

THE CRUISE OF THE GYRO-CAR

HERBERT STRANG

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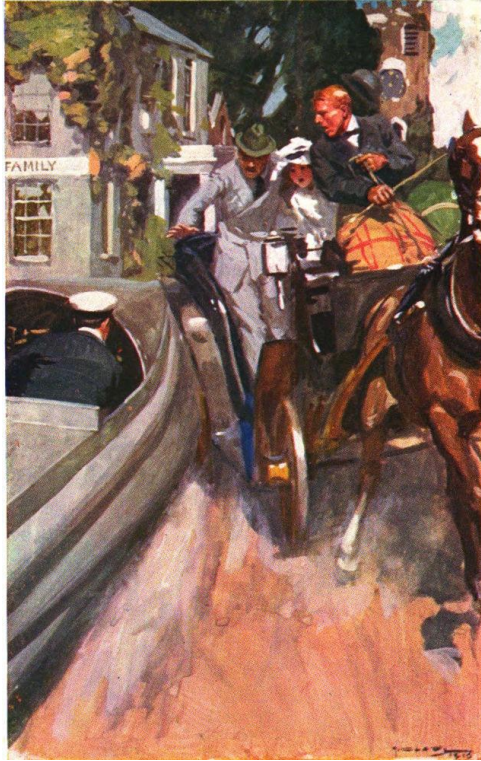
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THE NEW AND THE OLD

PREFACE

Albania, once a Roman highway to the East, has been for many centuries the wildest and most inhospitable of European countries. The mountains that had echoed to the tramp of Roman legions, and had witnessed the culmination of the struggle between Cæsar and Pompey, became some fifteen centuries later the scene of one of the most glorious struggles for liberty of which we have record. For nearly a quarter of a century Scanderbeg, the national hero of Albania, with a few thousands of his mountaineers, stemmed the advancing tide of Turkish conquest. When at length the gallant Prince and his people were borne down by sheer weight of numbers, and Albania became a Turkish province, this mountain land, which had been a principal bulwark of Christendom against Islam, served to buttress the unstable empire of her new masters. It has been the settled policy of the Turk to keep the Albanian in a condition of semi-independence and complete barbarism, as a kind of savage watchdog at the gate. From time to time the dog has turned upon his master, and in many a fierce struggle the mountaineer has shown that he has not lost the fine qualities of courage and love of liberty that inspired Scanderbeg and his followers.

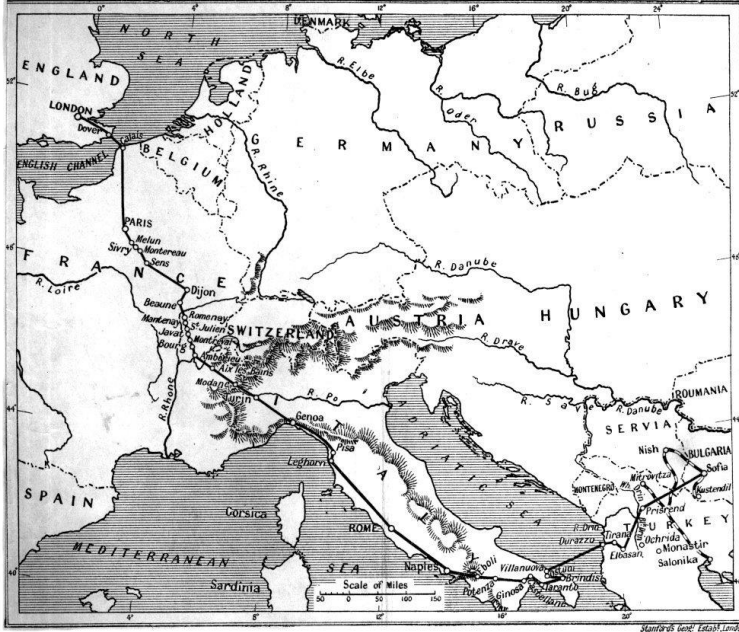
To the few Europeans, including J. G. von Hahn, Edward Lear, H. A. Brown, and E. F. Knight, who at no little personal risk have made a study of this romantic land and people, I am indebted for many interesting particulars, and especially to Miss M. E. Durham for the stories of "The Man and the Ass," and the

“Dismembered Cow.” The opening up of the country under the new régime in Turkey may soon render the visit of a motor- or gyro-car not more perilous there than in other parts of Europe, at present of better repute. But it will be long before the Via Egnatia, once the eastward continuation of the Appian Way, becomes as good a highway for motor or other traffic as it was two thousand years ago.

My young friend, George Buckland, is at present the sole possessor of a gyro-car, and he looks forward somewhat ruefully to the day when his scamper across Europe will no longer have the charm of novelty.

HERBERT STRANG.

THE ROUTE OF THE GYRO-CAR



THE ROUTE OF THE GYRO-CAR

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCES THE GYRO-CAR

Among the passengers who alighted from the train at the terminus of Shepperton, the little village near the Thames, one evening in early summer, was a young man differing noticeably, but in a way not easy to define, from all the rest. He was tall, but so were many; dark, but most men are dark; bronzed, but the young men who spent idle hours in sculling or punting on the river were as suntanned as he. Nor was it anything in his attire that marked him out from his fellow-men, unless, perhaps, that he was a trifle "smarter" than they. Yet many eyes had been attracted to him as he walked down the platform at Waterloo, and many followed him, at Shepperton station, as he stepped out of the compartment and doffed his soft hat to a young girl, who stood evidently awaiting him, and whose face lit up at his approach.

"Hullo, kid!" he said, in the young Briton's casual manner of greeting. "Where's George?"

"He'll be here in a minute or two," replied the girl. "I *am* glad to see you, Maurice."

"Thanks. How's Aunt?"

"The same as ever," said the girl with a smile. "Have you brought your luggage?"

“Just a valise. The porter has it. Take it to that fly, will you?” he added, as the man came up.

“Oh! Wait a minute,” said his sister, laying a hand on his arm. “George will be here in a minute.”

“That means ten, unless George has reformed. Well, well, children must be humoured.”

Brother and sister stood side by side chatting. The porter set the valise down by the fence. We may take advantage of the delay to explain that Maurice Buckland was one of the secretaries of the British agency at Sofia, and had come home on short leave. It was nearly two years since he was last in England. Affairs in the Balkans had been in a very ticklish condition, the focus of interest to all the chancelleries of Europe. A grave crisis had just been settled peaceably after a long diplomatic game of Puss in the Corner, and Buckland was at last free to take his well-earned holiday.

He showed an impatience far from diplomatic as the minutes flew by, and his younger brother George did not appear.

“Really, Sheila——” he began after five minutes.

“Please, a little longer,” interrupted his sister. “George has a surprise for you.”

“Has he, indeed! The greatest surprise would have been to find him punctual. What is he cracking his wits on now?”

“I mustn’t tell you. I wish he would come.”

They stood at the gate. A hungry flyman touched his hat. The porter was distracted between keeping one eye on the valise, the other on an old lady who seemed determined to enter the train before it had shunted to the up-platform.

Five more minutes passed.

“His surprise can keep,” said Maurice. “Porter!”

The man shouldered the valise and carried it to the waiting fly. Buckland and his sister entered the vehicle, the driver shut the door, touched his hat, clambered to his seat, and drove off. He knew the address; for the past year The Acacias, on the Chertsey Road, had been occupied by the Hon. Mrs. Courtenay-Greene, a middle-aged widow who kept house for her orphan nephew and niece. The fly rattled along through the village.

About half a mile from the station, as every one knows, the road sweeps round in a sharp curve to the right. To the left, at right-angles with it, stands the Anchor Hotel, with the vicarage adjacent and the old ivy-clad church beyond. Just as the fly reached the curve, there was a warning hoot from the opposite direction, and Buckland, glancing past the driver, saw a motor-car of unusual shape rushing towards them at the speed of an express train. With great presence of mind, and a violent execration, the flyman whipped up his horse and pulled it sharply to the near side towards the little post-office. Quick as he was, he could not prevent an accident. The motor-car, indeed, did not cut the horse and vehicle in two, as had seemed imminent, but merely grazed the off hind-wheel. Its occupant let forth a shout; the flyman had much ado to prevent his horse from bolting; and the motor-car, swerving from the shock, and

wrenched round by its driver, dashed across the road, into the brick wall that bounds the curve, and fell with a crash.

“Oh! He’s killed!” cried Sheila, rising to spring from the fly.

“Sit still,” said her brother sternly, holding her down. “Pull up, driver.”

“Easier said nor done,” growled the man, “with the hoss scared out of its wits.”

But in a few seconds he had the horse in hand, and pulled up a few yards down the road. Buckland then helped his sister out, and rushed to see what had become of his unfortunate brother. The landlord, ostler, and boots of the Anchor were already on the spot; the proprietor of the Old King’s Head opposite was running to join his rival; and as Buckland came up, the vicar hastened out of his gate in his shirt-sleeves.

The late occupant of the car, a young fellow of eighteen or thereabouts, turned from contemplating his battered machine to greet his brother.

“Hullo, old man!” he said. “Here’s a pretty mess!”

“H’m! No bones broken, then. Is this your surprise?” said the elder brother in his best ironical manner.

“More or less,” replied George with a rueful grin. “Why didn’t you wait for me?”

“It appears that by not doing so I narrowly escaped extinction.”

“She’s a beauty, really, you know—or was,” said George.

“I notice a beautiful hole in the wall. But come, we are being stared at by the whole population. What are you going to do with this beautiful machine of yours?”

“I shall have to put her into garage for to-night, and get her to my workshop for repairs to-morrow. The front wheel is buckled; it’s a wonder the whole thing isn’t smashed. If you had only waited, instead of taking a wretched old fly, we should have been safe home by this time.”

“Meanwhile the fly is waiting. I will leave you to make your arrangements, and may I beg you to be expeditious.”

Maurice Buckland affected at times a formal mode of speech that his brother, fresh from Winchester, found very galling.

Maurice returned to the fly with his sister, ignoring the crowd which had by this time gathered about the car. Having seen this wheeled by a score of helpers into the garage attached to the Old King’s Head, George rejoined the others, and the homeward journey was resumed.

“Just my luck!” said George. “I was going to drive you home in fine style. That’s my new gyro-car.”

“Indeed!”

“It goes like winking.”

“So I saw,” said Maurice dryly.

“Yes; my own idea, you know—that is, it’s an adaptation of Louis Brennan’s mono-rail car. You saw it has four wheels

tandem; it's like a motor bicycle. You've heard of the gyroscope, of course?"

"I am not aware that I have."

"Goodness! Is Sofia such a dead-alive place as that? I'll show you how it works to-morrow."

"Spare me! I have seen how it plays the dickens with time-honoured means of locomotion."

"But, you know, it's a splendid——"

"So are you, dear boy, but if you'll allow me to say so, it was quite time I came home. As your guardian, I must really exercise a little restraint upon your exuberance. Your allowance is clearly far too big, if you are squandering it in devising means for the slaughter of your innocent fellow creatures."

George felt somewhat resentful of his brother's superior attitude, and held his peace for a minute or two. But his enthusiasm soon got the better of him, and he began again.

"It's perfectly stunning, Maurice, the way she goes: isn't it, Sheila?"

"Yes; it really is, Maurice," said the girl eagerly. "We have had some splendid rides."

"Do I understand that you are so dead to all decency of feeling as to endanger your only sister's life as well as your own?" said Maurice severely.

“There’s no risk at all,” replied George; “that is, no more than in an ordinary motor. It was simply a piece of rotten bad luck. The gyroscopes are all right, but there’s a terrific amount of side thrust in turning a corner, and they’ve watered the road recently, so that in making allowance for the possibility of skidding——”

“Pray don’t treat me to a lecture on mechanics. The accident, as I conceive it, was the fault of your making an ass of yourself.”

“Here we are,” said Sheila, before George could answer, as the fly drew up at the gate of a large house. “We’ve got a lovely lawn, Maurice; I hope you’ve brought your tennis racquet.”

“My dear child, we have left the dark ages behind,” replied her brother acidly, and the two others, as they followed him into the house, felt that Maurice was even more insufferable than when he first put on high collars.

This impression was deepened at the dinner-table. The Honourable Mrs. Courtenay-Greene was a dowager of severe and wintry aspect, who wore pince-nez and had the habit of “looking down her nose,” as George irreverently put it. During dinner she and Maurice exchanged notes about common acquaintances, ignoring George until a chance mention of the gyro-car drew upon him a battery of satire, reproof, and condemnation.

“I shudder for our reputation,” said the lady. “We are already, I am sure, the talk of the neighbourhood.”

“Judging by what I have seen,” said Maurice, “we shall be lucky if we are not more than the talk. It will be manslaughter, at the least.”

“And our name will be in the papers!” said Mrs. Courtenay-Greene. “I live in a constant state of nervous terror. A motor accident on the road is disgraceful enough, but George is actually talking of running his ridiculous machine on the river.”

“Well, Aunt,” began George, but the lady closed her eyes and waved her hands as though warding off something ineffably contaminating.

“I will not listen to your plausible impertinences,” she said. “Maurice, shall we go and hear Tetrizzini to-morrow?”

George looked daggers at his aunt, and stole away as soon as dinner was finished, to talk over his grievances with Sheila.

Next day, he went early into the village, and returned in an hour or two, sitting on a lorry next to the driver, the damaged car behind him. It was taken to his workshop at the foot of the garden. Maurice was walking on the lawn, smoking a cigarette. He did not so much as lift his eyes as the vehicle passed, and George turned his head aside: the brothers might have been strangers.

For several days George was hardly to be seen. He had ordered a new front wheel and fork from the maker, and until they arrived forbore to speak of the gyro-car, and occupied himself in repairing the wind-screen in front, and in working at various mechanical models with which he was experimenting. He was going up to Cambridge in October, and the science master at

his school foretold that he would take a first-class in the engineering tripos, if he would only concentrate himself and not dabble in things outside the curriculum.

The new parts arrived. On the next day Maurice was strolling past the workshop, which he had never yet deigned to enter, when his attention was arrested by the sight of his brother's car standing by itself on the path. A faint humming proceeded from its interior. George was not to be seen. In spite of himself, Maurice found himself gazing at the machine with interest, for, though it had four wheels tandem, and was not supported on either side, it stood perfectly upright. He glanced round furtively to make sure that his brother was not watching, and then walked round the car, stooping at every few paces to look beneath it and assure himself that he was not mistaken. There were no supports; the machine was actually balancing itself on its four wheels.

"Rummy!" he murmured. "How's it done?"

He was peeping over the side of the car, when George's voice hailed him heartily.

"Hallo, Maurice! Isn't she a beauty?"

Instantly he moved away, and began to stroll down the path as if nothing could be less worthy of his attention.

"Swank!" said George to himself.

He turned the starting-handle, mounted into the car, depressed the clutch-pedal, and having advanced the speed-lever a little, ran up the path, out at the front gate, and disappeared.

Maurice flung his cigarette away, looking a trifle disconcerted. He went to his room opening on to the road, and remained at the window until he heard the hum of the car returning. Then he slipped into the garden, and was sauntering up and down, when George ran the machine down the path to its garage.

"I've had a jolly spin," said George. "Nearly ran into a foreign fellow in the village: there appears to be a little colony of foreigners there: come to try boating, I suppose."

He sprang out of the car, causing it to set up a slight rocking motion, and went into his workshop. Maurice stood at a distance of a few yards, contemplating what was to him an embodied mystery.

The machine was several feet longer than an ordinary motor-car, but about half as wide, and shaped like a boat. Indeed, its general appearance was that of a motor-cycle which had broken through the bottom of a rowing boat. Aft amidships there was a seat for two persons, arranged pannier fashion, and sunk somewhat below the top of the framework on which it rested. A little to the rear of the seat was a glass chamber, in which were two top-like things, connected by a bar. It was, apparently, from these that the humming proceeded, but they were not visibly rotating, though they swayed slightly. In front was the casing, presumably covering the motor; behind was a similar object, but smaller.

George came out of the workshop.

"Hallo!" he said, as if recognising his brother for the first time. "Taking a squint?"

“What are those things?” asked Maurice, nodding towards the glass case.

“Those? Oh, they’re the gyroscopes.”

He got into the car, and let down, one on each side, two supports, each with a small wheel at the end. Then he moved a lever to stop the spinning of the gyroscopes, got out again, lifted the cover of the motor, and proceeded to oil the engine. For some time not a word was spoken. Then Maurice broke the silence.

“Er! H’m! What, may I ask, is a gyroscope?”

“A top.”

“H’m! Do you think you could manage to speak in words of more than one syllable?”

“Well, gyroscope has three.”

“Undoubtedly. I am still a little doubtful as to the accuracy of your definition, or perhaps I should say, of the perfectness of my apprehension. Will you condescend to be lucid?”

“Oh, you want to be treated to a lecture in mechanics, do you? Are you sure it won’t hurt you? Aren’t you afraid of your name getting into the papers?”

Maurice opened his cigarette-case and offered it to his brother.

“Thanks, old man,” said George, contritely. “Got a light?”

Maurice struck a match, replaced the box in his pocket with deliberation, and said:

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