

## A Cruise on Wheels.

BY GEO. A. BEST.



THE dearth of good skaters in this country is obviously due to circumstances over which the sport-loving Briton can exercise no kind of control. Before the average skater has succeeded in attaining even a semblance of the "form" which distinguished his final efforts of the preceding winter, the first frost of a new season has vanished, and the succeeding visits of the ice-king are generally of so transitory a character that no marked improvement in style is possible.

And although modern ingenuity has succeeded in combating, to a certain extent, the defects of a fickle climate, there can be no comparison between mere rinking (even on a veneer of artificially produced and unseasonable ice) and skating over an unlimited surface in the open air.

The very nature of the sport is such that it cannot be enjoyed to the full within the narrow limits of four walls. Healthy and unrestricted exercise in the open air is the first essential of every successful pastime. Without this, sport becomes in time a mere amusement; and amusement which parodies sport is apt to pall after the novelty has worn off, until it is finally relegated to that dull land of boredom from which few discarded pastimes can ever hope to return.

As a "new sensation" roller-skating established a record for instantaneous popularity which was only equalled by the phenomenal rapidity of its decline. While the

"boom" was at its height there were few sceptics bold enough to prophesy that a reaction, at once so speedy and so complete, would follow the triumphant advent of the wheeled skate. But the inability of the tiny wheels to negotiate any but a specially prepared surface imposed upon the skaters a restriction which was quite foreign to the nature of the sport, and far from becoming a permanent pastime, rinking experienced a "slump" which was quite unprecedented, and is still unique, in the annals of nineteenth-century crazes and booms.

But after many years of somnolence the wheeled skate has been resurrected in a new form and under another name, and a substitute for ice-skating introduced which is at least more practical and ingenious than its unfortunate predecessor.

In appearance the new road skates resemble nothing so much as a pair of miniature bicycles. The wheels are 6in. in diameter, and are attached to the boot on the "acme"

principle. Jointed leg splints, extending from the skate to the knee, relieve the ankles of a strain which would otherwise prove unbearable; and an automatic brake, acting upon the front wheel, instantly corrects any backward run, and consequently removes the greatest difficulty in hill-climbing. "Pneumatics" have been discarded in favour of solid rubber tyres, as the exasperating defects of the former are naturally intensified in a tyre so small as to be immediately affected by even the smallest leakage. The skates vary in weight,



READY TO START.

From a Photo. by Douglas Smith, Southend.



FIRST MOVEMENT—"TREPIDATION."  
From a Photo. by A. Utyett, Ilford.

from six to eight pounds per pair, and this burden, although perhaps as light as is consistent with durability, is apt to make itself felt in a very decided manner during a prolonged journey. The general and widespread interest evoked by my appearance on the byways of Essex, mounted on a pair of Ritter skates, induced me to undertake a more ambitious pioneering cruise, in the hope that a written account of my experiences might prove equally interesting and instructive.

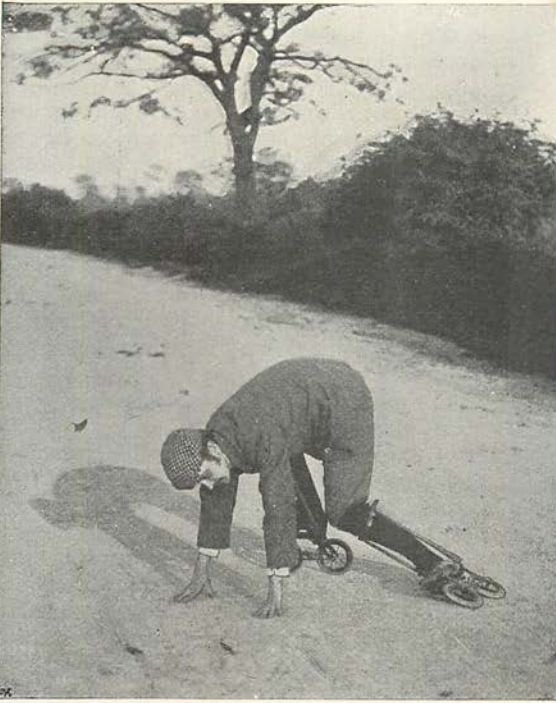
Every novelty in the way of locomotion is wont to fascinate its patrons when the initial discomforts and trials have been once overcome. In road-skating, as in every other pastime, these preliminary hardships are far from imaginary. Stiffness, soreness, and a feeling of irritability and humiliation follow rapidly in the wake of the beginner's first lesson. But while his limbs are still aching, and the discouraging remarks of ploughboy critics are yet ringing in his ears, the fascination of the new sensation asserts itself afresh; and the novice takes the road again and again until his muscles gradually become accustomed to the exercise, and the critical remarks of the most prejudiced onlooker are tempered with a grudging approbation.

My first endeavours to acquire the graceful art of road-skating were distinctly grotesque, and afforded the keenest possible enjoyment to some dozens of interested spectators. I fell hard and often, and, when down, could only regain my feet by a series of complicated and spasmodic movements which left sundry strange diagrams engraven on the dust of the roadway, and kept my fingertips busily employed for a period varying from fifteen to thirty seconds. But by the time I had learned to accomplish the whole of the feet-finding manœuvre well within the fifteen seconds' limit, I had forgotten how to fall, and nothing short of a three-inch rut, or a macadam rock, would bring about a disaster likely to call my newly-acquired experience into practice.

When I had skated over every fathom of roadway in my own neighbourhood, I became consumed with the desire to sail forth into the great world beyond. A cycling friend very kindly volunteered to act as bodyguard, and with the aid of a road-map of Essex, we traced out a thirty-five mile course, with



SECOND MOVEMENT—"GESTICULATION."  
"MY FIRST ENDEAVOURS WERE DISTINCTLY GROTESQUE."  
From a Photo. by A. Utyett, Ilford.



THIRD MOVEMENT—"COMPLICATION."  
 "KEEPING MY FINGER-TIPS BUSILY EMPLOYED."  
 From a Photo. by A. Utgett, Ilford.

dear, dirty Barking as the probable starting-point, and Southend-on-Sea as the desired destination. Our route lay through the villages of Rainham, Stanford-le-Hope, Pitsea, and Hadleigh; the roads were reported to be in fair condition, and the hills conspicuous only by their absence.

An unkindly wind, which blew from the east with annoying persistency, delayed the expedition for three days; but when, in response to our oft-repeated complaints, it met us half-way by veering round to the south-east, we hastily collected our cycle, our skates, and our camera, and decided to steer as straight a course as possible for the land end of Southend pier, without any further delay.

Vol. xv.—20.

Barking is noted chiefly for its unpicturesque creek, its rag-shops, and its untamed street gamin. The last-named speciality mustered in strong force as I rapidly adjusted my skates and indulged in a "preliminary canter," while my bodyguard industriously oiled his bicycle on the opposite side of the roadway, in order to convey to the crowd the impression that he was in no way connected with the expedition.

"A bicycle myde for two!" ejaculated one of the untamed, surveying the skates critically out of the only serviceable corner of a black eye.

"No, it's two bicycles made for one!" was the smart rejoinder of a quick-witted companion.

"Is this the Southend Road?" I asked, somewhat imperiously.

The crowd laughed immoderately.

"Sarthend, ho, yus! Fust turn to the right, just rarn'd the corner!" cried a facetious urchin of the extreme Cockney type. "If you put yer brake on now, you'll avoid runnin' inter the sea when yer gits there!"

My friend was already mounted by this time, and I followed him as rapidly as possible into the open country. The exertion was most exhilarating, and before we had



From a Photo. by]

LEAVING BARKING.

[A. Utgett, Ilford.



A STUDY IN HILL-CLIMBING.  
From a Photo. by Douglas Smith, Southend.

left Barking more than a mile behind, I had quite forgotten the unpleasant remarks which my unfortunate inquiry had elicited. But such an undesirable incident was scarcely likely to be repeated: rural wit is invariably less spontaneous and pointed, and Barking is quite unique as a nursery for precocious infants. The wind, which had most aggravatingly veered round to the east again since we started, precluded any possibility of "scorching" or record-breaking, and the pace attained was consequently by no means sensational.

On a long uphill stretch, some three or four miles out, I was considerably annoyed by my inability to escape the company of a strangely taciturn pedestrian. I wished to impress this gentleman with the fact that walking, as a means of locomotion, was entirely out of date. So I overtook him at the foot of the hill, and for a hundred yards or so managed to maintain a somewhat erratic lead. Then, while I rested for a moment to gain breath, he

strode silently by with a supercilious air of condescension and pity which was distinctly exasperating. Visibly distressed, and breathing heavily, I again passed the sardonic stranger, only to be overtaken a few minutes later in the same humiliating way as before. When we were exchanging positions for the seventh or eighth time the silent one spoke, and the spell was broken.

"Get off and walk!" he ejaculated, contemptuously.

"It's the wind, you know!" I explained, in disconnected gasps. "With a favourable breeze and a good road, I can cover ten miles well within the hour!"

But my undesirable companion was some yards ahead again by this time, and my explanation met with no audible response. A temporary lull in the breeze, however, and a mile of level roadway completely turned the tables in my favour; and when I overtook the unsympathetic stranger for the tenth (and last) time, I was gliding over the macadam at a speed which was probably greater than that attained at any other time during the journey.

At Rainham, I discovered my truant body-guard waiting for me by the door of a typical Essex hostelry. My coming had been heralded by a local courier, mounted on an 1891 bicycle, who had overtaken me during the first stage of the journey; and in consequence of a weird announcement of this worthy to the effect that "a chap were a-comin' down the road with a *real* bicycle fastened on each foot," I found a large crowd



From a Photo. by

IN FULL SWING.

[Douglas Smith, Southend.

awaiting my advent. Several villainous-looking curs were also on the look-out for some mild excitement, and they greatly appreciated the novelty in calf-hunting which I most unwillingly provided.

The good people of Rainham were obviously disappointed by the discovery that my "bicycles" were merely dwarfs; but when I had skated twice round the village green, in order to escape the obnoxious attentions of an absurdly enthusiastic terrier, the villagers were unanimous in the opinion that road-skating, as an exciting pastime, had a great future before it.

"You done that well, mister, an' no mistake!" exclaimed the local sage, approvingly, when I had "jumped" the curb and

I believe in thirty years' time nobody'll walk at all! Them as don't cycle will skate, an' them as don't do either will ride to market in motor-cars or flyin'-machines. Walkin' is on its last legs, sir; it's too slow for the rising generation, though it was considered to be a 'ealthy exercise in our time."

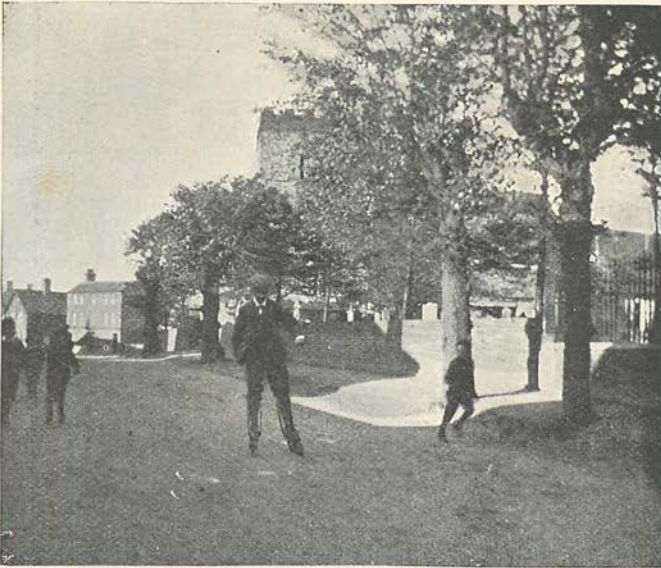
We were strongly tempted to linger awhile in this quaint, old-world hamlet; to interview its oldest inhabitant, commune with its wise men, and visit each of the numerous ancient hostelries which surround an ugly ragstone church, which is, perhaps, the least picturesque object of interest in the parish. But an unmelodious jingle, emanating from the neighbourhood of the village clock, reminded us that some thirty miles of unexplored Essex

roadway lay between Rainham and our destination; so we took the direction indicated by an immaculate finger-post, and sped silently through a wilderness of depressing marsh land, sparsely populated, and timbered with nothing more imposing than dwarf pollards and bracken.

A straggling village bearing the euphonious name of Orsett was reached after an hour's toil on a road abounding in ruts and gravel "breakers." The natives of this place proved to be distinctly disappointing from a journalistic point of view. Not a single inhabitant took the slightest notice of my movements. Even when

I skated right into the bar-parlour of the only inn in the village, the landlord appeared to consider that skating inside licensed premises, and bumping heavily against public-house furniture, was in no way either a novel or an interesting performance, for, after attending to my modest requirements, he became engrossed in the columns of *Lloyd's News*, and ignored my presence entirely.

The people of Orsett are obviously years ahead of the times in which they live; and they have wisely decided amongst themselves that no modern innovation, however startling, shall be allowed to disturb the placidity of their everyday existence. A flying-machine hovering over this place would excite no more interest than an ordinary carrion crow; and if the Siamese twins themselves had



From a)

ARRIVAL AT RAINHAM.

[Photograph.

joined my friend in the bar-parlour of the hotel. "Bicycles I can't abide, nohow; but them things—well, I never did see the likes, never! I wonder what'll be brought out next! We've got what Mother Shipton predicted: carriages without 'orses, an' now 'eres a sample of real skatin' without ice! Wonderful, that's what it is; an' them as lives longest 'll see most, for sure!"

"Right ye are, Tommy," remarked another rural philosopher. "The older one grows the more one sees, an' that's the solemn truth! I remember the first bicycle what come into Rainham well nigh thirty-five years ago. I ran out to see it just the same as our kids done to look at this gent to-day, an' we never thought at that time that cycling would be took up by 'igh an' by low as it 'as been.

elected to dine at this particular hostelry, it is highly probable that the only question likely to suggest itself to the mind of the phlegmatic landlord would have taken the form of a speculation as to whether his remarkable guests should be charged for as two persons or as one.

An aged rustic of inanely benevolent aspect, and an apparently hypnotized donkey, formed the only visible inhabitants of a timber-built settlement marked on our chart as Mucking.

Before granting us the sole copyright of a snapshot of himself and his steed, this "rude forefather of the hamlet" demanded an interview, of which the following is a *verbatim* report:—

"Wart's them?"

"Skates."

"Wart?"

"Skates!"

"Skates?"

"Yes."

"Wart are they for?"

"Skating."

"Skatin'?"

"Exactly."

"They ain't bicycles, then?"

"No, skates."

"Eh?"

"Skates!!"

"You needn't 'oller so loud; I ain't deaf! Wart's them sticks for?"

"To support the ankles."

"Uncles?"

"No, ankles!"

"Wonderful! I wish my ole woman was 'ere to see 'em."

"So do I. Where is she?"

"Dead an' gone well-nigh fourteen year ago!"

"I'm very sorry for you."

"Wart?"

"I'm sorry. You must miss her sadly."

"No, Sally worn't 'er name. It were Jane, same as the donkey's is. I called 'im after 'er."

I cut the interview short at this embarrassing stage; and left the ancient rustic still posing for the portrait which my friend had secured some ten minutes previously.

Near Stanford-le-Hope my signals of distress were observed by the driver of a passing brougham, who very kindly volunteered to

take me in tow. An adverse wind and a rough road had by this time rendered me almost speechless, so, completely demoralized, I nodded a guilty assent and accepted an offer of assistance which, an hour ago, I should have rejected with haughty contempt. Fortunately the photographer was a long way in advance at this humiliating stage of the journey, otherwise my brief degradation might have been depicted in compromising black and white, and published throughout the length and breadth of the country. As it is, I have touched upon the incident as lightly as possible.

A long rest at Pitsea completely restored my flagging spirits, and after a formidable



From a Photo. by]

"OFF THE LINE."

[Douglas Smith, Southend.

incline, locally known as "Bread and Cheese Hill," had been ascended, we passed rapidly through Thundersley and Hadleigh, until the ivy-covered tower of Leigh Church appeared in sight, while the distant waters of the Thames estuary, glittering and sparkling in the brilliant sunshine, formed a charming background to one of the most enchanting views in Essex.

The three miles of macadam which

connects Leigh with Southend was in perfect condition ; and the fact that this distance was covered in exactly fourteen minutes will give the reader a fair idea of what even a novice in the art of road-skating can accomplish under favourable circumstances. A steady, swinging stroke will carry the skater along with far less exertion, and with more speed, than the short, quick stroke which it is necessary to practise on a road with a good surface only in the middle and between the cart-ruts.

It was while making up for lost time on this picturesque stretch of roadway that the accident occurred which my watchful kodak fiend has called "Off the Line." A steep decline, several macadam waves, and a passing vehicle were the chief factors concerned in my unromantic downfall. I really began to fall at the top of the hill, but the final botanical dive was not undertaken until I had hurled myself round an abrupt corner at the bottom. The lengthened period required to successfully "come a cropper" while skating on the road gives the performer ample time to "hope for the best" and to "prepare himself for the worst." That he is compelled to "bear whatever happens" is an entirely superfluous remark. The picture speaks for itself in this respect.

Metaphorically speaking, the good people of Southend-on-Sea received me with open arms. My appearance in High Street, dusty and travel-stained though I was, excited considerable interest, and I was interviewed at great length by one of the few visitors still left in the place before I had time to remove my skates, and seek shelter in the comparative seclusion of the Royal Hotel.

From this somewhat disconnected narrative, my readers will be able to form their own opinions as to the probable stability, or otherwise, of the latest athletic innovation, and the possibilities of road-skating as a healthy and an exhilarating pastime.

So far as speed is concerned, the macadam skater will never be able to hold his own with even an indifferently mounted cyclist ; but for moderate journeys, undertaken on roads which are beyond reproach, the new sport has many advantages to recommend it. The convenient portability of the skates is a strong point in their favour, and if any rivalry could exist between road-skating and cycling, the former would score heavily in this connection. An enthusiastic admirer has aptly described the pastime as the "missing link" between cycling and walking, and, as such, it can scarcely fail to claim a large number of patrons from every class of the community.



From a]

ARRIVAL AT SOUTHEND.

[Photograph.