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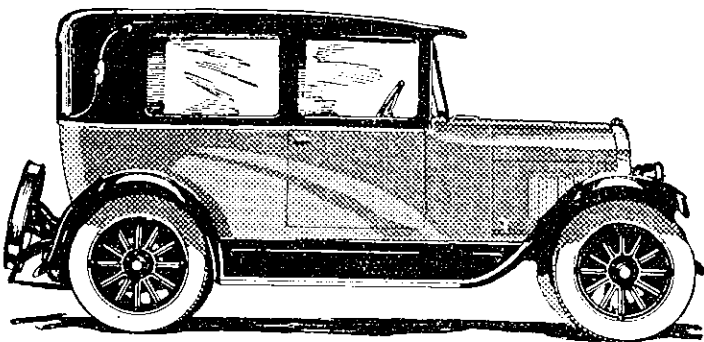
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The Battle of the Red Tail-Light

A Mere Pedestrian’s Thoughts on the Clash between Motorists and Cyclists

By K. R. G. Browne

For months now there has been raging in our midst a fierce and bitter controversy between two important sections of our community—those who possess motor-cars and those who go about their affairs less opulently but more silently, on bicycles. Insignificant causes frequently have widespread results, as witness the War of Jenkins’ Ear and the celebrated horseshoe-nail which determined the result of a battle which I cannot at the moment recall; and this impassioned disagreement which is dividing England against itself has its origin in nothing more impressive than a red tail-light.

Now it happens that at the moment, for economic reasons which it is unnecessary to explain in detail, I am neither a motorist nor a cyclist, but only a pedestrian, which as any cyclist or motorist will tell you, is a species of wart upon the body politic and the legitimate prey of all who travel on wheels. But in my time I have not only ridden bicycles with considerable verve and abandon, but also driven motor-cars belonging to people who did not know me well enough to prevent me. I adduce this evidence of my versatility, not in any spirit of braggadocio, but to show that, so far as this argument is concerned, I am in the position of a looker-on with sympathy for both sides and bias towards neither.

The position, as I see it, may be quite simply stated. The motorist urges that the cyclist should, in his own interest, be compelled by law to wear a red light astern after dusk. The cyclist flatly refuses to do any such thing. Hence the tumult and the shouting.

To take first the case of the cyclists—for they have but two wheels to fight with, as against their opponents’ four—these seem to be divided into two schools of thought. There are some who apparently base their arguments upon the theory that the aim of every conscientious motorist is to kill one or more cyclists per diem, in which ungentlemanly endeavour he would be materially assisted if his intended victims wore red lights to betray their whereabouts. As things are, say these theorists, the cyclist has at least a fair chance of escaping in the darkness; but force him to wear a red light, and he is as good as dead.

There are others who, while acquitting the motorist of deliberate homicidal intentions, yet insist that the discovery of a flattened cyclist upon his radiator at the end

of a run causes him no loss of sleep. Dogs, foot-walkers, and sheep, they argue, wear no tail-lights; why, then, should the cyclist? Let it be incumbent upon the motorist to avoid the cyclist if he can; but do not ask the cyclist to give him any assistance. The blame for the accident may thus be laid upon the motorist every time, which is obviously desirable.

The motorist, for his part, maintains that under present conditions a cyclist at night is quite the most invisible thing there is, as imperceptible as the jam in a doughnut, as hard to see as the point of a Scottish joke. How the dickens—inquires the motorist peevishly—can a fellow keep up a respectable average speed when he is liable at any moment to shoot round a corner into the middle of a flock, covey or gaggle of cyclists riding in open formation without so much as one rear light between them? Pantechnicons, hansom cabs and Atlantic liners—argues the motorist—wear red lights and make no fuss about it; why, then, this suicidal obstinacy on the part of cyclists?

All very difficult and complicated, is it not? One solution of the problem that suggests itself to me is that every motorist should be made to carry a searchlight such as is employed in ships of war, and every cyclist be persuaded to paint his back with phosphorus. Alternatively, if every cyclist could be compelled to drive a car, and every motorist forced to ride a bicycle, for a couple of hours twice weekly, I am confident that some workable compromise would very soon be discovered.

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