

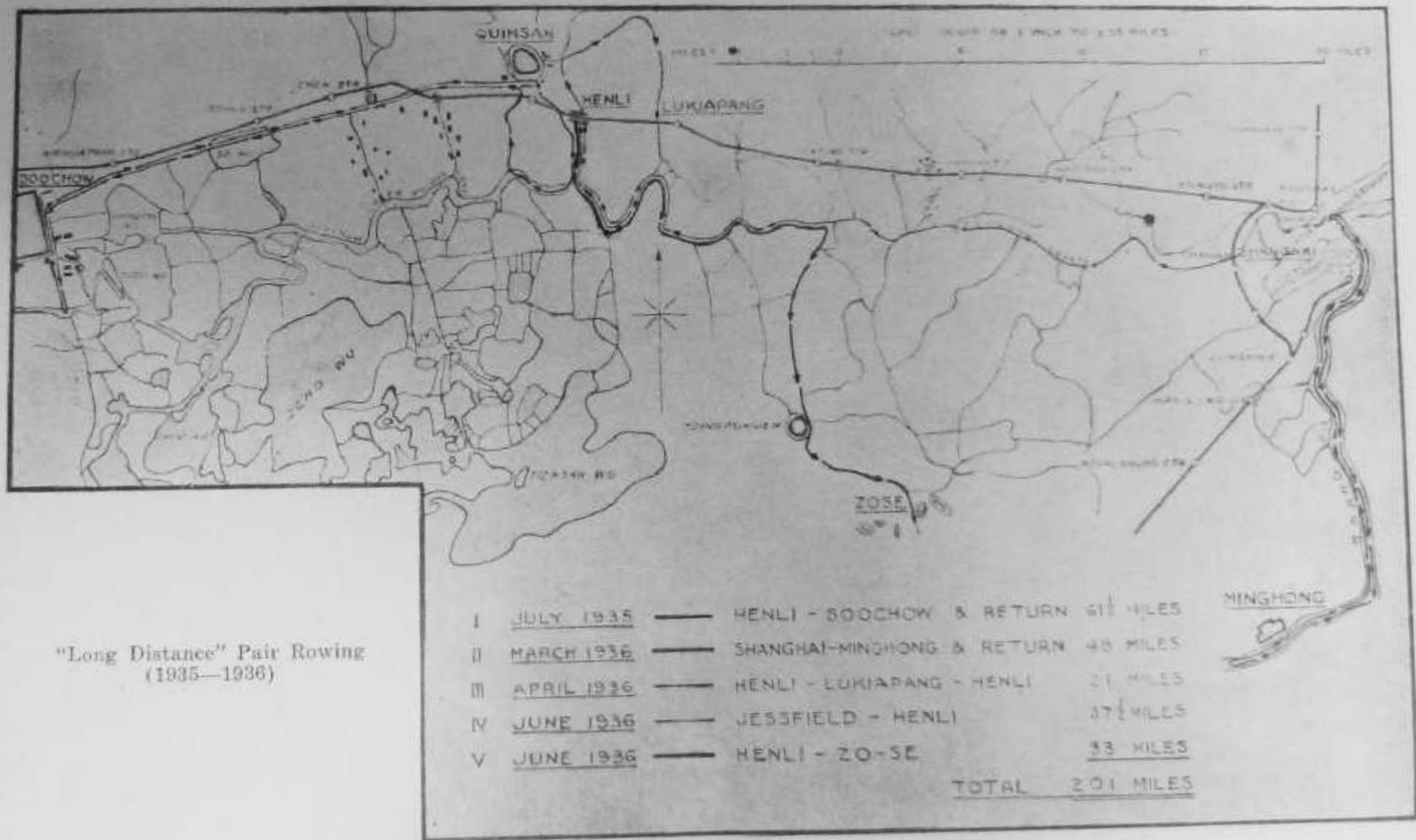
CHAPTER NINE

Long Distance Rowing

"PLEASURE" SPINS

THE numerous creeks which form a criss-cross pattern over the hinterland of Shanghai provide plenty of opportunity for exploration in Scull, Pair, or Four, and give at the same time an insight into the life of the villagers along the banks. The advent of a rowing boat in almost any creek off the beaten track of the Tsinyankong is certain to provoke a lively interest amongst the farmers and their youthful progeny. Sampans, and Junks on the larger creeks, are likewise intrigued and amused, and doubtless many a sly jest or quip has been discharged at the uncomprehending foreigner; but enquiry of his Chinese coxswain will only elicit such details as that the objective is "30 Li more far," a response which strikes the oarsman as scant information after five minutes' "walla-walla" by the natives.

Even the mighty Yangtze itself held no terrors for some of the Club's redoubtable oarsmen. At the end of October 1892, Messrs. W. G. Moore and E. C. Pearce, both tried "benchers of the gallant eight oar," rowed from Hankow to Kiukiang in two days and a half, being coxed by G. E. J. Gardiner of Hankow. The boat used for this Yangtze trip was a new one and named *Shamrock*. "The first day they rowed from Hankow to Ayres Island, 62 miles, the second day from Ayres Island to Wuseh Light, 55 miles; and the third forenoon from Wuseh Light to Kiukiang, 30 miles. Ignorant people have laughed at the trip, but it was merely made for the amusement of the rowers, and it is not child's play by any means to row a boat in the Autumn down a large and windy river, full of eddies and chow-chow water, like the Yangtze."



"Long Distance" Pair Rowing
(1935—1936)

The four Pleasure Boats then in existence, named the *Rose*, *Thistle*, *Shamrock*, and the *Randan*, were often used for tea picnic excursions on the Soochow Creek from the Upper Boathouse, with manly youth at the prow and love at the helm. As has been recorded elsewhere, the Creek was not crowded in those days nor was the water polluted by the factories along the banks. Ratting on moonlight nights down at Gough Island was sometimes done by using the four sculler *Centipede*, which could hold an Eight if it had a fair crew. Shooting expeditions too were often made during Autumn and Winter to "Four Waters," Anting, and return on a Sunday. A double scull was used which had been fitted with a mirror, treadles on bow's stretcher working the rudder. The Good Friday picnics likewise gave oarsmen an opportunity for distance rowing up to Lungwha and back. Woosung was then considered a day's work. It is recorded that an Eight stroked by M. Chapeaux made the down trip in 1902, the boat being towed back by launch.

The discovery of Henli in 1906, furnishing a watercourse that was far less susceptible to the vagaries of tide and wind than was the River, had the effect of emphasizing competitive rowing at the expense of that "pleasure boating" which was so delightful a characteristic of early Shanghai rowing days. Rowing became, and regrettably perhaps, a trifle more "grim."

Yet the "picnic" spirit has in isolated instances persisted into our times.

D. P. Legge and the author in July, 1935, rowed from Henli to Soochow via Quinsan and returned next day, a distance of nearly seventy miles. We were very kindly put up overnight at the A. P. C. Staff House outside the South wall of Soochow. A head wind on the return trip proved very trying, but the experience gained was of value in a subsequent attempt on the Jessfield-Henli record. We found that changing from Bow to Stroke afforded a considerable amount of relief if done every two hours or so. After a time rhythm became such that rowing was but light work, and the mind was free to wander over many topics for discussion en route.

The sketch map opposite will show the different rows that we undertook in a Pair during 1935-1936. Perhaps mention

might be made of the trip to Changzu during the 1937 China New Year holidays in a Four with two other enthusiasts, F. R. L. Carey and L. V. Fabian. The weather was bitterly cold, and it snowed quite heavily during our day's stay there which was spent exploring the hill and neighbourhood. The Chinese inn at which we put up was draughty in the extreme, and we huddled over a small charcoal fire, supplementing the fare provided with cake, chocolate, etc. which we had brought from Henli. The return journey was even colder, and we had to break the ice out of the runners to free the slides before starting. At one point on the return trip there was a strong following wind down a two mile stretch . . . we all lay down flat in the boat, holding our oars out as sails, and bowled along at a rattling pace.

"RECORD BREAKING" ON THE SHANGHAI-HENLI COURSE

Turning now to the more strenuous form of Long Distance Rowing, *i.e.* "Record Breaking," it was in 1915 that the first of the subsequently frequent "Marathon" rows from Shanghai to Henli or vice-versa was undertaken. The tide is of diminishing assistance during the first ten miles or so from Jessfield, and after that initial aid there is tideless water for the rest of the journey. Incidentally the course (now 37½, formerly 46, miles) is considerably longer than the "Marathon" to Athens, but has happily always been completed without any such fatal result as attended this event.

One may doubt whether such a strenuous course is rowed regularly anywhere else in the world. There is indeed the case of a Sculling Race for £100 on the Thames in 1832 from Waterloo Bridge to Gravesend, up to Richmond, and back to Waterloo, the 99 miles being covered in 11 hours 20 minutes. Such a race, however, is a notable exception to the general rule of comparatively "short" Long Distance rows elsewhere; the famous Putney to Mortlake and Poughkeepsie courses being 4½ and 4 miles long respectively.

Whilst it is true that the possibilities of heart strain have caused prohibitions against side by side racing over the Shanghai-Henli course, yet the crews do race against time. This row has developed from a sort of casual jaunt, in which the chief

thought was to husband strength in order to make sure of completing the journey, into a highly organised expedition in which tide-tables, time schedules for passing different landmarks, and carefully planned nourishment, all play their part. The attempts on the existing records are usually made soon after the Spring or Autumn Regattas, when oarsmen are at the peak of condition and well able to endure the severe punishment entailed. The Goddess of Chance has an important say in success or otherwise, owing to the unpredictable factor of delay caused by traffic congestion on the lower reaches, to say nothing of variable winds and other climatic changes. As evidence of the "racing" nature of this event it is interesting to see that the five Strokes who have broken records on this course since 1933 have all been winning Strokes in the usual Regatta races.

It is not possible to chronicle all of the numerous crews who have completed this arduous course since 1915, but they themselves are unlikely to be in danger of forgetting their ordeal!

The experimental nature of the first attempt in 1915 is evidenced by the time taken of 13 hours. E. A. Ericson in 1921 first showed the way by rowing in a Four to Henli in 10 hours . . . and then rowing back the following week-end in 7½ hours. Various attempts were made in succeeding years and J. K. ("Tiny") Jensen's Four holds the record for the old course of 7 hours 30 minutes. Owing to the danger to the boats due to the increasing traffic congestion in the lowest reach of the Creek, the Committee in 1934 decided that in future such attempts should start near Jessfield Railway Bridge instead of from the Club pontoon. This shortened the distance to Henli from 45.9 miles to 38.1 miles; conservancy operations during 1936 reduced the distance further to 37.5 miles.

There was considerable attention paid to the existing records in 1936, and, under ideal conditions, the English International Pair set up a new record of 6 hours 11 minutes—beating both the (new) Pair and Four records by a wide margin. Again in 1937 keen interest was evinced. A Four composed of three American "Griffins" and a Canadian put up a fine performance to break the record handsomely—only to see it broken a few weeks later by a British Four in another fine achievement. The

latter Four covered the distance in 5 hours 24 minutes, an improvement of 12 minutes.

DISTANCE RACING ON THE WHANGPOO

The other Long Distance event sponsored by the Club is the race formerly known as the "Byrne Trophies Race", so named after Mr. E. T. Byrne who donated four cups in 1928 and 1929 for "A Long Distance Race" on the River. In this event the Fours are started at two minute intervals, which means in effect that they are racing against each other as much as against time over such a long course as nine miles.

The first race was held the week after the Regatta over the course from Kiaojao Creek to the Public Gardens. Rough water was experienced in places and it was necessary to bail. Four crews competed and the Danish Four came out victors. Only one Four decided to forego the advantage of the Point Canal and took the longer course outside with its stronger current. In 1929 three Fours started, and the winners took 53 mins 50 secs.—an improvement of nearly 5 minutes on the time of the previous year. The 1928 winners again competed, but sank off the Garden Point—shipping too much water by staying in the centre of the river. The following year saw bad water conditions, and one of the two competing Fours had to stop in order to bail out, whilst the other was nearly full. In an endeavour to provide better racing conditions the course was changed in 1931 to a point approximately two miles above Lungwha to the same finish. The entries in 1933 were so numerous that two classes were instituted—Seniors in Light Fours, and Juniors in Heavy Fours. Two Senior and three Junior Fours competed; the winning Junior Four won in the record time of 49 minutes 10 seconds, which was but 75 seconds slower than that of the victorious Senior Four. Revived again in 1936 with four entries in Heavy Fours, this race provided spectators in the Public Gardens with a thrilling finish, with all four boats close together. Despite strips of canvas stretched along the outriggers the water was so rough after the Junk Anchorage that all boats were more or less water-logged.