

Side1

[Percy Bullock]

Greetings, Hart. How grand a way to speak to you like this. I wish you were sitting here listening so that you could also answer me at the same time.

I haven't had the opportunity to congratulate you on producing such a fine crew at Henley this year. What a magnificent show it was. And after reading your book, which was wonderfully put together as usual, and to see that poor little letter of mine nestling among your great president, Kent School, indeed, must be very proud of the performance of the Boat Club at Henley this year.

I know I was thrilled. I couldn't have been more thrilled than if Jesus had won the Grand. Because to see your crew rowing, and most really to watch poetry of motion, the way you got their timing taped, or did it come from inside your laddie?

You know, I feel sure, watching this crew this year, that you learned an awful lot from last year. I think of the way they were backwatering, filling the boat with water. It just could not go fast.

But this is the way to learn. And if you didn't learn anything, I learned an awful lot. It's strange, isn't it?

The older you get, the less you know, the more you want to learn. And I learned an awful lot from the Kent boys this year. Well done.

You deserve all credit, because you must have put in an awful lot of work to have got this performance. Also the boys this year, they were so extraordinarily cool and precise about everything they did. They had good schooling, good coaching, and they had the right mind, the right temperament, the right mentality.

And this is why I feel sometimes that a coach should be a good psychologist. You've probably found this out before now. But it was a grand show.

When one comes down to it, the more I look at rowing, the more I'm learning every day, they still get me down to the river coaching, and I get the opportunity of watching other crews. And I find that all the crews that move fast have developed a good legwork. You'll find that the beginnings are always taken initially with the legs, the arms being elastic and drawing pieces to really draw that power on the whole way through.

And when one sees the legs taking the beginning, the hands drawing at it elastically, and being patient with it, and sensing that the boat's moving with the blade in the water, this is what I always love to quote Steve on this action and reaction, equal and opposite. The water says to the blade, you push me, and I'll push you. And likewise, you get the reverse happening.

And when a man once gets this into his head, that it's the reaction of the water on the blade that's going to move the boat, then the faster the boat will move. Providing he realises one basic thing, and that is that the blade going through the water must go through hard. Otherwise it's pointless to put it in at the beginning.

When you see people who get the idea that if we just get it in quietly and then build it up through the water, I think it's nonsense. Because if you do this, you might just as well not put your blade into the water at full reach. And so we, I think, agree and come to the same conclusion that every body of the boat comes to.

That it's the blade that goes in hard, goes through hard, and throws it away hardest. And if you get this going truly, you get the joy of the forward swing, which, there's a little poem about that, about resting the heart on the forward swing. And one has to rest somewhere to get something out of it.

I find talking into this thing, it is so lonely that there seems to be no feeling. This is because I'm not used to it. I'm just talking to you now off the cuff.

If I were going to write it out before I spoke to you, then I might just as well write. And that's a terrible hardship to me always. So if this chat appears to be disjointed and hesitant, forgive me.

Because this is lack of experience, I suppose. Nevertheless, I think this is a wonderful way of capturing thoughts of the past. You know, I wish over the years I had such a thing as this to toy with.

When old Steve Fairbairn used to give his talks on rowing, he used to call it chats on rowing. These little chats used to talk happily together, which I think is much easier than being alone, talking to a dead machine. Somehow it's like bad rowing.

It lacks life. It lacks that idea of endless chain. But still, perhaps I'll get over it.

They say, in rowing, you know, the first five years are your worst. And the incredible thing is, Steve quoted this again, because the finishing turn is so difficult to get, you can't teach it. It's something that one has to acquire.

And this is why Steve always reckoned that an oarsman was better after five years, because the finishing turn was more natural to him. However, that be as it may, I can't help thinking that Steve would often have said the same today as he did then, that the oarsman would turn around and say, but I've rowed five years. And then, of course, you have to answer, yes, but you'll find you're better after ten than after five.

And so it's true that the story of rowing is that you can go on improving. And the moment you think that you can't improve, that you've reached the top, then, of course, is the end, because you never continue along an even line in rowing any more than you do in politics. There's always a leaning or a tendency towards the left or the right.

So in rowing, one gets the same tendency. In the orthodox theme or the Fairbairn theme, you get these feeling of being either one side or the other. But you can't keep a level course.

You'll either go up or you'll go down. You found this with crews. If they were to go constant the whole time, then they wouldn't improve.

It is only the idea of working the blade harder each stroke, working it at your top that's really going to produce results. It's this idea that if I go out for an outing every day and just say to myself, well, I just row the blade through like this every stroke. It's just the same.

I'm wrong. We should be. Because this means that we should become stagnant.

And stagnant boats are all too frequently found. I've found them anyway. I'm sure you have as well.

How interested, Hart, I was to see the letter with the five Ks in your small booklet. I trust the Americans don't think that the English are so ignorant concerning Ks and Cs. But nevertheless, it was one way that Steve had of putting it over what he really meant and to have it at the back of your mind always.

I stress this so often because, let's face it, if you have a crew which you've been training, you've trained them to race. You've trained them to move fast. You've trained them to go at their top, in fact, often more than their top.

And there's one thing that does kill a crew more than anything because it kills the rhythm, and that is crews trying to do more than their best. To exaggerate it, you can look at it as a circle. And if you try to get this circle outside your reach, then you get discord.

But have it within the reach so it is a perfect circle, and you are within that circle, then you have complete harmony, and this is when you can do your best. Of course, one always takes into account the type of training the crew has had. If the crew has been allowed to become lethargic mentally, if they haven't had their mind kept on moving the boat each stroke at their top, then, of course, it may be necessary to put fireworks under their seats preferably.

But otherwise, a crew that grows up the right way, which is to feel that every stroke is a good one and a hard one and a better one, then the need will be usually to cool them down and not do anything to get them over-anxious. There's nothing so bad, I think, as seeing a sculler or anybody so taught, so tied up, that they become almost unconscious. I've been taking Chris Balliol, the president of the Cambridge University Boat Club, you must remember him, the Jesus man, and I've been taking that sculling, and he's sculling through on the final tomorrow.

Now, he's a wonderfully, wonderfully highly strong boy and can break records, and yet he says sometimes, or often, that I coach him, and I tell him, look, I don't coach you at all. I try and help you to think for yourself, because it's all got to come from inside you, laddie. He doesn't realise it, but all I, at least, I don't think he does, but all I do is to just go down on the back for him and

tell him it's fine, it's fine, she's moving beautifully, and he's much competent and gets easier and easier in his working to move the boat.

And I think this is mainly why he likes to be on the bank, and that is because he's the type that wants cooling down, because he's always racing, day after day after day, racing, racing himself. So you see, there is no need, in this instance, to try and egg him on to do much better, which would only kill his endless chain, it would kill his rhythm, and once you've lost that, you've lost pretty well the whole heart in rowing. Talking of crews which want urging on when it comes to a day or two before the race, those who have been rather phlegmatic about their approach to moving a boat, I've come across one or two recently that have been like this, which proves that 5Ks aren't necessarily for all crews.

I always treat these crews who seem to want to stand around when they get off, or take it off easily, by telling them a story. I give them a start of 10 strokes and all they clock 35. This is perhaps three days before the race.

Then I eat at them and get them close and chat to them, and I tell them the story of what happens at Newmarket. This is the Mecca of horse racing in this country, quite near Cambridge. These racehorses, naturally like horsemen, are temperamental.

I tell them the story of when they bring the fillies out to race for the first time. These little fillies are fretsome and excitable, and they don't want to go. In fact, the tape goes up and they stand still, just prancing about.

I tell them that what they used to do, I'm not sure if this is true, but I've heard it anyway. They had a brazier. That's an old-fashioned iron contraption where you have a fire burning.

I suppose it belonged to mediaeval England. They used to put potatoes on this fire, baked potatoes they would be by the time the race was due. It was said that if they had a temperamental filly that they thought wouldn't go off, they would have these men standing around, they'd have leather gloves on, and just before the tape went up, they'd be at the back of the filly with the potato in their hand, and they would lift the tail of the filly up, pop the hot potato under it, and smack the tail down.

I used to say the filly was away, there was no stopping it. I've seen this story, which shows you how stupid we can be, especially horsemen. I've seen these crews go off, after telling that story, at 40 at least, and they'd never touched more than 35 prior to that.

You see there are crews that do need this sort of stimulant, this urgency about things. But this is because they've been kept down the whole time, I think, and never been allowed to express themselves fully. Do you use the exercise that I've found in the last few years the most exciting one?

That is taking the outside hand off the oar during the stroke and forward, either putting it on your hip or swinging the outside hand over your head to come and pick up the oar at the

beginning. They usually do this when paddling light, and one goes on doing this. It doesn't always look very clever, but they do get more clever as time goes on.

But the most exciting part is while they're paddling light after a stretch, you get them to put their outside hands on again. And then one sees the power coming on, and they begin to realise what a terrific amount of power they have with this outside hand drawing, with the extra leverage. And then we let them work it up to a paddle firm, which ends in a row.

It's absolutely fantastic to see the amount of power that comes on and the way the boat goes, all because this outside hand is really doing the drawing, where before I think often the outside hand doesn't mean very much to them. Since recording this earlier part, Chris Balliol, by the way, did win the Senior Sculls at Cambridge in a record time of four seconds faster than had ever been done before. And this was in adverse weather conditions, with quite a headwind up the last half mile straight.

But this was an incredible performance. And you know, I come to a thinking of another thought here. Old Steve Fairbairn said that it was the horse that did the work during the winter that won the Melbourne Cup, being an Australian, I suppose it would be the equivalent of our Derby.

If you think, and maybe you may well do, that I do quote Steve quite a lot, do forgive me, because I always looked on Steve as a man who taught a way of life, which is really, to me, almost more important than rowing. And rowing was used as a medium to obtain this mentality, which was very good. So if you think I use his name a lot, as I say, do forgive me, because it can be rather exasperating to people who didn't know him, to think that, well, he was the only one to do anything about anything.

He would be the last one to admit this, because he always was such a simple soul. I think mainly why I loved him so very much. Rowing is really a way of life.

And I tell those crews, or men that I go with, or boys, that it is such a way of life that one can learn to enjoy life to a greater and fuller extent. I tell them that I can get an awful lot of fun out of sweeping the dirty floor, because the achievement is that you are clearing something, and making it clean, making it tidy, and it gives me great satisfaction to do it. If I'm repairing a boat, then it is a thing of joy, because every time you do such a thing, then you look towards the finish, I mean finishing the article, not the finish of the stroke, that it is something that you've worked for the whole time, you've thought about, you've given your time, your love, your energy to.

Therefore, you get a great deal of satisfaction from doing just this. And so, when you teach rowing, Hart, I'm sure you do. I think I know you well enough for that now.

Always realise that whatever you're teaching a man to do in a boat, which really boils down to all honest things, then this must go through life with a boy, into manhood, and right through his life. I remember so well, a year before the war, when Mussolini was getting a bit excited and

stamping about, and Hitler doing the same thing, I came back and we were talking at the boathouse about this particular thing, and our boating at that time was going through a very happy phase, and I said, why can't we get, or somebody get, Mussolini and Hitler to come up to Cambridge and row in our first boat, or get them good enough to, they would enjoy themselves so much learning to move boats fast, and really enjoying the life that went with it, that they wouldn't have time to squabble, they wouldn't have time to get ideas of greed or hate.

And it never came off, but I often think of it, because I think it's tied up with this general mentality of doing your best. What is it, the words that say, whatever your hand turns to, do it at your best, although that's misquoting it. But that is the idea in life, that it goes through life.

Likewise, again, we have a saying in the club, and have had for many years, oarsmen, when rowing, don't just look at your blade and think, well, that was a bad stroke, it doesn't matter. It does matter. You must try and ensure that each stroke is the best, not indifferent.

Because if you have one bad stroke, or one man making one bad stroke in a crew, then that stroke will react and reflect right through the crew. And that bad stroke may well not only reflect throughout the crew, but throughout the boat club. And not only through the boat club, but throughout the college.

And when they leave college, maybe throughout the world. And this is where I think the importance lies in rowing. It gives the opportunity of doing these turns, or taking these strokes, step by step.

And when you remember, during one season rowing, the number of strokes a man takes, one can see how important it is if his mind is right, for that number of strokes to be right, and cared for the whole time. So, oarsman, make sure that your next stroke is the best that you've ever done. Never give way to being careless.

And the reaction may go right the way through the world, in a far greater way. And then you imagine, this story sounds far-fetched, but I've thought so much about it, thought so deeply about this, that I'm sure it's right. It not only puts the man's mind right, but it puts his heart right, which nowadays, I fear, is more necessary than probably it's ever been before.

And I do see symptoms of this. I don't know whether it's coming from better rowing, or I don't think it could be coming from politics, because I always think this is a way of getting away from true rowing. However, it's a thought worth thinking about.

As you know, we have a clock on top of our boathouse, and it's interesting to watch crews going by during the afternoon. Sometimes you'll see the, they're not usually very good crews, true, but you'll see them, they come slopping along the boathouse, and their eyes look up at the clock, and you can see in their mind, I'm not with the boat, I'm not with rowing at all. Oh, what's the time?

Oh, I shall be late getting back for my tea to be with me girlfriend, or something like that, which

again shows the wrong attitude towards rowing. While on this theme, another interesting thought is the idea of the story of the oarsman, who probably has become so coach-conscious that he doesn't think for himself, he just sits there and waits to be told just what to do every moment. In other words, he lacks initiative, and initiative, of course, is the greatest asset in rowing.

And this was often talked of as a man sitting in a boat, looking with the coach, looking just like a dead sheep's head on a butcher's slab, with his eyes wide open, ogling and saying, what shall I do next? How pathetic can one get? But surely, Hart, you don't want to hear all this twaddle.

I like to reminisce on all these things as I've heard over the years, because I think they have a great connection with rowing in helping to mould such a mentality. But if I know anything about you, I think you probably knew these answers long before I, and probably better ones too. It'll be interesting to hear what you have to say.

You asked for my impressions of last year's crew. And I assume, Hart, you mean 1971 and not 1972. I think I mentioned earlier in this tape about the particular things you were doing wrong.

But the things that stand out most in my mind with those crews of 71 were the way in which they were putting their blades in backwards to start with, which created the big backslash. This, of course, must stop a boat. Yet they were such strong lads.

And also the lie back at the finish would bring in an awful lot of effort, because one uses the last part of the stroke to almost reverse the movement from going back to going forward. And if you lie back too far, then it brings effort into the rowing. I'm saying no more about this, excepting that it may be, and well may be, that the 71 crew taught you so much, and yet it got the boys right on top of getting it beyond top dead centre at the beginning.

Not top dead centre, beyond it. This is why they got their backslash. And this is what kills the oil and ease.

But on the other hand, it would give them the idea of being able to catch it instantaneously behind the rig up, providing they were catching it with the right thing. And I don't think they were. They were catching it with the shoulders, as opposed to catching it with the whole of the weight.

This is why I talk of the initial little bit of leg at the beginning. I don't mean a wallop leg drive that flies down the bottom of the boat, leaving the oar standing in the water. One's mind must always be to move the boat with the blade.

And if one keeps concentrating on this, I don't think these great errors would ever occur. So their criticisms are our criticisms, at least I think so. I may be wrong.

But it may have been a good training ground for the 1972 crew, because here we see almost the reverse take. Well, no, not the reverse. We saw something nearer perfection.

And the one joy I had on receiving your letter and also the Kent news for October the 14th was the picture. I wonder if it occurred to you. I haven't before.

We're looking at it now. And the close-up of the Kent boys just going off the state boat. What a wonderful sight.

You talk about 5 Ks. One talks about confidence. One talks about power.

One talks about elasticity. These boys had it all. And we always have an idea of looking at a crew.

First thing I do when I look at a crew is to look at their faces. And if I see their faces all tied up, taut, angry, lips and nose looking as if they've just been punched by a boxer, oh, I feel what is wrong. Instead of a face screwed up in pain, there should be this look of peace and content on their faces.

And looking at this picture now, oh, it's a glorious sight to watch them. Only poor old seven and four look a little bit, I'm going to do more than my best. But apart from that stroke, I think you are, oh, no, all of them, they're absolute models of perfection.

Don't let poor old seven hear this, or four. If you do let him hear it, or if he does hear it, rather, tell them, I think, that they're just doing a little more than their best at the start. They possibly were looking better when they got the first two or three strokes over.

But they are really a placid-looking crew. This is the difference, I think, when you ask for Kent Crews. I think this is the smoothest, laziest-looking, which is a tribute, crew that I've seen coming out of Kent before.

I've seen Kent Crews of years ago who would win the Thames Cup. But they were very angular, very sharp. Everybody knew an American crew.

And, of course, you were going very much on the American lines in those days. The beginning was a harsh sort of business, and the finish was also a harsh business. It rattled the swivels, it was noisy, and the hands were thrashed away fast.

And it certainly wasn't the oil and ease that I always looked for in a good crew. And this oil and ease, I think, is of the utmost importance. But, mind you, it comes, providing one keeps working on the blade to move the boat.

I think this oiliness comes with cleverness of the turns, and also as their muscles get fitter. For example, this picture. Look at the way these arms are all drawing beautifully, elastically, all said and done, you know.

Their arms are purely connecting links, elastic, they're connecting links, drawing it on. I always like to... Another expression I have of a crew that's going beautifully, at least to me, going beautifully, and I always tell them when they've eased, oh, this is joy, this is what I term feline

elasticity.

I mean, you can absorb that one, if you can. You'll know what I mean. Imagine a panther on a trunk of a tree getting ready to have a go.

You'll notice the way it nestles down until it gets its feet and everything just right. And when it goes, it goes just like a piece of elastic, a lovely spring that carries the thing flying through the air. And one gets the same sort of elasticity in a crew as you see here.

I think this picture is a real joy to watch. I wonder if you've ever noticed it before. Stroke, he looks just like a general who's got absolute command of an army that's going into the field, being backed up by seven willing warriors, brave, cool, cool because they know their job.

And away they go. I think it's a marvellous sight. And so I think this year's crew had this competence and this smoothness that's so necessary.

And I think they had their life. Well, I know they had their life, too. I also looked at the other picture when you're winning, the one beside it.

And there I get another feeling. I seem to have lost count. I found I'd run out of tape suddenly, unexpectedly, in fact.

I turned over to the other side. And you will find that you will have to run through a lot of twaddle. But if I remember correctly, we're still talking about the pictures of the Kent crew in the final.

And looking again, you know, I can understand, of course, four having come from your second boat to come in like that, and for four to get a five, an extraordinarily good feat in so short a time. I take off my hat to them. They did a wonderful job.

If you are interested in this first bit, I'll tell you what it's all about. I mean the beginning of this side of the tape. I taped it last May term.

It was the day before the May races when the Jesus crew went head of the river. And we had a silver tea service presented to us by the master and fellows of the college. And we thought it would be a wonderful opportunity to christen it.

So we had the whole crew, plus Joe Saville, the coach, into our little snugly where we had tea and all tasty bits and pieces. You know, it's a grand evening. And you'll hear the back chat here and there that goes on.

And we always thought in the boat club that these sort of things were always beneficial to rowing because it's amazing how people will talk about rowing and boat work when they're sitting relaxed and having tea and buns and things. I hope it doesn't bore you. If it does, anyway, just pass by.

But look, please help. Will you try and retain that for me? What I intended to do was to tape this as an experiment.

But it seems to have taken so long I've gone almost hoarse with talking. So I didn't, or at least I wouldn't hope to recapture anything I've said. So I would rather like this kept as it is.

I don't want to get through it all again because one has to have a quiet room and no interference from outside at all. In fact, I think in one of these talks, I think in your other side of the tape, you will hear the doorbell going very faintly when I was recording last week. So do listen to it.

There's nothing private about it. You'll have to listen to it anyway to get through to the beginning of this last bit. So I think we'll leave the rowing part completely now until the next time.

You know, it will be a thrill, or shall I say it would be a thrill, to come and meet you all in your homeland, in your home surroundings, to see the whole set up. You know, if we ever do come, I'm fairly handy with my hands. I can milk cows.

Being a Bullock, that should be fairly easy. But as a youngster during the 1914-18 war, I went to a small farm where I used to go look after about 20 cows. Oh, no, I couldn't have been more than 13.

And I used to milk the lot by hand. We didn't have machines in those days. But even there, I found the same rhythmical movement that one gets in rowing.

So who knows? I may have learned something about rowing whilst working on a farm milking cows. It's a lovely draw-and-squeeze feeling.

I mean, it's just like rowing, isn't it? So if I ever come out, perhaps I can earn my living milking cows, and you can save your electricity on the farm for a bit. They're running a programme on the television by Aleister Cook.

I know you're very fond of him, as I am. And he's taking us on a trip across America. And, of course, with the colour television, it was really a magnificent spectacle.

Oh, you lucky people. The wonderful countryside. The autumn appears to be as pretty as any other time of the year, showing the way the leaves all shade off from green until they become their red just before they drop.

And it was really a picture. The flowers, the scenery of the green, the hills. It was really wonderful.

And going over onto the, what is it, north and south and west side of the country, looks far more sophisticated. I would imagine even more of a rat race. I don't know, but it certainly looked very pleasant.

And the places where there were the obtlorious, the wheat-growing belts, they look wonderful, too. You have, indeed, a marvellous country. I think you appreciate it.

In fact, I'm sure you all do. I'm amazed when you come to England and you think, in this pretty place, England, that I suppose it's because it's just a bit different. I like America to look like that very, very much, indeed.

And who knows, one day, we may be with you. You know, Hart, I feel all this talking about voting is terrible, from my point of view. I feel I've been so presumptuous.

And when you know more about rowing than I'll ever know. And you've still got a long way to go. But it's been grand just talking to you as we talk here, chats on rowing.

And it's nice to know how the other half live. And I look forward to other chats with you. I hope we'll get a tape from you sometime or other.

One thing I'd like to leave with you, that I suppose you've learned this point, too, over the years, and that is you finish a season with racing with a very fine crew, we did this in 1947 when we won the Grand at Henley, which is no small feat for a college crew, even in those days. And that crew, they never came to afterwards. Perhaps they thought they'd reached the height that their ambition and that was that.

But we tried the next year with a very similar crew, but it never came to. And you know, we've always had a saying also, that the one thing that you must not do, and that is to start off the next season where you left off. This is fatal.

One has to start at the beginning every time one starts. Do you find this? Maybe it's just this crazy Englishman.

But it is so, I think. One can take so much for granted when one starts off the season, especially after a successful ending to the last season. One thinks that, well, this has got to look like this, and that must look like that, when, point of fact, it was something they acquired as they went off.

And it was only because they started off with the basic things that were built on. But you know all these, so why should I tell you them? I don't know.

However hard it's been grand to chat, give my love to Brian and the children, and to Mr. and Mrs. Towle, and oh, all those, especially dear old Tote, Brian Mann, oh, and Dick Whittaker, oh, but there's so many of them, I could go on and on. Anyway, give them all my love and best wishes, and tell them I think they're a very lucky crowd of people to have such wonderful people and boys around them. This school must be grand.

I compliment all those who lead it, guide it, and trust that the boys and the girls will learn that Kent is the best school in America. In fact, I'm not sure one could go further than that, and say

in the world. I know you must be having a job to keep your hair bright all the time with this modern ways, or these modern ways, and that you're doing a wonderful job.

And when I see Kent boys come over, I tell everybody, it doesn't matter if it's in Henley or where it is, that the best type of American I've ever met, they've come from Kent school, and if you want to see a crew behave itself, watch the Kent school at Henley. This has always been so, even dear old Tote's time, and of course, during Father Sill's time, it was possibly even more so. He was very, very strict, but nevertheless, it was for the good, and must have turned out some grand men.

In fact, when I look at the letters that I have in the presentation that you all kindly gave me, and I see where an awful lot of these men are now, and the jobs, the positions they have, you know, it's something to be proud of, and it's something that a school is, I'm sure, really proud of. If I feel a sound a bit husky, I've got a shocking cold Hart. I hope you won't catch it off the tape.

I hope you'll catch nothing but good. I seem to be asking favours of you. I'm never able to do anything for you, and this to me is terrible.

Never mind. One day, perhaps I'll be able to do something for you, such as clean your shoes, or buy you a bicycle, or something like that. Anyway, all best wishes, Hart, fondest regards to everybody, and I wait for this tape.

I know if you take as long as I take to do this one, I'll get it sometime before next Henley. I hope so. Anyway, all best wishes, Hart.

Be seeing you. Bye-bye.