

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Henli Week-Ends*

TO oarsmen who are also lovers of Nature the charms of Henli are many and varied. The Peace and Calm that usually pervade this Mecca of Shanghai's disciples of rowing are at once a foil to, and a relief from, the "daily round and common task" that beset us in this great metropolis.

Some regard Henli as a place of physical purgatory, which must needs be visited a few times each Spring and Autumn in order to acquire a final polish, unobtainable on the turbulent waters of the Whangpoo. To the more discerning there are at least three distinct periods each half year when the lure of the Tsinyangkong draws them with magnetic influence.

First come the few restful week-ends prior to the official opening of the training seasons. At such times there is a delight in doing the minimum amount of rowing and the maximum of open-air reading and sun-bathing. The knowledge that such idleness must soon give way before the stern dictates of a hard-hearted Coach, just as the morning mists give way before the rising sun, adds a piquant flavour to the laziness inherent in us all. The delights of "Creek-crawling" in sculling boats can then be tasted, since the reaches around Henli abound with a myriad interesting waterways which beckon to the exploring mind. Some such promise fair, only to terminate abruptly in a stagnant pool harbouring a group of ducks . . . . ., which make derisive comment whilst the unfortunate sculler endeavours to turn around on his own axis. Other creeks wind and twist as if in agony, suddenly debouching into a straggling village; the foreigner does not pass unnoticed, and the younger generation rush along the bank with shrieks of "Ngakok Nyung" until a sudden widening permits a burst of speed. Yet other

creeks disclose sharp turns, after rounding which a large water buffalo may be found enjoying a post-prandial nap in mid-stream—incidentally completely blocking the way.

Then the real training season begins, and wise crews do long spins together in the search for true rhythm—a popular objective being the monastery crowning the Quinsan hill, whence a magnificent panorama can be viewed whilst sipping the hot tea so thoughtfully provided by the monks.

Sunset on Saturday is usually a signal for a stroll around the countryside before returning to the matshed for a mighty dinner. Anon the deep quiet of the night and the blaze of the heavenly constellations overhead still our talk, and sleep claims each and every one.

Sunday is far from being a day of rest, and Waung's myrmidons prepare great breakfasts against the return of hungry stalwarts aglow from an early morning "pipe-opener." The arrival of the Shanghai train with further devotees of the manly sport sees each crew endeavouring to fit in as many outings as possible. Coaches seated in the vantage point of coxswain's seat deliver witty, albeit scathing, comments upon the efforts of their straining charges, and become still more convinced that "Rowing is not what it used to be in my day, my boy."

As the Regatta draws nearer, the tempo grows faster, and the clicking of stopwatches gives either hope or despair to the exhausted crew which has just completed a "Course." Their attentive rivals on the bank scan them narrowly to discover any weakness, and then in their turn sally forth from the pontoon.

At last the Fatal Day is at hand; and all the comments in the Press, and all the wise advice of Coach, mean little to Competitors who possess in full measure "That Sinking Feeling." Nervously they see the clock hands draw ever nearer to the hour of release from office duties, and then partake of a frugal meal before the trek to the Regatta Special at the North Station. The older hands pretend surprise, observing the unconcealed anxiety upon the faces of those partaking in their first Regatta, but they too wish that the suspense was over.

At long last everything is ready, and the crews start off on their paddle to the Start with shouts of encouragement from

HENLI SCENERY



" . . . some such promise fair . . . . "



Cormorant fishing on the Tsinyangkong.

fair friends in the Enclosure ringing in their ears. A white foam in the distance denotes the approach of the Umpire's Launch, and the culminating agony is reached during the manoeuvres to line the boats. Nervous tension is almost at breaking point whilst the Starter sets his gun, and it is small wonder that splashing occurs during the first few seconds of the race.

Stroke endeavours to secure an early lead . . . steadies his crew to a long sweeping rhythm, disdainful of the frantic rate of striking of his rivals . . . picks his men up at the half distance with a well timed spurt, and does not let the effort die away . . . near Sprint Creek he rallies his tired crew for a final burst, and secures "First gun" amid the plaudits of the spectators.

After two days of strenuous racing the weary oarsmen relax from training rules, and celebrate their victories, or solace their defeats, in liquid manner, in company with their fair acquaintances. The good natured stationmaster attempts to cope with the boisterous throng returning to Shanghai, and crowds gather at each station to marvel at the talent displayed in full-throated community singing . . .

Peace and Calm descend once more upon the Henli waterway.