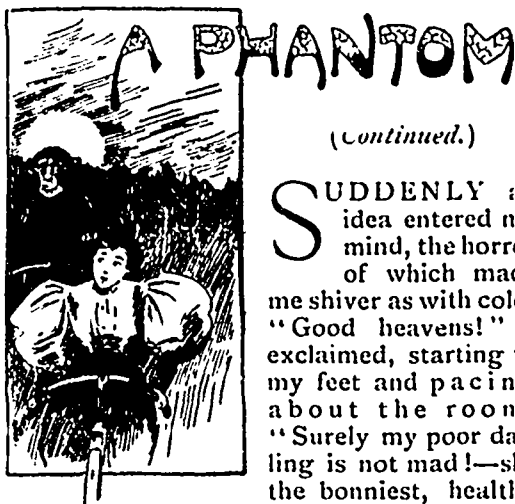




By Thomas Swift,
Ottawa.

(Continued.)

SUDDENLY an idea entered my mind, the horror of which made me shiver as with cold. "Good heavens!" I exclaimed, starting to my feet and pacing about the room. "Surely my poor darling is not mad!—she the bonniest, healthiest, strongest specimen of young womanhood I had ever met."

Then an alternative seized upon me. Was she a sleep-walker, or, more correctly, a sleep-rider? That might account for everything. Between insanity and somnambulism I clung to the latter.

"My poor Elsie!" I said. "Our wedding must be hastened, and then there shall be no more midnight masquerading in bloomers."

Coming to this conclusion with regard to Elsie herself, my thoughts reverted to the alleged cause of her fright. "The thing was like the Devil," Elsie said. Why, those were the terms in which Harry Lester had described his 'horror.' That poor fellow's case was a sore puzzle to me, too. I was unable to make anything of it except as a freak of a too vivid imagination and of a too tense nervous organisation.

Under this fresh spur my mental activities were enormously quickened, and a new and startling coincidence evolved itself. The Thing that terrorised Elsie was on a bicycle, and my bicycle had been taken and returned only a few minutes before I found my love lying on the sidewalk, at no great distance from 301 Dallas Street. Thus, turning and twisting things in every conceivable way, I came to the conclusion that there was some uncanny agent at work, and that Providence had ordained me to be the instrument for the unravelling of this tangled web of mystery and terror into whose baneful influence two lives very dear to me had been drawn.

About eleven o'clock next morning I received the following note from Harry Lester:

"Better this morning, thanks to your visit. It seems that another medical man, Dr. Wilson, was called to one of the boarders in this house last night, and I, too, like you, had his bicycle stolen from the door. His initials, J. W., were engraved on the head of the machine."

In a moment I was in the hall standing before the bicycle. It was a 'Rambler,' like my own, but on its head, to my utter confusion, I perceived the two engraven letters, J.W. I had innocently stolen another man's wheel. After sending the machine to its rightful owner, with a courteous note of explanation, I sat down to think the mysterious matter out in the light of this new and quite unexpected revelation.

CHAPTER II.

For the next few days things slid along in their usual grooves; the Thing, which I came to connect with the disappearance of my bicycle, occupying no inconsiderable share of my thoughts. On a wheel hired for the time I went my professional rounds. I made two calls of special interest. Elsie Tasker I found entirely like her dear self, bright and tender as any lover could wish,

but taciturn on one point, namely, what she chose to call her 'mad escapade.' Harry Lester I found much improved in health, due, as he expressed it, to the sense of security derived from sleeping with his window-shutters fastened. The results of these two visits were far from satisfactory, and I felt that I must know more if I was to be relieved from the perplexity of mind into which recent events had plunged me.

On the following Saturday morning, I had just seen a friend off at the Western Depot, when, to my surprise, I beheld Elsie and her brother Jack wheeling their bicycles to the baggage-van of an out-going train. My suspicions were in arms and my mind made up at once, upon seeing brother and sister take seats in a first-class car.

Having ascertained that the bicycles were checked for West City, I purchased a ticket to the same place and entered a second-class car, determined to pursue the adventure to the end.

At West City I followed the pair in a hack to a leading hotel, and took up my quarters at another hotel opposite. From the office



"ELSIE WAS STANDING IN THE FULL LIGHT OF A CHANDLIER."

clerk I learned that some bicycle races of a novel character were to take place at three o'clock. He handed me a programme of the races.

A company of cyclists, in the interests of the enterprising firm of the 'Road Sir' bicycle, held the field against all comers riding other bicycles, and offered long odds. The important event of the day was a race between the lady champion of the company and an unknown,—the stakes being \$500 to \$50.

At two o'clock I followed the Taskers to the Bicycle Grounds, secured a seat on the grand-stand, and, amidst an immense crowd, awaited further developments.

It was an open track; smooth, firm, and perfect of its kind.

Out of the first five races, which were splendidly contested, four went to the Company.

Then came the event of the day.

I had little time for reflection; for, amidst much applause, the two contestants walked out into the sunshine to the starting point, which was just in front of me.

The Company's representative was dark-featured and handsome, and arrayed in bloomers. Of average height and good

figure, her strong though not very symmetrical limbs—they were too thick about the ankles, probably from much riding—gave evidence of great power and speed.

I dared to glance at the Unknown, who was completely covered with an opera cloak and hood, which, with a gasp, I recognised at once. The hood, slipped from its place and revealed the golden head and lovely face of Elsie Tasker. I can scarcely say what I had expected; but when the cloak fell into the attendant hands of Jack Tasker, I groaned in agony. There stood my love under the rude, admiring gaze of the multitude, dressed in a black velvet costume, trimmed with gold, that might have been worn by a page at the court of Louis XIV., a perfect specimen of female grace and loveliness, but, to my jealous eye, a woman unsexed. The dress of the girl beside her was modest in comparison. For a few moments, I believe I went mad; for, in obedience to the wild call of "Sit down!" I was jerked to my seat. Slowly recovering my senses, I watched the two riders mount and start, Elsie on the outside.

On they whirled with ever-increasing speed, rider and bicycle becoming more and more one and inseparable until they rounded the first turn, the Company leading by a length. Then, as they flew along the straight-stretch, the advantage of Elsie's costume was plainly discernible. There was sufficient wind to keep the flag waving lively from the pole, and this breeze was directly in the faces of the riders. It filled and expanded the Company's bloomers and wide sleeves, which became so much dead weight, whilst Elsie's figure seemed to cleave the air like a solid body. Cause and effect were clearly evident to the keen observer. Elsie, without more effort, closed the gap and steadily left her opponent one, then two, then, as they turned towards the home-stretch, three good lengths behind, but did not quicken her speed; so that, as they passed the grand-stand, the Company was perceptibly gaining on her.

The excitement was intense. My anger was all gone, absorbed in the wild desire for the triumph of my darling, misguided though she was. I glanced at her as she swept past. Her face was pale, but set almost unto cruelty; her lips were slightly apart, and eyes bright and fixed. I choked with pity and longing. Round into the stretch on the farther side they rushed wheel to wheel, and the Company this time was on her mettle. Slowly, but surely, Elsie again drew away and at the turn was leading, but only by a length. Was she lagging? Could she keep the pace?

"The Company wins!" shouted some. "She'll beat the Unknown on the home-stretch."

I started at the words. They expressed my own thought. They reached the bend, and the Company drew up. My eyes were riveted on Elsie. I saw her head turn quickly. Then her figure bent ever so little forward, and a new impetus was given to the wheels.

"The Unknown!" was now the cry from those who had detected the spurt. "The Company!" shouted others.

Down the home-stretch they came, swift, straight and steady, and, amidst the wild excitement of the shouting spectators, flew across the winning line, Elsie leading by three-quarters of a length. Now, had I followed the mad, but noble impulse of the moment, I should have leapt the barriers and clasped my love in my arms. Afterwards I was sorry that I did not do so. But the fact was, I felt myself a traitor to Elsie and to myself. I rushed from the grounds and returned home by the first train.

All that evening I was miserable, my