



From a photograph by R. W. Thomas.

THE LAWN, ASCOT.

SOCIETY AT ASCOT.

BY MAUD RAWSON.

THE only way to obtain an inclusive impression of Ascot races would be to view them from a captive balloon, in which case, however, one would lose all the delicious incidents of each section of the course.

The standing marvel in the whole affair is the enormous amount of exertion taken by the idlest and the most exclusive sets in Society for the pleasure of spending four days in the pitiless sun, on a piece of ground that cannot by the wildest stretch of imagination be termed a lawn. There is the fact. You cannot explain it, any more than you can explain why the air of the Enclosure, divided only by a thin iron railing from that of the course itself, should be accounted so much more invigorating that those outside the railing must needs gaze open-mouthed over it, as if the zephyrs were all in the Enclosure. They are not. For sheer white-hot breathlessness commend me to the Enclosure. Just as a high-light in any object entirely subordinates local

colour, so does the sun in the Enclosure temporarily take the zest even from the most exquisite scandals—and it is the place of the daintiest scandals of the season. They float about on “lawn” and paddock, and fly from mouth to mouth as lightly as gossamer. But the threads are steel. You cannot break them.

Fortunately Ascot week is not always tropical. There is coolness in the dewy morning for those who do not “do Ascot” from London. Just as in the case of Henley, the folk who find one day’s racing at a time sufficient run down by an early special in dust-cloaks, and return at night. Happier the lot of those who form one of the many house-parties in the neighbourhood. Arrivals begin on Monday, and tolerably large circles sit down to dinner in the evening.

The business of the day begins early in an Ascot house-party. After breakfast the men can smoke and be idle; but for the women there is an impending and elaborate change of toilette, for one lunches about noon, and

then the omnibuses and wagonettes are ready, the first for the ladies, the second for the men of the party. Away goes the little procession, the dust rising in clouds; and presently the carriages strike the high-road and join the stream of traffic that plunges on between the powdered hedges to the inornate building that includes the owners' stand and the race-offices. There is a great brushing of "stove-pipes" and a furling of dust-coats before your party passes through the building on to the Lawn, each clutching his or her Enclosure voucher, lest, as sometimes happens, a loafer should snatch at it, and so gain entrance to the Royal pleasure, for which, it is said, the Master of the Horse annually refuses admission to some thousands of ambitious persons. That pleasure, as aforesaid, consists of a stretch of burnt, khaki-coloured grass, dotted with chairs in irregular lines.

There is something of the picnic about it all; it is as if Society, being stupendously hard up, had given its last sticks towards a "surprise party." For better or for worse,

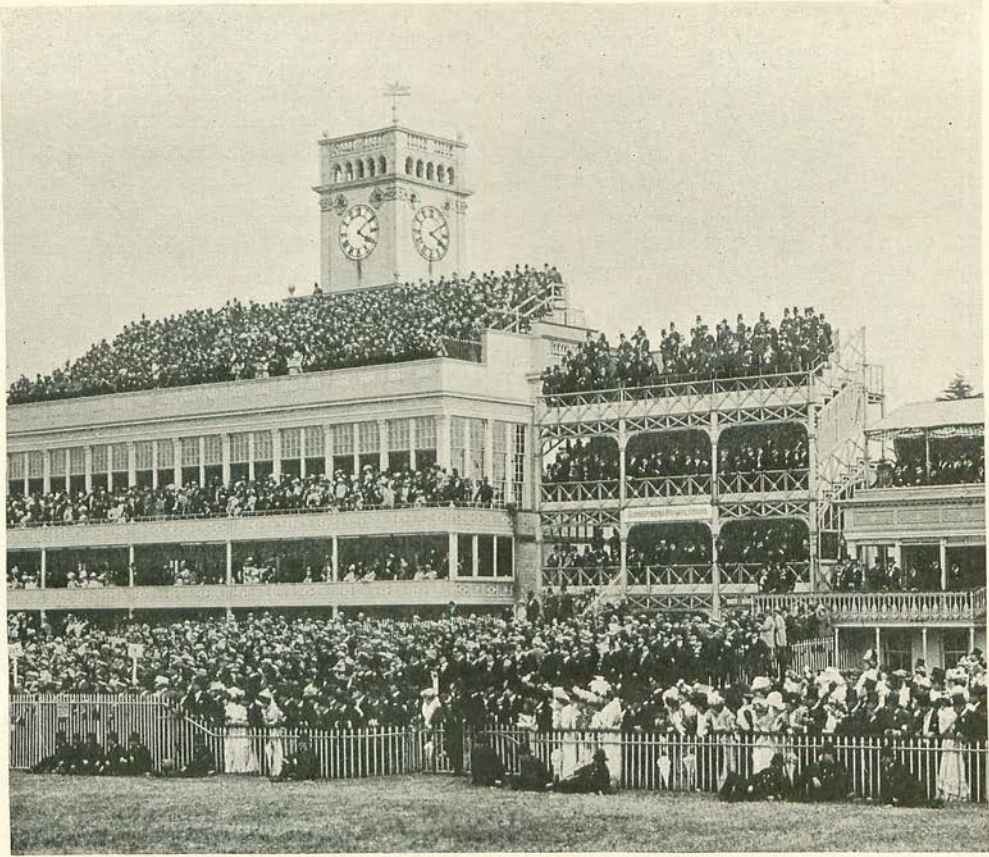
there are your chairs, the chairs of your party, somewhere between the Royal pavilion at the back of the Enclosure and the thin iron railing that separates you from the crowd on the course.

By this time it is about 1.30, and you are content to sit for a short while; there is so much to see. Presently the Prince of Wales and his party, who have lunched, come out into the balcony of their pavilion. The Royal ladies, mostly in shades of blue and white, take their seats; their race-glasses go up. The Prince himself comes down on to the Lawn and speaks to his friends, keeping always just in front of the pavilion, where shade is and the Royal chairs are disposed. Farther along the Enclosure His Royal Highness does not come. He keeps well away from the relentless kodaks of the general public beyond the railings.

You bethink yourself suddenly of a second lunch, for the first was probably a hurried affair, and you count yourself fortunate if you are sure of three or four hospitable club-tents. Even here it is too hot to think of



AMONG THE COACHES,



THE GRAND-STAND.

solid meals. You take a walk with your escort to find friends, perhaps, on some of the coaches on the other side of the course, and then a signal tells of the first race, and there is a scurry back to the Enclosure again. At the beginning of the day there is a praiseworthy effort to take an interest in the event. The *débutantes*, with whom this is a first Ascot, insist on taking a position on the raised portion on the left of the Lawn, by the winning-post. They even get excited, and yield timidly to a diminutive bet. It is not a race of much moment, perhaps, to the women who look on. The event over, the crowd pours once more across the course, and faces the iron railing. You lift your hand to close your parasol, and in that moment are unconsciously immortalised, for the relentless kodaks are there. Everywhere the one-eyed camera is levelled at the people who wear the little vouchers hanging from

their buttonholes. It is a polite but deadly revenge for such asserted exclusiveness.

There is no moment in the whole of the London season which offers a finer study in profile than Thursday in Ascot week, about an hour before the start for the Gold Cup. Seated about four or five rows back from the end of the Enclosure, you are entertained by the most amusing procession of faces, figures, and clothes to be seen in any part of the world. An American writer's impression of this social pageant was not a happy one, and priceless gowns do not appear to him to be trailed through the dusty grass with that reckless ease which distinguishes a genuine woman of fashion. "They all appear to be afraid of mussing their frocks," is his remark, "which, when they have so many, seems rather mean-spirited." The general complaint, however, on the part of the genuine racing-woman is that the fragile

gauzes and muslins which can only be worn once, and are so much the rage, are ridiculous. But the fashions pay no heed to occasions, and so the panorama of faces and frocks passes along the front of the Enclosure. Now there flits by a country baronet, with his two daughters; now a popular actor, who has so many friends to greet that his progress is slow. Now there passes beyond the rail a thin, eager-eyed gentleman "bookie," whose friends in the Enclosure nod to him and go up to register their bets on the right of the Lawn, where only the flanking railing separates the elect from a hedge of bookies of all sorts and conditions. From it there goes up a hoarse murmur, which never ceases till the last race is run. It looks the most informal affair in the world—just a string of shouting touters who can make you richer or poorer, if you desire it, within the space of half an hour.

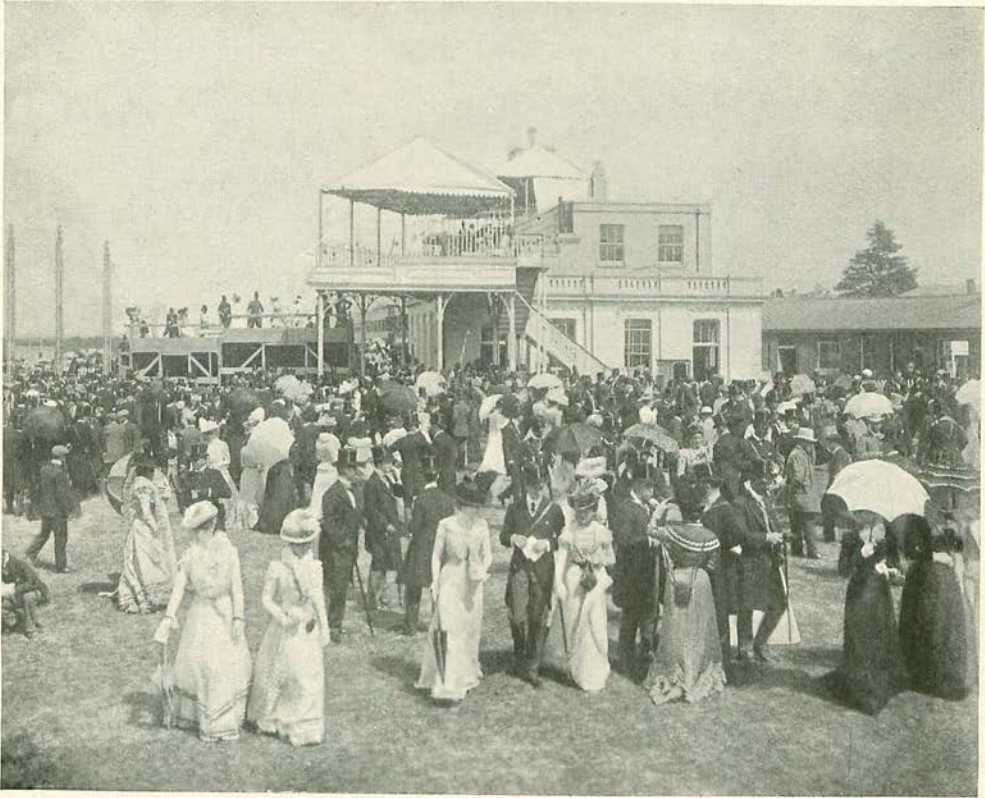
And still the stream flows on: peeresses and peers, the hope of a parvenu house in his coaching-uniform, a literary woman of title, wives of military and city knights, celebrities, well-dressed nonentities, and

"personages." Presently an elderly gentleman, looking like a retired Indian general, walks slowly down the gangway, leaning on a younger man, and hats go off to "the Duke," who pauses to chat to a Cabinet Minister. At the same moment you catch sight of a head and shoulders that should belong to some member of a learned society. Yet the race-glasses are worn with an accustomed air, though there is nothing to indicate the sportsman. As he comes nearer you puzzle over the face. Reminiscences of *Punch* cartoons harass your mind. You look again: the head droops a little, the thin grey beard flows down in an undecided fashion over the dust-coat, the mouth is slightly open, the eyes gaze upon the crowd, yet apparently see through it into infinite space. But, for all that gentle vagueness, you know that under that 'conventional hat is one of the longest heads in England—for the man who passed you was the Duke of Devonshire. There he passes, mingling with the crowd, regardless of kodaks or hustling or noise, paying no heed to the elect in the Enclosure, except for an occasional nod, while he saunters



From a photograph by K. W. Thomas.

WATCHING THE RACES.



IN THE PADDOCK.

gently along with the air of a friend of the people observing a people's holiday.

It is a pleasant change to leave the grilling Lawn, where the very backs of the garden-chairs are toasted, and take a turn in the Paddock, where there is a tree or two to keep the air a little cool. Generally speaking, this interlude is more strictly amusing than the Enclosure, for here are "all sorts," and the trainers and jockeys are an odd contrast to the men and women of Mayfair and the vast number of Londoners who take Grand-stand tickets for Cup Day. More restful, however, are the club-tents, where iced drinks and tea and fruit can be really enjoyed under the busy punkahs. Ascot is certainly a place of violent contrasts. What can be more curious than to step out of one of these luxurious white tents, dotted with floral tables, whence

loyal tricolour ribands are caught up to the roof in festoons, on to the brown heath that is littered with the picnic goods of the gipsy and coster bands ensconced behind the coaches?

Presently the sun declines, and the Royal pavilion throws a shadow over the Enclosure. The shadow lengthens. Very soon the last race is run, and people are calling for their carriages. You reach the house in time to bask in the garden till dinner; and then a little concert, with Ancona or Plançon or Denham Price or Blanche Marchesi as star, closes the week. If you are energetic you will join one or other of the river-parties at Maidenhead on Sunday; while for an alternative there is always the Park, where the scandals, the successes, the sensational episodes of Royal Ascot may be told all over again.