

A Perfect Gentleman

A Bicycling Adventure and What Came of It

by H.G. Wells

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It was the stirring of spring, the tendency of fashion and the ghost of a sneer drove him to do it. More particularly the ghost of a sneer. It was the tragedy of his life that he admired her, and he struggled against her in vain. She was frankly—antipathetic. You might have called her anything before you would have called her chic; at times he had to admit that she was—to tell the dreadful truth—“robust.” Moreover, the most exquisite epigrams, the prettiest turns of wit, would often as not simply make her stare and laugh—only too evidently at him. And yet when healthy Philistine schoolgirl asked him, “Do you ever venture beyond the Park, Mr. Crampton?” it sufficed. He told his mother plainly his honor was involved. And an irreverent porter saw him, already heated, wheeling his machine upstairs from the Sutton platform, and there are few things less adapted to go upstairs with any pretence to grace, on his way to Brighton—and her.

His machine, like himself, was a little overdressed—we are far from a sound criticism of bicycles—chocolate enameled it was, with translucent

mudguards and the daintiest white handles, and the gear case was of filmy celluloid, with a sort of metal dab like a medal upon it. He wore a cocked hat—or at least one of those brown felt hats that ought to be called cocked hats, whatever the proper name for them may be—and to distinguish himself from the common cycling cad, among other reasons, he wore trousers. The brown of his clothing was apt to his machine, and his tie white and pretty. And when the vulgar cabman outside Sutton Station called “New Woman” after him he pretended not to hear, and went on mounting his machine all across the road. He was quite a sight to see riding up the road toward Belmont, and the sun was so struck by his spick-and-span appearance that he picked out every line of enamel and metal on him and dazzled the passerby therewith. “Something like a thing to shine on!” said the sun. “Just look at this!” and “Did you ever?” in the excess of his admiration.

He had begun his ride from London to Brighton at Sutton—which was generous treatment for London in the geographical sense. His mother—he was her only son—had gone to Brighton by train. The Fentons were there also, and the juxtaposition had its quality of design. His mother had devoted her life to him; she held that he was delicate, and knowing the dreadfulness of public schools, almost as well as Oscar Browning, had kept him by her under a progressive series of amenable tutors—making a perfect gentleman of him according to her lights. And Madge Fenton, with her half share in Fenton’s Safe Cure, was just the fit mate for the sole proprietor of Crampton’s meat juice. It was quite a mother’s plan, to marry her son and yet keep him in the family. And certainly he appreciated Madge, though her attitude was a little doubtful. Yet the steady pressure of her elders was bound to win in the long run, and she was a good girl—as times go.

The road from Sutton to Burgh Heath looks like any other road on a map. But unlike the generality of roads known to Mr. Crampton it persistently went up hill. It was already going up hill at Sutton Station, and it went on pretty steeply for a space, but with an air of its being a last effort. Then round a bend came a view of a huge industrial home, and another last effort. Then a clear interval, even down hill, to Belmont Station, and then it started off again fresh as a daisy. It went up hill visibly for a mile to Banstead Station, and then masked by trees it continued to go up hill. Mr. Crampton was surprised, but the day was young and his man had oiled and adjusted his machine to a nicety. So he stuck to it—riding steady, and swinging a cigarette in the disengaged hand. Until recently a Bounder, with a machine that went clank, became audible behind him.

To Mr. Crampton the idea of being overhauled by a member of the lower classes was distasteful, and relying on the clank and the excellence of his machine he threw away the cigarette and quickened his pace. Thereupon the Bounder rang his bell—it was a beast of a cheap bell—and the clanking grew more frequent and louder, until it was close behind Mr. Crampton. After a sharp spurt Mr. Crampton decided that he would not race after all, and the Bounder drew alongside. He was quite the most dreadful type of Bounder, with a machine with a loose mudguard and a speckled bell; he had a very dirty suit of C. T. C. gray, and a perspiring red face with a strip of damp hair across his forehead. And he had the cheek to speak to Mr. Crampton!

“Pretty Jigger,” said the Bounder.

Mr. Crampton was so startled, he wobbled and almost collided. “I beg your pardon,” he said, in a repressive tone.

“Nice-looking machine you’ve got.”

Mr. Crampton was quite at a loss for words. But he was determined to shut the fellow up promptly. "I'm afraid I can't say the same of yours," he said at length.

"No, it isn't up to much," said the Bounder, cheerfully. "Are you going far? Because if so" —

Two Girls (possibly Nice Girls) appeared riding down toward them. They might think that he and the Bounder were travelling together! "It's no business of yours," said Mr. Crampton, "where I'm going." And something indistinct about "damned impertinence!"

"Lord!" said the Bounder. "No offence." It took him a minute to digest. Then he said something over his shoulder to Mr. Crampton that was lost, and putting his head down below his shoulders, went clanking off at a great pace, his shoulders moving with his feet in a manner entirely despicable.

Mr. Crampton rode quite erect, and with only one hand on the handle, to show that he was not racing, until the girls were well past him, and then he dismounted. This eternal hill was tiresome, and he did not want to overtake the Bounder. Walking, one could notice the fine growth of green with which the hedges were speckled, and the gum-exuding chestnut buds; and the dead nettles were all in flower. In fact, it was a pleasant change from the saddle for a man who was not a scorcher.

And at last he came to Burgh Heath. As this seemed to be a sort of village green, he mounted again. Some way along was a little sweetstuff shop, and outside was the Bounder's machine. The Bounder was in the doorway, with his hands in his pockets, eating. He looked round at Mr. Crampton and immediately looked away again, with a hollow pretence of self-esteem.

And away down a hill Mr. Crampton was passed by a tandem bicycle. He overtook its riders, a girl and a man, walking the next ascent. They seemed to

be father and daughter, the father a sturdy, red-bearded man with very fat legs, and the daughter decidedly pretty. She was dressed in greenish gray, and had red hair. Mr. Crampton was very glad indeed that he had got rid of the Bounder forthwith. He had to set his teeth to get up the hill, but of course it was impossible to dismount, and then came a run down, and then a long gentle slope that was rather trying, with a pretty girl on a tandem behind, that is, to keep one in the saddle. Reigate Hill came none too soon to give Mr. Crampton a decent excuse for dismounting. So he put the machine carefully where it looked well on the turf, and took out his silver cigarette case, and was in his attitude ready, looking over the clustering town and broad blue Weald, as the tandem couple came walking down the hill. So far the ride had been very pleasant.

After that the Bounder, hot and panting. He came toward the turf as if contemplating a lounge, and his eye caught the chocolate bicycle. He glanced swiftly up at Mr. Crampton, and went incontinently down the hill toward the town, visibly discomfited.

Mr. Crampton lunched in Reigate. It was in the afternoon that his adventures really began—as he rode toward Crawley. The morning's ride had told on him, and three gates had the honor of supporting him for leisurely intervals between Reigate and Horley. Cyclists became frequent, and as they went by during his sessions on the gate, he smoked ostentatiously or (after he had smoked sufficiently) sketched in a little morocco-bound sketchbook—just to show he was not simply resting. And among others, a very pretty girl flashed by—unaccompanied.

Now, Mr. Crampton, in spite of his regard for Madge, was not averse to dreams of casual romance. And the bicycle in its earlier phases has a peculiar influence upon the imagination. To ride out from the familiar locality, into

strange roads stretching away into the unknown, to be free to stop or go on, irrespective of hour or companion, inevitably brings the adventurous side uppermost. And Mr. Crampton, descending from his gate and mounting, not two minutes after she had passed, presently overtook her near the crossroad to Horley, wheeling her machine.

She had a charmingly cut costume, and her hair was a pleasant brown, and her ear, as one came riding up behind her, was noticeably pretty. She had punctured the tire of her hind wheel; it ran flat and flaccid—the case was legible a hundred yards off.

Now this is the secret desire of all lone men who go down into the country on wheels. The proffered help, the charming talk, the idyllic incident! Who knows what delightful developments? So that a great joy came to Mr. Crampton. He dismounted a little way behind her, advanced gracefully, proffered the repair outfit in his wallet. He had never attempted to repair a tire before, and so he felt confident of his ability. The young lady was inclined to be distant at first (which was perfectly correct of her), but seeing that it was four miles to Crawley, and Mr. Crampton a mere boy and evidently of a superior class, she presently accepted his services. So coming to a convenient grassy place at the cross road, Mr. Crampton turned the machine over on its saddle and handles, severely bruising his knee as he did so, and went quietly and methodically to work, it being then about 3 o'clock in the afternoon and the sun very bright and warm.

He talked to her easily. Where had she punctured? She did not quite know, she had only just noticed that the tire was “all flabby.” “A very unpleasant discovery,” said Mr. Crampton. “We must see just precisely what is the matter.”

“It’s very kind of you,” she said. “Are you sure you can spare the time?”

“I’m merely running down to Brighton,” he said. “I couldn’t think of leaving you in this predicament.” Mr. Crampton had of course no mechanic’s knowledge of bicycles, but he knew the things were very simple. He knew he had to remove the tire, and it did not take him long to discover that in order to remove the tire he would have to remove the wheel. How to get wheel off was a little puzzling at first—it was evident the chain would have to come away. That involved operations with a dress guard and a gear case. “It’s an inductive process,” said Mr. Crampton, lightly—concealing a faint qualm of doubt, and setting to work on the gear case.

“They’re frightfully complicated things,” she said.

“These machinery people make them rather stupidly,” said Mr. Crampton.

“I shouldn’t dare take the thing to pieces as you are doing.”

“It’s very simple, really.”

“I think men are always so much cleverer than girls at this sort of thing.”

Mr. Crampton did not answer for a second. “You’ve blackened your fingers!” she said.

It was very nice and friendly of her, but a little distracting. She kept stepping about on the growing circle of nuts, chain, screw-hammer, washers, and so forth about Mr. Crampton, and made many bright, intelligent little remarks that required answering. And she really was pretty. Mr. Crampton still continued to enjoy the incident in spite of his blackened hands and the heat of the day and the quite remarkable softness of the nuts on her machine. “If we are better at machine mending and that sort of thing,” he said, “you have your consolations.”

“I don’t think so.”

“The emotions,” said Mr. Crampton.

“But men have emotions.”

“As girls have bicycles.” said Mr. Crampton, with the air of a neat thing, mislaying the pin of the chain, and proceeding to pull out the wheel.

The removal of the tire was the turning-point of the affair. It simply would not come off the rim. “These detachable!” said Mr. Crampton. He had to ask her to pull, and the struggle was violent for a moment, and a spoke got bent. Then he pinched her finger severely. He knew the operation depended upon a knack, and as he was ashamed of not knowing the knack, he pretended to be doing something else when a man cyclist went by. Three little children came by, and seemed profoundly interested until Mr. Crampton stopped and stared steadily at them. Then each began edging behind the other, and so they receded. And a tramp offered ingenious but impracticable suggestions, until Mr. Crampton gave him sixpence to take them away. Then came the tandem he had seen in the morning, going Londonward, and the old gentleman insisted on knowing what was the matter. Beastly officious of him! “We can’t remove the tire,” said the young lady—a little needlessly, Crampton thought.

“Simple enough,” said the old gentleman, in abominable taste. It was simple—in his hands. In a minute the tire lay detached.

“I can manage now, thanks,” said Mr. Crampton, rather stiffly.

“Quite sure?” said the old gentleman.

“Quite,” said Mr. Crampton, with a quiet stare, and the old gentleman mounted his machine. For of course Mr. Crampton trusted to the directions on his repair outfit, as any one would.

“Thank you very much indeed,” said the young lady.

“No trouble at all,” said the old gentleman, and off he rode.

The next misunderstanding was entirely due to the silly, vague way in which the directions on the box were given. Really you had to stick the round

patch thing in to the puncture, but Mr. Crampton read rather carelessly, and first of all cut out a circular place in the air chamber, and seeing it was not quite round. He cut it a little larger, and so on, until it was a little too big for the patch thing. The young lady had been silent for the last ten minutes or so, watching Mr. Crampton's face, but now she asked suddenly, "Are you sure that is the right thing to do?"

"It says so on the box," said Mr. Crampton, looking up with a smile. "But really I don't see how we are to manage it quite."

"Do you know," said the young lady, "I wanted to be in Crawley by 4."

It was a little rude of her, but Mr. Crampton looked at his watch—it was five minutes past 4! "Dear me!" he said, agreeably; "the time has flown." And suddenly he remembered he was twenty-six miles from Brighton.

"I think, do you know," said the young lady, "if you don't mind, I will wheel my machine, after all. It seems such a long job mending it. And really, in Crawley the man"—

"These local fellows aren't always quite reliable. I'm frightfully sorry, you know, not to have got it right just at once, but"—

"It was very kind of you to try," she said.

"Do you know," said Mr. Crampton, "even now"— For the thing really interested him. His idea was to try a piece of paper smeared with solution; but it did not work, and at quarter past 4 he began putting the machine together, with nothing but a neat circular opening cut in the air tube of the tire to show for his wasted hour. His interest was fading, and the girl's manner was not so nice as it had been. And, curiously enough, the wheel would not go on right, and there was a difficulty about the chain. One or two of the little nut things may have lost themselves in the grass, and—trivial though they were—this complicated the business. Mr. Crampton was becoming painfully aware that

his hands were black and his cuffs crumpled. He suddenly felt tired and disgusted at the whole absurd incident, and, seeing the growing impatience of the girl, he hurried the rebuilding indiscreetly, using his wrench as a hammer when necessary. The eyes of passers by seemed ironical.

Bicycles are odd things. He made it look all right—except the gear case, which he had trodden on, but when he stood it up, right way up, the chain flapped about on the gear case and the wheel would not go round.

He tried what a little force would do, but it only produced curious clanking noises.

It was a most disappointing incident, and although the girl was indisputably pretty, curiously devoid of any real romantic quality. “It doesn’t seem right, quite yet,” she said.

“I’m afraid not,” said Mr. Crampton, rather red in the face, holding the machine by saddle and handle and looking at it in a speculative way. It was really rather a difficult situation, and he was trying to think what to do next. It came of being a gentleman, of course, and chivalrous. Bounders would have ridden by in the first place, without attempting to help. He wanted very badly to swear, and it was very clear indeed in his mind that he ought to be riding on.

His self-control was admirable. “I’m afraid it’s no go,” he said, looking up and smiling.

She was looking quite straightly at him. There was no appearance of anger in her manner, but she remarked quietly: “I don’t think you ought to have touched my machine. I’m afraid you know very little about them.”

Mr. Crampton perceived at once that she was not a lady.

All the more reason, he told himself, that he should assert himself a gentleman. “It seems to me,” he said, “that I can do very little good in this case.”

“It seems so to me,” she said, annoyed to find him not humiliated.

There came a rhythmic clanking on the road, and the red, damp-haired Bounder in gray, whom Mr. Crampton had snubbed at Banstead, going Londonward now, and riding laboriously, drew near. “Ullo!” he said, softly, to himself, and as he passed, “Nothing wrong?”

Positively she answered him. Mr. Crampton did not notice it, because he was looking at the machine, but she must have done so.

The Bounder was already some yards down the road, but he dismounted with such alacrity that he almost tumbled over. He flung his machine into the hedge in a fine, careless way, and came back. “What is it?” he said.

“Nothing,” said Mr. Crampton, full of angry shame.

“Had a tumble, Miss?” said the Bounder, not at all abashed, with his eye on the bent mudguard.

“I can manage very well, thank you,” said Mr. Crampton.

“Let’s have a look at the jigger,” said the Bounder, advancing: and suddenly became aware that he had met this obstructive person in brown before. He looked at the girl.

“Please let the gentleman see,” said the young lady quietly.

At that Mr. Crampton’s temper gave way entirely. “Very well,” he said, quite crossly. “I understood I was to mend your machine. I’ve wasted an hour on it.”

“Steady on,” said the Bounder, very quietly, bending down and looking at the machine.

“I didn’t know you wanted to stop every man that came along,” said Mr. Crampton, suddenly exasperated to insult.

“Steady on,” said the Bounder again.

Mr. Crampton replied with a look of freezing contempt.

"When you were rude to me," said the Bounder, looking up, "I let you alone. But if you're going to be rude to this Young Lady, I shall just punch your 'ead. See? I'm an engine-fitter, and it don't take that to see you've been pretty near knocking all the quality out of vally'ble machine."

Mr. Crampton was breathless with anger. "I'm quite prepared to pay for any damage I've done," he said.

Neither of them had the manners to answer, though he stood quite a minute. Trembling with indignation, Mr. Crampton picked up his machine, mounted a little clumsily, and rode off. He rode very fast until he was round the bend—just to show how angry he was. For a space he was boiling with rage. Then he laughed aloud in a sardonic fashion. "Of all possible experiences!" he said. "Ha! ha! And this comes of trying to help a fellow-creature!"

The sardonic mood remained. He hated every human being in Crawley, both on the right-hand side and on the left. Most of them, from their manner, seemed to be aware of his recent indignities. He rested at Crawley an hour, hating people quietly but steadily, and thinking of alternatives to his sayings and doings with the Bounder and the Young Lady. It was 6 when he rode on again, and the sun was setting. A mile out of Crawley he came to a long dark hill. Twilight came as a surprise, and with it came an acute sense of fatigue. He dismounted. Presently he mounted again. It was difficult to decide which progress was most tiring—afoot or a wheel. And this was pleasure! An acute realization of the indescribable vulgarity of cycling came into his mind. A dirty, fatiguing pursuit that put one, at the mercy of every impudent cad one met. He began to stamp with his feet, and use words that even his mother's care had not prevented his learning. The road before him was dark, interminable, impossible. He saw a milestone dimly, and went to it with a lingering hope

that Providence might have interposed on his behalf and cut out a dozen miles or so, but there it was: "Brighton, twenty miles."

And then comes a mystery. Within ninety minutes Mr. Crampton was alighting outside the best society hotel at Brighton. There is a railway station at Three Bridges, but I hold that an author should respect the secrets of his characters. There was no incriminatory ticket on his machine, and he never gave any one the slightest ground for supposing that he did anything but cycle the whole way. His hat was awry, his clothes dirty, his linen crumpled, and his hands and face and tie were defiled with black from the young lady's chain.

His mother received him with effusion. She had grown nervous with the darkness. "My dear, dear Cecil," she said, advancing. "But how white and tired you look! And the dust upon you!" She laid caressing fat hands upon his shoulder.

"Don't," said Mr. Crampton, briefly, and flung himself into a chair, scowling.

"You might give a chap something to drink," he said, "instead of standing there."

But after dinner he recovered, and talked to her. Among other things, he admitted he liked Madge, and seemed to take his mother's timid suggestions in a sympathetic spirit. "But I wish she didn't bicycle," he said; "it's a bit—common."

They lunched next day with the Fentons. He waited for his opportunity to score his point, making no attempt to lead up to it, and so it did not come off until late in the afternoon. Mrs. Crampton would have boasted to Madge of his manliness in riding the whole way but for his express prohibition.

"No," he said, quite calmly, in answer to some remark. "I didn't train. I wheeled down."

Madge looked quite surprised. "Fifty-two miles!" she said.

"I don't know the distance," said Mr. Crampton. "It didn't seem so exceedingly long."

The increase in her respect was swift and evident. "How long did it take you?"

"Six—seven hours. I started about midday. But I didn't scorch, you know. And I stopped about half an hour mending a girl's tire."

He tried to look as though he had done nothing extraordinary.

"Here's Ethel, of all people!" said Mrs. Fenton, rising. "My dear!"

Mr. Crampton looked up, and there in the doorway was the heroine of the punctured tire. . . . Madge rose, too, to welcome her friend, and missed his expression. "And here is Cousin Cecil," she said, introducing Mr. Crampton. The newcomer advanced brightly, stared, hesitated, and bowed coldly.

Mrs. Crampton never quite understood the, business, because her son was not only reticent, but extremely irritable when questioned. Evidently the young people had met before, and were under considerable constraint. She is inclined to think from the subsequent incidents that Ethel was a designing sort of girl, who set Madge against him with the idea of securing him herself. In that, at any rate, she was disappointed. But the Brighton gathering was certainly a failure, and Mr. Crampton is still not engaged. Yet, seeing his position, it is odd some girl has not snapped him up. Madge (silly girl!) married a young doctor three months ago.

—H.G. Wells, in *The Woman at Home*.

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