

Boat Race Day

21st March 1891

Nathaniel Willis opened the door for his employer, then followed him out. They were met with the same grey day they'd seen through Mrs Brown's grimy windows.

"Which crew do you think will win?" asked Mr Reid.

"Need you ask? Cambridge of course," answered Willis, closing the door behind him. "Oxford might be favourites to win but I'm not going to entertain the possibility of the opposition winning?"

Reid paused at the garden gate with his back to their modest lodgings.

"Well, it still rankles that the organisers allowed a former Cantabrigian captain to coach the other side. Lehmann might have felt embittered that he wasn't selected for the Blue boat but to spite his University, well, that just takes the biscuit. One can only hope they change the rules to prevent a reoccurrence."

When they reached the river, an icy gust of wind prompted Willis to rearrange his scarf. He wrapped it tightly about his neck, tucked in the ends, then did up the top button of his coat. He was impatient to continue their walk, but his employer took off a glove, licked the tip of his index finger and held it up. Reid then moved the finger through each cardinal point.

"What have we got?" asked Willis.

"Good news for the crews and bad news for the spectators. As one might expect given it's so cold, it's a northerly wind."

As on previous occasions when they happened to be working in London on a commission for Mr Harding, thereby earning themselves an invitation to his riverside home for his annual Boat Race Day party, they had decided to take a minor detour to Hammersmith Bridge. Over a leisurely cooked breakfast, they had agreed it was the best place to take in the pre-race atmosphere.

They joined the stream of pedestrians headed the same way.

Being jostled and keeping an eye out for pickpockets was part of the race day experience, but the street entertainers, who lent a carnival feel, made it worth a bit of discomfort.

It was common knowledge that Hammersmith Bridge, albeit situated just shy of the half-way point of the racecourse, provided one of the best vantage points of the race. Consequently, it attracted more than eleven thousand spectators.

It was made common knowledge by the newspapers that, when alarming cracks started to appear on the old Hammersmith Bridge, its engineer hadn't accounted for the additional weight, prompting the

building of a strengthened bridge. Willis tried not to dwell on how close the old bridge had come to collapse. If it were not for their connection with Harding, they might have stood by the railings pressed in by other spectators. As it was, Willis could enjoy the spectacle, knowing that, when the race was underway, they'd have a bird's-eye view of the boats and the crews.

Crossing any one of London's bridges on any day was a joy to Willis, looking down upon the mighty river with a command to inspire envy in Father Thames, seeing sailing boats catching the tide and tugs battling against it, and, at Black Friars and beyond, seeing heavily laden ships appearing to glide up to their berths beside the long lines of warehouses provided endless entertainment.

They hadn't walked as far as the bridge when a voice called out to them.

"Mr Reid! Mr Willis!"

They turned to look. It was Mr Harding's bespectacled and bearded physician. He was standing at the gate of a fine tall house, one befitting his station. He had an earnest yet kindly expression.

"Morning, Gentlemen!" he said, raising his hat. "You would do well to avoid the crowds on the bridge. The Russian flu still means to claim more victims. I've attended three cases just in the last week."

"Thank you, sir. We appreciate your concern," said Reid.

Dr Morgan pulled out his pocket watch.

"The race is scheduled to commence at eleven and it's just gone nine," he said. "It's high time I set off. May I walk with you gentlemen to Mr Harding's house?"

"Of course, sir," said Mr Reid.

"We'd be delighted," added Willis.

"You are very well situated," said Reid, looking up at the physician's property.

"Not for much longer, I fear. You couldn't have failed to notice the mass of buildings encroaching on our village and market gardens.

Using his cane, Dr Morgan pointed in the direction from whence they had come. With that they set off.

"I would have wagered my favourite meerschaum pipe that the boat race would be cancelled," said the physician. "To think that just a week ago the country was in the grip of a great blizzard and freezing weather. Up until a few days ago one could still see snow lying about. I shudder when I think of those families whose menfolk perished at sea and the farmers who lost livestock.

"A winter such as this will not be so quickly forgotten. For a three week stretch it was so cold that the river froze for over a mile at Twickenham. If I had been a younger man and in possession of a pair of ice skates, I might have joined the revellers on the frozen river, anything to take my mind off the bodies piling

up in the morgue. Doubtless you read the newspaper reports too, the ones which kept a tally of the frozen bodies recovered from under railway arches and doorways before the authorities took heed and stepped in.

“Since last November I’ve struggled to get about to attend to my patients, but I had winter fuel and a well-stocked larder. I could take measures to guard myself against the cold, but not seeing a glimmer of sunlight for weeks on end has tested even those blessed with the sunniest of dispositions.

“I don’t suppose it’s been any easier for you gentlemen trying to reach your clients so you might ply your trade?”

“Indeed,” answered Mr Reid. “Either we couldn’t get to our clients or we couldn’t get back to Cambridge. I’ve struggled to heat my workshops and get in supplies, but I’m blessed with a loyal team of craftsmen and my clients have all been understanding, so we’ve not suffered the loss of our reputation.”

“Good, good,” said the physician.

“Doctor Morgan,” Willis began hesitantly. “I was hoping to catch sight of the street organ grinder who claims the prime position just before the bridge on Boat Race Day. Has he survived the winter? And, what of the match seller, the girl who wore the lavender-coloured dress last summer? What has become of her?”

The physician came to a halt.

“Come to think of it, I’ve not seen either of them in quite some time, but don’t be disheartened! The spring will surely draw them out. If I catch sight of either of them, I’ll be sure to give them any spare coins I’m carrying.”

As they walked beside the Thames, the towpath continued parallel to the Lower Mall. Crowds had already gathered. Willis enjoyed looking at the various skiffs which had dropped anchor and were bobbing on the water.

Unlike some years, the stretch along Hammersmith’s Upper and Lower Malls wouldn’t prove too much of a challenge for the crews. Had westerlies been blowing, the crews would have met with choppy water all the way to Chiswick Eyot. This increased the risk of the boats taking on water and sinking. Then again, south-westerlies striking the river just beyond the eyot at Fuller’s Brewery had the power to create the highest waves along the course, which explained why crews preferred an arctic, northerly blast.

Otherwise, the crew on the Surrey side stood to gain a last advantage along the same stretch the men were walking. It wouldn’t be the first time Willis had got to see a significant turning point in the race as he watched from Harding’s house.

Willis and Reid showed Dr Morgan the deference his occupation commanded by allowing him to dominate the conversation. A more cynical observer might claim that people of status or influence were always in want of a decorator or being asked by their acquaintances if they could recommend someone. Willis knew that Reid happened to find the physician interesting, as did he.

Harding's Kelmscott House was still some way off. It stood slightly taller than the neighbouring properties along the Upper Mall, and a distinctive row of trees started just beyond its boundary. There were scant signs of spring and it would be several weeks before the trees had a new canopy of leaves, which would obscure the river for anyone looking out of upper windows. What also set Harding's house apart were its shutters, a feature Willis approved of.

A few minutes later they reached the flagpole, one of several along the course. It had been furnished with temporary flags, which fluttered about, to give the spectators an indication of the strength and the direction of the wind. As the race would go ahead no matter what the weather conditions, if the flags were being whipped about by the wind, Willis would have been concerned for the crews, but he was confident the boats were unlikely to take on water. They also served as a point of reference for the coxes whose job it was to steer their boats towards the part of the river with the fastest tidal current. At the end of the race, the colours of the winning university would be run up each flagpole, back to the starting point at Putney Bridge, to notify the spectators which crew had won.

There was still well over an hour to go until the race, yet, the excitement of the crowds was infectious. As ever, he was pleased that Mr Reid had talked him into staying in London the extra night. Besides, as his employer had pointed out, he'd be back home in plenty of time for tea.

Two properties down from the Harding Home, Dr Morgan stopped walking. Willis couldn't fail to see his expression had become serious.

"I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news but a shock awaits you."

Before he could say any more, they were joined by Mr Wyndham Scott, one of Harding's neighbours. He was tall with a straight back, giving him a soldier's bearing. He wore a moustache and had a smattering of grey running through his hair, nevertheless, it was apparent he had once been a handsome man.

"Morning, Gentlemen!" he said, tipping his hat. "Probably best you call at the house first, but Mr Harding has instructed me to round up as many new arrivals as I can."

Dr Morgan's face relaxed into a smile.

"I'm pleased our host has managed to leave the house. He's been looking forward to today's gathering."

"He's in good spirits and doing his utmost to hide his discomfort and the effort of taking part," said

Scott. "We tried to talk him out of today's exertions, but we sparked his anger. Mr Harding refused to be denied one of his favourite days in the calendar. He maintained that, as long as there's a Boat Race, there'll be a Boat Race Day party."

Mr Harding and his oldest acquaintances had studied at Oxford. Since then, Mr Harding had worked on commissions in Cambridge, formed friendships there, had considered setting up his workshops in Cherry Hinton (ultimately favouring Merton Abbey) and, more recently, had struck up a correspondence with the Head of the Fitzwilliam Museum in respect of some manuscripts both were keen to acquire so, whilst he supported Oxford, he was always sporting regardless of which team won. Therefore, Willis and his employer had no qualms about accepting their invitations.

At the house, they were given enthusiastic handshakes by acquaintances they had come to know over the years and had arrived just ahead of them.

One had to wait one's turn before being received by Harding's family, whom they remembered to congratulate. Harding's younger daughter had been married less than a year but, if Willis was not mistaken, Harding's wife, his daughters and their new son-in-law all looked strained. It struck him that everyone was making a concerted effort to be jolly. Whilst it wasn't apparent what was wrong, it confirmed Dr Morgan's and Scott's indications that something wasn't right.

Mrs Harding, who still looked striking, not least because of her unusual eyes, expressed how pleased she was that the Cambridge contingent had come to renew their friendship. She then apologised profusely and explained that their preparations had not gone as smoothly as they ought.

"We could do with an extra pair of hands. One of our household simply upped and left yesterday without a word of explanation. You'd think that we had treated her cruelly. She's never been so well dressed and booted."

"Therein lies the answer, Mama," said the eldest daughter.

"I'm sure you are right, dear," said her mother. "I do hope she'll be sensible and not settle for any old scoundrel. I fear she will confuse charm for real strength of feeling."

Her youngest daughter said, between clenched teeth, "This is mere speculation, Mama. We will send out word and see what comes back."

"One can always rely on our May to be possessed of good sense, when all around have lost their heads," said her mother.

Willis felt a palpable sense of relief when Mrs Harding instructed Mr Scott to lead them to her husband. It had struck him that they had inadvertently walked into the kind of domestic strife one might read about

in a Jane Austin novel, something that was best resolved without guests present.

The previous year, Harding had pinned up a cartoon for his guests to admire. It had been produced by his oldest friend and associate, Edward Finchley-Browne, to celebrate the completion of a tapestry which they had presented to their former Oxford college.

Harding's assistant, Mr Dearle, had explained to Willis the painstaking intricacies of the tapestry's production from Finchley-Browne's cartoon to the finished article. Dearle took care to explain the dying processes for the wool as Harding had taught himself the required skills, then passed his knowledge onto his workers at Merton Abbey.

"At last! Now I know why Mr Harding's hands were stained deep blue," Willis had exclaimed. "Mr Harding waved his hands at Mr Reid and I and declared indigo to be the most wonderful natural dye."

This, in turn, had prompted Mr Finchley-Browne's son, who had overheard their conversation, to regale them with the story of how Mr Harding had accompanied his parents to the theatre with blue hands.

"It was only after he had accepted their invitation that it occurred to him that he might be denied admission. The worry of it spoilt his enjoyment of the evening."

"If I may enquire, what was the performance?" Willis had asked.

"The Sorcerer'," came the reply.

Willis was still at a loss as to why the answer had amused them so, but they had laughed like drains until they had finally managed to compose themselves again.

Just recalling the conversation, he couldn't help but smile.

"The stables are over there," Dr Morgan said, pointing to them with his cane.

Scott continued walking.

"Sir, we're not going to the stables," said Scott, amused.

"Do you know where we're headed, gentlemen?" Dr Morgan asked Willis and his employer.

"No, sir," Willis and Reid chorused.

"Well, you are all in for a surprise," said Scott.

They had walked past several properties when Scott stopped at a low roofed cottage with weathered red tiles.

"If I may go ahead, gentlemen. There isn't much room, so Mr Harding's acquaintances have to be told to make room for the next group."

The men looked at each other.

When the cottage door opened again, three men came out. Each one had to remove his hat and lean

forward as they were taller than the door. Willis didn't recognise any of them, regardless, everyone exchanged cheery greetings.

"Please forgive us, but Mr Harding insists we do the introductions at the house. And, we're conscious that you've little time before the race starts," said the with man whose fine woollen scarf was lined with pale yellow silk.

Mr Scott appeared at the door and ushered them in. He instructed them to go into the room immediately to the left, where they found a good proportion of the space was occupied by a non-mechanical printing press. It was being operated by only one man, but he was assistant by another man, who was standing by to take the newly printed sheets.

"Welcome, comrades!" said a familiar voice behind them. "Welcome to the Kelmscott Press!"

They turned to greet Mr Harding.

Even though Dr Morgan had tried to warn him, Willis was taken aback by Mr Harding's appearance but tried not to let it show. He had known Mr Harding for nearly two decades and, in that time, he had always had an ample figure, so Willis was shocked to see Harding's clothes hanging somewhat loosely from his frame. His hair, which had always been unruly, making one suppose it was unkempt, had been greying for some years. It had become almost completely white. He could see Harding was gripping his walking stick, suggesting he was suffering intense pain, and was standing with a slight stoop. His face was drained of colour and drawn, another indication he was in pain. Harding had suffered from gout for many years and Willis strongly suspected he was in the throes of another attack.

"I knew I could count on Dr Morgan attending but, with everything stacked against the Cambridge crew, I couldn't be certain you gentlemen would be joining us," Mr Harding said.

"We wouldn't miss it for the world, comrade Harding," responded Reid.

"Now you've seen Mr Giles working the printing press, please follow me comrades," Harding said.

With that he turned and left the room.

They bid Mr Giles and his assistant a 'Good day!' and followed Harding into the adjacent room, where Mr Scott was waiting for them with another gentleman.

"You know comrade Scott. Let me introduce you to Mr Bowden my compositor and pressman."

After an exchange of handshakes, Mr Harding said, "I'm not quick on my feet so I shall start heading back to the house while my comrades show you the first sheets off the press."

He gave a sweep of his hand indicating to where they had been pinned up on the walls.

Willis recognised the interweaving stems and curling acanthus leaves which Mr Harding had used as a

reoccurring motif for his surface and textile designs. They went over to take a closer look and found that on every sheet Harding's intricate patterns framed blocks of text. Only black ink had been used, yet the designs were just as attractive and provided just as much interest as if colour had been introduced.

"These are magnificent!" Willis blurted out.

He typically let his employer speak first but his praise couldn't be contained.

"Truly magnificent!" Reid added. "What inspired you to publish your own books?" he asked.

Mr Harding was still hovering by the door as though he had waited for their reactions.

"A 'who' rather than a 'what'. I attended a talk given by comrade Scott. Rather than focusing on his career as a printer and the initiatives he had introduced, he talked about Nicholas Jenson, a 15th century Venetian printer and engraver. With the aid of a magic lantern, he was able to convey photographic images of the font Jenson had developed. I came away determined to develop a font that is medieval in appearance yet easy to read in order to create the perfect book.

"Fortunately, I had kept Finchley-Browne's Psyche and Cupid illustrations in the hope that I might employ them one day, that said, I have long desired to do justice to Chaucer's work. When Ted and I meet on Sundays, the preparatory work for an illustrated edition has become our primary occupation."

The men took their time studying the sheets but, before they had seen them all, Scott announced that they too had better head over to the house because the race was about to start.

Harding was trying to break down the class system, which was stacked to favour the ruling classes, through his socialist activities. Nevertheless, his guests gathered according to their place in the pecking order. Harding, his family and his closest acquaintances had congregated at the windows of the first and second floors. Those employed to do housework and the laundry, had gathered in front of the house and Willis and Reid joined Harding's most esteemed workers and tradesmen, who had gathered along the edge of the roof. Willis couldn't speak for Reid, but he preferred being on the roof. Making polite conversation was exhausting and he enjoyed the respite, besides he could bear the cold better than most.

He looked down stream in the direction of Hammersmith Bridge and Putney and took in the view. He then looked in the other direction. His gaze followed the curve of the river as far as Chiswick Eyot where it opened out and formed two long reaches. The dull sky reduced Richmond's wooded slopes to a dark band. Had it been a bright day, the sunlight would have reflected off the water and dazzled them.

Without having seen the views, Willis supposed one might question Harding's judgement for having taken on a house that was prone to flooding.

Depending on the wind and weather, most crews took somewhere between twenty to twenty-five

minutes to complete the course. If the race was started punctually, they might only have a ten-minute wait before the boats passed under Hammersmith Bridge.

The flags were in the process of being changed. The order of the new pairing indicated that Oxford had won the coin toss and had chosen to row on the Middlesex side of the river. Therefore, if Cambridge were behind when they came into view, they needed to make the most of being on the inside of the bend and claim the advantage.

The crowds were always loud but the noise in the distance had begun to build, thereby, the spectators gathered on the riverbanks heralded the appearance of the competing boats. Both crews were wearing bright, white tops, which stood out against the murky river. If Willis was not mistaken, Cambridge were in the lead.

“Come on Cambridge!” he called out.

“Come on Oxford!” responded the men to the side of them.

Their shouts also promoted support for Oxford from the windows directly below.

At last he could make out his boat’s oars. He liked to monitor their strokes to see whether weeks of practice would pay off, and whether they had lots of stamina left.

Oxford were gaining.

“Come on Cambridge!” Willis shouted again.

“Come on Oxford!” the men to the side of him bellowed.

He could see the boats surging forward whenever they completed their strokes and that Oxford were level.

As the boats surged past, their voices were lost in the roar. Willis could, nevertheless, make out the sound of clunking as the crews pulled on their oars, of water being splashed and churned, and the coxes giving encouragement to their respective crews.

Oxford had taken the lead but not by much, ensuring Cambridge were still a threat.

“Come on Cambridge!” Willis shouted after them, as they headed in the direction of Fuller’s Brewery. “Take the middle of the river!”

The crews were followed by a flotilla of boats. The lead boats carried officials, whose task it was to ensure a fair race, and there were people on hand should a crew end up in the river.

Reid’s arm suddenly appeared in Willis’s field of vision.

“Look! If I’m not mistaken, Cambridge have taken the lead again,” he said.

They watched as Oxford took it away from them again. At least they could see the dark figure of the

opposition's cox appearing to be much smaller than the lighter figure of the Cambridge cox.

But not for long as Cambridge came back with a spurt.

When the crews were out of sight, Willis and the other men stayed put. They waited for the flags on the pole further upstream to change and reveal the outcome of the race.

They waited and waited and waited.

Finally, they heard a cheer some way off in the distance. Shortly after the flags were lowered and... Oxford's flag was run up the pole.

A deafening cheer went up next to them and below, prompting Willis and Reid to offer their congratulations to the other spectators on the roof.

"It just wasn't the Light Blues' day," one of the men consoled them before he and the other men went back into the house to congratulate their host and to celebrate.

Willis expected Reid to follow them inside, but he appeared not to be in any rush. Instead he turned and took in the view, suggesting he too had spent much of the race wondering if this was to be their last invite.

"Come on!" Reid finally said. "We need warming up."

"We need thawing out," Willis retorted.

He wasn't keen on mulled wine, which the Hardings liked to offer their guests on inclement race days, but, for once, he was not going to decline."

Willis followed him back along the roof to the attic window and crouched down.

As they pushed the reluctant sash window up, Willis heard a curious sob from below. In the same instant, both he and Reid moved closer to the wall so they might determine whether they needed be of assistance or maybe to intervene.

(Typically, roofs don't have walls but Harding's had an aesthetic function: it obscured the roof at ground level. Regardless, Willis was grateful it was there to stop them falling off.)

He could hear Harding's wife speaking.

"...Our Jenny was stricken with meningitis last month. She had hardly turned the corner when my husband, who had been beside himself with worry, had to take to his bed. At the height of the attack he struggled to even hold a pen to write."

"He's had attacks of gout before," said another lady. "Did you not write from Italy that he was stricken with an attack so severe your husband had to be carried from the train to the carriage? Ten years must have passed since then."

"Indeed, but this one was attended by other alarming symptoms."

“You don’t suppose his physician is simply erring on caution,” her acquaintance asked.

They heard another sob.

“Dr Morgan found my husband’s kidneys to have been gravely affected. He told Mr Harding in no uncertain terms that he must consider himself an invalid. He made a point of telling him to preserve his strength and to live following a careful regime. My husband will not submit, he will not allow his spirit to be vanquished. He is up at four in the morning, thereby he achieves half a day’s work by breakfast and puts us all to shame.”

Willis could well believe Mrs Harding’s concern that her husband was working as hard as ever. Harding was nothing if driven.

“The truth of the matter is that his sleep is disturbed by pain. Regardless, my protestations and that of his physician have fallen on deaf ears. Mark my words, as soon as he’s recovered sufficiently, he’ll resume all his political commitments and he’ll be off. He’s let it be known that his dearest wish is to visit Iceland again.”

Willis saw the anguished look on Reid’s face and patted his arm.

His employer responded with a weak smile, then in the next instant he jumped to his feet, startling him.

“Come on! After you, Mr Willis!”

Willis was keen to get the blood circulating in his legs again too. He noticed Reid peering over the wall, taking another look at the view. Willis dutifully ducked his head and was just about to step through the open window, when he was pulled back.

“Look over the wall!”

Willis had no choice but to look as Reid had grabbed him under one arm and hoisted him up. He looked to where Reid was pointing and, to his amazement, he could see the street organ grinder making his way through the crowd.

“I’m pleased your concern was ill-placed,” said Reid.

Willis watched the man walking along. He had a purposeful stride, suggesting the world wasn’t bearing down on him.

A gust of icy wind sent them indoors.

At the stairs, they were greeted by the heady smell of warmed red wine, cloves and cinnamon, which had wafted up from below. The two men followed it all the way to the kitchen where they found Mr Harding’s youngest daughter ladling it into cups from a large pot, which was sitting on the stove, and handing them to guests.

They found Mr Harding in the drawing room holding court.

He spotted them and said, "I won't have any long faces spoiling the celebrations Cambridge comrades. Just for today you are honorary Dark Blues."

"Cheers to that, Mr Harding!" said Reid, raising his cup.

Harding smiled and said 'cheers' even though he was bereft of a cup.

Willis could only hope that Harding might adopt the values of the Temperance Society in order to extend his life.

He could distinctly recall Harding telling them with absolute incredulity that the wife of one of his most important patrons had shut down every public house on their land. Willis had been of the same mind as Harding, that the ruling class shouldn't impose their rules on the working classes unless they suffered the same punitive actions. Yet, now, he dearly wished Harding could be saved from himself and his inability to do anything by halves.

Aside from acquiring more books and medieval manuscripts for his library, Harding didn't believe in the accumulation of riches, but he wasn't one to stint when it came to opening bottles of wine and port for his guests.

As to be expected, someone had cut in and grabbed Mr Harding's attention.

Reid had insisted on having just one drink as they had walked down the stairs, but he took Willis's cup off him and asked, "Can I get you a refill?"

Willis nodded and cast a glance around the room. He was determined to speak to as many guests as possible but where to begin?

"You don't like mulled wine," retorted his wife when Willis was done explaining why he was back later than he had intended.

Willis offered to make a fresh brew and headed to the kitchen. He slipped his hand in his jacket pocket, pulled out a box of matches, and, as he passed the mantel piece, placed it next to his pouch of tabaco.

He filled the kettle with water. It came out of the tap so cold he wondered if the pipes were in danger of freezing again. He placed it on the stove and, as he waited for it to boil, he reflected on the day.

On the way back to the train station they had encountered the matchgirl, the one who had worn a lavender dress the previous summer. She was standing close to the tram stop under an awning. Her face had lit up when both he and Mr Reid had bought a box of matches each and Willis had paid much too much money for his.

“Thank you, kindly, gentlemen,” she had said, “but you’ve given me too much money.”

He had rewarded her honesty by saying, “If you want a domestic position with a respectable family, head to 26 Upper Mall. Do not tarry! One has just become vacant. You will find Mr and Mrs Harding in good spirits as they support Oxford. Be sure to tell them Mr Willis sent you and has paid your first day’s wages, thereby, they’ve not lost anything in allowing you to prove your worth. If they agree, try working for them for a day. You can always sell matches again, if you decide it’s not for you. This way no one has anything to lose. I hope you are not afraid of hard work, but they will see you right. You’ll have a bed and you won’t go hungry.”

The girl looked at Willis for a moment without saying anything, but, to his relief, he detected a flicker of life in her eyes.

“Thank you, sir. I’m to go to 26 Upper Mall and asks to speak to Mr and Mrs Harding. I tells them Mr Willis ‘as sent me and ‘as paid my first day’s pay so I proves my worth.”

“Yes, Miss. I’ll await to hear from Mr Harding as to how you got on.”

Willis smiled to himself and wondered how the girl would fair and whether Mr Harding would practice what he had preached by giving her a chance to better her situation in life.

Cambridge might have lost, it had been bitterly cold, yet, it been the best Boat Race Day for quite some time.