

The Home Reading Circle

BREAKING A RECORD.

BY OWEN HALL.

Author of "The Track of a Storm."

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PART I.

The world is said to be really run by its enthusiasts and it may be true for anything I know to the contrary but I am pretty sure from personal experience that the enthusiasts themselves don't always enjoy the process of running it. Take my own case, for instance. I am an enthusiastic bicyclist—indeed I have been branded by inconsiderate acquaintances as a bicycle fiend—and here was I, at the moment when this unvarnished tale begins, feeling very clearly and unpleasantly that I was in it. Now, this was not the worst because I had been decidedly in it during the four days of our hill picnic at the cave temples of Murishabad. As a stranger bringing good introductions, I had been received with the open arms of Indian military society, and that the fact that I had come to make a tour of India on my bicycle had given me something of the vogue that attaches all the world over to any thing specially eccentric. I had been invited to accompany my original idea of making the hill journey from Koondevalia to Murishabad on my wheel, which had gone up in one of the wagons and in spite of all my enthusiasm I would willingly have let it go back in the same way had it not felt ashamed to feel so far to renounce my freely-expressed opinions.

I felt very much, I confess, like the engineer helix with his own petard that morning as I stood watching the last of our cavaliers winding down the mountain road and feeling that I was condemned by my own choice to more or less solitary journey as the only representative of the new locomotion. I glanced around at the site of our now deserted picnic camp by way of taking a last farewell before starting. There was little left, indeed, even now, except the site, for already the little crowd of retainers, conspicuous in their turbans and white linen garments, had struck the remaining tents and nearly completed the stowing of the thousand and one pieces of baggage which go to make up the strict essentials of an Indian picnic. The place had been well chosen and picturesque, and even now the open glade where the giant teakwood trees cast their shadows on the grass and the level sunlight lay in flecks and splashes of gold, formed a scene to delight an artist. Four or five wagons, drawn by pairs of mid-eyed zebu oxen, were receiving the last of their loads, and it was evident that in a few minutes more the hill picnic party would have started, and the mountain glade which had received so much laughter and been the witness to so great an amount of pleasure would be left to its solitude.

As my eye lingered over its last aspect of the place something unconsciously led it upwards from the level of the camp to a point on the hillside, where, as I remembered, a well-defined path ran along the slope between clumps of tall bamboo and stately tree-ferns. The path had been a favorite one, and perhaps it was this that led me to glance up at it for a final farewell. As I did so, however, I was startled by the apparition of the head and shoulders of a man, who was cautiously peering out from the thick shrubbery and leaves. It was a noticeable face, with a pair of bright grey eyes that even in the distance gleamed and sparkled with what seemed to me an expression of friendly hatred, as he watched the proceedings. I was, of course, and then glanced quickly down the road after the retreating party on horseback. The face was a startling one, and its expression made it still more impressive. It was only a few minutes before I could shake off the impression that it bore no good to the party which he watched so intently. He did not seem to notice me, or perhaps he felt sure he was concealed, for he remained as if in thought for a minute or two, and then suddenly disappeared.

It was not without a sense of vague uneasiness that I mounted my bicycle and followed the path, whose voice and laughter could still be heard from time to time, although a bend in the mountain road had hidden them from sight. A minute or two of the familiar exercise recalled me to my choice of locomotion, even at the expense of company. There was something in the smooth, gliding motion, silent and eminently independent, that seemed well suited to the place; none of the heavy, lumbering gait of the elephant, no nervous starts like those of a high-spirited horse; perfect independence and control, with an amount of exertion hardly greater, while the freedom of action was all in favor of the machine.

I had soon overtaken the others and made one of the little cavaliers that was making the most of the morning hours to diminish the march of forty miles that lay between us and the cantonments of Koondevalia. Fortunately, it was all down hill, and the road, though in its upper parts little more than a good mountain track, was smooth and good. For my own part, though the sun was hot, my effort was so trifling that in the comparatively cool air of the high tableland, I was quite able to enjoy the scenery, and the

oriental features of the landscape, which had not yet had time to lose their charm since I had landed a month before at Bombay. We made good progress, and by the time we reached the spot that had been chosen for our midday halt and meal we began to feel that we had diminished a good deal of the eighteen hundred feet that represented the difference in elevation of the temples at Murishabad and the Cantonments at Koondevalia. The stately teakwood trees, the most striking feature of the vegetation of the higher level, were rapidly giving way to masses of tropical looking foliage and shrubs. There was still great trees, indeed, but the wide-spreading branches with their many stems and fig-like leaves, the wool tree, with its vast foliage, and the stately tobacco plants were becoming more and more mingled with the palms and the hundred other vegetable forms that tell unmistakably of a tropical forest.

The spot chosen for our halt was a romantic one, and it was rendered still more so by the close neighborhood of an old hill fort, said to have a dark history in the old Maharratta wars, and even to have been used as a robber stronghold in much more modern times. The preparations for lunch were not yet complete, and it was proposed that we should spend the time of waiting in exploring the old fort. It stood but a short distance—perhaps two hundred yards to one side of the road on which we were—and the idea was hailed as a good one and acted upon at once, at least by the younger members of the party. Most of us dismounted and sought one or the other of the forest paths which appeared to promise shorter ways to the top of which, dark and threatening looking, could be seen rising out of the masses of tropical jungle that lay between us and the higher ground on which the old robber fastness had been built.

Perhaps it was a little spice of native obstinacy that led me to cling to my bicycle instead of joining one of the parties on foot, whose laughing voices made the echoes of the jungle with the unaccustomed sounds of pleasure and amusement. Reasons are nearly always mixed, and I didn't take the trouble to analyze my own as I once more mounted and pursued the road we had been traveling a little farther, in search of the place where it might be joined by the path leading up to the fort. In a minute or two I had reached it. The old fort builders had made no attempt to conceal the approach to their stronghold, and I paused for a moment to admire the unostentatious but patient labor that had been spent in hewing away the beetling granite crag, round the foot of which it swept to join the main road. The sounds of laughter higher up the hillside, made me face the steep ascent, and it was only after five minutes of rather harder work than was pleasant that I found myself on the level of the fort. Even here I was at the actual level of the entrance, for the road dipped once more into a hollow rising suddenly to the ruined gateway.

I glanced round and saw that as yet none of the others had arrived. The hollow before me was not deep, and letting my bicycle go, the impetus of the descent carried me with a rush up to the very entrance. I was in the very act, and within a few yards of the gateway, when my eyes met a man's face looking out at me through the arch of the wall. It was the face I had just seen, and which had fascinated me with the malignant gaze it had fixed on our last night's encampment from the hillside some hours before. The thought flashed through my mind with an irresistible conviction, that the man was the same as the man whose face I had just seen, and the same marked features, the same eager gleaming eyes, the very same deadly fierce expression which had started me in the morning. It flashed out upon me from the shadows cast by the crumbling gateway for an instant, and in the same instant it was gone.

More startled now than I should have cared to own, I leaped from my machine and shouted a welcome to the others of our party who were now beginning to struggle by twos and threes from the jungle. My victory was acknowledged by the rest, and we proceeded to explore the old building. To my surprise there was not a sign of the man whose face I had just seen—he had utterly disappeared. The fort seemed to afford no place where he could be concealed, and it was with a sense of uneasy astonishment that I failed to find him. The rest of the party were disposed to laugh at what they called my apparition, and even identified it with the old Maharratta chief who had built the fort. I couldn't laugh myself out of the idea, however, nor shake off the uneasiness which it caused me, and after spending a few minutes in convincing myself that the man was really gone, I remounted and returned by the way I had come.

Col. Maitland had stayed, with the more matured portion of our party, at the spot selected for the luncheon, and there I found him seated on a camp stool and watching, with all the interest of a well-seasoned East Indian, the preparations for the meal.

"Back first, Hall!" he exclaimed, as I rode up to where he sat under the simple shadow of the wide-spreading tree. "You made short work of the fort, then." I had already decided to tell the colonel my adventure, so I at once explained to him what I had seen, mentioning the apparent identity of the men I had noticed.

"You think he was the same man, Mr. Hall, do you?" he said.

"Well, sir, I hardly like to say so, it seems so unlikely, but I confess I do think so."

The colonel looked thoughtfully around for a moment. "Well," he said at last, "most likely it's a mere coincidence, but I have just been hearing that the neighborhood has been getting a bad reputation lately, and it may be as well to keep together. Would you mind warning the party up at the fort that they had better hurry back to luncheon? Don't alarm the ladies, of course, but get them to come."

The colonel's manner impressed me,

and in another half minute I was retracing the path I had already traveled a few minutes before.

PART II.

It was with a sense of relief, which, in spite of the shadowy nature of my grounds for anxiety, was considerable, that I saw the whole party safely collected in the pleasant picnic meal which had been prepared under the wide-spreading shade of the great banyan tree. I fancied I could make out a corresponding look of relief on the colonel's face, and detected him more than once in the act of glancing around him, but I was conscious that this might have been a mistake, and I could even fancy that the old fellow was chuckling inwardly over my credulity in being so easily alarmed. At any rate, nothing of the alarming character happened, and the luncheon, with its luxurious leisure, was the counterpart of those we had enjoyed throughout the days of our mountain picnic. Whatever effect my story might have had on the colonel's mind, it was by no means apparent in his actions, for he certainly didn't attempt to cut short the time allotted for the midday halt. Looking at him, as I confess I did from time to time, it seemed to me that he had dismissed his ordinary easy-going manner, and I came to the conclusion that I had made rather a fool of myself by speaking to him at all.

Our halt must have lasted nearly two hours, and the sun had become more and more oppressive in the afternoon had fully reconciled us to the pleasant idleness of the moment, when the arrival of the ladies we had left behind in the morning served as a reminder that the afternoon was nearly over. The word was given to start once more, and by the time the tops of the slowly moving wagons had disappeared round the first bend in the road below us we were nearly ready to follow them. The ladies were about to mount their horses, and I fancied I could observe a few uneasy glances cast at my bicycle, as if they were uncertain how far its near neighborhood would be conducive to the good behavior of the animals. It was unnecessary to say a word for it, an unmaking virtue of necessity I mounted and prepared to act as an advance guard. My annoyance was little more than momentary, for there is something in the motion of my wheel that always saves me from nervousness, and before half a minute had passed I found myself spinning smoothly down the long and gentle slope at the further end of which I could see through the vista of sunlight the shadow of the wooded gorge which contained the main part of the baggage of our party.

It was pleasant to glide swiftly, yet without any effort, over the elastic turf checked by the light and shade of the overhanging rocks, and the long succession of gorgeous tropical plants and shrubs that hedged in the sloping road on one side, confronted by the abrupt masses of rock that rose, wreathed in creepers and gemmed with flowers of the most brilliant colors, on the other. There was no need of exertion, for after a few moments the incline was more than sufficient to insure speed, so that I had ample leisure to look about me as I went. Even now the thought of my apparition was partly present in my mind, although, as I swept past the spot where the hill path to the old fort joined the road on which I was traveling, I had the pleasant impression that I was leaving it behind. In spite of this, I was conscious that it was to the upper side of the road that my eyes turned involuntarily, and that I was filled with quick, sharp glances the hollows that opened among the rocks, and the clumps of luxuriant vegetation as I swept past them on my downward course. Suddenly, just as I was smiling to myself for the second time, a horse sprang out of the bushes of the very edge of the rocky wall, which at that spot rose perhaps twenty-five feet above the road. He had a gun in his hand, and tied to the muzzle was his loosened turban, which he waved three times over his head, as if in token of a very act of waving it when I swept past at his feet. His eyes were fixed on some point further down the road as I did so, and even then I don't think he could have been aware of my presence.

What did it mean? I looked over my shoulder and saw our party—some thirty in all, of whom ten were ladies—cantering down the road three or four hundred yards behind. I could imagine I heard their laughter as they came on. There was a danger—danger of some kind, I was sure—and I had just seen it. If a face, and the expression of a face, were for anything, the danger was imminent and deadly. As the conviction flashed across my mind I tried to think what was to be done. Unless he had actually fired, as I can tell how hard a task it is to think under such conditions of emergency. The danger evidently lay in front, where some two or three hundred yards off, the ox-wagons were traveling along unconsciously, but the party against whom it must be aimed were still behind. I hesitated for a moment, and then feeling the necessity of doing something, I turned half round in my saddle, and waving my arm frantically over my shoulder, I called out: "Halt! Danger! Back! I hadn't tried to stop, and it was probably fortunate that I hadn't for the echo of my last word was still ringing in my ear, and my eyes were still fixed on the party behind me, when a sharp warning had produced, when a sharp whistle whistled closely past me, and at the same moment the sharp report of a gun startled all the echoes of the spot.

Had I thought for an hour I could have hit on no better plan for giving the alarm, and even as I involuntarily bent my head, as if to escape the shot, it was a sensation of no little relief that I heard it. At the same moment, and while I was in the act of looking back again to see what effect it had, my hand went instinctively to the belt under my loose coat where I had religiously carried my revolver in its case since my arrival in the country. Fortunately I was not yet going so fast as to make this difficult, and in a very few seconds I found myself able to throw myself hastily from the bicycle under shelter of the cliff. It was only a matter of moments, and as I turned the machine about, I heard a sharp shot from the direction where I could see that the wagons had stopped and were now huddled together.

THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE.



HE: "My darling, I always feel like taking off my shoes when I enter your sacred presence."
"Well, I would rather you did it now than after we are married."
—From "Life." Copyright, 1897, by Mitchell & Miller.

"Stilly over again, I guess," I muttered to myself, savagely, as I bent over my wheel and, skirting the rock above the road, I put all my strength into the effort to back to the spot where I had seen my unprovoked assailant. It was a different matter from the descent, indeed, but yet it was far from steep, and my chief effort was to keep myself centered, partly to avoid a second shock and partly to give myself a better chance of taking my savage-looking friend unawares so as to return his compliment. The plan had the advantage that it made it impossible for me to catch sight of our party. Straight as the road had looked to me riding in the middle, or perhaps a little nearer the trees, there was evidently a bend and now as I crept up close to the cliff it shut me off from a view of the upper stretch.

After all, it was only for a minute or so, and then noting the spot where the rock rose bare and rugged and gripping my revolver—a large and serviceable one—in my hand, I swerved into the bushes and, with a quick and noiseless rush, my idea had been a good one. As I came in sight of the top of the rock once more my friend, was, in the very act of turning away, and the momentary glance which I got like a flash of light at his face, seemed to me to show a savage, well satisfied smile on his dark features. In a moment I had fired, and at the same instant he had seen me. There was a short fierce exclamation, as with a threatening motion of his arm he plunged into the tangled mass of bushes behind him. I couldn't be certain that I had hit him, but the rest of our party evidently thought so, for they shouted: "Well done! Good shot!" by way of greeting my return.

They had halted near where the path to the fort joined our road, and in another minute I had joined them. About half of the men had ridden back to where the wagon that was to have followed was still standing, and it was Col. Maitland who rode a few paces forward to meet me and greeted me with the words: "That was a good idea of yours; glad you got the scoundrel."

"I hope I did, colonel," I replied, vindictively. "Do you suppose there are many of them?" I added.

"A good many, I should say, otherwise they would never have attempted an attack." I glanced around, and as even my unilitary eyes could see that our present position was quite untenable, and attend to some business. After doing this, the young man brought the would cross over to Detroit and see the sights. He wandered around for a time and finally drifted into Woodland to witness the afternoon performance.

Among other attractions on the bills was a prestidigitator, who, after performing several seemingly impossible feats, ended up by decapitating a man. The trick is cleverly done, and to the uninitiated is startling in its suggestiveness. Woodley sat unmoved throughout the performance, until the last act on the programme—that of decapitation, was reached.

As the conjurer, after stating what he was about to do, started making his preparations, the young man began to display considerable uneasiness. He shifted in his seat and glanced about him nervously. At last all was ready and with one sweep of his big, keen knife, the magician apparently severed his victim's head from his body holding it out in plain view of the audience. The trick is an old one and beyond a little applause and a few nervous "Oh's" from the timid ones, nothing was thought of it, the whole being a bit of clever deception. Woodley, however, had never seen the feat before, and imagined that some terrible blunder had been committed. He sprang to his feet and rushed from the hall just as the curtain was falling, and what had befallen him he could not explain, but a few hours afterward he staggered into his father's house.

It was all done in a moment. I saw the start, which for the moment paralyzed all four of the party; I heard the loud, quick exclamation of astonishment at the unheard-of apparition that flashed past them; and the impetus I had gained as I came down the slope had carried me to the ruinous gateway of the old fort before any of the party had recovered sufficiently to put his gun to his shoulder. The surprise had been complete, and I was in possession of our place of refuge in time. Perhaps they had really thought there was something supernatural about me, for no sooner did I throw myself from the bicycle than they seemed to recover themselves and prepared to fire. There was nothing to be gained by exposing myself, and I had just sheltered myself in the angle of the gateway when two shots, one after the other, passed closely by me, and the reports of the rifles rang out sharply overhead. Two only, I thought to myself; the others must be following me up. I looked out quickly, and I was just in time, for the two men were almost upon me. Each had his gun in his hand, and behind them I could see the others coming up the slope. I hesitated no longer, but stepping out into the middle of the gateway I fired. The man nearest me stumbled and fell heavily on his face not a dozen yards before me, and my finger was just about to press the trigger a second time when the man who was next leaped suddenly into the air and rolled almost at my feet. At the same moment the sharp report of a rifle announced the arrival of our party at the top of the hill path. My other two assailants heard it as soon as I did, and by common consent darted off into the dense cover of shrubs and undergrowth that hedged in the track on either side.

THE GRIP AND A PARADOX.

When your bones all ache like blades and you can't see out of your eyes, An' your legs go wobbly like a scuttled ship; No need to go to doctors with a lot o' what an' why's— 'Tis a dollar to a cent you've got the grip.

An' when your think-tank's rusty an' the cogwheels will not work, An' your intellect nippers fall to naps; An' you feel less like a Christian than old Abdi Ham, the Turk, You needn't wonder why—'tis just plain grip.

Them's the time for disappearing from the stress of worldly strife, For if you feel a trifle lipp, Though it may be paradoxical, you've reached a point of life Where the best thing you can do is lose your grip.

—New York Evening Sun.

ONLY A MAGICIAN'S ACT.

Yet It Frightened a Young Farmer Into Insanity and Gray Hairs.

From the Detroit Tribune.

John M. Woodley is the name of a young farmer who lives in Sandwich South. One week ago he was strong and healthy, with a mind considerably above the intellects of his associates. Today he is little better than a physical wreck. His hair, which was black as a raven's wing, is already turning gray.

On Tuesday last Woodley, who is about twenty-four years old, was commissioned by his father to go to Wind- sor and attend to some business. After doing this, the young man brought the would cross over to Detroit and see the sights. He wandered around for a time and finally drifted into Woodland to witness the afternoon performance.

Among other attractions on the bills was a prestidigitator, who, after performing several seemingly impossible feats, ended up by decapitating a man. The trick is cleverly done, and to the uninitiated is startling in its suggestiveness. Woodley sat unmoved throughout the performance, until the last act on the programme—that of decapitation, was reached.

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