

WOMEN ON WHEELS.

BY MRS. HUMPHRY.

THERE is an old story of a Scotch sexton who, meeting a ghost in the churchyard one night, asked it:—"Is it the general resurrection, or are ye only out for a wee daunder by yourself?" One feels inclined to paraphrase his question *à propos* of the present craze for cycling that has attacked society. Is it only a passing fancy? Or is it a revolution? Who shall say? There is nothing so fickle as fashion. In the beginning of the year the women of the leisured classes devoted themselves to skating, many of them throwing themselves with such energy into the new amusement as to seriously injure their health. The cycling mania has taken even deeper hold, as may be made manifest to anyone who shall visit Battersea Park about half-past ten in the morning. Hundreds of gently nurtured girls are there to be seen on bicycles, some of them expert enough, others still in their novitiate, and many of them accompanied by mothers who have had perforce to take to cycling in order to perform their duties as chaperons.

The life of a society mother in the season is never a very easy one. She has to rise early, and go to bed late, and rarely finds a chance of recouping herself for lost hours of rest by a stolen nap in the afternoon. She has to sit in a ballroom, looking on at the fun, her own amusement consisting in silently recalling the dear old days when she herself was young and blithe, or in exchanging platitudes with



other chaperons. And now that she has to "bike" in order that her daughters may enjoy their long spins under her guardianship, she must occasionally feel as the hen does when the fluffy little yellow ducklings she has mothered betake themselves to the water. Some of them are content to send a groom, also on wheels, to look after their pretty daughters; and some take just as keen a pleasure as the girls themselves in the rapid motion and the exhilarating exercise. Lady Jeune is one of these. With her two charming daughters she enjoys many an agreeable ride, and uses her iron steed for shopping excursions as well. The convenience of "biking" is enormous; so much so that West End cabmen complain that they do not get nearly so many fares as they used to do; just as the livery-stable keepers assert that there is considerably less demand for horses now than during any preceding season. Piano manufacturers declare that bicycling is interfering with the sale of pianos; but this is a conclusion scarcely so clear of deduction as the other two.

So general is the devotion to the new mode of locomotion, that at country houses a room is now devoted to the housing of the bicycles, and the host has not to find mounts for nearly so many of his guests as he was wont to do. Both men and women prefer the wheel to the quadruped; and the novelist of the future, should the former have come to stay, will arrange many a situation in harmony with the new pastime. Fancy an elopement after the new pattern! The fugitives on a sociable, and the irate father in pursuit. What a dramatic combination could have been made of Gretna Green, the bicycle, and the blacksmith!

Among those who know nothing practically about bicycling, an impression pre-

vails that it is necessary to sit astride. This is, of course, quite erroneous, but the number of people who are deterred from wheeling by this mistake is very great. Others are prevented from learning by fear of falling, but there is no more danger than there is in learning horse-riding, if so much. The teacher is much more in danger of getting a nasty blow than the learner. A belt is passed round her waist, and furnished with a handle which the teacher grasps. In the wobbling of the pupil he gets many a bruise. I have often noticed the difference between women learners and men. The former laugh at their own struggles, sometimes so heartily that they cannot proceed. Men take the matter more seriously, bend their whole minds to it, and only laugh at their spills when some one else starts it. And yet women often get on quite as quickly.

On the other hand, there are more utter failures among women learners than among men. The Duchess of York and Princess Maud of Wales learned quite easily. The Duchess of Connaught was nervous and took more time over the acquirement. The Queen of Italy is an expert rider. The Duchess of Portland, the Marchioness of Hastings, and the Countess of Dudley are all proficient. The first ride is extremely tiring, though certainly not more so than the first ride on horseback after some months. Every muscle in the frame seems to have a separate ache of its own, and there are few more agreeable sensations than that afforded by a rest on a comfortable couch after a long lesson on a bicycle.

The question of dress is a vexed one. The aristocratic world clings to its skirts. The ladies of a lower social scale believe in knickerbockers, or Lady Harberton's divided skirt. Those who have ridden without a skirt, vow that they will never ride in one again. In France, hardly any woman wears a skirt when wheel-riding, replacing it, as a rule, by very full trousers of the Zouave sort. English ladies

of the upper ten thousand wear skirts varying in length and width, and sometimes stiffened with horsehair in the hem to keep them out from the wheel. Lady Norreys, one of the cleverest bicyclists, wears such a skirt, or did for a time. I fancy I have seen her with unstiffened skirt of late. She has a very strong feeling against the divided skirt, an antipathy that is shared by Lady Wolverton, Lady Lurgan, Lady Yarborough, and Lady Londonderry. For my own part, though I share their prejudice, I feel convinced that it will before long be completely outgrown and forgotten, and, should the craze for cycling last so long, in two or three years a skirted woman on wheels will be regarded as a survival, and in no sense up-to-date. And I am the more particularly certain of this because a recent invention promises to utterly revolutionize the science of cycling.

I refer to the sliding-seat, arranged on the same principle as applied to boats.



This economises the strength enormously by allowing a backward and forward movement to the saddle and securing freedom from vibration, at the same time giving a surprising increase of power. When the sliding-

seat comes into universal use, as it certainly will when it is generally known, the costume of lady cyclists will be adapted to it. The sliding-seat cannot be adopted by any one riding in a skirt.

I have seen some graceful wheel-riders of my own sex, and should like to men-

tion the names of a few who are pre- eminent in this respect. But to do so would be invidious; especially as I must record the fact that the picturesque riders are a very small minority. The great majority are very much the reverse. I have been hunting in my brain for an ad-



jective wherewith to describe them, but cannot find one that does not seem too severe. What I particularly object to is the back view of the average rider. It is distressingly hideous, except in cases where the skirt of the coat or jacket is long enough to reach the saddle.

Girls who ride in blouses and scanty skirts can have no idea of the unbecoming fashion in which some skirts dispose themselves. The most graceful costume as yet devised is that invented by a well-known Manchester firm. The skirt forms a drape over the bodice when the cyclist is wheeling, and droops low over the back, while at the same time it affords the arms perfect freedom. This seems impossible, but it has been achieved by the ingenious inventor. In an instant, when the wearer alights, a button is unfastened on either shoulder and the skirt drops to the ground over the knickerbockers and gaiters, both of which are in the same material as the

dress. Woollen underwear is indispensable, otherwise the danger of chill after a long run is very great. Jäger garments of various degrees of thickness or thinness, according to the temperature, obviate all risk. The only danger, apart from chill, lies in overdoing the riding and straining the muscles. One doctor has said that cycling is good for girls but bad for women. Another declares that it is excellent for both young and old, unless there is inherent delicacy of constitution or weakness of heart. But in moderation lies the great safety.

What first strikes the spectator at Battersea Park is the ugly way in which the skirt is kicked out when the wheel-woman is pedalling. It is a fact that the limbs are much more freely displayed in this way than the performers imagine, especially in windy weather; and this is one of the strongest arguments used against skirts by the advocates of rational dress.

As to footgear, only the novice tries to cycle in boots. The ankles have so much to do that these soon become intolerable. Shoes are the proper wear. For summer wear the sailor hat is preferable to any other, worn a little forward so as to shade the eyes. A veil will be found a useful addition for keeping off the flies, which often seem to make, of set purpose, for the rider's eyes. I have seen more than one man cycling with a dark gauze veil pinned on over his cap. Disagreeable at any time, the suicide of a fly in one's eye is doubly so when wheeling. A tight corset is always a mistake, but never more so than when riding a bicycle. The exertion necessary for propelling the machine, especially uphill, combined with the pressure caused by the corsets on the vital organs, is very likely to cause an attack of faintness which would, at the least, be very inconvenient, and might possibly be dangerous.

There is no doubt that much of the objection entertained against bicycling proceeds from the idea that it is fast and

unfeminine ; but when we remember how many things that were once considered fast and unfeminine, now enter into the ordinary programme of a woman's life, we may safely infer that after a while this will probably follow their example.

In the early days when women rode on pillions, they would have been horrified at the idea of having the back of a horse all to themselves. In another decade things will be made very smooth for the active, vigorous, and enterprising young woman who is now in the nursery or busy with lessons in the schoolroom. When the general public, at home and abroad, becomes thoroughly habituated to the sight of women on wheels, the fear of looking fast or conspicuous will have vanished.

Meanwhile, the great thing is to be very

careful in the choice of a saddle. An uncomfortable one may prove to be absolutely dangerous to health. A machine should never be bought until after more than one trial trip has been made on it. Perhaps, after a while, the saddle may be made a little larger for women riders. Not even the shortest distance should be ridden without a brake ; a precaution not always observed. Slow riding should be carefully practised as a means of avoiding accidents in crowded thoroughfares. Over-fatigue should be most carefully guarded against, especially by timid riders, for the two causes combined have been known to bring on severe cases of nervous prostration, a malady that can be induced in a very short time, while the cure of it often covers many years in such cases as do not terminate fatally.

