

# I PREFER TO WALK

(Written for "The Listener" by M.B.)

I WAS given a bike for my birthday when I was fourteen, and after that I used to ride it backward and forward to school five days a week over the same three miles of houses and shops. But when I'd had my new bike only a couple of days and was learning to ride it I ran it head on into a brick wall and bent the frame somewhat, and after that I used always to ride leaning slightly to the left. This turned out to be quite a good thing in a way, because nobody at school wanted to borrow my bike much because they felt a little strange leaning to the left. Quite often they would forget and fall off and then next time they would borrow someone else's bike.

After I left school I didn't use my bike much except for going up the street to get the messages, and when I said good-bye to it before coming down here it seemed to have quite resigned itself to spending its last years in the coal-shed.

OF course I've always wanted to have a horse. But if you want to get from place to place in the country it's much simpler to collect your bike from the wash-house than your horse from the paddock. I wrote to father, asking him to send my bike down as bikes are fashionable once more. He replied that my bike was in pieces, not as a result of natural disintegration, but because my young brother had decided to take it to pieces and straighten the frame, but had been called up before he could put the pieces together again. Dad said that as soon as he got a week-end free from digging trenches with the Home Guard he would collect all the ball-bearings from the different corners of the house, put the pieces together, and send the complete bike down.

This will take time, I decide to try to buy a bike, but the Government has forestalled me. Then, by a master stroke, I manage to borrow a bike from someone I know who is being transferred for six weeks. Every morning I bike up to the village to get the provisions, and every afternoon I bike out to an afternoon tea party or a meeting of the institute.

THEN suddenly I realise that the weeks are slipping by and that soon I will have to give back my borrowed bike. I determine to do at least one big trip on it. I look at the map. New Plymouth is thirty-three miles away. If I leave immediately I can be back in time for tea.

Although it's almost ten o'clock it's still rather chilly so I clothe myself warmly in jumper, cardigan, and slacks. I mount inartistically (it's a man's bike

and I still have difficulty with the cross bar) and wobble out the gate and across the bridge.

Once out in the road elation possessed me. There is little traffic. I whizz along the straight, pedal down the hills so as to get some way up the opposite side, then speed down again with the wind whistling past me. (Why did I bother taking a train to Auckland last time I went? You can get there in half the time on a bike).

I HAVE covered five miles. The hills I go up seem steeper, the downhill less frequent. I think longingly of a bicycle built for two, or even a bicycle built for one. This bicycle was certainly not built for me. The saddle is very high and rather narrow. The handle-bars are a long way down. And when I have to get off to walk up a hill the cross-bar is in the way and I am forced to fall off.

It is getting hotter. I take off my cardigan and roll up my trouser legs because I hadn't thought about trouser-clips and my cuffs keep catching in the chain. My face goes a queer purple colour and I can feel the muscles of my legs standing out like whipcord. When I look down at them I am disappointed to find that you can't see the muscles standing out like whipcord. But I happen to know they are.

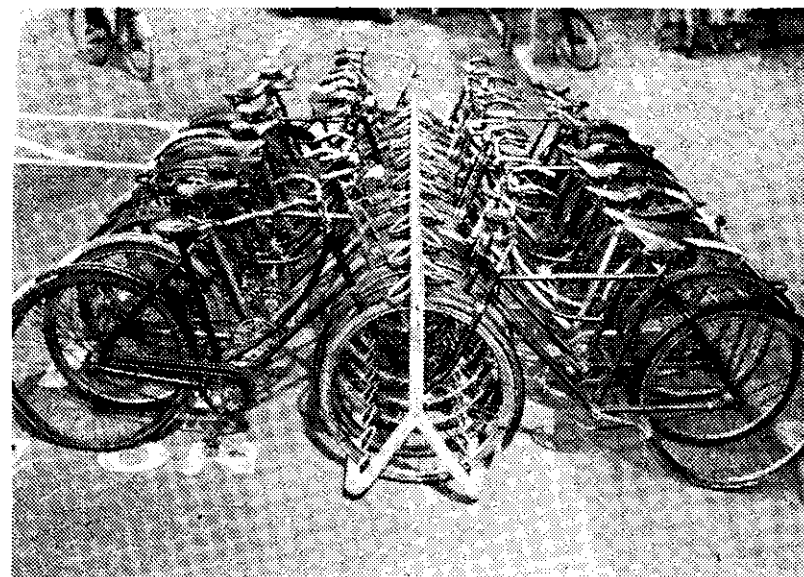
Three miles out of New Plymouth a truck stops in front of me before, but it is only because they are delivering something. But this one is stopping for me. The driver hoists my bike on to the back and me into the front and gives me a bottle of lemonade. He tells me he will be leaving New Plymouth on his way back at four o'clock this afternoon and will look out for me and my bike and take us all the way home.

My friends in New Plymouth are out so I go into town and window-shop. On my way home at a quarter to four I call in once more. They're home now and insist on giving me a cup of tea, and they're quite surprised when as the clock strikes four I leap up with half a piece of meringue cake in one hand, splutter So-sorry-I-must-dash, and seize my bike.

IT'S pleasant riding home very slowly. I go for a few yards and then sit down by the roadside for a few minutes. There's a strong head wind and I understand now why I whizzed along the level coming in. But it doesn't worry me. I amble along waiting for that friendly honk behind me.

Eight miles out of New Plymouth I develop cramp in my stomach. Through bolting my afternoon tea or through crouching over the handlebars? I ride and walk alternately. It is very hot.

I pass several rivers. I long to plunge headlong into them, to lie on the bank and dabble my feet. But I dare not leave the road.



"BIKES are fashionable once more": In some New Zealand centres the cycle-parking problem has become so acute that stands have had to be erected

Twenty miles from New Plymouth I hear three honks of invitation behind me, but it is merely three nasty eighteen-year olds in what I feel sure is a converted truck.

By this time the final death of hope has engendered a grim determination within me. The pedals ring slowly round and round. I count Mr. Semple's white posts at the side of the road, and how many pedal turns to a post. I explain to myself that every turn of the pedal means a yard further from New Plymouth and a yard nearer to home and dinner.

I AM cruising slowly along the level when suddenly my bike stops dead. I look down. My right trouser cuff is firmly wedged in the chain. I fall heavily to the right, my bicycle on top of me.

It is very restful lying on the roadway (even a gravelled roadway) if you've just biked fifty-five miles. I know that if I try to get my cuff out of the chain I will pull the chain off, and I don't want to walk nine miles home, dragging my chain behind me.

I am right in the middle of the road. I notice a large vehicle (a service car which passed me a moment ago) backing rapidly towards me. I try to edge to the side of the road, dragging the bike, but I am too tired to make the effort. I am a second Vera, waiting fatalistically for the great big saw.

A YARD from me the service car stops, and out leap three hefty farmers. Presuming me pinned beneath my vehicle they lay strong hands upon it. There is a rending sound as my trouser cuff parts from its leg. (No, of course it doesn't matter. Only 32/6 worth.)

They help me to my feet. I thank them. One of them presses a trouser clip into my reluctant hand, another hands me my mangled cuff. They wave me good-bye as I mount once more and wobble the first few yards along the road. The going seems easier. Is it perhaps that with dusk the wind has died? Or is

it that cool currents of air are breezing up my cuffless leg? The saddle no longer digs into me. The handlebars seem to have risen at least six inches.

It isn't till I have turned down the home stretch that I realise what has happened. There is a distinct bend in the cross-bar and I am leaning slightly to the left.

## "Why I use New VEET to remove hair"



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★ New 'Veet' leaves the skin soft and velvety-smooth, without a trace of ugly bristly stubble like the razor leaves.

★ New 'Veet' is a dainty, white cream, sweetly-scented, clean and delightfully pleasant to use.

★ New 'Veet' weakens growth — unlike the razor which only makes the hair grow back faster and coarser. 1/4 and 2/7 at all Chemists and Stores