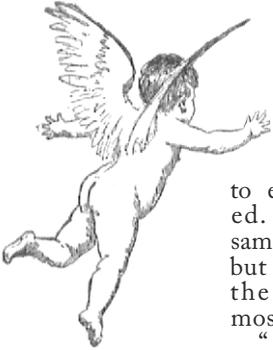


A FIN DE CYCLE INCIDENT.

By Edna C. Jackson.



THEY had been engaged just eleven minutes by the clock, and were in the stage of trying to explain how it happened. People often try the same thing ten years after, but the first debate upon the question is usually most satisfactory.

"'Why do I love you, darling?'" the Professor was saying in limpid tones. "Because you are my ideal

woman: so pure, so modest, so flower-like! Because, looking into your beautiful eyes, I can see the sweet soul reflected there!"

Taken literally, this was egotistical in the Professor; considering that all he saw was his own image—scholarly, rather stern-faced, with spectacles. If he had looked deeper into those blue mirrors he would have seen a flicker of guilt sneaking behind this sweetness.

"Dear Horace!" Renie exclaimed, as she put one small hand timidly against his cheek, but quickly drew it away as she saw by a slight cloudiness above the glasses that even this expression of tenderness conflicted with his rather fossilized notions of maidenly reserve.

"Whoo!" sniffed the "sweet soul" *sotto voce*. "If I didn't know what a heart of gold he really has, his notions of propriety would make me tired!"

"Your very words are flower-like, my little saint!" cooed the infatuated lover. "You have none of the bold ways and language of the so-called *fin de siècle* girl; no mannish posing as an athlete!"

Renie moaned mentally. "Saint! Must I spend my life on a pedestal? I can't—it's too condensed! I must get those antiquated ideas of his remodeled to the present century! I wish I were not so afraid of him!"

But she was—there was no denying it. Perhaps it was her love that made her dread his stern disapproval. She felt herself a pocket edition of Jekyll and Hyde; she meant to confess to the Hyde later, or else try to live up to the Jekyll. But—

"What a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive!"

Meanwhile, she neglected this golden opportunity to confess herself a *fin de siècle* sinner who loved yachting, rowed a shell like a mermaid, jumped gates on her trusty steed, and went in for athletics, as she often remarked, "for all she was worth." Thus she drifted deeper and deeper into this good man's confidence and away from her own.

"Do you know?" said the little saint with a swift, upward smile, "I thought you—you cared for Rill Richmond."

"Miss Richmond! I must confess that on a slight acquaintance, I was inclined to admire her; but—heavens!—she poses as an athlete, dresses in gymnastic costume, swings Indian clubs! How could one admire such a woman?"

"But," faltered the small coward, "are there not occasions when these accomplishments might be of use to a woman?"

"Not to a womanly woman," replied her lover with scathing contempt. "I cannot imagine such a woman—you, for instance, my darling—putting herself in a position to need such questionable accomplishments. But I must go." He arose with much the same kind of cheerful alacrity that Adam might have exhibited when evicted from Paradise. "I promised to meet Manager Stevens; the strikers are acting outrageously."

"Do you think they are altogether to blame?" asked Renie, putting in this weak way a question on which she had very decided ideas.

"Certainly!" he replied, in haughty surprise; "to what is the world coming when the working classes presume to dictate to their employers? But, there, little one! What are you supposed to know about the great problems of capital and labor?" He took her in his arms and held her close.

"Good night, Renie; my pearl, my angel, my own!"

"Pearl! Angel!" Renie drew a long breath as the door closed upon her ardent lover. She clasped her hands in mute protest as she continued: "This pedestal is growing narrower and narrower! I shall certainly tumble, and

what a smash there'll be! I am not ready to be an angel; wings would be horribly in the way. Or a pearl! Shut up in a shell with an oyster—ugh!" A shiver of rebellion went over her. She dashed up the stairs and flung a door wide open.

"Jim! Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy!"

"Here!" quietly remarked a boyish voice at her elbow, "save the roof; never mind the remnants of your lungs. What's the row?"

"Hush!" cried Renie, dramatically, "I'm dying for exercise! I'm perishing for gymnastics! I'm yearning for Indian clubs!"

Suiting the action to the words, she seized a pair from the wall. Her eyes sparkled; a soft flush came into her cheeks; the lace sleeves fell back from the rounded arms, and the supple form swayed to and fro as she swung the clubs with lightning speed, round and round, above her rumped, curly head, tossing and catching them deftly. Altogether it was a pretty picture and told of long and patient practice.

"All very well, Missie," commented her young brother, glancing critically up from his task of pumping air into the pneumatic tire of his bicycle, as Renie ended by swinging the clubs dangerously near his head, giving a blood-curdling whoop and tossing them into the farthest corner of the room, "but what would Attorney Horace P. Waldon, *alias* the 'Professor,' he of the straight-laced ideas and irreproachable walk and conversation, say if he saw you doing the Comanche act in this giddy and reprehensible style?"

Renie's face flamed scarlet as she

remarked with studied indifference: "I do not know that Mr. Waldon is the ruler of my actions."

"I'm glad of it; but if I did not know that you are a girl that never fibs, Renie," returned Jim, guilelessly, "I would doubt that statement. I really thought he meant 'biz' by the token of all these flowers and visits. I'm glad he don't; for, though he is no end of a good fellow, he'd be a mighty uncomfortable sort of a brother-in-law. Do you believe in the transmigration of souls Renie?"

"I don't know," she answered absently, as she sat curled up on the rug beside him, watching the process of adjusting the saddle with intense interest. "What's that to do with the subject under discussion, anyway?"

"Just this; you've read of those toads that wrap a solid rock around themselves and indulge in little catnaps of five thousand years or so? I imagine that sometime, way back in history, the Professor might have been one of those toads and since he has arisen to the glorious estate of man he still clings

to his antique toad ideas—why, what's up?"

The mischievous eyes, so like her own, watching her furtively, saw my lady's white brow contract in a wrathful frown.

"James Raine! How dare you talk so of the best, noblest, kindest, manliest—"

"Whew! anything more? All those adjectives for a mere passing acquaintance! Then you did fib awhile ago, young woman!"

Two pairs of merry eyes met and two pairs of fresh lips laughed mischievously



"THE EARTH TREMBLES." (p. 198.)

"Renie, he is a good, old chap, after all; so are you! Come along, now, and I'll teach you to ride the bike; I have borrowed a ladies' wheel purposely."

"Oh, Jim, will you?" she cried, rapturously, springing to her feet, then, with a sudden thought, sinking back again. "But—but—I guess I'd better not."

What would the Professor say if he saw his ideal floweret riding a wild, dizzy bike? In his eyes it was the cap sheaf of all unwomanly offending.

"Renie Raine! You had already promised me to ride!" exclaimed the boyish, indignant voice.

Renie looked up delighted.

"I believe I did, Jim! It wouldn't do to break a promise, would it?"

"I should think not! Come along; it's late, and nobody will be passing on Park street. Hustle!"

A minute later two young forms were hovering in excited, but solemn discussion over the wheel on the quiet, asphalt-paved street at the back of the house.

"Here! Try that saddle! Is it low enough? Now, first learn to mount. Left treadle up; foot on that; give yourself a push with the other foot; push down on left treadle and catch t'other as it comes around, see?"

"Of course I see; that's easy; g'way!" and Renie confidently placed one foot on the raised treadle and came down in an ignominious tangle with the wheel, where she lay, laughing in the most reprehensibly tomboyish manner until extricated.

"That's just like a girl!" Jim exclaimed in lofty contempt. "Goose! Don't take your other foot off the curbstone until you get ready to start! I'll hold you until you learn to steer; now," after a few minutes' drill, "try it alone."

"It's all the fault of these miserable skirts!" stormed Renie, giving the poor bike a small kick with her slippered foot. "I don't see what skirts were made for, anyhow! They are always in the way!"

"I don't know what you are going to do about it," remarked Jim, with cheerful encouragement, "unless I lend you a suit of my clothes."

"I wish you might!" sighed Renie, surveying him with mournful envy; then a reckless idea took possession of her. Once on the downward path, the

wretched girl descended with lightning speed.

"Jim," she lowered her voice as she whispered the awful resolution, "I'll get bloomers!"

Jim flung himself across the wheel in an agony of suppressed hilarity.

"Oh, if my lord professor should see you in that rig—and riding the bike—you abandoned creature!—oh, me, oh, my!" his voice tapered off to a squeal of rapture as he mentally pictured the effect.

"Jim!" (there were tears on the long lashes and a suspicious quiver around the red lips) "I feel like a villain! Do you really think he would care if—if"—she added weakly, "if I wear a skirt over them?"

Jim manfully choked down the hilarity that threatened to burst forth in yells and declared with all the emphasis of truth:

"Care! Certainly not! All the girls are wearing 'em. Of course, we won't break on his enraptured sight all at once!" His voice gave a tell-tale tremble, but he recovered; "but we'll sort o' let the two facts of bloomers and bike ooze through his inner consciousness so gradually that he will get used to them before he knows it. Oh, he'll be proud of you, Renie, when he sees you flying along like an expert; indeed he will! Like as not——"

Oh, James, what a load of whoppers are you piling on your overburdened conscience!

"Like as not he will get a wheel himself and go with you."

"Do you think so, Jim, really?" cried the culprit, happily. "I wouldn't deceive him for the world, but I do want to ride the bicycle!"

The next night found the two again struggling over the problem of how to keep the center of gravity on a flying machine that seems built for the especial purpose of setting all rules of the scientist at defiance. But alas for Renie! What saintly pedestal was ever graced by a rig like this! Full Turkish pants of blue, blouse, and saucy cap crushed over boyish curls!

"That's something like!" commented Jim, approvingly, while his pupil mounted the steel steed with all the jaunty confidence of the skirt-emancipated woman.

"You must keep your feet going,"

explained the teacher; "you can't tip over if you keep treading. If it tips, don't try to brace up the other way, but go with it. Try again; that's right! Steady! Tread water! Go with it! Go with it! Why didn't you go with the bike?"

"Didn't I go with it?" moaned Renie, from her position prone on her left ear on the hard pavement. "Ain't I with it now? Leave me alone, James Raine! I have no breath to talk. I want to think!"

"There are thoughts of which we may not speak," quoted Jim, dancing around his pupil in unfeeling glee; then, with a sudden rush, he grasped her arm. "Run, Renie, run! Here comes His Nibs, the Professor, around the corner!"

"Jim!" whispered the culprit hoarsely, "what shall I do? I can't get past him! I'm discovered! I'm lost!"

"My mackintosh! There on the fence! Bless the Fates, he's near-sighted and this street's dark! Good evening, Mr. Waldon."

"Good evening. I—I thought I heard Miss Renie," remarked the Professor, peering around near-sightedly.

"She was here a minute ago—oh, Renie!"

"Good evening," said a soft, innocent voice near by, and a small figure hovered just in the shadow of a sheltering tree. Jim jumped on the wheel and basely deserted, much to the Professor's satisfaction.

"My darling!" he murmured fondly, "I came this way from the directors' meeting only to pass your house. I did not dream of this luck. Little violet! how like you is that dark, graceful, nun-like robe!"

Renie laughed a low, half-hysterical little peal.

"A boy's mackintosh, a mile too big, over bloomers!" she was saying inwardly. "Oh, me! Oh, my! A nun in this!"

Aloud, she said, not very enthusiastically, with her hand on the gate:

"Will you come in?"

"I cannot, darling! I have many hours of work yet to-night. Until these labor troubles are over I will have but little time even for you, my pet."

"I wish," she said, timidly, "you would not take such an active part, Horace. There is so much bitterness,

and—and there is right on both sides, is there not?"

"Yes," he replied, slowly and judicially, "right and wrong. But," he smiled down on her much as if she was a tiny, white kitten, "do not trouble your pretty head about such deep subjects, pet. I am in no danger." He kissed her brow with deep reverence and tenderness. "Heaven make me worthy of you, my pearl!"

"Pearl," muttered Renie, surveying her dreadful combination rig of trousers and mackintosh with deep self-contempt. "It is an outrage to deceive him so!" she said to herself as he walked away.

"Don't you laugh, James Raine!" she continued, coming upon that young person sitting on the edge of the porch, in the moonlight; "I am going to be a good, quiet, womanly woman. You hear me? I am pure Jekyll henceforth."

"Um-m!" drawled Jim, reflectively, falling gently backward and studying the dancing vine-shadows through his half-closed lids. "What a nice pair of antiques you will be! Mr. and Mrs. Professor. Oh, say, Renie," in a brisker tone, "in that case you will not want the new bike father and I selected for you to-day?"

Renie, who had passed into the hall, was back in a flash. "Jim, you don't mean it!" she exclaimed, rapturously. "What is it like? Tell me quick!"

"It is one of those earthly vanities which you have forever renounced, young woman!" replied James, grimly. "It's a pity, too," he sighed. "Such a beauty as it is; all nickel-plated, light-running, geared up to 2:40 and the cutest little plate with your name on it. We meant it as a surprise, but, of course, since you don't want it—"

"James Jefferson Raine! who said I didn't want it! I wish it was here now. I want to try it! Will you go with me to-morrow? Oh, you dear boy!" His neck was clasped in a smothering embrace and in her bloomers she executed a wild can-can in the moonlight that would have caused Professor Horace P. Waldon to drop down dead could he have seen her.

The result of the matter was that with the downward celerity of the backslider, Renie plunged into a course of bicycle riding and became an expert in that giddy amusement in a wonderfully brief space of time. But if the

sweetness of stolen fruits was hers, so was the bitter core. She even shed tears in sleepless nights of remorse over her reprehensible double life. Several times she bravely resolved, since she could not decide between her lover and her wheel, that she would boldly ride, bloomers and blouse, around by his office or his club and reveal to him her offending in all its enormity; but the next day she would weaken, seek the streets least frequented by him or fly miles into the country and try to deaden the stings of conscience with the excitements of exploration.

It was a cool morning in late July when Horace stopped at Renie's door to bid her a long farewell, after the manner of lovers who are to be severed by cruel fate for a possible space of thirty-six hours, or worse still, maybe forty-eight.

"I must go to Bulkeley on horseback," he explained, "as the railroad is in danger of being blocked before I get back. But a twenty-mile ride is not much. I will come back late to-morrow, long after your blue eyes are closed, violet." He thought how fair and sweet she looked in her white, lace-trimmed wrapper.

"You should have a bicycle," suggested Renie with an Eugene-Aram-like longing to touch on the secret of her remorse. "See there."

Rill Richmond flashed past on her wheel, jaunty and charming in bloomers and cap.

"If we both rode like-like that," she faltered, "I might go with you-part way."

My lord Professor put on his haughtiest frown.

"Even for that great pleasure, Renie," he said, freezingly, "I would think I had paid a great price for your company in the loss of my ideal! But there!" taking her in his arms as the quick tears sprang to her eyes; "don't cry over such an absurdly impossible thing, my pet. It angered me even to think of your name being used in reference to such an unwomanly exhibition."

"That settles it!" declared Renie after the door closed upon him. "This must end right now! I cannot give him up-my darling!" A tragic sob gave emphasis to this last: "I will give up my bike! James! To-day ends my career as a bicyclist. This afternoon I

will take a farewell ride; to-morrow you must take the wheel away—anywhere—only out of my sight!"

"Whew!" whistled Jim, bringing the front legs of his tipped-back chair to the floor with a thud, "I believe you mean it, this time, Topsey."

"I do," she said, firmly; "then I will tell him all—and—if he cannot forgive me—"

"You'll still have your bike, Topsey!" called Jim after her with cheerful consolation, but she had gone to her room, where she succeeded in making her eyes so red and swollen that she concluded to put off her farewell appearance until the next afternoon.

Renie felt like an ingrate while she patted her willing steed caressingly. It seemed like a thing of life skimming lightly over graveled pike and grassy paths.

"Poor old wheel! I almost wish we could meet him coming home and take our chances; but, ugh!"—a thought of his contemptuous glance at Rill Richmond came to her. "I don't dare! I must give you up, Old Faithful." spoke she was speeding right on over the road which she knew he must. The long summer twilight beg deepened, and a silvery crescent hung in the sky before she realized that her last appearance as a rider must positively be drawn to a close.

"Almost night and I am miles from home," she said, slightly dismayed. "I can make it quicker by taking the wagon track through the woods. It is rather dusky." She eyed the deep shadows doubtfully. "But I can make the mile in five minutes at most."

It was shadowy under the trees, and the carpet of moist leaves made a soft and noiseless track for the wheel. That is why from the other side of a thick growth of bushes, the voices of two men who lay there lazily smoking vile-smelling pipes, reached Renie's ear. Ill-favored customers they were, with hobo written all over their unkempt persons, but with a certain cold-blooded smartness in their talk that chilled the listener.

"And wot if we do have to chug him one so his skull won't hold water? It'll be laid to the strikers; every'ing's laid to them nowadays. Mighty good thing fer chaps like wese. Wot's that old saw: 'W'en honest men fall out rogues git

their innings?' That's near enough anyhow."

"It's a gaudy streak of luck dat we found out he's carryin' dat swag ter his folks ter-night; lots er thousan's, count it later—don't savvy jest how much, but 'nuf ter save er couple er pore heathin frum perishin' er thirst fer many er day," put in the other with pensive self-gratulation.

"He needs killin' on gen'ral principles," added number one, philanthropically. "He's a high an' mighty chap, Mr. H. P. Waldon! That's his name. Wot's any feller want with a job loto' tails ter his kite like that? The last name I had wuz No. 763, an' it wuz 'neat an' serviceable,' as the cloding dealers say. But he'll likely git the killin' fast enough. Jake an' Bill's watchin' de Mill road, an' dere ain't no udder he kin come."

"Den fer er divvy an' er skip!" grinned the other, "an' all laid ter de strikers; oh, dis is pie, pard! Wot's dat?"

A soft rustle of leaves, a rush as noiseless and swift as a swallow's flight, and straight past the two startled hoboes flew a small form on a wheel. Before the tramps could start to their feet she was out of sight.

They looked at one another, and the rougher of the two laughed.

"Jest er gal on er bike; but she give me er bad turn!"

"Ye don't s'pose she heerd?" queried the other, doubtfully.

"Heerd? Nothin'!" She wuz cuttin' 'cros't from the road like the wind, an' them dam' leaves deadened the sound; she never drempt we wuz on earth. But we'd best shut our traps er some one might catch on an' then—" He drew imaginary stripes around his body, and the two resumed their reclining posture and talked low.

In an incredibly short time Renie had passed through the woods and alighted on a smooth country road which, a few rods farther on, crossed the railroad. It was a very white, resolute face that she turned toward the path over which she had just come. "You are planning to murder my Horace! But you never shall do it! I don't know exactly what to do; but I'll spoil your plans, somehow!" The consciousness that upon her alone rested her lover's life steadied her thoughts, and a plan outlined itself distinctly as she spoke. "It is twelve

miles to the forks of this and the Mill road where those others are waiting. If I go by the road, I may not be in time, even if I get past those men; five miles this side of Bulkley this railroad crosses the Bulkley highway; I must catch him there; I can do it by following the railroad; it is the only way!"

"He told me he would meet the eight o'clock train there; get some valuable papers—it was that dreadful money he meant—and start immediately home." With trembling fingers she took out her watch, and calculated that she had just time enough to accomplish her purpose. "If I can only reach him in time! Oh, if that train will only be late!" With a quick motion she loosened the encumbering skirt and tossed it away; then rapidly glancing over her wheel to see that every part was in order, she sprang upon it, and in an instant had gained the track and turned to race against time. It was not exactly the ideal bicycle track. Stones and ties bumped her up and down unmercifully; but she only bent lower, and with set lips passed over rough and smooth with indifference. A mixture of moonlight and starlight faintly showed her the way; sometimes a long stretch of smooth path by the track gave her a gain in time, though the instant consumed in lifting the wheel over the rail and remounting made her frantic; then as the path disappeared, back again to the well-filled center of the track. Sometimes steep embankments towered over her, making the way dark and uncertain; then would come a strip of moonlight; again a dive into the shadow of overhanging trees, from which the cry of night-birds sounded lonesomely.

"If I can only get there in time, only in time!" she whispered to herself with white lips.

Just then with a crash and a bump she fell, striking squarely on her poor back across a sharp tie, and the bike upon her. She had run into a cattle-guard. Stunned and breathless she lay there a moment, then weakly staggered to her feet, found to her joy that the wheel was all right and mounted with the painful consciousness that her back protested against every move. The fall had hurt her badly, poor child, and struggle as she would, a deathly sickness stole over her.

"I won't faint," she muttered, as she

sped on unflinchingly and half hysterically. "What is it the new school of thought teaches? All things are imaginary? I have no back! I have no back! No pain, no back, no pain no—what's that? Great Scott! a long trestle!"

Like a flash she was off her wheel and without thought of the danger if a train should come, warily she pushed the wheel before her. She thinks only of the delay. It seems an hour, though only two or three minutes that she is crawling over the giddy height. She gains the other side at last. Thank heaven! the rest of the way now is comparatively smooth and well lighted. She knows where she is now—three miles from where the Bulkley highway crosses the railroad. Can she make it, or has he already passed on to his death? She sets her teeth and bends to her work. How the wheel flies! Over rough and smooth, but she has forgotten the pain. Only for a little time! a little, little time! One mile—it must be—two! It is growing late, so late! Can he have passed by? Fly, good wheel, fly!

Suddenly before her yawned, densely black, the tunnel. She had forgotten that. And what is that far-away humming and rumbling of the rails behind her? Half a mile straight through the tunnel is the goal she seeks. She can take the road to her right; the dirt road; it leads around the hill a mile and a half. It is safe for her, but every minute may mean her lover's life. The alternative is the tunnel. She knows the meaning of that rumbling of the rails. A stone in the darkness—a broken tie—a break in the wheel—in that means no escape. Will she risk it?

Not once does the brave wheel slacken; not once does its rider waver! Into the black cavern she speeds and is swallowed up in darkness. She bends lower over the machine, of which she seems to have become a part. Perhaps the angels are clearing the way—they have been credited with such things in an emergency like this one—perhaps she calls on them softly. If there be obstructions she cannot see them. The track is straight as a die,

and if she keep to the smooth center there is a chance for her. She is hardly conscious; all life seems to be merged in feet and close-set lips. She begins to see a dim opening before her; how faint it is! Nearer, nearer! A scream that reverberates deafeningly against the rocky walls makes her heart leap and stand still. *The train has entered the tunnel!* It is now or never a race for life. The earth trembles. Nearer the opening comes, nearer the rushing monster. One last effort of strength!

Professor Horace P. Waldon, riding serenely along toward the crossing, thinking with hushed reverence of his fair lady love asleep in her lily bower, hears the screech of a locomotive, reins in his horse, then beholds issue from the blackness a vision that makes him spring to the ground with the impression that he has gone suddenly stark, staring mad.

That same lily maid, with bare head and flying hair that looked as if it had never heard of hairpin or comb; face showing white against smoke, headlight and starlight; in bloomers on a bike that turns off just ahead of the engine, but not so far but that, as she staggers toward him with outstretched arms, the poor wheel is caught up by the slackening train, tossed high, and falls beside the track a finished cycle.

How indignantly the workmen heard the plot which was to cover them with infamy, and how they captured the hoboes and turned them over to the authorities, does not belong to this story.

But the fact that Jim's prophecy came true is the moral thereof. Mr. and Mrs. H. P. Waldon (the title "Professor" seems to have dropped from him of late) spend most delightful hours together, perambulating the country, per cycle. The wrecked one stands as a precious relic in Mr. Waldon's library. And Renie wears bloomers. Her husband says she converted him to a belief in their utility by the first words she gasped as she staggered into his arms that night:

"I—I never could have made it with a skirt on!"

