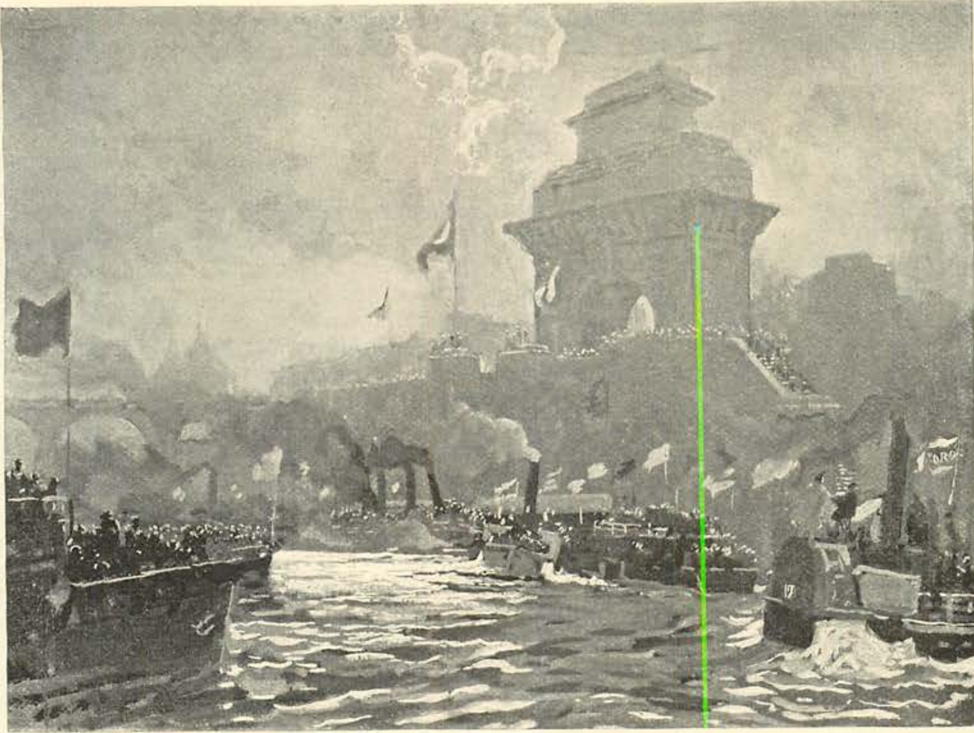


THE STEAMERS LEAVING THE TEMPLE STAIRS.

THE OXFORD AND CAMBRIDGE RACE.

PLAY IN LONDON.

BY ELIZABETH ROBINS PENNELL.

WITH PICTURES BY JOSEPH PENNELL.

THERE is no sort of play the Londoner loves so much as a race—that is, if racing comes under the head of his play; sometimes it looks as if it were his serious business in life.

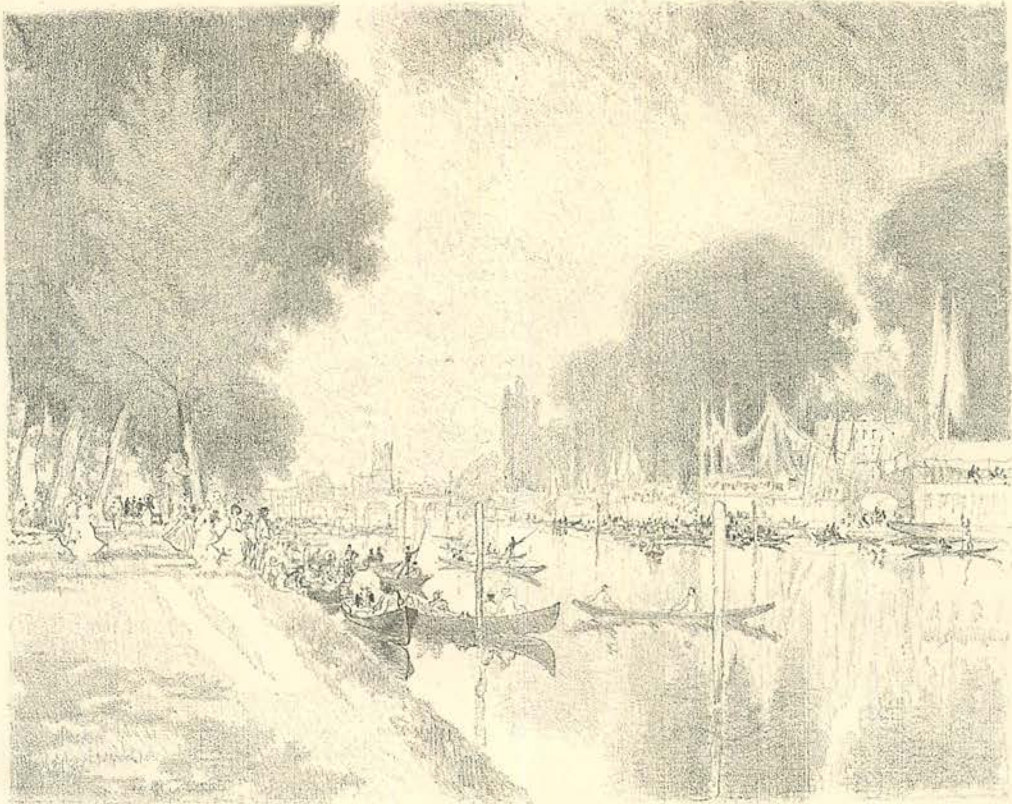
Toward the middle of March, London suddenly becomes an arrangement in blue. The race is fixed for the second Saturday before Easter, when the Londoner, who has passed weeks and months without holiday or pageant, is in the humor to make the most of it. And London decorates itself in anticipation. The draper's window becomes a harmony in blue; so does the stationer's; so does the milliner's; so does all Regent street; so do Oxford street, Piccadilly, Kensington. In the Strand and Cheapside, the fakir puts away his penny bagpipes and his shirt-studs and his toys, and brings out trays of tiny light- and dark-blue buttonhole buds. The railway companies print their time-tables in light and dark blue. And the papers, if they do not change the color of their ink, cut down police news and literary notes to devote the space to daily accounts of the crews out for practice; and the columns of personal gossip are filled with descriptions of the men, their food, and their fancies. The condition of No. 6 is of more importance than the health of the prime minister, and the blister on the finger of a stroke more serious than a defeat in India. About ninety-nine out of every hundred people in London have something staked upon the race; for the Londoner is a born gambler, though his gambling has been officially suppressed—possibly the reason of its never-failing charm for him.

On the day itself the whole town apparently takes sides. Light blue and dark blue flutter in little bows from the whips of 'bus- and hansom-drivers, from the necks of 'Arry and 'Arriet, on the coat-flaps of the city clerk

and the Piccadilly swell. From all quarters of the town there is a rush, a flight, a scramble toward the river where it flows between Putney and Mortlake, and where it has the advantage of being lined with malls and terraces on one side, and long stretches of tow-path on the other. Some years the race is rowed in the afternoon, when everybody is free, Saturday being half-holiday; some years it comes off in the morning, the time depending on the tide. But though the hour may change, the crowd never dwindles. When necessary, the Londoner turns the half-holiday into a whole holiday without waiting for permission; this is the only difference. For in his way the Londoner is a bit of a philosopher. Starvation may stare him in the face to-morrow, but what does that matter to-day? "Fate 's a fiddler, life 's a dance!" and he enjoys his races while he may.

Usually he journeys to the race-course by trains, when, whether he pays for first-, second-, or third-class ticket, he is jammed with nineteen other people in a carriage intended to hold eight or ten at the most. But to push, elbow, jostle, struggle, fight for a place, and then to be wedged in as tight as a sardine in a box, is a part of his fun. If you do not fancy the struggle on the train, the omnibus is as hopeless; it is full in a moment. If you have a "donkey-shay" or a brougham, you drive down, in glorious and, in the first case, convivial independence. If you have a bicycle, you leave it at home. A hansom means ruin; tc walk is a task. Altogether the most delightful and beautiful way is to go by water—if you can. True, regularly every boat-race day, steamboats and launches and tugs and barges, in a long procession, start from all the piers, but congregate chiefly about the Temple. But you cannot get a ticket for the mere paying or asking. You must have very serious reason to show why it should be granted you on the boat for the press, or for the "old blues"—sedate, gray-haired judges, and members of Parliament, and attorneys-general, and barristers, and parsons, even, in disguise, and professional men of every kind, as keen as in the years long ago, when they were performers, and not lookers-on. The Englishman never outlives his love for sport. I remember, last boat-race day, an old Oxford man, now a prominent solicitor, telling me, with all the pride of a little street Arab, that he had climbed to the top of the highest arch of Barnes Bridge to watch the race.

SHOOTING HAMMERSMITH BRIDGE.



LUNCHEON HOUR AT HENLEY.

Then, too, there are the boats chartered by peddlers for advertisement, the familiar names of popular soaps or pills hung from the deck-railing or set up on the smoke-stack as if on the board. Manage to be taken on board any one of these, and you learn again, as you may already have learned at Lord's or on Epsom Downs, how amazing is the unconscious picturesqueness of sport in England.

The steamers, tugs, launches, barges, waiting at the piers between Charing Cross and Blackfriars, especially at the Temple, are so gaily decorated with flags and streamers as to turn this part of the Thames into a pageant that only Claude could have imagined, but that London produces as matter of course, and the Londoner ignores from force of habit, though he can rave with cultured complacency over the "Carthage" in the National Gallery. The Temple landing-stage, as you look back from Waterloo to where it piles up in the middle distance, dominated by St. Paul's, is always impressive. But when color and life are added, you realize more than ever the pictorial possibilities of London, which the authorities are combining to destroy. The barges and steamers and tugs, as they wheeze and puff up the river, oftener than not under a stormy, threatening sky, with a brisk wind blowing, keep arranging themselves over and over again into the most stunning pictures, and their banks are thrown into backgrounds as effective—palatial at Westminster, medieval at Lambeth, rural at Battersea, majestic at Chelsea. At Putney, since the old bridge was pulled down, much of the character and charm of the river has vanished. But there are the boats, and the flags, and the people on shore, and the noise of innumerable negroes and steam- and hand-organs, with the squeak of Punch from afar; and there is all the amusing misery of waiting.

And then, at last, there is the race, though every one who has not money on it knows it is the least important item in the day's performance. You would not find the same crowd out of England, but the race would be much the same anywhere. It begins, to my untrained eyes, tamely, unemotionally, save for the two men who hold the boats,—I am too much of an outsider to know their technical

THE STARTING-PLACE, HENLEY.

name,—and who crouch and hang over the bows, a mass of suppressed energy and excitement, as alert and eager and muscular as a tiger about to spring—in their very pose something of the intensity of those last sixty seconds before the gun, which to the racing man are, according to Tom Brown, a little lifetime. From the steamer following you see nothing of the race but the first bound and dash of the boats, and then the backs of the cockswains and the blades of the oars, and sometimes only the launch of the umpire. But what you do see, and never tire of seeing, is the colossal London crowd, the flags, the barges, the movement. From the shores you command one little act of this wonderful drama. But from the boat the scene changes with every foot. Now you are passing the huge mills at Hammersmith; and the many flags streaming from their tall chimneys, and the crowd massed upon great stands and breaking up the hard, straight lines, and the steamers ranged along the bank, give unaccustomed gaiety and splendor to the dull and dingy riverside. A minute more, and you are rushing close under the trees on the opposite slope, where all the merry-go-rounds of England have mustered, glittering and gorgeous in their new spring paint and gilding. Then, such an uncanny effect as you go shooting under the bridge, and a solid mass of cheering, wide-open-mouthed heads glare down upon you. But, indeed, from the time you start until the end, you are the center of an uninterrupted, inarticulate yell. On the tow-path above there is a rushing, jostling mass of men on foot and on horseback, running at full speed after the boats, shouting themselves hoarse, splashing through the water if the Thames is high, as it generally is at this time of the year. Barnes, so placid in its suburban respectability at other seasons, is now as boisterous and rowdy as a country fair. Beyond the railway-bridge, on the river road, traps wait in a line with their wheels in the water; and on the river, barges are anchored and made into floating stands. There are millions and millions of people. Mortlake, for the finish, has strung garlands of flags from tree to tree, and more flags float and wave from the jam of steamboats lying close to the low northern bank, where more people are rushing, struggling, stumbling,

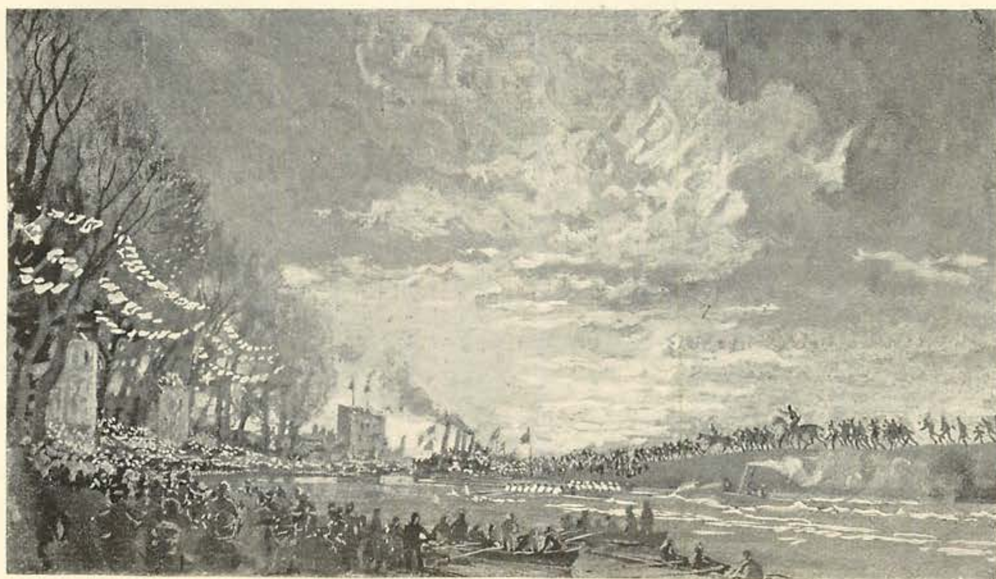
jostling, roaring, panting. There is one final, terrible crush on the banks, when the crowd, which can get no farther, stops. As the boats pass the winning-post, more than one of the crew dead beat, the yell becomes an unearthly shriek, as steamboats, launches, and merry-go-rounds all join it. From the press boat pigeons are let loose with despatches, and tin cans containing a full account of the races are thrown at the floating telegraph office. The "Graphic" balloon with its special correspondent soars away. Small boats collide, and large ones get run down by bigger steamers. People are fished out by heroes who are ever on the watch for such catastrophes and subsequent rewards.

Why should you care which boat wins? You do not know, unless you are absolutely at the finish.

The race is over, but not the fun. The crowd must get home—someway, anyway, no one minds how; so there is plenty of noise and confusion and crushing. Every one races back. First the steamers with the crews aboard,—the winning one with the big sign "Oxford" or "Cambridge" hung aloft,—and all the others puffing and whistling after them. On shore, away go drags and 'buses and donkey-shays, till the roads out of Mortlake and Barnes are packed tight with an innumerable mass of horses and wheels, and Hammersmith Bridge is blocked beyond the powers of a whole division of police. The underground stations are mobbed, the carriages captured by storm. In town, newsboys are already shrieking, "Extry special! Winner of the boat-raise!" The public houses do a roaring trade. In the evening, not a seat is to be had for love or money in any music-hall about Leicester Square.

You might think the river, after this, had exhausted its possibilities. But the university boat-race is a very small affair compared with the regatta at Henley. The university race is an afternoon's or a morning's holiday. Henley is lavish, and gives a three days' entertainment. The university race is eminently democratic, all sorts of Londoners turning out for it, from the costermonger to the "old blue," from the ragged street urchin to the undergraduate, from 'Arry and 'Arriet to the fashionable world of Mayfair and Belgravia. You can get to Putney for twopence or threepence, or for nothing, if you walk. But it is a matter of some ten shillings to journey down to Henley, or ten pounds, if you mean to take a boat, and to lunch, and to do the thing in style. The regatta, therefore, has pretensions to exclusiveness: it is for those who can pay, like most exclusive things in England. Its crowd is the Ascot and Goodwood crowd, the Lord's Cricket-ground crowd when the Oxford and Cambridge match comes off, the Rotten Row crowd in the season—the smart crowd, the crowd that wants to be thought smart.

Henley is a quiet little riverside town that for eleven months and three weeks reposes in dignified calm. The remaining week it wakes up to live at such a pace that it is no



THE FINISH AT MORTLAKE.

THE FINISH AT HENLEY.

wonder it needs the rest of the year to sleep off the effects. This week is the first in July, when the English summer is in its luxuriant freshness, and nature has already seen to the decoration of the race-course. For on each side the Thames above the little town stretch wide green meadows, and long rows of elms and spire-like poplars, and the simple pastoral scenery that makes it the enchanting river that it is.

On an ordinary summer day you are sure that Henley's charm of charms is its serenity. But see it decked for its one mad carnival, and you are as certain that it looks its best when it is all excitement; when house-boats line the "shy Thames's shore"—house-boats painted white and red and gold and blue and pink and green, adorned with the brightest flowers that bloom and the gayest flags that wave, and the brilliant gowns and many-hued flannels of men and women who sit perpetually drinking tea and champagne under the vivid awnings; when the town itself is full, every inn and every lodging overflowing, a constant stream of people, in the same brilliant gowns and many-hued flannels, crowding and jamming through the usually drowsy streets, and over the fine gray bridge that Henley is so proud of; when the river is covered with boats—the pleasure-fleet of the Thames: skiffs and punts and canoes and steam-launches, and even an occasional homesick-looking sandalo or gondola; when, from the morning of the first day until the evening of the last, all London not already here is brought down in an almost endless train from Paddington.

The house-boats are towed to Henley days beforehand, and a mooring-place for each claimed months in advance. It is amusing, of course, if you happen to have one yourself, or, better still, if friends are ready to take you on theirs. But it is best of all to be a simple spectator, enjoying the performance as you might a Lyceum spectacle.

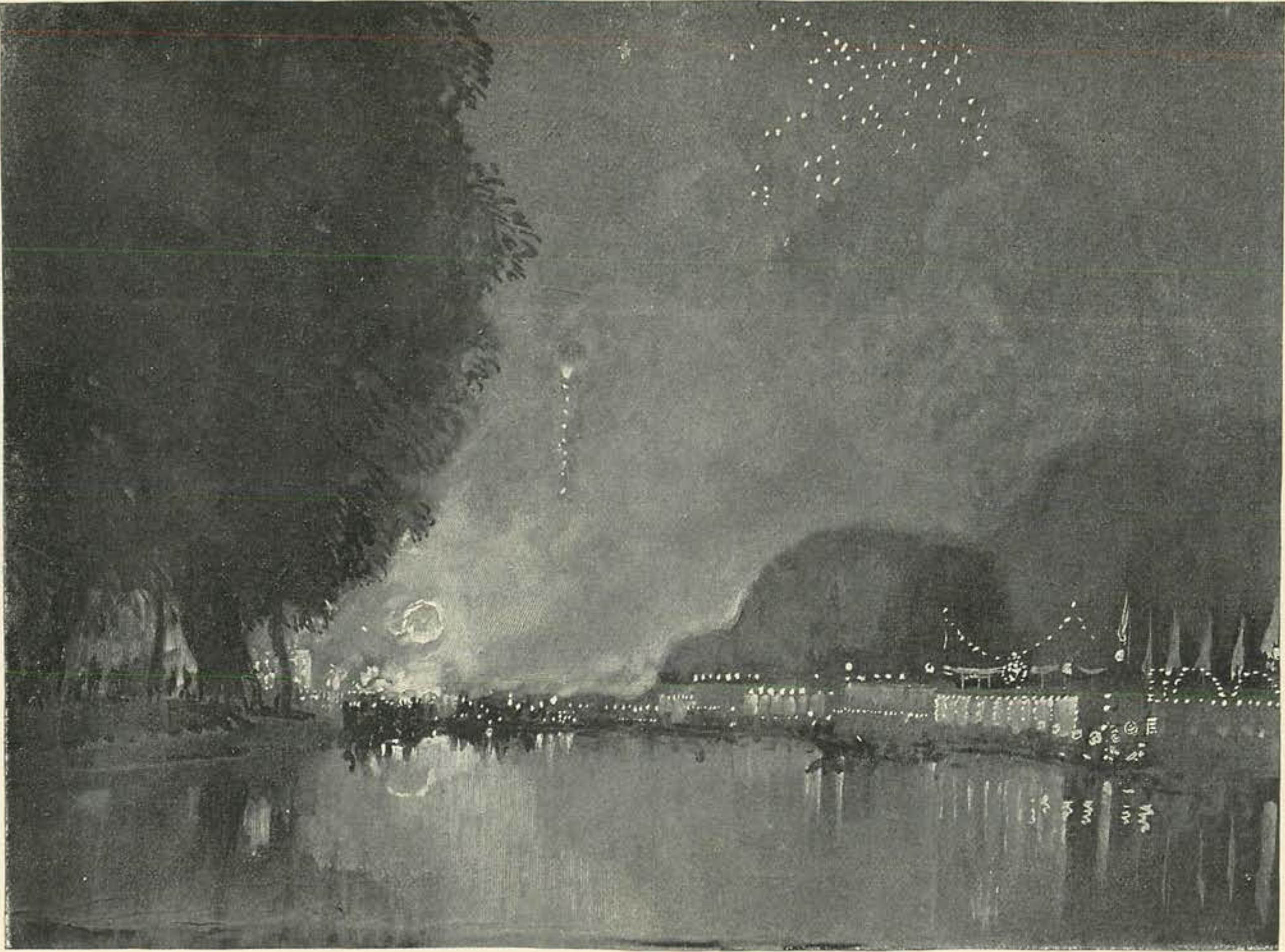
Do not ask how it is done, but just look and see how lovely the river is with its line of gorgeous house-boats, and the little craft coming and going, and the flutter of light summer dresses, and the great trees on the banks radiant in the sunshine. To be sure, sometimes it rains straight through regatta week, and Henley is draggled and disconsolate. But, as a rule, July skies are blue, July showers light and fleeting. Does not Mr. Ashby-Sterry, as social clerk of the weather, prophesy

> On Henley Bridge, in sweet July,
> A gentle breeze, a cloudless sky?

The races start a mile or so above Henley, from an island, or eyot, as the Englishman calls it, where, among the trees, stands the little classic temple of the old landscape gardens. With the cluster of waiting boats by the banks, and the white flannels and jerseys of the crews, and the crowds on shore, and the great elms and poplars and distant blue hills for background, you might think Watteau had designed the picture for your delight. There is no finer reach on the river than from here to Henley Bridge. But a railroad company, in sheer wantonness, proposes to extend its line along the shore, to put up an ugly embankment through the meadows, tearing down every elm and poplar that rises in its way, and, to complete the sacrilege, throwing an ugly bar across the river, close to the old gray time-stained arches. But if railroad companies are powerful, sport is strong in England, and there promises to be a pretty fight for the fields where all London picnics so picturesquely every regatta week.

Many of the Henley races, I am told, are important and even exciting events to boating men. Has not the famous Cornell yell swept along the banks, striking terror into the vast multitude there, though not into the crews? There are serious people, unlikely as it may seem, who come not solely to frolic in the open air and create beautiful Watteaus, but from solid interest in the races. I remember once seeing, to my astonishment, —I had been in England only a short time,— a learned Shaksperean tearing through the crowd, following the course of the boats, his venerable gray head bared to the sun, his cap waving wildly in the air. And I remember, even now with amazement, the appearance of a grave barrister, whom I had seen not long before in the alarming solemnity of wig and gown, got up for Henley in a bright scarlet blazer and a jaunty straw hat, galloping for dear life to the finish. These are trifling incidents, but they help to explain that the races are rowed for some other purpose than, as you might think, merely to interrupt the gay monotony of the entertainment, and to add to the stir on the water.

This they do, however, most effectually. For hours before the first begins, everybody who can has got into a little boat of one kind or another, and pulled or rowed or pushed or paddled or steamed out into the stream, until the river for a mile is so completely floored over that an expert in the art of balancing could walk from one bank to the other; and they threaten to lie jammed there forever,



THE FIREWORKS AT HENLEY.

so physically impossible does it seem for a single one to move an inch; when—you hardly know how or where—a signal is given to clear the course, and there is such a pushing, pulling, puffing, poling, paddling, shouting, laughing, shrieking, splashing, as never could be anywhere but on the Thames at Henley during regatta week. But in the end the boats do extricate themselves, and draw up on each side, in front of the house-boats and under the trees; and as far as you can see are two long lines of white flannels, straw hats, red parasols, until river and shores seem suddenly transformed into a huge flower-garden. There is a distant roar of voices, which grows louder and louder, nearer and nearer. On every house-boat, skiff, canoe, launch, and punt there is a delirious waving and fluttering of hats and handkerchiefs. On the shores there is a rushing of an eager, struggling, stumbling, shouting crowd. And before you know it, the boats have passed—the race is over.

Another minute, and the canoes and skiffs and punts have broken loose, and are bumping and dodging and crashing into one another again, in a frantic, interminable uproar. If the weaker capsize in the conflict, nobody cares; it is part of the game. If the unwary oarsman or pilot goes floundering into the water, he is fished out and sent ashore. In the swarming meadows, even in the boats, the irrepressible negro minstrels are twanging the banjo and singing. It is the marvelous color that strikes you above all else. There is nothing to be seen like it, the world over. You may have more sunlight for the pageants of the South; but not even the regattas of Venice are more brilliant, more dazzling, more flamboyant, more riotous in color, than the river at Henley these first days of July. It is the extraordinary part of the English that if they throw off restraint at all in the matter of dress, their license knows no bounds. Men get themselves up as extravagantly, women array themselves in as daring and violent hues, as the tulips of Holland. No Liberty tints here, but the primary colors in all their purity. Yet the license is governed by conviction. Not one man or woman of that vast throng would dare to appear in the same costume in Piccadilly or the City; but it would be no less a breach of the proprieties, no less a crime, to carry their City or Piccadilly uniform to Henley.

And this pageant of color goes on all day long, unchanged save for the new arrangement of lines and masses whenever there is a pause for a race or an interval for luncheon or tea. If you may doubt the interest of the races, there is no question of the importance of luncheon. Indeed, when the hour comes, you might think it the one and only business that had brought London down to Henley. On the house-boats champagne corks are flying. Little parties sit under the trees, eating sandwiches. The "Red Lion," where Shenstone wrote the oft-quoted lines on the window, and all the inns in the place, are besieged by an army of ravenous men and women, pushing, elbowing, crushing one another in the mad pursuit of food and drink. The English holiday crowd at meal-time is a stupendous sight.

Hardly has the last champagne cork popped when it seems to be tea-time. And so the feasting goes on through the afternoon, while the elms and poplars throw longer and longer shadows across the meadows, and the golden light grows in the west, until with the dinner-hour the feast that has never come to an end begins all over again.

As the west pales, lights glimmer here and there from a house-boat. Then more and more burn brighter in the gathering dusk, and they blaze out in long lines and brilliant clusters. There are lights on the bridge, on the shores, in the town. Everywhere on the river Chinese lanterns flit hither and thither like giant fireflies. It is a fairy river—a river of shadowy distances and wandering flames, a river crossed and circled by shining, shimmering paths of gold. The long twilight deepens into soft summer darkness, and the lights burn ever with greater brilliance. On the last night of all, showers of golden rockets illuminate the town and the water and the boats. A glorified sunset seems to have burned into the heavens, and now again skiffs and canoes and punts and every kind of small craft are wedged in tight from shore to shore, breaking loose as if by miracle in the final scrambling, scrunching struggle for the last train up to London. Unless you have patience and fairly good temper, it is as well not to trust yourself on the water.

The morning of the next day the crowd has gone; the house-boats are towed away, one by one; for another year Henley returns to its slumbers.