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A Tale of Henley 1899 WHERE THAMES SMOOTH WATERS GLIDE

Launched at society. A TALE OF HENLEY REGATTA By Victor L Whitechurch

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*"I tell you, the curse of our so-called civilization, in Western Europe at least, lies not so much in tyrannical governments and fools who submit to them, as pleasure - luxury.
What is it that makes men and women apathetic to the shrieking cries of humanity?
the racecourse, the theatre, the ballroom, the world of selfish, social pleasure and amusement.
It is against this that blows must be directed in the future if we would achieve our ends.
It must not be the single tyrants struck with the dagger, the public building ruined with the bomb, unless the bomb is cast into the theatre rather than into a council chamber! "*

These extra-ordinary words were borne forcibly upon my ears as I awoke from an afternoon siesta one sunny day in the beginning of June. I was spending a week or two on the North Cornish coast and had walked from my hotel at Tintagel to a charming little inlet known as Tregarget sand taking my lunch with me in a satchel. After my modest repast, partaken of at the foot of huge rugged cliffs, with the waves breaking in upon the smooth rocks in the foreground, I had strolled aimlessly along the shore until I had hit upon a cave in the cliff.

Bent on exploration, I penetrated this cave for about twenty yards, sat down on a comfortable rock within, lit my pipe, and gave myself over to the contemplation of the sunlit sea sparkling beyond the entrance.

The day was very hot for the time of year, and the cool atmosphere of the cave was a welcome change. Finally, half reclining as I was upon the rock, I must have dozed off to sleep, and, as I said before, the above sentences fell on my ears as I woke.

At the entrance of the cave were two men. One a small, rather stout, bearded individual, seated with his face turned slightly away from me; the other a young man of about six or seven and twenty, with an excited, ruddy face, fair sandy moustache, and curly hair of the same colour. He was standing up before his companion, declaiming to him with earnestness and many gestures.

I saw at once that they were not aware of my presence, hidden as I was in the semi-darkness and shadow of the cave's interior. My first impulse was to come forth and declare myself, but laziness and curiosity combined got the better of me, and I kept still.

"And so we are going to put this study into practice, eh?" said the man who was seated, slowly and deliberately.

"We are my friend, yes - at last we are," went on the other, excitedly.

"I have worked the scheme out to the full, and we are and our two good comrades are agreed.

Yes, in a month's time we shall strike a blow at which society shall indeed shudder and take warning - a blow to pleasure on a gigantic scale."

"Meanwhile," rejoined his companion, *"I should keep a bit cooler if I were you and not talk so loud. One never knows where danger exists."*

"True," replied the other; *"my excitement carries me away sometimes, especially when I think what we have undertaken."*

"Well," said the stout man, rising from his seat and taking his companion's arm, *"it's lucky I know something about submarine ..."*

That was all I heard.

The breaking of a wave drowned the rest of the sentence as the two men disappeared from the mouth of the cave. I rose to my feet and prepared to follow them. Then I reflected for a moment. If I left the cave at once, and they chanced to see me, the consequences might not only be disagreeable to myself, but, at least, I should excite suspicion. So I waited for a few minutes. When I emerged into the daylight once more I saw them disappearing in the distance towards the little Bay from which one mounted the cliffs. I started quickly after them, but had scarcely gone a dozen steps when my foot slipped on a bit of seaweed attached to a rock, and I fell heavily with an awful crash on my knee. When I picked myself up I could only walk slowly and with pain, and the end of it was that I lost sight of the two strangers all together. Subsequent enquiries in the neighbourhood failed to draw any information concerning them. The incident remained in my memory for a week or so, and then gradually died away.

At the time of which I am speaking I held a lieutenant's commission in the navy. I had been invalided home from an African station for six months, and was gradually recovering my health, which had suffered from fever, and was taking things pretty easily.

One day I received an invitation to go and spend a week at Henley during the regatta. Some friends of mine had

at, and were getting up a fairly large party. Now, as there happened to be a certain lady in the case whom I knew was also invited, I accepted with alacrity, looking up all manner of boating costumes, packed my portmanteau, and took an afternoon train from Paddington on the day before the regatta.

As we moved out of the station I noticed the man seated in the farther corner of the carriage. Something, I could not at first tell what, about him seemed familiar, and presently, as he turned his face half way away from me to look out of the window, there flashed across my mind the scene in the cave at Tregarget. It was the small man with the dark beard. My curiosity was aroused, especially when it flashed across my mind that the month was just up. He appeared the very essence of a boating man, clad in light summer costume and a straw hat. When the train drew up at Henley there was a further development. I tall young man in flannels and blazer was on the platform, and lounged up to my travelling companion as he alighted. It was the other of the two men.

"Got it?" I heard him exclaim, in a casual tone of voice.
The bearded man nodded, and they walked towards the brake van.

I waited on the platform for a few moments. Presently I saw them assist a porter to lift a large package out of the brake van, a box about 4½ feet in length and some 18 inches Square. They seemed very particular about the way it was laid on a trolley and wheeled down the platform. I saw them both deposit this box in a cab, end up, and drove off. I engaged another, and as we journeyed to the river I pondered over the somewhat mysterious affair, but forgot all about it a few minutes afterwards when I met Hilda Carr at the tea table on the houseboat. I had come to Henley with the express purpose of proposing to Hilda Carr. She told me afterwards she guessed it herself. But my love making by no means made much headway for the next twenty four hours.

Girls are such idiots, or at least they behave in such a silly way, that they make a fellow feel bad. They can't be serious when a man wants to be serious.

When I got her up in a quiet little corner of the upper deck that same evening, and managed to blow out the Chinese lantern nearest to us to make it darker and give me a better chance; and when I began talking seriously about the stars and things, instead of seeing what I was driving at, she simply said:

"Oh, Mr Barton, do come and listen to these lovely [African gentlemen]."

And then she went off to the others and encouraged a pack of wretched [said persons] who were serenading the houseboat from a punt.

It was just the same the next day. She never gave me a chance. She sat next to a fellow named Willoughby at lunch, and he seemed to get on famously with her. It nearly drove me wild. I hinted to her that I was put out, but she only laughed at me. But in the evening, after dinner, my luck turned, and I managed to get her alone in a Canadian canoe belonging to the houseboat. We paddled upstream beneath the quaint old bridge, now crowded with people returning to the station. The sun had set by the time we reached Marsh Lock, about three quarters of a mile from the course. I paddled into the lock with some other craft.

"Are you going farther, Mr Barton?" said my companion.
"Oh, I replied, let's just go through. There's lots of time."
To tell the truth I was anxious to get into a quiet reach, for I had a certain question to ask. That was why I wanted to go through the lock.

I was just beginning to ease down a bit when we had gone a few hundred yards farther, and was thinking of how I had better begin, when a certain voice arrested my attention.

It came from a houseboat. Now, during Henley week most of the house boats are moored alongside the course on the Bucks side, and it was somewhat unusual to find one above Marsh Lock. It was a small, dingy looking concern, and only four men were aboard her, sitting on the deck smoking. The voice I recognised was that of the fair-moustached young man and there he was, one of the group. The coincidence set me thinking as I paddled on.

Was there some deep plot about to be unfolded?

Were they nihilists or anarchists?

I remembered that outburst against society pleasures, and here was the man who made it, present at one of the gayest scenes in England - Henley Regatta; what did it mean?

"A penny for your thoughts!" Said Hilda. *"Why so silent?"*
"They're not worth it," I replied.
Why do men always make bungling replies at the wrong moment?
"Oh," she said, rather tartly.
"No," I said, realizing that I had put my foot in it.
"If I'd been thinking of you it would be different."
"I'm sure I don't want you to think of me," she replied;
"but really we'd be better turning. It's getting quite dark."
I turned the canoe rather surlily. It had choked me off for the moment.
As we neared the houseboat once more, I rested on my paddle so as to drift by silently.
A punt was alongside, and in the gloom I could see a figure stepping into it.
Then I distinctly heard the words:-

"Menuv aftu <c> ... drop my handkerchief."

I ~~upped~~ my paddle in the water and we shot ahead, the punt following close astern.

We entered the lock together and lay there side by side. As I struck a match to light a cigarette the glare of it showed me the face of the man in the punt. was the young fellow with the red moustache.

I am not going to weary the reader with the details of how I proposed to Hilda Carr on the way back.

Suffice it to say that, in spite of my pleading, nothing would induce her to give me a decisive answer. She would neither say yes nor no, and I simply felt a fool.

I felt a bigger one next day. She snubbed me horribly, and I nearly kicked young Willoughby.

I'm afraid I got in a temper, so much so that I sneaked away from lunch and embarked in the canoe by myself, determined to paddle up and down the course.

Anyone who has tried this at Henley knows what it means. Between the bridge and Regatta Island are hundreds upon hundreds of boats, punts, and canoes, a veritable carnival of colour and beauty such as can only be seen on this beautiful reach on the Thames.

Every now and then the warning bells command the clearance of the course, and the craft on either side become still more densely packed. It is no easy task to pilot ones way through the endless flotilla, and skill and patience alike are necessary.

Bump!

The nose of my canoe ran into a punt.

It was not my fault.

The occupant, who was using paddles only, ought to have seen me.

"I beg your pardon, sir!" it was my old friend of the fair moustache, got up in flannels and blazer, working his way upstream.

Good. I wanted something in my present mood to take my mind off things. So I determined to follow him. It was a good 5 minutes before I could turn, at when I did so he was 50 yards away from me.

Bang! A race had begun.

I was hemmed in for a minute and could not stay. I could see him moving on, though.

"Well rowed, Eton!"

"Go it, Leander!"

"Now then, stroke!"

The crews came by in grand style. My eyes were fixed on the punt creeping ahead.

Splash, and an ugly rocking. The wake of the umpire's steam launch.

All clear now. I slipped into the course and picked up a little speed. In and out, carefully, gingerly, went the punt and my canoe. At length we were beyond the crowded part, and as I shot under the bridge my unconscious quarry was punting hard about 100 yards ahead upstream. I kept this distance between us, for I did not want to raise his suspicions.

Presently we drew near Marsh Lock.

He punted up to the shore, made his punt fast, and stepped out. I followed in a lazy manner, lighting my pipe carelessly as I strolled after him towards the lock.

The latter was full of boats coming down stream. They had just closed the upper gates and opened the sluices. I watched the water swirling into [out of] the lock, and then I marked the movements of the man I had followed. He was close to the upper gates, gazing at the stream beyond.



Upper Gates, Marsh Lock, Henry Taunt, 1878

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I looked, too, and saw rather a curious thing. There was a large boat with two men in it close alongside the mysterious houseboat some little distance upstream. Apparently at a sign from the man who stood on the lock, they came rowing towards us. When they were about 100 yards away they stopped pulling, and, in an aimless manner, allowed the boat to drift round, so that the stern pointed towards the lock gates. Then I saw that not only was the boat of unusual size for a river craft, but that she carried something rather heavy in the stern - something covered over in a peculiar manner.

One of the two men in her kept her in position with her head upstream, the other stood up and gazed towards the lock.

The latter had now filled [*emptied*], and the lock keeper and his assistant were opening the lower gates to allow the boats out. Presently both of them were opened wide and the procession commenced.

It was then that I turned to look at the man of the punt. He was apparently studying the water, and puffing away at a cigar.

Suddenly I noticed he held a handkerchief loosely in his hand. a moment afterwards and he had dropped it dash dropped it into the water above the upper gates.

I looked at the boat.

The man who had been standing up was apparently stooping. There were no other boats near him.

Suddenly I saw some dark object drop from the stern of the boat into the water.

The man who was standing near me instantly turned and walked quietly but quickly away from the lock gates, while the boat immediately put towards the shore.

I was fairly puzzled but only for an instant. For I saw something the next moment that appealed to my knowledge of naval gunnery, and revealed one of the most diabolical plots that the mind of man can conceive.

That something was air bubbles rising to the surface of the water and travelling quickly towards the lock gates by which I stood.

I knew the meaning of them only too well, and realised the appalling situation in a moment.

A small torpedo, driven by compressed air, had evidently been launched from the stern of the boat, and in about ten or fifteen seconds would strike the lower gates beneath the surface of the water.

And then what would happen?

I Menu e mi < > the lock above - the lower gates of Marsh Lock stood open. It that the miles of water, four feet or so in height, would come sweeping down. It would be impossible to close the lower gates, and in five minutes a huge "tidal wave" would rush irresistibly and without warning upon the thousands pleasure-seekers on the regatta course below. The destruction would be simply appalling. All this flashed through my mind as I watched the ominous bubbling of the escaping compressed air drawing nearer and nearer.

For a couple of seconds or more I stood petrified with the horror of the situation. Then I threw off my coat, took a running dive, and plunged into the river. I had determined to turn the course of the torpedo. I rose to the surface and struck out. The bubbles were only twenty yards off. I measured the distance with my eye and swam on. Crack! Splash! Close to my head in the water. The light-moustached man had seen my dive, rushed to the bank, and was firing at me with a revolver, regardless of the sundry spectators who were running towards him. Crack! Splash! Missed me again. The bubbles were very close, I dived, opened my eyes beneath the surface, and saw the ugly black thing coming at me. I knew that if I touched the apex I stood a chance of exploding the thing. But I was perfectly cool. I waited a moment, then put out my hand, seized it by the head very gingerly, and with a push deflected its course towards the bank; the screw at the end struck my face slightly as it turned, and I rose to the surface and swam in the other direction for dear life. Towards the bank! Yes, as I looked over my shoulder I saw my adversary standing close to the edge of the water. "Back for your lives!" I yelled to some men who were making for him. "Back!" The torpedo struck the bank. There was a dull roar, and I could see the earth fly and a mighty splash of water. Then I felt it felt as if I was struck on every part of my body, and I knew no more.

When I recovered consciousness I was lying on a sofa in the lock keepers cottage. Some fellows in flannels were standing around me. "You're alright," said one; "I'm a doctor, you know. You've only had a shock. By Jove, though, you've done a plucky thing." "Did you see it?" "Only partly - you know what happened, eh?" "No - what?" "Why, the thing exploded just at the foot of the fellow who was potting at you. We halted in time, but he was blown clean off his legs - it was awful. I couldn't do anything with him." "Where is he?" "Dead," said the doctor. "He came round for a couple of minutes first, and began to curse you. Then he told us it was a small torpedo, with eight pounds of gun cotton and an air motor and that if it hadn't been for you, Henley would be swamped by now. He died gloating over the thought." "Have they caught the others?" "What others?" I told them. But no one had seen the two men in the boat make off, and they were never caught.

The houseboat was searched afterwards by the police, and sundry tools and machines discovered, together with a few spare pounds of gun cotton. From these it was evident that the torpedo had been about four feet long and weighed almost fifty pounds, quite a small one, but sufficient to have blown up the lock gates, and thus to have brought destruction on thousands. They punted me back to Henley, took me aboard the house boat, and told the story. And a couple of hours later I forgot the horror of it when Hilda Carr said "yes". She told me she had meant it all the time, but intended to wait until the end of the week but but now I had done something to earn it sooner. And Willoughby had been sweet on another girl, after all. So it all ended happily - except for the young anarchist.

[A great tale of 'daring-do'! But I think, though I am willing to be corrected, that the devastation that this attack would have caused has been much overemphasized for the dramatic effect. Except for the boats immediately below the lock on that side, and any boats unable to get clear of the greatly increased current above the lock, I don't think there would have been much danger to anyone. It certainly would not have resulted in a four foot wave entering the regatta reach. You only have to think of a four foot wave leaving the lock, and then spreading out to fill the whole width of the river below the lock. The wave would need to become ten times wider, and therefore ten times lower. The lock itself would constrain the amount of water that could pass. The major problem would have been the blockage to river traffic, both at the lock and in the drained reach above. I doubt the crews taking part in a race when the consequences reached them, would have noticed.]

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