

# WHEN THE WORLD TAKES TO WHEELS

By HELEN DARE

AD I been a visitor from Mars I am sure I would have thought I would be looking upon the performance of some solemn rite, some mystic ceremony, as the Personally Conducted when seeking strange lands are treated to the Snake Dance on the desert and the Whirling Dervish on the sands of Africa—at the usual, very small additional expense.

Surely nothing else could set adult human beings to going round and round and round like this, singly and in pairs, in a sort of speechless ecstasy.

Round and round and round—their bodies swaying this way and that in a strange rhythmic motion.

Round and round and round—sometimes faltering, staggering, clutching frantically at thin air, from fatigue or excess of emotion, no doubt.

Round and round and round—sometimes suddenly falling with a crash or a thump—according to the meagerness or amplitude of the structure of the beings—momentarily overcome by exhaustion or fervor perhaps; then struggling to their feet again with wild gestures and frantic efforts, unheeded by the speeding throng.

Devil-driven can they be, these madly hurrying, swiftly gliding beings?

Round and round and round—ever onward when their spirits seem to flag and their limbs to lag by the intoxicating plinky-planky-plunk of the piano that must be devil-played, even as the beings are devil-driven, for no visible fingers press the keys that are unceasingly lifting up and dropping down, striking the notes to which the hurrying throng keep time.

Round and round and round—the young and the old and those of middle life, never speaking, never smiling, never laughing, their eyes fixed in rapt gaze, perhaps of adoration or celestial contemplation; one or another now whirling and rushing backward, as if taken with sudden vertigo or touched with madness of despair or joy, then whirling again and going forward as before, ever on and on and on.

As I sit at one side, alone, upon a chair, among the tiers of empty chairs, alone and unheeded by the speeding throng that looks never to the right nor the left, but ever into some dim beyond, I note that the same beings flash past my vision again and again, on an endless, aimless journey, some steadily like the planets in their orbits, others spasmodically dashing in and out among the rest, in erratic course like comets.

I note, too, that when indeed beings that have become familiar drop out, new beings appear and the throng hurries on, ever on and on and on, without diminution of members or of speed.

Round and round and round they go—youths and maidens clasping hands and swaying in unison; youths and maidens gliding singly and seemingly unconscious of each other; youths and maidens pursuing each other, overtaking and capturing each other without losing one single rhythmic beat of the curious gliding motion.

Round and round and round they go—the beings of middle life, male and female, singly, with arms crossed behind them or hands thrust deep into their pockets, lost in meditation or the delirious joy of motion; in pairs, supporting each other in the onward struggle, making mighty effort and but small and tortuous progress.

Round and round and round they go—even the aged, the patriarchal makes with bald heads or white beards, the females stout but determined, or those luckier ones whose gray locks and wrinkles must be marked to belie the slenderness of their waists.

Round and round and round they go—and darting in and out among them, with waving arms and legs and a sort of studied malice in their movements, are these impish sent to torment them, to impede progress and endanger limb and life, to afflict them and make their penance more real, or are they, indeed, as an extraordinary indulgence and toleration would seem to indicate, merely the young of their kind—the exuberant, undisciplined male young?

I note—from my chair among the tiers of empty chairs—that a strange rumbling accompanies the movement of these beings. Even as I heard the great building—can anything so hideous be a temple?—I noted it and wondered.

Is it an undertone of groans and lamentations?

I look more closely.

Surely these are little wheels, little sets of wheels such as are used for moving about the furniture in dwellings, the little wheels called casters, that are fastened to their feet, even as they are to the feet of beds and tables and desks and particularly heavy chairs. It is these little wheels, I note, that make the strange rumbling sound, and send the beings on their gliding, curving dashes with which they sweep along annihilating distance.

Wonderful! Wonderful!

What can this weird ceremony, this mystic rite be?

Is it that these beings of all ages and conditions—for I note the great and lowly mingling here, even clutching at each other—are doomed to glide in an eternal race?

Is it exaltation or adoration, that drives them round and round and round?

Could they stop if they would?

Would they if they could?

This I say, would have been the form my musings would have taken, as I sat lonely upon my chair, in that wilderness of empty chairs had I been a visitor from Mars.

But—not being a visitor from Mars—I am, even as you are, "wise to the game," and I know perfectly well that these, my ordinarily sane, sound and practical fellow beings, some of whom are the bank-

ers we leave our money with for safe-keeping, others of whom are the merchants and the merchants' clerks who spend our money with, are merely roller skaters, reveling in the latest, maddest fad of a mad, mad world.

I am not, I say, a visitor from Mars, yet so long as I remain on the side, sticking to my chair in that wilderness of empty chairs—and it takes both hands to hold on and resist the temptation of that vortex—this is what roller skating looks like to me, and I haven't seen the weirdest of it yet.

I haven't seen the Beginners' Pens.

I haven't hung over the rail and watched the male beings initiated into the first degree.

I haven't sat on a footstool and peered through the bars at the female novitiates undergoing the trials of the preliminary ordeal.

Why is roller skating?

Now that the question is popped at you, you can no more answer it, I'm sure, than you can answer that other profound query that is chiefly used to break the social ice:

Why is an oyster?

And what it is is as great a mystery as why it is.

Roller skating is surely not a sport. This going round and round and round on little wheels in a circumscribed, inclosed area is no more like ice skating, with its freedom and possibilities and surprises and tingling exhilaration, than that mild nursery concoction called cambric tea is like the beverage that cheers.

It surely is not an athletic exercise, for it combines the maximum of speed with the minimum of exertion—except, of course, in the initiatory stages, where the reverse is true.

It surely is not a social pastime, for it seems to even the most unprejudiced spectator a solitary pleasure, or at best a speechless ecstasy for two.

It may encourage social communion, but it certainly does not seem to be a promoter of conversation, for I have seen in the rinks the most susceptible beaux, old and young, go round and round and round, doing the Dutch roll, cutting figure eights and other didoes, with their hands in their pockets and their eyes rolled to

the rafters, and never a glance for the distractingly pretty girls cutting past them.

And to match them, I've seen the distractingly pretty girls, past mistresses of the art of flirtation, glide and sway and away and glide a whole afternoon or evening away in a moon-eyed abandonment to the motion that can only be equaled by the insidious whiffs of opium or the sorceries of hashish.

That's it!

If roller skating isn't a sport nor an exercise, nor yet a diversion, it is an intoxicant, and that is why the whole world has taken to it—perhaps.

That is why the papa and the grandpapa of the small boy who makes a perilous dash down hill with one roller skate under the elbow of his trousers, are going round and round and round in the roller skating rink, or taking surreptitious lessons in secluded halls at a dollar per preparatory to the round-and-round debut.

That is why the mamma and the auntie and the big sister—yes, and the physical cultured grandmamma—of the little girl who divides her pair of roller skates with her chum and becomes a sidewalk menace to slow-moving, short-sighted pedestrians, have all taken to the Beginners' Pens and the dangerous fascinations of unformed instructors, who fascinate—no, I mean instruct at a dollar per hour.

There's no use denying it, the roller skating craze is rampant, and everybody is either skating or learning to skate, while rinks and schools for skating are cropping out upon the city's surface like chickenpox on a schoolboy.

Somebody has called it a revival of roller skating, but it isn't, any more than this year's prairie fire is a revival of the prairie fire of ten years ago. It is just a fresh outbreak, but a deal more virulent than it was before, attacking all ranks,

ages and conditions, in no sense a respecter of persons.

Indeed, society leaders and belles and beaux, society matrons and society infants have fallen victim to it as readily as the pretty girls in the candy stores and the husky youths who come up out of the foundries with their sweaters and never-show-dirt shirts to wrestle with its intricacies in the Beginners' Pen.

With my own wondering eyes I saw leading lights from the law association, grave medics, and astute financiers winding their way in and out among grocery clerks and butcher boys, college and high school students, giddy, gum-chewing girls and otherwise sedate and well-regulated housewives on the fascinating little wheels. And I

saw—would you believe it—one young clergyman, the very pattern of a young clergyman, pink and white, well groomed and decorously coated in black, who was tasting the incipient pleasures of this innocent intoxicant, learning, in fact, still waving his arms to maintain his balance, "swimming round the rink," as the ride little boys describe it, throw, actually throw, his clerical arms around an unregenerate black sheep gambling man, not to snatch him as a brand from the burning, but to keep from going down kerfump himself.

Such a leveller is roller skating. The craze that it was twenty years ago was nothing to the craze it is on this second visitation.

Then Society frowned it down and

trouble, you may see Society in any one of the Beginners' Pens of any one of the rinks persevering side by side with the hot polloi, striking out as wildly with arms and feet as the others, as clumsily, all of a heap, grinning as sheepishly when struggling to the feet that usually tread exclusive ways.

"Mixing" democratically, too, and not a little selfishly, for one pretty bud going to her Pacific Heights home in a Larkin-street car artlessly confided to a friend, and the rest of us:

"I've just had the loveliest time at the rink. I skated most of the evening with a riveter. He called himself, from the iron works. He's a splendid skater—and his hands are as rough as—bark. Teehee!"

"He said he'd look for me next time he came. Just fancy! Teehee!"

And it isn't a snobbish teehee! at all, let me tell you, but just of girlish enjoyment, and we all teehee'd with her, at least in spirit.

What is there in roller skating that makes its victims willing to endure the agonies of the Beginners' Pen?

One can understand the perseverance of the boy in the sweater who slides and joggles and spraddles and sprawls his unruly way from one end of it to the other, for in strenuousity is joy for the boy kind.

But the stuff and studious individual, professional by his spectacles and soft white hands, sedentary by his rotundity—what is there in this latest, maddest fad that sets him to struggling with those fendish little wheels that snatch his feet from under him, that bump him, that pound and pillar and fence, that set him to waving his arms like a windmill gone mad, that plump him flat upon the floor with an impact that jars his teeth in their sockets?

What is there in it that inveigles the matron out of her dignity into slipping and sliding about on a couple of sets of casters, clutching at men and women—without the formality of an introduction, remember—whom she would scorn to put on her visiting list?

Whatever it is, it's a very potent charm, for from its first devotees—the merely young and giddy and unclassified—it has spread until there is no safety in age or rank. From their first headquarters, at the large and necessarily democratic Mechanics' Pavilion, they have overflowed until there's a rink in every quarter.

Society, of course, cannot be democratic long, and having fallen victim to the fad, it soon organized itself into a club that enjoyed the privileges of the Pavilion without the intrusion of the mob one night every week. It was the Monday Night Club, with a membership of 500, and a list of patronesses that included the names of the undisputed leaders—Mrs. Eleanor Martin, for instance; Mrs. Downey Harvey, Mrs. Walter Hobart, Mrs. James Follis. The club was organized for but four nights' skating, but so splendidly did the finances and the enthusiasm hold out that its skating extended over nine nights, and it has disbanded reluctantly only at the approach of Lent.

So potent is its charm that it has beguiled not only the most unexpected victims into skating, but hard-headed business men into investing their money in leases, rink floors and skates.

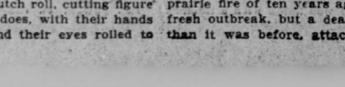
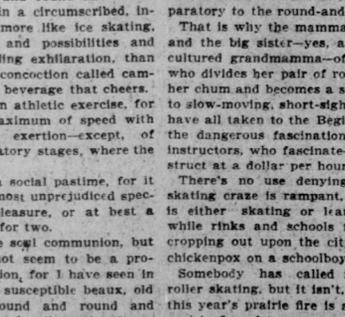
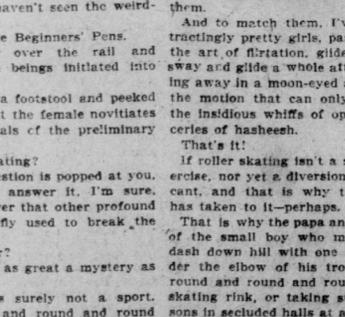
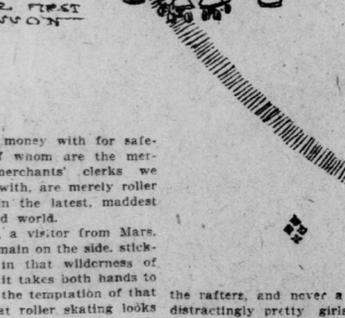
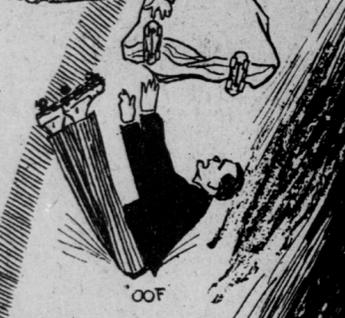
The pavilion is frankly democratic, advertising its masked skating carnivals unblushingly with prizes for "a fat ladies' race," "most comical lady's costume" and "most comical gent's costume."

So, quite naturally, in the face of this there has sprung up a new and exclusive rink on Pacific avenue, in the old armory, that was once upon a time in its history a riding school for fashion also. Here all sweaters and never-show-dirt shirts are to be barred; no "fat ladies' races" are to be contested; no "rents" are to be on the list of eligibles. It is to be small and highly select, and already its list of patrons reads like a chapter from the Blue Book.

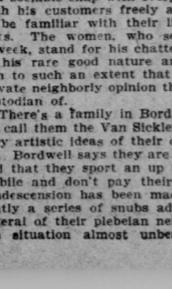
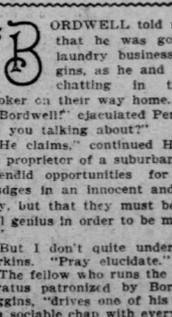
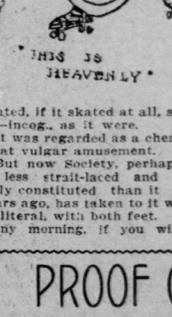
Jewish society has made for itself quite the most exclusive and handsomely skated rink in the city by turning the spacious, lofty, well lighted, beautifully floored ballroom of the Concordia Club from its original purpose. There the club members practice of mornings with skilled instructors and there they have a ladies' night once a week that is as well attended as the smartest dance or swellest wedding.

Quite as naturally rinks sprang up or are about to spring up in the Mission in the Richmond district, south of Market and—where do you think this last one is?—on the Barbary Coast! Yes, even those freebooters of the night life are abandoning the waltz and the two-step for the price it—and are taking to the little wheels and going round and round and round with the rest of the world, fashionable and otherwise.

What greater proof can there be of the lure of the roller skate when in this territory, already famous for its skates, the denizens take to the new kind!



WHEN IT IS A SOLITARY PLEASURE.



THE SMALL BOY ALWAYS IN THE WAY.

HER FIRST LEVON.

## PROOF OF BILLY'S GENIUS

BORDWELL told me yesterday that he was going into the laundry business," said Higgins, as he and Perkins were chatting in the elevated smoker on their way home.

"Bordwell" ejaculated Perkins. "What are you talking about?"

"He claims," continued Higgins, "that the proprietor of a suburban laundry has splendid opportunities for paying off grudges in an innocent and unmalicious way, but that they must be seized by a real genius in order to be made the most of."

"But I don't quite understand," said Perkins. "Pray elucidate."

"The fellow who runs the mangling apparatus patronized by Bordwell," said Higgins, "drives one of his own wagons, is a sociable chap with every one, gossips with his customers freely and has come to be familiar with their likes and dislikes. The women, who see him twice a week, stand for his chatter on account of his rare good nature and confide in him to such an extent that there isn't a private neighborly opinion that Billy isn't a custodian of."

"There's a family in Bordwell's block—I'll call them the Van Sicken—who have very artistic ideas of their own superiority. Bordwell says they are a lot of cads, and that they sport an up to date automobile and don't pay their bills. Their condescension has been maddening. Recently a series of snubs administered to several of their pebban neighbors made the situation almost unbearable. When

Billy, the laundryman, came to the rescue.

"Some green hand in his establishment made a awful mixup and bits of the Van Sicken wearing apparel were distributed throughout the community where they would do the most good. The dilapidated condition of most of the articles rejoiced the hearts of the recipients. Bordwell drew a dress shirt and a union suit which he says he would have been ashamed to send to a rummage sale.

"Every piece was plainly marked 'Van S.' so that there was no doubt about it. Several returned their finds directly to the owners, and one aggressive lady suggested a joint note of sympathy and offer of pecuniary assistance.

"It was evidently most distressing to the aristocracy, and Bordwell avers that the 'For Rent' sign now upon the Van Sicken house is the direct result. He says that Billy's talent is certainly marvelous, and in spite of the laundryman's protestations he insists that it was a beautifully worked out plan from beginning to end, as Billy acknowledges that the Van Sicken were three months behind on his books.

"Bordwell says this is not the only proof of Billy's genius. Some months ago the two had an argument over prices, and the next week Bordwell's pajamas came home starched as stiff as frozen fish. Billy almost wept tears of contrition over the incident, but Bordwell thinks it was a case of getting back at him just the same. He says there is no end of such opportunities in the laundry business, and the wonder is that more men of high abilities don't go into it."