



Winfred Ernest Garrison

## Into the Heart of England

*In 1898 a young church historian bicycles through England, Scotland, and Wales and writes home to tell his story*

A rainy Sunday at sea, a rainy Monday off the north coast of Ireland, and then we land at Liverpool on a rainy Tuesday morning. The immediate outlook for cycling is not brilliant, but one of the rules already laid down is that everything is to be enjoyed. Remembering this, we comment upon the beauty of all rain, and the special beauty of this particular shower. Then we go out and get wet in it. It seems rather an ominous indication of a moist climate that nearly every other shop on the first street we ascend displays waterproof goods in the windows. It seems as if half the population earned its living by keeping the other half dry. I have

since learned that this is a slight overestimate of the importance of the mackintosh industry in England, but my conviction of its magnitude remains. In the course of a nine weeks' tour in any civilized land one is sure to have a variety of weather, and some of it wet. If we start with the worst, the next change must be for the better. On the basis of such sage considerations as these we determined to make the start at once. Mounting our wheels early in the afternoon we rode out of Liverpool in a torrent of rain, and down the road toward Manchester. The rain was more persistent than most English showers, for it continued through the afternoon, and finally cleared in a sunset of crimson and gold. But even rain could not spoil the charm of that first twenty-five miles of English highway. Between stone walls and hedges it wound its way, and through a series of Lancashire villages so closely set that one never knows whether he is really in town or country. Our wheels and ourselves were candidates for a Turkish bath, but after all it was not so bad. Our waterproof capes had served us well, and the wheels, after a good grooming, were none the worse. The start had been made, and the stop that first night was at a typical English country inn.

The typical English inn is an institution singularly compounded of virtues and vices. To begin with its virtues, it is, if it is good enough to deserve to be called typical, scrupulously clean. It is quaint, queer and cozy. Your wants are attended to promptly and respectfully. Even if you order anything so extraordinary and un-English as a glass of cold water with your meals or a cup of coffee for your breakfast, the maid endeavors, though usually without success, to suppress her astonishment. Nowhere does "local color" seem to be applied more freely than at a good inn. But the dark side of it lies in the fact that the inn is generally a saloon as well as a hotel. Frequently the latter function becomes insignificant by the side of the former. Many inns have no provision for entertaining travelers over night, and in almost all of them the chief source of revenue is the tap-room. Here may be seen the gloomier side of English rural life, the curse of intemperance. At the same time one need not overlook the value of the inn, and especially its tap-room, as a social center and forum for the interchange of ideas. This unpleasant side of the English inn (which, by the

way, is also a characteristic of the hotels of small towns in many parts of our own country and Canada) has given rise to a system of temperance hotels, always quiet and respectable, and generally clean, but never anything but commonplace and uninteresting in themselves.

The particular inn which sheltered us our first night in England bore the picturesque name of "The Eagle and Child," and it was quaint and cozy. I dried my shoes before the open fire in the kitchen, where shining vessels of brass and copper hung in rows on the wall like a phalanx of full moons. The hostess served us our "tea," including "new laid eggs" and buttered bread and marmalade, in a little parlor with diamond-paned windows looking out over a garden of old-fashioned flowers fresh and fragrant after the rain. And we were glad that we had come.

The following morning we rode on into Manchester. Just how or why it happened, neither of us has been able to make out, but we were certainly the object of more popular attention during the three hours which we spent in that city than often falls to the lot of two modest cyclists. Perhaps it was the mere fact that we were bicycle tourists, for that is something which can never be concealed; perhaps it was the fact that we had American wheels, for everyone seems to recognize an American wheel at a glance; perhaps it was the color of the wheels, for my companion's was blue and mine was green, while nearly all English wheels are black. At any rate, the people of Manchester seemed to consider our case well worthy of consideration. If we left the wheels at the curb while we entered a shop, the sidewalk and half of the street were immediately blocked by a curious crowd. If one of us staid by the wheels, they eyed him, too, as if he were a creature of supra- (or sub-) terrestrial origin. Not a question was asked, not an intelligent glance directed at any part of the outfit—just a steady, stupid, brazen stare.

At first I essayed to photograph the crowd gathered about the two wheels, but no sooner was the kodak unfolded than the crowd, catching sight of it, at once moved over bodily and joined in solid phalanx again about me and the camera. That put a stop to the hope of photographing the scene.

Then we went into council and devised a plan to disconcert and abash our observers, The next time we stopped the crowd gathered as usual, and we were in the center of it. The crowd gazed stolidly at us, the inner circle being about at arm's length. Thereupon we leaned upon our wheels and proceeded to discuss the peculiarities of the various individuals about us, in a good, sonorous tone. The color of their hair, the cut of their clothes, the style of their boots and their various individual characteristics of physique, gesture, gait and garb were thoroughly gone over in their hearing. Some left when they saw that they were under fire. More staid, though with evident signs of embarrassment. Still more were absolutely untouched. As a means of ridding ourselves of a crowd of impertinent gazers, it had to be admitted that the scheme was a failure, and it is my conviction still that nothing less imperative than artillery would be able to disperse a crowd of Manchester gazers.

It is but fair to add, in justice to both ourselves and the English people, that nowhere else has our appearance been greeted in this fashion, though the small boys in several widely separated villages have shouted "Klondike" at us as we rode through.

From Manchester our route lay southwest through a corner of Cheshire and that portion of Derbyshire known as the Peak District. It is our first view of English hills. What else England may have in store for us we cannot tell, but if there is nothing finer than the hills and valleys of Derbyshire all our hopes will still be realized. A road like a park boulevard winds in and out, up to the hilltop, then down to the valley. Finally, after a steady climb for eight miles, followed by a swoop into the valley, a descent of five hundred feet in a mile and a half, we reach the town of Buxton, the highest town of England, and one of the chief inland watering-places. It is really a charming and cheerful place, with handsome buildings, elaborate baths and a pleasure park which is a piece of admirable landscape gardening. The semi-invalids who infest the place in droves, mostly in bath-chairs—the dreariest of all vehicles used by the living—do all they can to impart a melancholy flavor to the scene, but they can make almost no headway at all against the naturally cheerful atmosphere of the place. For us it is chiefly valuable as a halting-place for the night and the

starting-point for the still more delightful ride through the very heart of the Peak District on the next day.

Aside from the beauty of the scenery, two points stand out vividly in this day,—Chatsworth, the home of the Duke of Devonshire, and Haddon Hall, an uninhabited but well preserved baronial mansion of medieval times. The description of these two noble houses may be passed by for the present. It is enough to say that one represents the limit of magnificence in present-day architecture (the house is only two hundred years old), floriculture and landscape gardening, while the other carries us back five centuries to the days when every noble Englishman's house must be literally his castle, or he would soon have no house at all. It is pertinent at this point to remark upon the generous spirit which moves the Duke of Devonshire to throw open his park, which is nine miles in circumference, his gardens, which are a piece of fairy-land, and a large part of the mansion for the free inspection and amusement of the public.

I recalled an old book with the alluring title, "The Devil in History," which describes the various riotous excesses and wholesale crimes of which men under diabolical influence have been guilty from the beginning of time. In connection with Nero's revels and the bacchanalian orgies of Eastern potentates, the author pictures Chatsworth as a modern instance of fiendish magnificence and extravagance. But it would be admitted, I suppose, that the impulse which leads the Duke to turn his deer-park into a public pleasure-ground and his residence into a free museum and art gallery, comes from a different source.

Passing Derby, of race-course fame, we leave the region of the hills and soon enter the less picturesque but more historic county of Warwick. There is no more enchanted ground in England than the twenty miles from Coventry to Stratford-on-Avon, by way of Kenilworth and Warwick. Coventry is a singular compound of heterogeneous elements, the old and the new. One may wander for hours among its narrow, crooked streets, while visions of the past rise constantly before his eyes in bodily form. It is a most tempting spot for the snap-shot artist. Only one of a thousand interesting objects is Ford's Hospital, an ancient monastery of the Gray Friars, in 1529 converted to more righteous uses as a home for old ladies. The

building is much older, a timbered structure of quaint design, part of which dates from the fourteenth century. And on the other side of the town there are the great bicycle factories, representing the most modern of all great industries. For Coventry stands for cycle building as Newcastle for coal and Burton-on-Trent for beer.

It is a matter of only four or five miles from Coventry to Kenilworth, a rather treeless and uninteresting village, which one rides through with scarcely a glance aside. In the old days the common people's village knew its place too well to attempt to divide honors with the nobleman's castle. But the Castle, — ah, the Castle! No, I shall not describe it. One must go to Scott to know Kenilworth Castle as it was when the royal romance was being played within its walls, with Queen Elizabeth, Amy Robsart, and Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, as principals. To know it as it is, there is no way but to go and see it. And one need not despair of finding romances of real life within those massive, ivy-shrouded walls even now, for, among all the possible places for lovemaking, a ruin is easily first choice among that grade of English society which complacently calls itself the "lower class." The proximity of uninvited witnesses is a matter of small concern to 'Arry and 'Arriet. Heedless of all intruders, he can swear that his affection will be as enduring as the gray walls about them. One can swear by the eternal stars anywhere on a clear night, but they have really no relevancy to the matter in hand, for man is not responsible for their endurance. But to point to a Norman arch, a work of man which has stood the storms of half a dozen centuries, — that might be more effective. An oath of constancy by that token might be considered reasonably potent, as such things go. I looked from a window of the crumbling tower which was once the prison of the unfortunate Amy Robsart, down into the grassgrown moat. There they sat close together in that grassy moat, and he was telling a story which she seemed strangely startled, but not displeased, to hear. All that in the very shadow of Amy Robsart's dungeon, — think of it! — whose mouldering ruins have for three centuries and more proclaimed the perfidious inconstancy of the Earl of Leicester. And yet, if one might judge by a casual glance — and upon my honor I did not give

more—this lover from the “lower class” had no reason to feel discouraged. I’ll venture ‘twas all due to his oath by the Norman arch.

The road to Warwick is full of interest, but we must hasten, for a storm is upon us. At last we are driven for shelter to the most beautiful spot on the road, the old Saxon mill, from which there is a charming view of Guy’s Cliff, a baronial residence of much interest, across the Avon. Even the rain, the cyclist’s most unrelenting foe, has for this once done us a good turn. But English showers, if frequent, are also short, and we are soon in Warwick. The Prince of Wales and the Duke of Marlborough are visiting at the castle, and we cannot enter. So we ride on, for we are to pass this way again in a day or two, and we are anxious to spend Sunday in communion with Shakespeare. Ten miles more of quiet shady road with an occasional glimpse of the river, and we ride into Stratford-on-Avon just at dusk Saturday evening.

Stratford-on-Avon, 26 June, 1898

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