring an action against you for heavy d-d-damages if you d-d-do.”

“ Upon what grounds ? ”

“ B-b-because I'm a member of the Club in good and honourable standing.”

Again the welkin was rent in twain with a derisive howl of incredulity.

“ W-w-wait and s-s-see ! ”

A magnificent beard was hurled into the face of the brilliant dramatist ; a heavy wig struck the superb cranium of the Sage.

Charrington stood before them !

After a breathless pause, Exminster burst into a roar of laughter. Everybody laughed and applauded.

The Grid had been spoofed !

Charrington, without a smile upon his face, exclaimed :

“ Fred ! ”

“ Sir ? ”

“ Bring me the betting-book.”

The betting-book at the Grid is almost as interesting (and as valuable) as the betting-book at Brooks's. In it are recorded the wagers made between members.

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The steward brought the sacrosanct volume. Charrington took it, opened it, and read aloud the following entry :

“ Major Charrington wagers fifty guineas with Lord Exminster that he will break the most cherished rule of the Club. Within six months Lord Exminster will be offered a drink by Major Charrington, and Lord Exminster will accept and drink the same.”

“ I'll take your cheque now, my dear old Ex,” said Charrington.

Exminster expressed the sense of the Grid.

“ You've earned it, Char.”