

VII.

After this whirlwind Mr. Hoopdriver paid his reckoning and--being now a little rested about the muscles of the knees--resumed his saddle and rode on in the direction of Ripley, along an excellent but undulating road. He was pleased to find his command over his machine already sensibly increased. He set himself little exercises as he went along and performed them with variable success. There was, for instance, steering in between a couple of stones, say a foot apart, a deed of little difficulty as far as the front wheel is concerned. But the back wheel, not being under the sway of the human eye, is apt to take a vicious jump over the obstacle, which sends a violent concussion all along the spine to the skull, and will even jerk a loosely fastened hat over the eyes, and so lead to much confusion. And again, there was taking the hand or hands off the handlebar, a thing simple in itself, but complex in its consequences. This particularly was a feat Mr. Hoopdriver desired to do, for several divergent reasons; but at present it simply led to convulsive balancings and novel and inelegant modes of dismounting.

The human nose is, at its best, a needless excrescence. There are those who consider it ornamental, and would regard a face deprived of its assistance with pity or derision; but it is doubtful whether our esteem is dictated so much by a sense of its absolute beauty as by the vitiating effect of a universally prevalent fashion. In the case of bicycle students, as in the young of both sexes, its inutility is aggravated by its persistent annoyance--it requires constant attention.

Until one can ride with one hand, and search for, secure, and use a pocket handkerchief with the other, cycling is necessarily a constant series of descents. Nothing can be further from the author's ambition than a wanton realism, but Mr. Hoopdriver's nose is a plain and salient fact, and face it we must. And, in addition to this inconvenience, there are flies. Until the cyclist can steer with one hand, his face is given over to Beelzebub. Contemplative flies stroll over it, and trifle absently with its most sensitive surfaces. The only way to dislodge them is to shake the head forcibly and to writhe one's features violently. This is not only a lengthy and frequently ineffectual method, but one exceedingly terrifying to foot passengers. And again, sometimes the beginner rides for a space with one eye closed by perspiration, giving him a waggish air foreign to his mood and ill calculated to overawe the impertinent. However, you will appreciate now the motive of Mr. Hoopdriver's experiments. He presently attained sufficient dexterity to slap himself smartly and violently in the face with his right hand, without certainly overturning the machine; but his pocket handkerchief might have been in California for any good it was to him while he was in the saddle.

Yet you must not think that because Mr. Hoopdriver was a little uncomfortable, he was unhappy in the slightest degree. In the background of his consciousness was the sense that about this time Briggs would be half-way through his window dressing, and Gosling, the apprentice, busy, with a chair turned down over the counter and his ears very red, trying to roll a piece of huckaback--only those who have rolled pieces of

huckaback know quite how detestable huckaback is to roll--and the shop would be dusty and, perhaps, the governor about and snappy. And here was quiet and greenery, and one mucked about as the desire took one, without a soul to see, and here was no wailing of "Sayn," no folding of remnants, no voice to shout, "Hoopdriver, forward!" And once he almost ran over something wonderful, a little, low, red beast with a yellowish tail, that went rushing across the road before him. It was the first weasel he had ever seen in his cockney life. There were miles of this, scores of miles of this before him, pinewood and oak forest, purple, heathery moorland and grassy down, lush meadows, where shining rivers wound their lazy way, villages with square-towered, flint churches, and rambling, cheap, and hearty inns, clean, white, country towns, long downhill stretches, where one might ride at one's ease (overlooking a jolt or so), and far away, at the end of it all,--the sea.

What mattered a fly or so in the dawn of these delights? Perhaps he had been dashed a minute by the shameful episode of the Young Lady in Grey, and perhaps the memory of it was making itself a little lair in a corner of his brain from which it could distress him in the retrospect by suggesting that he looked like a fool; but for the present that trouble was altogether in abeyance. The man in drab--evidently a swell--had spoken to him as his equal, and the knees of his brown suit and the chequered stockings were ever before his eyes. (Or, rather, you could see the stockings by carrying the head a little to one side.) And to feel, little by little, his mastery over this delightful, treacherous machine, growing and growing! Every half-mile or so his knees reasserted

themselves, and he dismounted and sat awhile by the roadside.

It was at a charming little place between Esher and Cobham, where a bridge crosses a stream, that Mr. Hoopdriver came across the other cyclist in brown. It is well to notice the fact here, although the interview was of the slightest, because it happened that subsequently Hoopdriver saw a great deal more of this other man in brown. The other cyclist in brown had a machine of dazzling newness, and a punctured pneumatic lay across his knees. He was a man of thirty or more, with a whitish face, an aquiline nose, a lank, flaxen moustache, and very fair hair, and he scowled at the job before him. At the sight of him Mr. Hoopdriver pulled himself together, and rode by with the air of one born to the wheel. "A splendid morning," said Mr. Hoopdriver, "and a fine surface."

"The morning and you and the surface be everlastingly damned!" said the other man in brown as Hoopdriver receded. Hoopdriver heard the mumble and did not distinguish the words, and he felt a pleasing sense of having duly asserted the wide sympathy that binds all cyclists together, of having behaved himself as becomes one of the brotherhood of the wheel. The other man in brown watched his receding aspect. "Greasy proletarian," said the other man in brown, feeling a prophetic dislike. "Got a suit of brown, the very picture of this. One would think his sole aim in life had been to caricature me. It's Fortune's way with me. Look at his insteps on the treadles! Why does Heaven make such men?"

And having lit a cigarette, the other man in brown returned to the business in hand.

Mr. Hoopdriver worked up the hill towards Cobham to a point that he felt sure was out of sight of the other man in brown, and then he dismounted and pushed his machine; until the proximity of the village and a proper pride drove him into the saddle again.