

SQUIRE JOHN

A TALE OF THE CUBAN WAR

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CHAPTER XIX.

Surrounded by Fire.

Truer words were never spoken than when Travers declares they had hot work before them.

As the others comprising the little party of defenders come tumbling out of the compartments which they have defended so bravely, they, too, discover the advance of the guerrillas, marked as it is by a dozen waving flambeaux hastily snatched from the fires.

Jack is by instinct a leader of men. His quick mind grasps a problem and almost on the instant solves it. He seems to know by intuition, as it appears, just what sort of action suits an emergency.

Speedily he places his men where they can do the most execution, and in the darkness they crouch alongside the carriage, awaiting the coming of the enemy.

There is hardly a breathing spell before those who come running along the railway track will be close enough to invite an opening of the engagement.

The guerrillas of course cannot see the carriage, since all lights have been extinguished; but knowing the nature of the ground, they are able to guess its present position with some degree of certainty.

Jack is there in the van ready to give a good account of himself. He has regulated matters so there may be no great waste of ammunition. Smithers and himself are to open the ball, and if it becomes necessary, the others will chime in.

The two comrades are close together, and have time for the exchange of a few sentences ere the nearest torchbearers come within the range where they have marked an imaginary dead line.

Then the ball opens.

Doubtless the advancing guerrillas understand the situation as soon as the double flash cleaves the darkness up the rise, for their savage shouts seem to increase in volume.

Those in the lead are naturally the ones to suffer when meeting with such an obstacle.

Two torches are seen to plunge downward, and those who carried them will hardly give further trouble.

Still, behind presses a throng; the catastrophe has not dulled their enthusiasm, but rather whetted their appetite for revenge.

Again Jack and Smithers let loose. They are as cool and collected as though practicing at wooden targets. Each second is the signal for a double discharge, and the regularity of this death dealing report stamps itself upon the mind with awful distinctness.

Unseen by Travers, two heads have appeared at the carriage window. An overpowering curiosity to see the nature of the danger that hangs over them has influenced Jessie and the Spanish girl to thus endeavor to survey the scene.

They discover the advancing torches, and hear the shouts of the assailants; then come the reports of firearms and the terrible confusion that ensues down the track. Secretly one of these gentle hearts is praying for the safety of the man who has offered his body as a bulwark between those desperate devils and herself; for Jessie Cameron has indeed made a startling discovery, though she does not as yet breathe its nature even to her stepsister.

Meanwhile, the fusillade has borne fruit. Even brave men might recoil before such systematic firing. The shots continue to ring out as if by machine work—each discharge

might be the pulsation of a mighty heart capable of sending leaden hail whistling through space.

From incarnate rage the shouts blend into cries of alarm—yes, even of terror.

The advance is not given up, but a new system of tactics brought into play.

One man gives his torch a toss into the surrounding jungle. Another sees the point and follows suit. For a brief interval the air seems filled with flambeaux, each describing a parabola and landing in the thicket.

Jack understands what it means, and has no liking for the advance that must follow, since it means the possible arrival of the guerrillas at the car, and a possible hand-to-hand conflict that will work against them on account of inferior numbers.

He sees many dark forms stumbling forward over the bodies of those who have fallen; the torches have not gone out, but kindle incipient conflagrations among the dead leaves.

"Fire! Give it to them hot," is what Squire John exclaims.

With a crash the others open. Even Ah Sin can do his share, since Jack has no use for a retainer unable to handle a gun, and in the early days of their intimacy taught the Celestial how to aim and fire, though the Chinaman cannot be broken of gun-



Then the ball opens.

shyness, and persists in shutting his eyes each time he pulls trigger.

Such a wholesale discharge is enough to quite finish the business.

The advance has been feeble before, but now it ceases entirely. When the seeds of a panic are sown they germinate with lightning rapidity. From lip to lip the cries of alarm pass. Perhaps never before in all their experience have these barbarians met with such a desperate resistance as this.

They melt away, these fierce guerrillas.

In the dim light their fleeing figures can be seen in various quarters in desperate flight. The shots continue so long as any are in sight, and while probably lacking in execution, certainly add to the temporary terror of the mob.

Some have sought safety in the forest, and Jack's attention being called to this fact, he awakens to a new danger that confronts them.

The dead leaves and brush catch fire easily at this time of the year, since the opening of the rainy season has been delayed.

Already in half a dozen places, where the descending torches alighted, can be seen a rapidly-spreading blaze. The breeze seems to be in-

creasing with the passage of each minute of time, and fanning the flames into vigorous life.

Jack knows better than any of the others the full measure of the new danger menacing them.

Still, what can be done?

There is a fire for every man, some of them already burning so fiercely that it would tax the ingenuity of a single individual to encompass the destruction of the blaze.

Should they attempt to extinguish the fires that already begin to snap and crackle as they greedily seize upon new material, they will naturally become a target for those of the bushwhackers who may still linger near.

Hence nothing can be done.

The others begin to notice the increasing light.

They comment on the fact that presently they will offer fair targets to the aim of the enemy; but strangely enough none of them appear to grasp the most serious part of the impending disaster.

Even Smithers, usually so quick to see such things, makes no mention of it.

It is suggested that they seek the interior once more. None of them are loth to do so. The guard and Ah Sin find an asylum in the end compartment as before.

Smithers appears to dislike this division of their forces, and one of his first acts upon entering is to examine the partition between.

His scrutiny appears to satisfy him, for he at once opens an assault on the wall, which proves to be a mere shell, and in wretched condition at that; for under the vigorous measures brought into play by the energetic agent, there is an opening made through which the stoutest of the party can pass with ease.

Don Roblado and Spencer are keeping watch at one door, and Jack opens the other in order to take an observation.

He is really startled and not a little worried at the amazing progress made by the fires. They have eaten their way along on that side of the track until the lines of separation have ceased to exist, and all are united. The flames, fed by dead leaves and branches from trees lopped off during the passage of some West India hurricane, now leap hungrily into the air, as though snapping at the branches overhead.

Travers cannot remember ever seeing a fire start with so much vim.

And while he leans there at the door, his mind endeavoring to plan new methods of meeting the deadly dangers that keep cropping up so continually, he feels a touch, and experiences a burning sensation. Some monitor of the heart, some marvelous intuition of the spirit tells him it is the hand of his Highland lassie that telegraphs thus to his soul.

"Is the danger over?" she asks, softly.

Roblado and his friend lean out of the other door and compare notes over the situation. Smithers has passed into the next compartment to speak with the guard, and no one is near but Juanita, Jessie's faithful friend and stepsister, who loves her with the blind affection which the Aztec worshippers felt for their sun-god.

"That would be hard to say," he replies, softly. "These men are desperate characters, and although we have temporarily beaten them off, they may return. I hope you will not be alarmed, however. We have been able to hold out this far, and give a good account of ourselves, and, with the favor of Heaven, will continue to do so."

"We are under heavy obligations to you!" she says; and Jack smiles grimly at the way Fate manages his case.

"I hope you will not think so. No man could stand by and not lift his hand to defend ladies," is what he manages to say.

"Pardon—you are not a Spaniard, sonor?"

Travers suddenly remembers that he no longer holds the pebble in his

cheek; he has been talking in his natural tones.

"Only an American, lady," he replies.

"I thought so," he hears her say, as though to herself, and immediately follows by asking aloud: "You appear to be more anxious than before, and I imagine we are threatened with some new danger. You see I am brave. I would know the worst. So please let us understand what is coming next."

"It will come from the fire," he says, quickly.

"I understand what you mean," she says, as she leans out of the door, sustained by his arm—"the forest is afire. We are in danger of being burned alive. Well, sir, that is a terrible fate to face, but I had rather meet it than fall into the hands of those wretches;" and Jack, remembering the savage appearance of the guerrillas, fully half of whom were black devils, can heartily say "Amen" to her words deep down in his heart.

What Jessie characterizes as a forest fire has really reached the dignity of such a conflagration, for the flames have seized the branches, and shoot upward with a vehemence that promises a wonderful result.

If the wind grows stronger it will sweep over the ridge and run a course of miles until checked by some stream or savannah.

"Can nothing be done? The heat is already becoming so dreadful. Perhaps the carriage may take fire, and we will lose our refuge," is what Juanita says, just behind them.

Jack has been considering the matter, and trying to decide which of two evils is the lesser.

He realizes that whatever is done must be accomplished quickly, else the intense heat may cause the old tinder-box of a railway carriage to take fire.

Before Travers can make any further remark upon the subject, he hears Smithers calling aloud for the "doctor" in the next compartment, and it suddenly flashes across his mind that it was agreed he should pass under the name of Dr. Jim.

Evidently his presence is needed. Smithers shows some trace of excitement in the tone of his hail, and it may be set down for certain that when he allows his well-trained nerves a little holiday, there is good reason for alarm.

(To be Continued.)

PANAMA CLIMATE NOT DEADLY.

Temperature and Rainfall Not Worse Than in the United States.

There is a widespread belief that the climate of Panama is so fatal that the construction of the canal can only be accomplished at an enormous sacrifice of human life. Both malaria and yellow fever may be said to be to-day practically under control, and these are the two diseases, says the Scientific American, which are most to be dreaded when the great construction camps are assembled and work is in full swing throughout the whole length of the canal. According to Gen. Abbott, the records of the hospital of the old Panama canal company show that the total death rate among the laborers was far less than is commonly supposed, being in fact from 44 to 67 per 1,000.

It seems, moreover, that the rainfall has been the subject of as gross exaggeration as the diseases. It varies from about 130 inches on the Atlantic to sixty-five inches on the Pacific, a record that can be duplicated in the United States, where the average rainfall on the Atlantic coast is about fifty inches and the fall on portions of the Pacific coast compares in total precipitation with that of the Atlantic terminus of the canal. Furthermore, it will be news to many residents of our more northerly latitude to learn that the temperature ranges at Panama from 70 degrees to 85 degrees Fahrenheit, and that it is very rarely that the thermometer reaches the high temperature which is experienced when a hot wave passes over the United States.