

LIGHTNING JO,
THE TERROR OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL.

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FOOTNOTE:

CHAPTER I.

THE CRY FOR HELP.

“TO THE COMMANDANT AT FORT ADAMS:

“For God’s sake send us help at once. We have been fighting the Comanches for two days; half our men are killed and wounded, and we can not hold out much longer. But we have women and children with us, and we shall fight to the last and die game. Send help without an hour’s delay, or it’s all up.

J. T. SHIELDS.”

Covered with dust, and reeking with sweat, with bloody nostril and dilated eye, the black mustang thundered up to the gate of the fort, staggered as if drunken, and then with a wheezing moan, shivered from nose to hoof, and with an awful cry, like that of a dying person, his flanks heaved and he dropped dead to the ground, his lithe, sinewy rider leaping from the saddle, just in time to escape being crushed to death.

Scarcely less frightful and alarming was the appearance of the horseman, so covered with dust and grime, that no one could tell whether he was Indian, African or Caucasian; but, whoever he was, he showed that he was alive to the situation, by running straight through the gate of the stockades, into the parade-ground, where, pausing in a bewildered sort of way, he glanced hurriedly around, and then shouted:

“Where’s the commandant? Quick! some one tell me!”

Colonel Greaves chanced to be standing at that moment in converse with a couple of his officers, and upon hearing the cry, he moved toward the stranger with a rapid tread, but with a certain dignified deliberation that always marked his movements. Knowing him to be the man for whom he was searching, the messenger did not wait for him to approach, but fairly bounded toward him, and thrusting a piece of dirty paper, scrawled over with lead pencil, looked imploringly in his face, while he read the words given above.

And as the colonel read, his brows knitted and his face paled. He felt the urgency of that despairing appeal, and he saw the almost utter impossibility of complying with it.

“When was this written?” he asked, of the dust-begrimed courier.

“At daybreak this morning,” was the prompt reply.

“How far away are your friends?”

“Forty miles as the crow flies, and I have never drawn rein since my horse started, till he fell dead just outside the gate.”

“How many men are there in this fix?”

“There were twenty men, and a dozen women and children. When I left, about half that number were alive, and whether any are still living, God only knows, I don’t.”

“I hope it is not as bad as that,” said the colonel, again glancing at the paper, and involuntarily sighing, for despite his schooling upon the frontier, he felt keenly the anguish of this wail, that was borne to him across the sad prairie. “Not as bad as that, I trust; for if they have held out two days, we may hope that they are able to hold out

still longer. But how is it that *you* succeeded in reaching us, when they could not?"

Feeling that some explanation was expected of him, the messenger spoke hurriedly, but as calmly as possible:

"Twenty of us were conveying a party of women and children—the families of merchants and officers at Santa Fe—through the Indian country, on our way to that city, when the Comanches came down on us, in a swarm of hundreds, and finding there was no escaping a fight, we ran our wagons in a circle, shut the women and horses inside, and then it seemed as if hell was let loose upon us. Yelling, shouting, screeching, charging was kept up all that day into the night. We picked off the red devils with every shot, but the more we killed the thicker they came, seeming to spring up from the very ground, until the prairie was covered with them. At night we had a little rest, and we thought perhaps they would draw off and let us alone. Why they didn't make a charge upon our camp that night, I can not tell; but they only sent a few stray shots, more than one of which was fatal, and at daylight the fun began again, and never stopped till the sun went down, when there wasn't much of a pause then. That was yesterday, and we had it all through the night, and since we halted the day before yesterday, there hasn't been a drop of water for horse, man, woman or child, so that you can see what an awful strait they are in."

By this time quite a group had gathered about the messenger, enchained by the thrilling tale he told, the truth of which was so eloquently attested by his manner and appearance.

“But you haven’t told us how *you* got here,” reminded the colonel, as the man paused for a moment. “*You* have succeeded at least in insuring your safety.”

“We made up our minds about midnight last night that something of the kind had to be done, as it was our only hope. Two of our men tried to steal through, crawling on hands and knees, but both were caught within a hundred yards of the camp—one shot dead, and the other so badly tomahawked, that he died within an hour of getting back to us. So I told Shields to let me have his mustang, which is the fleetest creature on the plains, and I would either get through or do as the others did. So, just about daybreak, I crammed that slip of paper in the side of my shoe, stretched out flat on the mustang’s back and give him the word. Away he went like a thunderbolt, with the rifles cracking all about my ears, and the Comanche thundering down upon me like so many bloodhounds. I fell more than one bullet in my legs, and I knew the horse was hurt pretty bad—it didn’t hinder his going, and the noble fellow kept straight along till he brought me here. But you act as if you didn’t know me.”

“Know you?” repeated the amazed colonel. “I never saw you before.”

CHAPTER II.

THE ANSWER.

The powdered, begrimed face was seen to expand into something like a grin, and raising his hand, the courier literally scraped the dust from his cheeks and eyebrows, and then, as he removed his hat, a general exclamation of amazement escaped all.

“Jim Gibbons! is it you?” called out the commandant, as he recognized a man who had been employed at his fort a year before. “I thought your voice had a familiar sound, but then your own mother would not have recognized you.”

“But come,” added Gibbons, moving about uneasily, “we’ll talk over this matter some other time. I’ve brought you the message, colonel,” he added, making a graceful military salute. “I had heard in St. Louis that you had been sent to another command, else I would have known whom to ask for. Now, can you help us or not?”

The officer folded his arms behind his back and walked slowly over the parade-ground, signifying by a nod of his head, that Gibbons should do the same.

“I *must* help you,” he said, in a low voice; “such a call as that can not pass unheeded. But, Jim, you see my fix. We ought to have a full regiment to garrison this fort, and the Government allows me but six hundred. Two hundred of these men are on a scout up toward the mountains, and won’t be in till dark. Do you know there is some reason to fear an attack upon the fort, from a combination

of several tribes under the direction of the infernal Comanche, Swico-Cheque?”

“Why he is at the head of the devils that have our friends walled in. I know him too well, and have seen him a dozen times, circling around on his horse, yelling like a thousand panthers, and tiring about a dozen shots a minute. I have fired at him five or six times, but never grazed him once.”

“Well, I think it is more than likely that we shall have an attack from him. Now, you know something of life on the plains; tell me how many men you need to bring your friends into the fort.”

“We ought to have a hundred, at the least.”

“You ought to have five hundred at the smallest calculation. I tell you the Indians in this part of the country are among the best fighters and hunters in the world, and if I send a hundred men out into the country, where they are sure to come against old Swico and his band, the chances are that they will all be served as were Colonel Fetterman’s men at Fort Phil Kearney, a month or two ago. You know that over a hundred of them went out, and never a one was ever seen alive again.”

“But, if I understand that matter right,” replied Gibbons, who was becoming impatient and uneasy at the delay, “these men were entrapped and massacred; I don’t think there is any likelihood of that in our case. But, colonel, pardon me; I wish to know your decision, either one way or the other, at once. If you conclude that you can not spare a hundred men to go forty miles away to help this party, then let me have a fresh horse. I will return, sail in and go under with the rest.”

And Gibbons attested the earnestness of what he said, by starting to move away; but Colonel Greaves caught his arm.

“Hold on! you shall have the men you need. I have been trying ever since I heard your story to decide whether I ought to risk the safety of a hundred men to save one-tenth that number; but I can’t think. It seems to me that I hear the wailing cry of those women and children coming over the prairie, and if I should turn my back upon them, their voices and moans would follow me ever afterward in my waking and sleeping hours. Yes, Jim, you shall have the hundred men. I will lead them myself, and we will make hot work in that gulch before we get through.”

The colonel, having made his decision, did not hesitate for a moment. Turning sharply upon his heel, he beckoned to the adjutant, and gave him peremptory orders to make ready a hundred men for a scout into the Indian country. They were to be armed with rifle, revolver and cavalry swords, and to be mounted on the best horses at the fort.

As he turned about to say a few words to Gibbons, he saw the tears making furrows down his grimy cheeks. He attempted to speak, but for a few seconds was unable to articulate. Taking the hand of the colonel, he finally said, in a choking voice:

“I thank you, colonel, and God grant that this may not be too late. Oh, if you could have seen those pleading faces of the women, those cries of the helpless children for one swallow of water, the dead bodies of the men, that we had drawn in behind the wagons out of reach of the red-skins, and the screeching devils all around, you would send your whole garrison to their rescue. Where is Lightning Jo?”

“He went out with the scouting party this morning, and that is what caused me to hesitate about sending the company to the help of your friends. I always feel tolerably comfortable when I know that he is at the head of the men.”

While the bustle of hurried preparation was going on within the fort, Gibbons accompanied the colonel to his lodgings, where he washed the dust from his person, partook of water and refreshments and explained more in detail the particulars of the misfortune of his friends. He was equally desirous that the wonderful scout, Lightning Jo, should lead the party, as he was a host of himself, and having lived from earliest childhood in the south-west, he was as thorough an Indian as the great chieftain, Swico-Cheque himself, and the daring Comanches held him in greater terror than any other living personage.

But the case was one that admitted of no delay—even if it was certain that Jo would be in at the end of an hour. Half that time might decide the fate of the little Spartan band struggling so bravely in Dead Man’s Gulch, and the release of the beleaguered ones was now the question above all others.

It required but a very short time for the party to complete their preparations. Out of the seemingly inextricable confusion of stamping horses, and men running hither and thither, all at once appeared full one hundred men, mounted, armed and officered precisely as they had been directed.

An orderly stood holding the horse of Colonel Greaves, until he was ready to mount, while another was at Gibbons’ disposal.

The next moment the two latter had leaped into their saddles, and placing themselves at the head of the cavalcade, rode out of the

stockade upon the open prairie, which had scarcely been done, when a new and most gratifying surprise awaited them. The march was instantly halted, and the face of Colonel Greaves and of Gibbons lit up with pleasure.

CHAPTER III.

LIGHTNING JO.

That which arrested the attention of the company riding out of the stockade of Fort Adams, was the sight of another party of horsemen coming through a range of hills about half a mile distant, one glance only being sufficient to identify them as the scouts already referred to as being under the guidance and leadership of the great western celebrity, Lightning Jo.

“Now, that’s what I call lucky,” exclaimed Colonel Greaves. “Jo is the very man of all others that we need.”

The horsemen rode down the declivity at an easy gallop, and shortly reined up in front of the stockade, with a graceful salute, and an action that indicated that he awaited the commands of his superior officer.

The scouts, or hunters, had turned their time to good account, as was shown by a number of buffalo carcasses, or rather the choice portions of such, supported across the saddles of their animals; the appearance of the beasts, too, indicated that many of them had been subjected to the hardest kind of riding.

A few words explained to Lightning Jo the business about to be undertaken, and he at once assumed his position as leader of the company that had just prepared to start, the colonel withdrawing into the fort again, where it was his manifest duty to remain, while the desperate attempt to relieve the beleaguered party in Dead Man’s Gulch was being made.

The scout did not take a fresh horse, and when pressed to do so, he declared that his mustang was as capable of a fifty mile tramp, as he was upon the morning he started upon the hunt from which he had just returned.

“Come, boys! business is business,” said he, in his crisp, sharp tone, as his steed carried him by one or two bounds to the head of the cavalcade he was to lead. “Come, Gibbons, keep yer place alongside me, and yer can explain as we ride along.”

And as the company of brave men gallop to the southward on their errand of mercy, each man a hero, and all with set teeth and an unalterable determination in their hearts to do all that mortal man could do to save the despairing little band that had sent its wail of anguish across the prairie, we will improve the occasion by glancing at the remarkable man who acted as their leader.

Lightning Jo had gained his appellation from the wonderful quickness of his movements, and his almost miraculous skill as a scout. His celerity of movement was incredible, while his equally astonishing strength excited the wonder of the most famous bordermen of the day. It was a well established fact that Lightning Jo, a couple of years before, at Fort Laramie, had been forced into a personal encounter with a badgering pugilist, who was on his return to the States from California, and who had the reputation of being one of the most scientific hitters that had ever entered the prize ring, and who on the occasion referred to was so completely polished off by Jo, that he lay a month at the fort before he recovered from his injuries.

It was said, and there was every reason to believe it, that he was capable of running miles with the speed of the swiftest mustang of

the prairie; that he had traversed the Llano Estacado back and forth, times without number, on foot, passing through the very heart of the Comanche country, without any attempt to disguise himself, or conceal his identity in any way; and yet there was not a mark upon his person to attest the dangers through which he had passed scathless and unharmed.

His horsemanship was perfect in its way, and no living Comanche—the most wonderful riders on the Western Continent—had been known to exceed, and very few to equal him. For the amusement of those gathered at some of the posts which he had visited, he had ridden his mustang at full speed and bare back, throwing himself from one side to the other, and firing from beneath the neck or belly of the animal, picking up his hat from the earth when galloping, at the same headlong rate, striking a match upon a stone on the ground and carrying the blaze lighted in his hand. He had thrown the lasso, with such skill, as to catch the hoof of the plunging buffalo, and then by a flirt of the rope, flung the kicking brute flat upon his side, as the daring rider thundered past, and slapped his hat in the eyes of the terrified animal. He could fling the coil with the unerring certainty of a rifle shot, and would manipulate the rope into as many fantastical convolutions as a Chinese conjurer.

His prowess with the rifle was equally marked, and the tales of his achievements with his favorite weapon were so incredible in many instances, that we would not be believed were we to repeat them. He carried a long, murderous-looking weapon, the mountings of which were of solid silver, and had been presented to him by one of his many friends, whom he had been the instrument of saving.

At the home of his old mother at Santa Fe—the only living relative he had upon earth—he had rifles, swords, guns and every manner of weapon, of the most costly and valuable nature, that had been given him by grateful friends. His revered parent during his absence was literally overwhelmed with attentions and kindnesses by virtue of her relationship to Lightning Jo, the scout and guide who had proved such a blessing to the settlers of, and travelers through the West.

The hero was about thirty years of age, slim and tall to attenuation, with high cheek-bones, eyes of midnight blackness that snapped fire when he was roused, and long hair, as stiff, wiry and black as the tail of his mustang. His countenance was swarthy, and with a little “touching up” he might have deceived Swico himself into the belief that he was one of his own warriors. This was the more easy as Jo spoke the Comanche tongue with the fluency of a genuine member of that warlike tribe; but he scorned such suggestions when made to him, declaring that he was able to take care of himself anywhere and in any crowd, no matter who were his friends or who were his enemies, an assertion which no one cared to dispute in a practical way.

Looking at his profile as he rode along over the prairie at a sweeping gallop, it would have been seen that his nose was large, thin and sharp, the chin rather prominent, and the lips thin. The mouth was rather large, and the upper lip shaded by a thin, silky mustache of the same jetty hue as his eyes. The rest of his face was totally devoid of beard, except a little furze in front of his ears. He had never used the razor, nor did he expect to do so.

Of course he sat his horse like a centaur, and, as he rode along, those keen, restless eyes of his wandered and roved from side to

side, almost unconsciously on his part, as he was ever on the alert for the first appearance of danger. Such in brief were a few of the noticeable points of the great scout, Lightning Jo, who was a leader of the party of rescue, and who is to play such a prominent part in the thrilling events we are about to narrate.

As he rode beside Gibbons, whose anxiety was of the most intense character, and who could not avoid giving frequent expression to it, the scout at length said:

“Just stop that ’ere fretting of yours, now, Gib; ’cause it don’t pay; don’t you see we’re all stretching out on that ’ere forty miles, just as fast as horse-flesh kin stand it? Wal, that being so, where’s the use of fuming?”

“I know, Jo, but how can a person help it when he knows not whether his friends are dead or alive? There is philosophy in your advice about whining and complaining, and it reminds me of one of the members of the party—a young lady, whose disposition had something heavenly in it.”

“Who was she?” asked the scout, in an indifferent way.

“Her name, I believe, was Manning—Lizzie Manning—”

“What!” exclaimed Lightning Jo, almost bounding from his saddle, “is *she* there, in that infarnal place? How in the name of Heaven did she get there?”

“She was one of the party that left St. Louis, and of course shared our dangers the same as all.”

“The sweetest, purtiest, best little piece of calico that has been heard,” repeated the scout to himself. “God save *her*, for she’s

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