

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and  
Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1937.



# THE CHARM OF SKATING.

A SPORT THAT MAKES ALL MEN EQUAL.

By H. E. BATES.

**T**HERE is nothing at all in the whole world of sport and pastime quite so exhilarating as skating. It has every virtue that a sport should have, no vices, and just a pinch of the salt of danger. It asks for no teams, no clubs, no opposing sides, no petty competition, no snobbery of dress or behaviour. With a pair of skates a man can get as near to being a bird as he ever will without going up into the air; a divine feeling, easy, exhilarating, untiring. There is nothing better. When almost all sports have become commercialized or cheapened or even embittered by publicity, skating remains a perfectly friendly, social, beautiful thing, to be enjoyed for its own sake.

It stands out at the other end of the scale from hunting, not seeking to hurt or pursue or terrify anything or anybody. It is democratic; class distinctions do not touch it. In fact it breaks down social barriers, so that there seems to be more friendliness and laughter on a stretch of ice than anywhere else in the world.

## Down to the

### meadows.

We used to rush down to the meadows, skates ready, almost before the ice could, in all reason, be expected to bear. I have been first on that marsh, before the sun had any power at all, when the virgin ice with its light dusting of rime or snow had no mark on it except the starry prints of birds' feet and when great veining cracks split and shot out every step I took. But if it cracks it bears; if it bends it breaks. And sure enough, cracks mean nothing; it is that sickening undulating bending that is charged with danger.

I learned on an antique pair of my grandfather's skates, circa 1870, strap-on, long runners, screws eaten away by rust and corruption. The division of time spent on them and time spent on my backside was roughly equal. I got into all those crazy entanglements of the beginner: arms windmilling, skates up, bottom down, all those acrobatics which are part of the fun. And I would look with reverence and envy at very old men and even quite old women who had appeared out of retirement, with skates of even greater antiquity than my own, to skate again with all the elasticity and grace of youth.

## Agile in dotage.

How do they do it? What is it, in skating, that enables a man to perform that trick of perpetual youth, of being able to skate on with agility into the years of his dotage? Imagine a man reappearing, at seventy, to astonish the younger generation at football. Yet always, on that ice, there would be men of sixty and seventy, hands behind backs, heads forward,

bodies light, scissoring along as though on oiled limbs.

And there would be I, young and agile, struggling along as though on legs of lead, encountering all the difficulties and obstacles in the world: ice-bedded stones and sticks, tufts of sedge, other beginners. One by one the straps broke and then, at last, the skates broke. I rushed up to the blacksmith's, had them mended, rushed back again. Straps held now by bits of string, boot-laces, safety pins,



"Six of the most approved methods of appearing ridiculous on the ice": from an old print dated 1796.

and what not, I rushed on to the ice with renewed vigour and confidence, only to go head over heels at once, as though by clockwork.

Then, in time, all that crazy perseverance was rewarded. I could skate. I could begin to travel with ease. I could look at the sky. I could even look, out of the corner of my eye, at other beginners doing their own first acrobatics. I could feel that rare joy that only skating can give, the joy of extreme exhilaration, of travelling by a process that seems hardly to belong to earth.

## A world of ice.

And only then, of course, could I even begin to look at the world in which I moved: that still taut winter world of profound coldness, with its sugar frost and sugared trees and sedges, the beautiful loftiness of the pale blue wintry sky, the almost red winter sun falling very early across the meadows in the afternoons towards a horizon already smoky and tawny with the promise of frost. Once fairly expert, I could drink in the glitter and sparkle of the early morning world, when the ice is still like glass, black and clear, with the first skate marks on it like crescents and scribbles of chalk; and

when, on the edge of the marsh, where sedge and rush make a big circle, the white cat-ice, thin as window-glass, waterless underneath, cracks off like brittle shot in the silent, frozen air.

Sedges and grasses and reeds are then, in the early morning, fantastic. Frost embalms them and they stand rigidly like the sugared ghosts of themselves, relics of a strange ice-age. And in very severe, wicked weather the first skin of ice would be forming a lip on the river edges, a jagged cream-coloured or blue-white line like the depth line round a sea-coast on a map, and the river itself would look in some way ominous, deadly smooth, as though beyond the cream and white ice another expanse of ice were flowing slowly down, like shining running jet.

## Laughter in the air.

Then as the day went on I could look at the people; I mean I could look them in the face. I could stand and talk with old friends and join in that peculiarly joyful laughter that you always get on ice: everybody laughing and shouting with great gaiety, girls shrieking, men shouting greetings, the whole combination of light sound flung up into the air from the ice as though from a sound-board of glass, and mingled with it the sound of skates, that thin, musical cutting sound of steel on ice that, for many people, is half the joy.

Then, as the day went on and people thickened, some enterprising gent would arrive with a potato-oven or hot chestnuts or a tea-urn, and set up by the bridge; and you would skate over and warm hands by the fire and break a potato or two, or drink a cup of tea, and talk and laugh, and wave hands to friends, and take great breaths of pleasure and feel, generally, that you could, if only there were ice, skate on and on and down to the sea.

## Fabulous frosts.

And once, it seems, in the days when the climate of this island, like its manners and morals, was less disturbingly complex and more inclined to keep to its seasons, they did skate down to the sea. At least, they skated for forty miles, all down river, under bridges, missing locks, by mills and wharves and villages and pubs, in a fabulous frost that lasted thirteen weeks, and then in another that lasted six. Colossal days! In England, where winters are often more like wet reflections of spring, it seems like a Russian fairy tale. Men put on their skates, then, by the fireside and skated off from their back-doors and down lanes where, later, I was to walk as a boy. Horses and carts were drawn across the ice; bonfires were lighted. Bonfires and hot potatoes and frozen rivers and Victorian maidens in muffs!—it was a miracle painted on a Christmas card.

And of all the curious miracles performed by frost I used to notice one, on that marsh, in particular. All the birds would disappear. The vast concourse of gulls and peewits and swans would vanish utterly. A few rooks, a few starlings flying over in the red afternoons, an occasional heron—nothing more remained. When did they go? By night or by day? Warned by instinct of frost? Whenever they went, I never saw them. And how good it would have been to see them, the great grey uprising of gulls, the immense martialing of peewits, the glorious looming away of the swan cloud. But we never saw them go, or, in fact, when the thaw began, return. They came and went on almost fabulous wings.

FOR how can tyrants safely govern home  
Unless abroad they purchase great alliance?  
SHAKESPEARE.

It is always the best policy to speak the truth,  
unless of course you are an exceptionally good liar.  
—JEROME K. JEROME.

CV81✓