

An Affair of Wheels

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By CAPTAIN J. W. FULLER.



GEORGE HOULDING sat gazing out of the window as the short autumn afternoon was fast waning into even. Here he had been sitting idly musing for the past hour or more, scarce noting the various objects which flitted into and out of the narrow boundaries of his view, and now was sunk into a pleasing reverie, the progress of which we will endeavor to follow.

Back he went in fancy to the day when he had first looked upon the face of his beloved Margaret. 'Twas but a short three years since, and yet as he looked back it seemed as though a great gulf yawned between that past and this present, and that the man who had played his part in those days was another being altogether than the one who now sat here looking out into the gathering gloom. How vividly he could recall all the circumstances—every word and gesture. It was as though the whole scene was being enacted before him, in which that other being—clothed in remarkable semblance of himself—played his part and partook of his feelings and impulses.

What a contrast that afternoon was to this, though the same season of the year! One of those brilliant days in late October with which we are often blessed, when the sun from out a cloudless sky shines forth in all his glory, warm enough to infuse a glow into all nature after the slight nip of frost during the night preceding, yet not hot enough to enervate; indeed, in the more shaded nooks a bare hint of coolness in the air is at once noticeable, which, however, quickly flees from whence the genial shafts of the sun could exert their influence; a clear, bright bracing day, the ideal wheeling weather of our more northern climes; the time when Nature seems to hesitate upon the threshold of a sterner season, and to express her reluctance in a last brilliant display of all her brighter charms.

As he wheeled along the quiet country road that memorable Saturday afternoon, contentment had taken possession of his heart, and he fairly drank in the beauties of the scene in deep draughts. Here, the dull brown of the fallow field; there, the fresh greenness of the new grass brought up by the fall rains; and anon the tiny sprouts of the winter wheat just peeping forth and giving whole fields the exquisite effect of delicate shading from darker to lighter tints, as the sprouts were above or just breaking the surface of the soil. Also the beautiful variety in the coloring of the patches of woodland; the sturdy oaks with their darker tinted leaves, the stately pines in unchanging sameness, the elms, the hickory, the walnut and butternut, the maple and beech, each with its turning leaves presenting a profusion of color which the most brilliant kaleidoscope could not pretend to equal; while along the rail fences, the thorn-apple, the wild plum, the blackberry, and the hazel bush, with—save, perhaps, the latter—little to show of their late fruitful profusion, formed natural hedges in perfect keeping with the sturdier growth of the forest. Even the

flitting of the swarms of innumerable tiny green flies, as they gambolled in the glorious sunshine and incidentally developed ambitions to explore one's eyes and throat, or the threads of spiders' weaving which continually brushed one's face, seemed but to put the touch of completeness upon the delightful day; and a feeling of exhilaration which made the blood course quickly through the veins, could be resisted by no healthy human animal.

Houlding had wheeled some twenty miles upon that Saturday afternoon, his solitude (for he had chosen to ride alone) adding to his enjoyment; and now, as the evening shadows were beginning to lengthen, he leisurely pursued his homeward way in the direction of the city, which was several miles distant, while a quiet satisfaction and at-peace-with-all-the-world contentment had entire possession of his bosom. Easily coasting down the gentle slope of a long grade of the roadway, he was all at once startled out of his quiet musings by a piercing scream, and turning saw a vision of feminine distress bearing down upon him with great rapidity.

At a glance he took in the situation. The left pedal of the fair cyclist's wheel had come in contact with some obstruction in the roadway, and been broken off short; then in the excitement of this vexatious accident the rider had lost control of the right pedal also; and now, all unwillingly, she was coasting rapidly down the hill at—to her—an alarming rate of speed, while the quickly revolving shank of the broken pedal threatened at every turn to draw in the skirts of the grey riding habit so perilously near, with results that might prove serious. On she came, straight for the easy-going wheelman ahead, with every prospect of making a double spill then and there, or, if he escaped, there could be no question but that she at any rate would come to grief before reaching the foot of the hill.

He at once obeyed the natural impulse to get out of harm's way, and drew off toward the side of the road; then a desire to release the unfortunate young lady from her perilous plight came uppermost, and his plan of action was quickly decided upon. Drawing warily near the path once more, increasing his speed as he did so, just as the runaway wheel came alongside, he stretched out his hand and secured a firm grip of the centre of the handlebars. For a moment or two he still further increased his own speed, then commenced to gradually exert a backward pressure upon his pedals until by the time they had reached the foot of the hill he had both wheels under perfect control and shortly brought them to a standstill. As he did so the fair rider, who until now had borne herself bravely through the trying ordeal, tumbled off her wheel, and but for her rescuer's convenient arms would have fallen in a heap upon the road. He half carried her to the roadside and laid her upon the grassy bank, then looked helplessly about for water; but with a brave effort the shaken girl pulled herself together, and blushing vividly at finding herself in the arms of a stranger, said, brokenly:

"I—I am deeply grateful to you, sir, for your—your skill and—bravery in rescuing me from serious injury. How can I ever thank you?"

"No thanks are necessary, my dear young lady," gallantly responded he. "It was but a little thing to do, and no skill was necessary. Your own pluck in staying with your wheel

so determinedly was what saved you, rather than what little I did."

"Oh, no! I was not plucky in the least. To tell the truth, I was desperately afraid, and wanted to jump off; but just knew that I would fall and scrape my face through the loose gravel of the road. Ugh! It makes me shudder to think of it."

"I see. You were such a coward that you were ready to hang on until the death. Well! all I have to say is that that's a new kind of cowardice to me. However, you are well out of it, anyway. Your wheel seems to have gotten the worst of the scrape."

"Oh, that unfortunate wheel!" she responded, gazing ruefully at the disabled machine. "I suppose I shall have to walk the remainder of the way. Is it very far to town?"

"Somewhere in the neighborhood of three miles, I should say."

"Is it that far, really?" she questioned in blank dismay. "And is there no other way of getting back but walking?"

"I'm afraid not. Unless you would care to ride my wheel, which, of course, is at your service, or," he added slyly, with just the suspicion of a smile playing about the corners of his mouth, "unless I carry you?"

"No, thank you,"—and he was quite entranced with her rosy blushes—"I'm afraid I've trespassed upon your good nature more than enough already in that fashion. But come; I must be starting if I'm to get home before dark. You, I suppose, will ride on?"

Not choosing to answer this last most unnecessary question, he picked up the fallen wheels, and guiding one with either hand stepped off toward the city, and she perforce did likewise. For several minutes they walked along in silence, until Geoffrey, in an effort to resume conversation, enquired, quite gravely:

"You are fond of wheeling?"

For answer she broke into a silvery laugh.

"There, you are quite conventional, and, really, I am again deeply grateful; for nothing, you know—or I suppose you don't. Men are so densely ignorant in some things,—braces up shaken feminine nerves and helps a woman get her 'grip' back so quickly after she has lost it, as the necessity of being conventional. So, to be very decorous in my reply: yes, I am very fond of wheeling, but—and now I feel shaky again—in moderation. I draw the line at coasting and such recklessness—tho' for the future." And again she broke into that silvery laugh which so charmed her companion.



BOSTON FERN.

Courtesy of J. A. Sinners.