

The Wheels of Chance

A Bicycling Idyll

H.G. Wells

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There was once an idyllic period, when bicycles became efficient, basically using the same design as today, as well as becoming reasonably cheap and hence accessible, when roads were reasonably good (yet not asphalted in general) and more to the point free of automobiles. This happy state of affairs did not last long, maybe two decades at most, although the real profusion of cars did not occur until after the Second World War¹. What it brought about, especially in densely populated places such as England, was a craze in cycling. H.G. Wells himself was an avid cyclist. It allowed even the working classes to get around, and there were cheap hotels catering to them. Some people claim that it meant a lot in breaking down class barriers in a highly stratified societies as such as the British, as seated on a bicycle everyone became more or less equal.

In this early novel by Wells, you are presented with a rather delightful story, be it at times a bit too didactic in its purpose, based on bicycling in southern England. Although this takes place a century and more before my own cycle adventures, it catches the experience beautifully as surprisingly not really that much changed in the interim. The sense of being on your own and owning the roads and towns you pass on and through respectively, the satisfaction of getting places on your own locomotion, and in the total freedom of choosing your own routes on the spur of the moment, consulting your maps², indulging your whims. Of arriving at a cute little town, seeking out some lodging, taking a sight-seeing walk, having dinner, a good nights sleep (incidentally Wells provides here one of the very best renderings of a dream I have ever come across in the literature) and then a good breakfast in the morning spent in happy anticipation of the adventures in store. Reading through it my legs begin to twist and I am happily, if somewhat admonishingly, reminded of my own forays. One difference though is that the protagonist of the story has some problems mastering his bike. To get on is a problem, and even worse to get off, and steering without wobbling is a skill which we take for granted, but apparently was not at the time. Wells certainly draws on his own experiences, it would be far-fetched indeed to assume that he made it all up. The point is that it is easy to pick up the skill of bicycling when you are a child³ but much harder, even supposedly impossible, when you are an adult. The latter cannot be true of course, because the bicycle craze started with

¹ In Sweden cars did not come into their own until the mid-fifties, and roads were still used to a large extent by cyclists, then in a few years cars took over, and cyclists became marginal. My parents usually got around in the late thirties and forties on bicycles, and I being born a generation later envied them.

² The itinerary of the route is real and can easily be followed on a modern map, all the towns and villages named actually existing

³ I got mine at five, without supporting wheels as is now the fashion,

grown-ups and not children. Wells must have picked up the skill in his late twenties, and Tolstoy acquired a bicycle when he was over sixty and learned to ride it. But apparently it was not easy.

The plot of the story is simple. The protagonist is a draper assistant, stuck in a dead-end job, to which, incidentally, Wells himself was initially condemned, before he got himself an education and discovered, and more importantly, had others to discover his writing ability⁴. But this unfortunate young man did at least get ten days of vacation during a year of drudgery, which he used on his bike. In one the very first pages he encounters a young lady in a gray bicycling outfit, who seems much more adept than him on the contraption, later he meets her again and again now with an older man as companion. The encounters become so regular that the latter suspects him of being a detective, either commissioned by the step-mother of the girl, or by his own wife, because he is up to no good. Presenting himself as a mentor to the young girl to introduce her to literary society and make her dreams of becoming an independent writer and a woman in charge of her destiny, his real purpose, as he 'elopes' with her, is to seduce her, a theme that Wells would return to in much greater detail in his novel 'Ann Veronica'⁵. When the dishonorable intentions of her mentor become apparent, the young pampered girl, innocent of the crude realities of life, recoils in horror and disgust. Now our protagonist comes to her rescue like a knight on an errand and together they continue the bicycle ride, as the young girl is reluctant to return to the restraining household of her step-mother. Our young protagonist senses the difference in social status between him and her, she seems to know all the books one should read, while he had never had time for such pursuits. By chance he embarks on a piece of duplicity to present himself with an imaginary background in South-Africa (replete with natives and lions) but eventually owns up to the shameful deception. She, however, instead of being put off, finds it touching. He promises to better himself by working hard at his education, and she promises to send him books. Eventually a rescuing party, consisting of her literary step-mother and some of her admirers, finds her, and she is returned to the fold, while our hapless protagonist is to be returned to his proper place, (after all they have run out of money, a trivial aspect of life the young lady had been oblivious of) but not without some tender leave-taking and mutual promises. Although his interest in her has been romantic, that has clearly not been mutual, and we are relieved of a conventional ending of boy meets girl and gets her.

It is all written with a light touch, and very differently from the science-fiction stories he has become known for to posterity. There is something of 'Three Men in a Boat' to the piece, and actually that author Jerome, also wrote another book in which his men went on a bicycle trip to Germany, but attracting far less attention than the adventures on the Thames. As a bicycling novel, Wells attempt is far superior to that.

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⁴ He compared his initial fate to that of Dickens in the blackening factory.

⁵ reviewed earlier in these volumes