

A Novel Defense

by W. Thomson

“What has become of Tom Grant?” said the leader of our party as we, one after another, roused up after a long midday sleep.

“Gone off, as usual, on a beetle and butterfly hunt, I suppose,” replied Tom’s chum, a young fellow named Austin.

“Well, it was a mighty foolish thing to do in these parts, without his rifle, and I see he has left that behind. When did he go?” rejoined the captain.

“Don’t know, Cap, but I guess he never took a snooze at all. I waked up first of the crowd, and he was gone then,” Austin somewhat anxiously answered.

Charlie Blake, whom we had elected captain of the expedition, out of deference to his longer experience in the country, turned to the party, with a very serious expression on his handsome face, and said:

“Boys, it is now two o’clock. We’ve been sleeping for over an hour and a half, and Grant may have been gone all that time. He is quite unarmed, and the brakes and thickets about here are full of jaguars, panthers, palmeats and wild-hogs; and, worst of all, the terrible tree-boa is by no means rare. Most of these creatures lie close hidden during the heat of the day, but Tom is just as likely as not to run right into their lairs, or, by his single presence, tempt some of them from cover, and if he does— Well, we had better lose no time in hunting him up.”

We were a party of six: five of us young fellows, from Boston, who had lately graduated and were now, before settling down to the serious business of life, spending a few months in Brazil, on a botanizing, entomological and hunting trip. The sixth man, Charlie Blake, was a thirty-year-old New Yorker, whom we had fortunately run against at Valverde, where he had been for some time engaged in trade, and who had very kindly consented to join us for a week or two, thus supplying to the rather light-headed a much-needed modicum of ballast.

Of late, we had made Valverde our headquarters, but we were now out on a tour of exploration, and it was on the second day after leaving the old town that we found ourselves, at noon, in that prolific stretch of country which lies above the junction of and between the Tocantins and Rio del Tigre river. A wonderful land, indeed! whose amazing richness of tropical vegetation, gorgeous bloom of endless flowers, myriad of birds of brilliant plumage and incredible wealth of scarcely less brilliant insects, on every side delight the eye; but whose groves and swamps, dark forests and deep-grassed plains teem, alas! with noxious, venomous life, and in the green-scummed waters of whose stagnant lagoons deadly malaria forever lurks.

We had lain down beneath the shade of a clump of vine-clad cypress and gum-trees to sleep away the hot noontide hours, and discovered, only on awakening, that Tom Grant, a never-tiring entomologist, had disappeared; but had it not been for Blake's warning words, none of us would have felt the least misgiving as to his safety.

Now, however, all were anxious to start out at once on the search; and extending ourselves into a line, with an interval of about fifty yards between each two men, we set off up-stream, knowing that our comrade must have taken that route, as the rivers' junction lay immediately below us.

Every now and then, as we pushed laboriously along through the almost impenetrable woods, one or another of us discharged a single shot, in hope of hearing an answering halloo; but the only effect of our fire was to scare from their hiding-places or drive to deeper cover hundreds of screaming parrots, chattering monkeys and the thousand-and-one flying and creeping denizens of the forest wilds.

No human voice responded to our summons, and yet we felt assured of being on the right trail, for three several times we had found half-burnt matches, and once had picked up a fragment of drawing paper which we knew to be Tom's. We had spent fully two hours in going, perhaps, as many miles, and not having lately come across further signs of our friend, Charlie Blake gave it as his opinion that, if still alive, he had lost himself and was probably wandering in a circle somewhere in the labyrinthine depths, where the sun, his only guide, could not penetrate.

"And, boys," he concluded, "if we do not find him before nightfall we shall never again see him in this world."

It was now past four o'clock, and already the gloom about us was sensibly deepening, and prowling beasts of prey began occasionally to cross our path. Joe Burke knocked over a sinking wolf, and Frank Austin brought down a wildcat from the top of a lofty gum; but neither of these shots brought hail or shout from our absent friend.

We were still advancing in a tolerably straight line, always keeping within speaking distance of each other, when suddenly we broke out of the dark forest into a large, treeless savanna, where the sun shone gloriously and the rank grass was breast high. Immediately on reaching this, Hugh Kimball called out:

"I say, boys, something has passed along here not long ago. Look at this narrow path where the grass has been parted."

We all hurried to the spot, and Blake at once said:

"We're on Tom's track, sure enough! You see the trail is widest at top, whereas if made by a wild beast crawling along, it would be widest at the bottom."

We now fired three shots in rapid succession, and, after waiting a moment, were about to shoot again, when Austin held up his hand with a "Whisht!" and each one strained his ears to listen. Yes; there was no mistaking it; far away from toward the declining sun came a faint halloo, once,

twice, thrice repeated, and five lusty throats sent up cheer after cheer as we realized the joyful fact that our comrade was indeed found.

Dashing along, now wading, tearing, scrambling through the long, wiry stems as best we could, we made our way for a half-mile, seeing nothing as yet, but ever more distinctly hearing the same “Halloo! Halloo! Halloo!” always promptly answered by our own encouraging shouts. At last we caught sight of a broad sombrero and the shoulders of a man above the tall herbage, *backing* slowly toward us.

“Hush, boys, hush!” cautioned Charlie Blake, “there’s something unusual here—” and, being now within easy speaking distance, he softly hailed Grant, and asked:

“What is up, Tom?”

The young fellow never turned his head, but, while his right arm seemed to be gently moving up and down, and strange, flashing, dazzling gleams of blinding light played fitfully beyond him, answered in a curiously restrained voice:

“Boys, there’s a thundering big jaguar following me up, not twenty feet away! I’ve been standing him off for the last half-hour by flashing the rays from my pocket-mirror in his eyes, but he’s getting used to the game now, and you’ve got here just in time. Don’t let us lose him! One of you come slowly up straight behind me, and the other four sweep around and get in rear of the brute, but don’t waste a moment, for he begins to look mighty ugly.”

As we heard Tom’s startling explanation, a thrill of hardly repressed excitement ran through the little party. Frank Austin, carrying his own and his chum’s rifle, advanced cautiously toward him, and the rest of us made a detour and crept, silently as possible, through the grass until we reached a point directly in line with the actors in this singular drama. Then we rose to our feet, and, peering over the top of the rank growth, saw a most curious sight, indeed. Crouching low on his belly and creeping stealthily along, lay a full-grown and beautifully spotted jaguar, while, a few yards behind him, Tom, gradually backing away, held between his fingers a common little mirror, such as prospectors carry, and, as he faced the sun, continually flashed the reflected rays into the eyes of the brute, who, on each repetition of the trick, recoiled in momentary terror, snarling and showing his great fangs, and then resuming his course until again checked in the same way. The hungry, bloodthirsty monster was so intent upon his expected prey, and, I suppose, so puzzled by the extraordinary defense, that he appeared to have eyes and ears for nothing else, and it was only when our simultaneously raised gun-hammers came into full position with a sharp click that he turned his head and saw us. Then, the spell of his absorbing pursuit being broken, he gave a hoarse, savage cry of rage or fear, and for one half-second standing at bay, seemed undecided whether to fight or fly.

That instant sealed his fate. Four rifles cracked together, and each one sent a heavy conical bullet crashing through his large round skull, and, without so much as a tremor, he sank stone-dead to the ground. With a shout of triumph, we brushed past the carcass and rushed over to Tom, who, now that the fearful tension was relaxed, had dropped—and little wonder—insensible into Frank Austin’s arms. Tom, however, was made of good stuff and soon revived, when, after emptying

the contents of two or three of our water-flasks down his parched throat, he told the story of his unprecedented adventure in a few words.

“When you fellows lay down to sleep,” said he, “I took my net and set out for a little hunt, intending to be back by the time you should awake; but I met with such success that I went on and on to the edge of this savanna, and then across it nearly to the further side. I heard all your shots; but, of course, you did not hear me shout in return until you got into the open.

“I secured lots of rare specimens here, and had just picked up a fine scarlet beetle, when I noticed, a little way off, a slowly advancing, trembling wave in the long grass, as if some monstrous serpent were crawling through it. I, at first, supposed that this really was the case, and stood carefully watching, prepared for a run. But I very quickly found that retreat was out of the question when, in a minute or so, I caught a glimpse of this dangerous beast’s head as he wormed himself flat along the ground; and I am not ashamed to confess that I fairly shook with fright at the sight, being, as you know, utterly unarmed.

“I had read somewhere that beasts of prey will fly at the sound of the human voice; and so I tried to frighten this fellow off by a series of wild yells.

“Perhaps he did not recognize these as ‘human’ at all; but, anyhow, he did not scare worth a cent. On the contrary, he crept steadily on until within fifteen feet, when he humped up his back and his horrible green eyes glowed like emerald flames as he evidently made ready to pounce upon me. I had now scarcely a hope of escape, but a sort of merciful numbness came over my senses, and I did not much seem to care.

“It appears almost miraculous, but at this moment, in my half unconscious state, expecting instant death, I happened to think of one of our school-boy games, and—why I hardly knew—jerked this tiny mirror from my vest-pocket, and, standing with my own face to the sun, flashed the focused light into the jaguar’s eyes; and, to my great delight and astonishment, the surprised brute, at a single bound, sprang fully twenty feet to one side. Then, finding that he was not hurt, he came on again to be scared time after time in the same manner. So, for over half an hour, the strange fight was kept up, I, with my face always to the sun, backing toward camp and he persistently following and gradually getting more and more bold as he became accustomed to the trick. I could plainly see, just as you came up, that a catastrophe was imminent, and I have no doubt that, if you had been ten minutes later, I should have perished. But all’s well that ends well, and we shall have this magnificent pelt to add to our collection.”

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