

SQUIRE JOHN

A TALE OF THE CUBAN WAR

BY ST. GEORGE RATHBORNE

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CHAPTER XVII.—Continued.

No one is hurt, but each man draws a long breath, as if comprehending that the battle is now on, and that it will not cease until much destruction has been wrought.

So Jack scrambles to his knees and has his arm out of the window almost immediately. That hand holds a weapon, and one he knows well how to manipulate.

The guerrillas present as fair a target as anyone could wish, seen in the light of the fires. Jack Travers has had many opportunities for becoming an expert shot.

If he were dealing with wild beasts of the chaparral he would have no more thought of mercy than he feels toward these lawless outcasts whose hands are raised against both sides and whose daily calendar is marked by terrible deeds.

So Travers opens right merrily upon them, his only desire being to make each one of the six bullets give a good accounting.

He is not allowed to monopolize the whole affair. Smithers is just as eager to have a hand in it, and his gun sounds about as regularly as Jack's. The senior and Spencer also manage to get in a shot or two, and taken all together, the reception they spring upon the astonished guerrillas is fully as efficacious as it is sudden.

A temporary demoralization seizes upon the assailants, and they melt away. Some run to the shelter of trees, others to the opposite side of the carriage, while a few drop to the ground, hoping that among the wounded they may be safe for the present.

"Well done," cries Don Rafael; "but is anybody hurt?"

They have luckily escaped all injury, which fact may be laid to the unprepared condition of the enemy. Perhaps when a second engagement has ended they may not be able to present such a fine showing.

"Listen!" exclaims Jack.

The report of firearms can be heard.

"Some of them have entered the carriage!" exclaims Roblado, for the shots certainly sound close to their ears.

Jack scouts the idea.

"Not quite so bad as that," he says.



Travers opens right merrily upon them.

"But listen. Those reports are surely just beyond this thin partition. Carramba!"—as two shots sound at once.

"That is true. But they are fired by the guard and my servant, who, cut off from this compartment by the advance of the enemy, have been compelled to take refuge in there."

"I believe you are correct, senior. That is a piece of luck in our favor."

A sudden silence has fallen on the scene—a silence that seems to pre-empt the coming tempest—a silence that is even more terrible than the clamor that has preceded it.

The situation is certainly very black, and even sanguine Squire John does not dare to think of what the immediate future may hold for them.

To successfully defend the carriage against these dare-devil guerrillas is a task well-nigh impossible. Above all, Jack dreads lest the enemy conceive the idea of utilizing fire in order to accomplish their end. The old carriage if once kindled would burn like tinder. So Travers finds himself in the position of a master at chess who discovers a weak point in his defense whereby he may be mated, and as it is his opponent's move, he sits there on nettles awaiting the discovery that will bring his defense to naught.

Smithers knocks on the wall.

"Hello, there!" he calls, and the guard answers.

"Hold the fort; load up again, and be ready for a sortie if necessary," again calls the agent.

The silence does not last long; but in the interim the guerrillas have evidently been heavily reinforced, if the fearful chorus of screeches and "Again!" shouts Roblado, pushing close to the opening; "and let it be to the death, seniors all!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A Change of Base.

They come sweeping forward very hoarse yells that marks their second advance is any criterion.

Like the hurricane that sometimes devastates Cuban sugar plantations, Jack is really appalled at the number of desperate men opposed to his little band, and more than ever does he realize what an uphill task lies before them; indeed, it must be through a miracle that they escape, if at all.

As the guerrillas advance they open fire on the carriage with all manner of guns; so while this firing lasts it is necessary for the defenders to lie low, lest some of the missiles that sing so lively a tune, and snap splinters from the framework above, find a more congenial lodgment within their bodies.

Smithers seems to realize that their enemies are poorly provided with firearms. He believes they will speedily exhaust their fire, when it may be reasonably safe for himself and allies to reply.

Just as he figured so it comes to pass. The shots, which dropped so fast in the beginning, become more scattered and about cease.

"Now, give it to them!" roars Smithers.

A gallant burst follows—fire flashes in spiteful streaks from that side of the carriage.

Again they scatter, as before, leaving a portion of their number on the ground; but Jack notices a difference in their actions. The majority dash alongside the carriage. They are thus out of the allies' range unless one dares thrust his head and arm outside, which action would be almost suicidal.

Sounds are heard as of some one pounding. They come from underneath the carriage, and mystify even Smithers for a time. It is evident that their enemies surround them, and have even mounted to the roof, as they can be heard moving about.

The suspense is torture.

Smithers has kept on guard, watching the opening; nor does he watch in vain. Without warning, he suddenly fires his pistol, and from the

floundering on the roof, together with the terrible Spanish curses that cause the girls to clap their hands over their ears, it seems positive that some reckless fellow allowed curiosity to get the better of discretion when he lowered his head in the attempt to investigate the interior of the carriage. Jack can stand it no longer.

He already imagines he can hear the crackling of flames underneath the carriage. Something desperate must be done.

"Senior, assist me in opening the other door just wide enough to allow the passage of my body," he says to Roblado.

"Carajo! what would you do, young senior?" asks the Spaniard, while Jack sees the girls rise to their knees at his words as though in alarm.

"Something must be done immediately. I do not like to alarm the ladies, but I fear those wretches mean to burn the carriage—that they may be even now starting fires underneath us," returns Travers, quickly, desperately.

"But tell me, how would your going have any effect? They will shoot you on sight. You are a brave man, senior, but we cannot afford to lose you," declares Roblado.

"I must go. I believe I can change our conditions. The light of these fires is apt to prove our ruin. See, they are upon the curve; this other side is almost in shadow. I will take my chances. Once out, senior, I can send the carriage perhaps two hundred yards away from this fatal spot."

"Alone—you, senior?"

"It is easy, I tell you. There, you have the door ready to open. I shall go."

"Senior, I see you are determined, so good-bye, and Heaven protect you," says Roblado, squeezing his hand.

Jack gravely wrings that of Smithers, for he hardly expects to see him again—at least, the chances are against it.

Then, as he turns to squeeze through the narrow opening, he is stopped by the senior's daughter, who seizes his hand.

"Sir, the Virgin guard you. This night you may win that which you prize above all else on earth. Jessie, bid him Godspeed," says the Spanish girl, hastily.

Then Jack for the second time in his life holds the hand of his wife in his own, and ere he releases it he has pressed a kiss there.

He dares linger no longer, but filled with high aspirations regarding the desperate plan that has flashed upon his mind, he slips through the narrow opening.

Just as he feared, the crafty assailants are endeavoring to start a new blaze under the forward end. Their diabolical intention is to have the carriage afire, when those who have twice given them such a warm reception must come forth to their fate or roast in the flames.

Travers has a chance to put his little plan into operation.

Creeping along beside the carriage, he reaches the wheel where Ah Sin placed the iron pin.

Much depends on his ability to withdraw this. As the weight of the carriage must in a measure be resting upon it, he may find this task beyond his strength.

Backward and forward he twists it, while the fire rises higher. His energy increases; in sheer desperation he puts forth gigantic efforts. All the while he is encouraged by the fact that the pin moves more freely.

At length a tremendous rally on Jack's part gives him success—the coupling pin is in his hands.

Now, if the carriage will only take a notion to descend the short grade! But there is no occasion for mental anxiety with regard to this, since the withdrawal of the iron pin is instantly succeeded by a movement on the part of the railway carriage.

Jack has driven in his first stake, and it remains to be seen whether he can hold his claim against all comers.

Upon finding the car in motion there is a burst of shouts from those underneath and others on top.

In this emergency nothing can be found with which to block the wheels,

and already too much momentum has been acquired to accomplish this result by mere muscular effort.

Jack, finding that it will not be necessary for him to stand by and prevent any detaining action with his revolver, ceases to run alongside the carriage, clutches hold of the side, and swings himself on the footboard.

The heavy carriage gains momentum as it proceeds. Jack only wishes there might be a down grade all the way to Havana, when they would reach the Cuban capital with flying colors.

Alas! It is but a baby run—perhaps two hundred feet, then a short level, and after that a rise, where they will again be stopped.



Backward and forward he twists it.

Well, that is the limit of his hopes, and he can find no cause for complaint.

Already they are on the level; the momentum acquired causes the carriage to ascend the other rise thirty yards or more, when it gradually ceases to push onward. Jack is on the alert; he jumps off and makes an admirable use of the iron pin, against which the burden of the adventurous carriage again rests.

Jack is pleased with the result.

They have a fighting chance, now that the light of the fires does not betray them.

No sooner has he made sure that the pin will hold than he rushes around to the other side, and reaches the door.

"Senior, it is I!" he exclaims, not wishing to be too warmly received.

He is greeted with exclamations of joy from within, and his hearing must indeed be very acute to catch feminine voices from among the rest.

"It was beautifully done," declares Roblado, with enthusiasm.

"Very good; but we have only made a beginning, senior. Listen, and you will hear their shouts as they follow. See how they wave torches snatched from the fires as they come! We have still more hot work awaiting us."

"You never spoke truer words, sir!" exclaims Smithers; "and we are fools if we allow them to build more fires around us. Out, then, every man, and keep them at bay. Hello! there, in the other section! Open the door and join us. The situation has changed, and we must not allow ourselves to be shut up again. All hands on deck to repel boarders!"

(To be continued.)

Spain's Periodical Changes.

"On the whole, Spain is wonderfully peaceful and miraculously loyal," says a writer. "Any native returning to his country after, say, twenty years' absence would scarcely know it. While Victoria was reigning over England Spain saw six sovereigns of various kinds, and none very good; one republic; several civil wars, and a whole waste-paper-basketful of constitutions."

During the courtship a man declares he cannot live without her—and after marriage he often finds it impossible to live with her.—Chicago News.