

III

At supper that night, holiday talk held undisputed sway. Mr. Pritchard spoke of "Scotland," Miss Isaacs clamoured of Bettws-y-Coed, Mr. Judson displayed a proprietary interest in the Norfolk Broads. "I?" said Hoopdriver when the question came to him. "Why, cycling, of course."

"You're never going to ride that dreadful machine of yours, day after day?" said Miss Howe of the Costume Department.

"I am," said Hoopdriver as calmly as possible, pulling at the insufficient moustache. "I'm going for a Cycling Tour. Along the South Coast."

"Well, all I hope, Mr. Hoopdriver, is that you'll get fine weather," said Miss Howe. "And not come any nasty croppers."

"And done forget some tinscher of arnica in yer bag," said the junior apprentice in the very high collar. (He had witnessed one of the lessons at the top of Putney Hill.)

"You stow it," said Mr. Hoopdriver, looking hard and threateningly at the junior apprentice, and suddenly adding in a tone of bitter contempt,--"Jampot."

"I'm getting fairly safe upon it now," he told Miss Howe.

At other times Hoopdriver might have further resented the satirical efforts of the apprentice, but his mind was too full of the projected Tour to admit any petty delicacies of dignity. He left the supper table early, so that he might put in a good hour at the desperate gymnastics up the Roehampton Road before it would be time to come back for locking up. When the gas was turned off for the night he was sitting on the edge of his bed, rubbing arnica into his knee--a new and very big place--and studying a Road Map of the South of England. Briggs of the "dresses," who shared the room with him, was sitting up in bed and trying to smoke in the dark. Briggs had never been on a cycle in his life, but he felt Hoopdriver's inexperience and offered such advice as occurred to him.

"Have the machine thoroughly well oiled," said Briggs, "carry one or two lemons with you, don't tear yourself to death the first day, and sit upright. Never lose control of the machine, and always sound the bell on every possible opportunity. You mind those things, and nothing very much can't happen to you, Hoopdriver--you take my word."

He would lapse into silence for a minute, save perhaps for a curse or so at his pipe, and then break out with an entirely different set of tips.

"Avoid running over dogs, Hoopdriver, whatever you do. It's one of the worst things you can do to run over a dog. Never let the machine buckle--there was a man killed only the other day through his wheel buckling--don't scorch, don't ride on the foot-path, keep your own side

of the road, and if you see a tramline, go round the corner at once, and hurry off into the next county--and always light up before dark. You mind just a few little things like that, Hoopdriver, and nothing much can't happen to you--you take my word."

"Right you are!" said Hoopdriver. "Good-night, old man."

"Good-night," said Briggs, and there was silence for a space, save for the succulent respiration of the pipe. Hoopdriver rode off into Dreamland on his machine, and was scarcely there before he was pitched back into the world of sense again.--Something--what was it?

"Never oil the steering. It's fatal," a voice that came from round a fitful glow of light, was saying. "And clean the chain daily with black-lead. You mind just a few little things like that--"

"Lord LOVE us!" said Hoopdriver, and pulled the bedclothes over his ears.