

A CYCLIST IN SOLILOQUISING MOOD

E. Gerald Bullen (R.N.) 17/3/37

It is evening. The wind is roaring outside and forcing the rain in heavy splashes against the window-panes, whilst I sit drying my rain-soaked stockings at a cheery fire. I have just returned from a cycle-run, this being really a battle against the elements for over an hour, with a compensating return run, the strong easterly wind taking me along nearly as fast as I could turn the pedals.

On a hillside near the house are a number of trees, upon which the wind is beating with all its fury. The sound reminds me of the time, some three years ago, when the ship on which I was serving was crossing the well-known Bay of Biscay in a severe storm. Our decks were so often awash that it was dangerous to venture far on the upperdeck. My thoughts wander, as a cyclist's do, and I recall how on that occasion the fresh-water tanks leaked and the water became salty. Strangely enough, on our reaching Gibraltar, the most popular tune played by the female orchestras in the many cafes was 'Stormy Weather'. This we soon changed into 'Salty Water' – sung to the same tune!

From such scenes, my memory turns to a recent Saturday in mid-February when I had the luck to experience an almost perfect spring day. After an early lunch, I sallied forth, wandering along some unfrequented lanes to take a short-cut through a muddy path at the back of Townhill, and so I came to the southern side of the Cleish Hills. It was a wonderfully clear day and my heart was full of joy at being able to enjoy such glory as met my gaze when, crossing the hills by the Old Road, suddenly, on rounding a bend, I came upon a marvellous vista. A few miles before me lay Loch Leven with hardly a movement on its surface, the Bishop Hill forming a perfect background, with white splashes of snow showing sharply against the dark, natural colour of the hill. Around and above me, the skylarks were singing, showing their appreciation of such glorious sunshine! One of the many advantages of travelling by bicycle is that Nature's orchestras can be heard without any disturbance of their music.

About this time, my latent spirit of exploration came to the surface and with it an urge to find a new road or two. So out came the map, and soon I was speeding towards Milnathort and over the quiet hill road to Glenfarg. Quite in keeping with the bright sunshine were the gorse bushes, their brilliant yellow blooms helping to keep high the hopes of a joyful heart. Soon I was crossing the main road at Glenfarg and so up a 'wee brae' to a spot where the unexpected sight of the Lomond Hills brought me from the saddle. I had seen them before from various directions, but this aspect gave me more thrills than any of the others, so stern, yet so inviting, they looked, the two peaks clearly seen, and the long gullies filled with snow.

A few minutes later I was in the hamlet so musically named Newton of Balcanquhal – a name I found almost impossible to pronounce! It was an easy run then to Strathmiglo,

where a track across the fields called me from the busy road, and once more I was ploughing through mud and 'dubs', earning again my nick-name of 'Mud-plugger'. And so to a well-earned tea with happy Fife D.A. members at Ladybank.

The smell of singeing stockings brought me back with a jerk to the fireside, yet soon my mind was taking me again through cycling memories, varying from the thrill of riding my first 'built-to-measure' bicycle in crowded London, to the time I bathed in a stream in the Welsh mountains above Builth Wells. That was in the middle of a summer tour noted for its heatwave weather, and how welcome was that brief dip in the cool waters.

On similar lines my mind wanders back to the time I met a particular cycling chum after a long absence on duty abroad. We were enjoying a four days Easter tour, and for a long time our conversation ran on thus:- 'Do you remember that moonlight night we sat on the bridge near Wimborne Minster in Dorset and sang 'Toselli's Serenade?' This was countered with:- 'Do you remember how five of us slept in one bed made up on the floor one August Bank Holiday in the upper reaches of the Wye Valley?' and again:- 'What about that time you ate four poached eggs on one round of home-made bread at Mrs. Broom's of Castle Coombe, the well-known Wiltshire village?'

Truly, cycling is far more than a mere pastime. It gives one a vast storehouse of precious memories, not to mention that great feeling of joy at being alive, when gazing at some specially dear and familiar scene, or having just conquered a particularly hard pass.

And so to bed!