

Some Wonders from the West.

XI.—LOOPING THE LOOP ON A BICYCLE.

BY ERIC HAMILTON.



ONE of the most sensational cycling feats on record was that recently performed by Mr. Robert B. Vandervoort, a young electrician of Brooklyn, New York. Few of the numerous recreative features of Coney Island, Atlantic City, and other popular American seaside resorts have appealed to the public taste so powerfully as the flip-flap or loop railway. Roughly speaking, the idea is to shoot down an incline and then round a complete circle, the car keeping the rails simply through the centrifugal force. Our illustration of the loop will most adequately convey an idea of its principle of construction, and as a hair-raising, sensational ride it would be difficult to beat. "Looping the loop" in America has become even more popular than shooting the chutes. To complete the journey in the special car designed for the purpose is a sufficiently exciting experience, but to accomplish the trip on

a cycle is courting certain death. Mr. Vandervoort's accomplishment is unique, inasmuch as he is the only man who has ever successfully and safely performed the feat more than once. Other aspirants for sensational notoriety have made the attempt, but have only encountered disaster.

The loop sensation was devised by Mr. A. T. Prescott, who controls the one at present in operation at Coney Island. Several years ago, when he was a boy fourteen years old, he built a model loop of wire, and used to derive great pleasure in making a billiard-ball travel right round the circle. At first he could not induce the ball to loop the loop, but by gradually increasing his starting incline, in order to obtain the requisite impetus upon the ball, and building his circle in proportion, he at last achieved success. But with the typical boyish characteristic, when he had succeeded in making it work satisfactorily he grew tired of it, relegated it to the rubbish-heap, and forgot its very existence.

Several years later he visited a popular seaside resort near Boston, and watched the popular enthusiasm with which crowds of people enjoyed shooting the chutes. They revelled in the sensational whirl down the incline, and he realized that the owners of the attraction were reaping a financial harvest

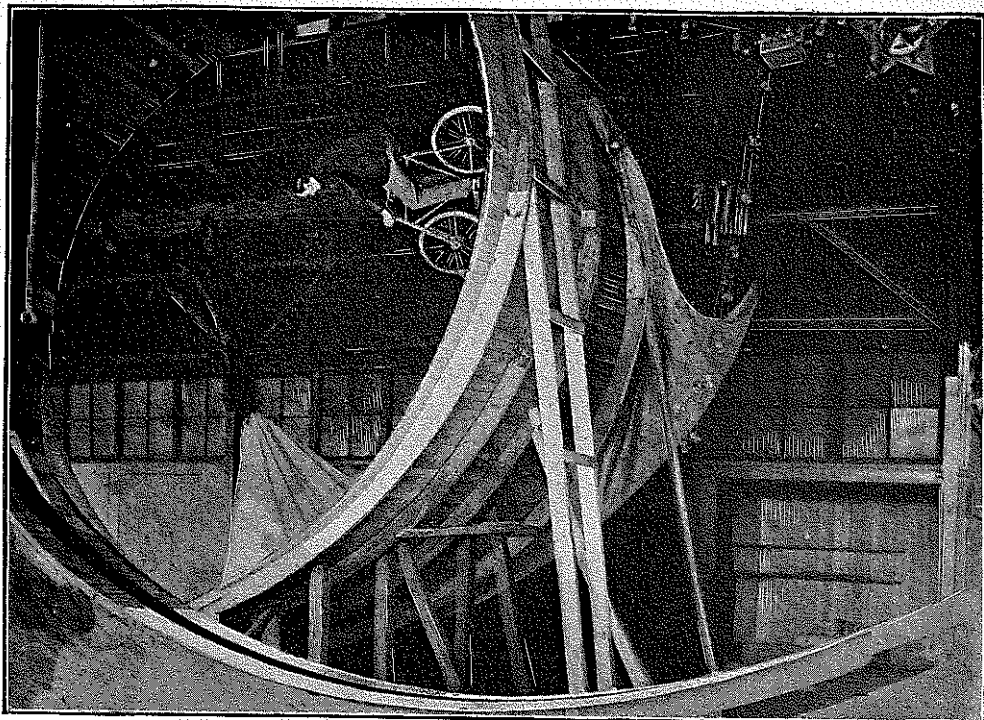
from it. Instantly the idea of turning his quondam plaything to financial account flashed across his mind, and he determined to make the experiment. He went home, resurrected his old toy, and built a model from it with a loop twenty inches high. He constructed a little car, placed a glass of



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MR. R. B. VANDEVOORT.

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IN THE LOOP.

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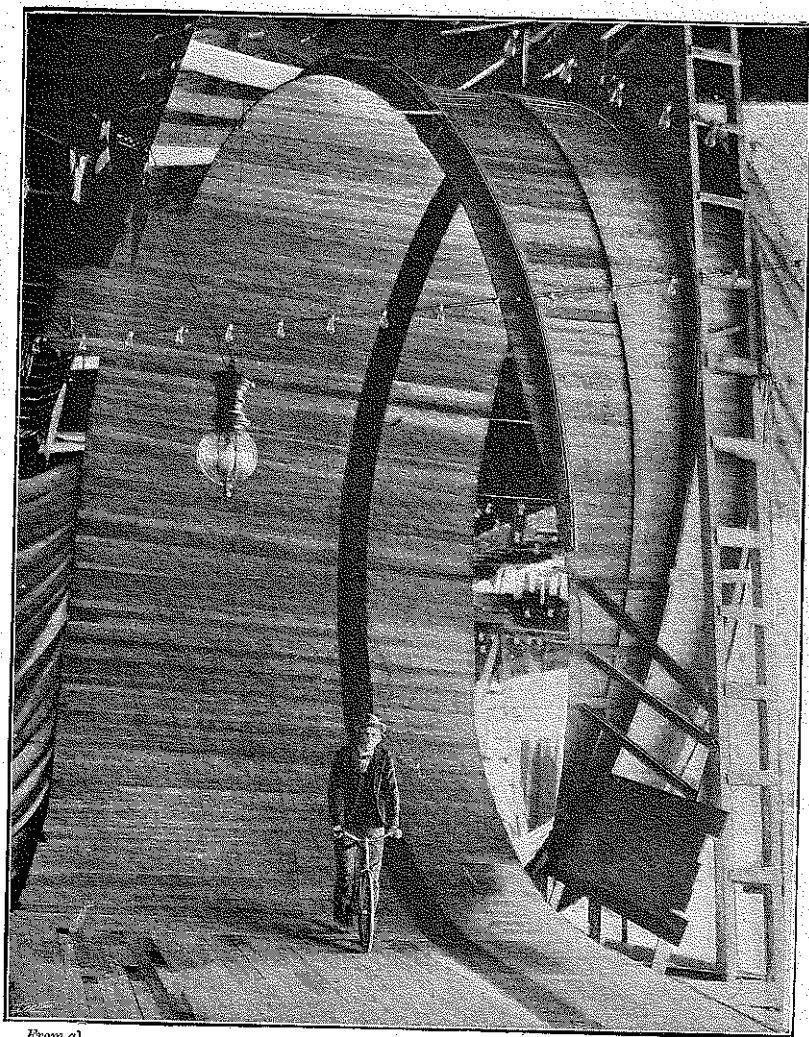
water upon it, and dispatched it through the loop. The experiment was a great success. Not a drop of water was spilled in the journey. Mr. Prescott thereupon patented his device and built a full-sized loop at Revere Beach, near Boston.

But his loop met with great opposition at first, especially from the sceptics and the medical fraternity. The former characterized it as a murdering machine, and the latter said that the shock to the nervous system of people who performed the journey would be dangerous. But Prescott laughed at their qualms, and to prove his confidence in its practicability and safety he, together with his carpenter, made the maiden trip. This initial journey took place on a moonlight night about ten o'clock. The inventor was so anxious to carry out the trial and was so sanguine of success that he could not wait until daylight to undertake it. Directly the work of erection was completed Prescott jumped into the car and urged his carpenter to accompany him. They gripped the sides of the car like grim death as it slowly started down the incline, rapidly gaining momentum as it proceeded. They held their breath as the car whizzed like lightning round the circle, and did not breathe freely again until

it had come to a standstill on the top of the gradient at the other side of the loop. Although the journey had only occupied a few moments it seemed an age. Once the safety of the performance was exemplified to the public it leaped into popular favour, and is now one of the greatest money-making amusements that have ever been invented.

Immediately the loop had established itself in the popular estimation, a cyclist named Mack, aspiring to fame, made the hazardous attempt of riding round the loop. But he came a cropper instead. He had completed about three-quarters of the circle when he lost control of his machine, swerved violently off the track, and pitched into the canvas net placed on one side with terrific violence. The result was a broken ankle, which was sufficient to deter him from further attempts.

A month after Mack's unsuccessful effort another cyclist named Stewart attempted the journey, and looped the loop with conspicuous success. Stewart was so elated with his initial triumph that he essayed the trip again. But he was over-confident. He lost control of his cycle just as he was at the top of the loop, and was thrown down with such



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JUST COMING OUT OF THE LOOP.

[Photo.

violence that two boards were broken. This accident damped Stewart's enthusiasm so much that he never again attempted the feat.

It was at this juncture that Vandevort came upon the scene. He was only an amateur cyclist, but he was so strongly tempted that he resolved to make the trip notwithstanding both Mack's and Stewart's disastrous failures. He had watched the latter's two performances, observed his mistakes, and determined to profit thereby. But he was not animated with the same anxiety that characterized his two predecessors. He mentally ran over the route several times, and carefully calculated when to steer the cycle to either the right or left.

Vandevort, however, quickly realized that the most important qualifications to

ensure success were a clear head, steady nerve, and complete presence of mind throughout the journey. He did not essay the trip straight away, but quietly indulged in steady practice. He painted a black line in the centre of the track right through the loop. At first he started twenty feet from the bottom of the incline and clung closely to the central black line. When he had thoroughly mastered the twenty feet start he set off from a few feet higher up, and gradually climbed the gradient as he mastered the journey until he had finally reached the top of the incline, forty feet above the ground. When he had satisfactorily reached this point he announced that he was ready to loop the loop.

Vandevort had obtained a special cycle

for the performance. Owing to the enormous strain to which the velocipede is submitted it was built of automobile tubing and weighed sixty pounds. The tyres are of the solid pattern, as pneumatic tyres are too dangerous, owing to their liability to burst, in which event a calamitous accident would result. There were no pedals, as it was imperative that the wheels should have absolutely free play, and the success of the feat depended upon the velocity with which the bicycle travelled down the starting incline. Therefore, in place of the pedals were two rests for the feet.

Before starting Vandevort carefully examined every inch of the loop to make sure there were no loose boards or other obstacles which might throw him off the track. A doctor was in attendance in case of any emergencies, and also to observe what effect the ride exercised upon the nervous system of the cyclist.

Vandevort then climbed to the top of the incline and, after requesting silence upon the part of the few privileged spectators, so that he might not be unnerved or his attention diverted from the track, he mounted his bicycle. Slowly he started, his body bent forward, his face set, and his eyes riveted upon the centre of the track. Like a flash he shot down the incline, steered his machine to the right correctly as he entered the loop, was whizzed round the circle by the force gathered in his descent of the incline, and was shot out like a cannon-ball at the other side. The complete silence which reigned was only disturbed by the humming noise of the tyres and the whistling of the air as Vandevort swept through it; but it

was finally broken by the daring cyclist crashing into the drag ropes, which he had placed at the exit of the loop to bring him to a standstill. The whole trip had only occupied a few seconds, and he had whirled round the loop like a flash of lightning.

The doctor immediately ran up to ascertain the results of the journey upon the rider. Vandevort's pulse showed an acceleration of two beats upon what it was before he started, and his face was ghastly white. But there were no other ill-effects, and his pallor was probably attributable to the relaxation from the tremendous tension of his nerves during the trip.

The intrepid rider once more entered the loop and examined his course by the trail of his tyres. How nearly he met with disaster may be gauged from the fact that at one point his cycle went within three inches of the edge of the track. To accomplish the journey with safety it requires a quick eye, owing to the velocity at which the rider travels. If Vandevort had not steered his cycle at the psychological moment of the entrance to the loop proper he would have been thrown out of the loop and probably killed. It was an exciting experience, and, as Vandevort laughingly said when afterwards describing the performance, he simply "put his faith in his patron saint and let the machine go."

Now, however, the intrepid cyclist "loops the loop" on his cycle with the same equanimity that the ordinary rider coasts a hill. No other aspirants to fame, however, have yet attempted to emulate Vandevort's sensational feat, probably remembering the fates of Mack and Stewart in this connection.