

A Madman

By Maurice Level

He was neither wicked nor cruel, but he hungered for the unexpected. The theatre did not interest him, yet he attended often, hoping for the outbreak of a fire. He went to the fair at Neuilly to see if perhaps one of the menagerie animals might go wild and mangle its trainer. Once he even visited the bullring, but its calculated bloodshed was mundane, too controlled. Meaningless suffering revolted him; he craved the thrill of sudden catastrophe.

Then, after ten years of waiting, fire indeed ravaged the Opera Comique one night when he was there. He escaped uninjured, but soon afterwards he saw the celebrated lion-tamer Frederick torn to pieces by his cats. The madman was only a few feet away from the cage when it happened. He lost interest in wild beast shows and the theatre and fell into a deep depression.

But then one morning he saw a garish poster, one of many that covered the walls of Paris. Against a blue background, a peculiar slanted track descended, curled itself into a circular loop and then plummeted straight down. The top of the billboard depicted a tiny cyclist about to dare the dangerous route.

The newspapers ran a story explaining that the cyclist intended to ride down just such a track. "When I reach the loop," he told reporters, "you'll actually see me round it *upside down!*" The press was invited to inspect the track and the bicycle. "I use no mechanical trickery," the daredevil bragged, "nothing but precise scientific calculation. That—and my ability to keep up my nerve."

When the madman read the article, his good spirits returned. He immediately went to buy a ticket. He did not want his attention distracted when the rider looped the loop, so he purchased an entire box of seats opposite the track and sat alone on opening night. After a suspenseful wait, the cyclist appeared high above the audience at the top of the ribbon of road. A moment of tense anticipation, then down he sped. As promised, he circled the loop with head underneath and feet in the air—and then it was all over.

The performance certainly thrilled the madman, but as he exited with the crowd, he knew he might experience the same intense sensation once or twice more and then, as always, the novelty would die. Still . . . bicycles break, road surfaces wear out . . . and no man's nerve holds out forever. Sooner or later, there must be an accident.

The cyclist was scheduled to perform for three months in Paris and then tour the provinces. The madman decided to go to every single performance, even if he had to follow the show on its travels. He bought the same box for the entire Parisian run and sat in the same seat night after night.

One evening two months later, the performance had just ended and the madman was on his way out when he noticed the performer standing in one of the corridors of the auditorium. He walked up to him, but before he could utter a word, the cyclist greeted him affably.

"I know you. You come to my show every night."

"That's true. Your remarkable feat fascinates me. But who told you I'm always here?"

"No one," the rider smiled. "I see you myself."

"But how can you, so high up? At such a moment, are you actually able to study the audience?"

The cyclist laughed. "Hardly. It'd be dangerous for me to look at a crowd shifting around and

prattling. But confidentially, there's a little trick involved in what I do."

"A trick?" The madman was surprised and dismayed.

"No, no, I don't mean a hoax. But there's something I do which the public is unaware of." The cyclist winked. "This'll be our little secret, yes? When I mount my bicycle and grasp the handlebars, I never worry about my own strength and coordination, but the total concentration the ride demands concerns me. It's almost impossible for me to empty my mind of all but one idea. My greatest danger is that my eyes may stray. But here's my trick—I find one spot in the auditorium and focus all my attention on it. The first time I rode in this hall, I spied you in your box and chose you as my spot. The next evening, there you were again . . ."

The madman sat in his customary seat. The usual excited buzz filled the hall. A hush fell when the rider made his entrance, a black speck far overhead. Two men held his bicycle. The cyclist gripped the handlebars, stared out over the heads of the crowd and shouted the signal. The men gave the machine a shove.

At that instant, the madman rose and walked to the opposite side of his box. The audience screamed as cycle and rider shot off the track and plunged into the midst of the crowd.

The madman donned his coat, smoothed his hat against one sleeve and departed.