

THE FIRST OF A SERIES

EPIC RACES OF THE PAST.—I

THE CUCA CUP

In this series we shall revive, for the benefit of those new to cycling and cycling history, the stories of famous rides, races and riders. Thirty years or so ago cycle-racing events drew crowds of hero-worshipping and spellbound enthusiasts. Perhaps the most famous of them all were those for the Cuca Cup, the story of which is here retold by Charles Eade

IN the 'nineties of the last century the development of the bicycle quickened. The pneumatic tyre, the free-wheel, improved chains, wheels and methods of construction, new inventions and companies, cycling clubs and races, came crowding one upon the other. For the bicycle was the fastest vehicle on the road, and the public had taken it to its bosom. From being the pastime of the moneyed few it had developed into the vehicle of the multitude, and when the public accepts a thing as part of the ordered state, it inevitably becomes the cynosure of intensive sport.

And so it was with the bicycle. Into this somewhat frenzied period arrived, almost like a bolt from the blue, the Cuca Cup, and it is a mild expression to say that it caused a furore.

Not only did it attract vast crowds, but also the picked men of the period, for it was honour indeed to have one's name engraved upon its ornate exterior. Its origin was due to the desire to popularise a brand of cocoa, and the story of the several races for its possession is still the most cherished of the many for which the story of cycling has been responsible.

How the Cuca started

This most famous of all cycle-race trophies "put up" in connection with cycle sport was the Cuca Cup. Presented to the London County Cycling and Athletic Club by Messrs. Boot and Co., Ltd., proprietors of Cuca cocoa and chocolate, this valuable trophy, nominally worth a hundred guineas, was, by an arrangement with the celebrated club referred to, renewed by the firm whenever won outright. And from the time of the very first race for it, the attention of the whole cycling world was centred on the Cuca Cup by the wonderful performances of Frank Shorland, who, in 1892, won the first contest with the then prodigious mileage of close on 414 miles. The following year, he repeated this performance, covering 426½ miles. And, in 1894, he made the trophy his own property with the magnificent record of 460 miles, 1,296 yards.

This series of wins by Shorland was a wonderful epic. For those three years, while he was beating all comers in the Cuca races at Herne Hill, he was similarly dominating the roadmen and winning the North Road twenty-four-hour races, setting up new records for that event each year.

There was a special touch of drama about the second of the Cuca races, in 1893. That was the year when the N.C.U. instituted licences for pathmen, and they began to make a drive against "makers' amateurism," withholding licences from anybody under suspicion. Shorland suffered in this way, and his licence was withdrawn. He appealed, and his old friend F. T. Bidlake, who was himself entered for the race on a tricycle, fought out the case before the Appeals Committee. The outcome was in doubt up to the last few hours, but Bidlake won and the licence was restored. So Shorland rode and



The Famous Cuca Cup.
It was of enormous size and weight.

won. It says something for the marvellous personality of the man that all the worry and uncertainty did not affect his form.

But here was the most remarkable feature of the second Cuca. Bidlake rode and, on his tricycle, covered the marvellous distance of 410 miles, 1,100 yards, which still stands as record, and is possibly the greatest cycle ride ever accomplished. He ran second in the race, beating all the bicyclists except Shorland himself. Had he failed in his efforts to get Shorland's licence granted, would Bidlake have won the race on a tricycle, and thus caused the greatest racing sensation the world has ever known? It stands as one of the fascinating problems of history, but Bidlake himself, with characteristic modesty,

always said that it was because the bicyclists ran each other almost to a standstill that he was able to go ahead and beat them on his tricycle.

Well, it all belongs to the past, and nearly all the actors in the drama are dead. Shorland, Bidlake, E. B. Turner, who granted the licence—all are passed away. Only George Lacy Hillier, the promoter of the races, is still happily with us.

It was in these historic contests, the most popular long-distance events ever held, that the art of pace-making was first scientifically cultivated, and the germs of the present system originated. Latter-day race methods for lengthy events are nearly all mere improvements upon them, and no little gratitude is due from cyclists generally to the men who so successfully engineered these early "twenty-fours."

In 1895 a new Cuca Cup was constructed, being different from the old one and, in the opinion of some, not so effective, the trophy that may be supposed to grace the sideboard of the invincible North Road distance devourer being a particularly graceful vase, with very elegant handles, which latter the second cup lacks. As was the case with the first, however, the second cup is in reality worth more than the amount stated; and it weighs fully 640oz. It was won in '95 by George Hunt, who, recovering just in time from the effects of having his collar-bone smashed earlier in the season, got his name on the trophy by finishing first, with 450 miles, 1,459 yards to his credit.

Hunt a non-starter

That year, owing to trouble with regard to his racing licence, Hunt was unable to take his place amongst the dozen men who faced the starter on the beautiful August evening, when the annual day-and-night's pedalling for the Cuca Cup took place. The starters at Herne Hill included F. R. Goodwin, G. Padbury, J. Hunt (brother of last year's winner), P. Litchfield, and A. P. Pepper. Goodwin was eleven minutes inside another record at 200 miles. At 250 miles he was outside again; but before 300 he once more managed to get in front of time. He was, however, very much done; and though, at five o'clock on the Saturday evening, he was forty-four minutes inside Shorland's amateur record, made in the Cuca race of 1894, it soon became very doubtful whether he could be kept going to the end. The excitement of the last hour, however, revived him. There came a wire from Wood Green to say that Huret, the leading man, having the race safe in hand, had stopped at twenty-two hours. At 7.20, Goodwin went by Shorland's record of 460 miles, 1,296 yards. At six minutes to eight, the hour of finishing, a tremendous cheer from the 6,000 spectators announced that Fontaine's "unlicensed" record had been passed. And Goodwin sat up at pistol fire, all out, with the grand total of 476 miles, 1,702 yards, having ridden in the time over sixteen miles farther than any amateur before him. Hunt was second, nine miles behind.