

The Escape

by **Joseph Alexander Altsheler, 1862-1919**

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He paused a moment at the foot of the hill, panting and weak. None of his pursuers had come in sight, and the interval was precious for rest. Yet he did not feel his exhaustion fully, until he leaned his spent and trembling figure against a rock, when every bone and muscle began to ache, and the hot breath, coming in irregular puffs, rasped and burnt like steam drawn through his throat. He strove against the growing weakness, and was sorry that he had paused, merely to give the creeping languor a chance to overwhelm him: yet he lingered, the strained heart and dizzy brain alike crying out against more exertion; then his sight grew dim, the sunlit day suddenly darkened, and he shook in a nervous palpitation as if a chill had seized him. But he was not afraid: he did not feel fear as the ordinary

human type would have felt it; his emotions were physical, not mental, and with dull anger he cursed under his breath the weakness that was conquering him.

Illustration:

Morgan

There had been many hazards in the life of Morgan, but never before had he been pressed so hard. It was a surprise and pursuit by numbers, and now he knew that only kind chance or his fleetness of foot could save him the life that he enjoyed like a strong animal or the primitive man.

He leaned more heavily against the rock and his breath grew a little longer, though the painful opening and shutting of the blood valves was like the thrust of a knife. His clothing was torn into many rags by the briars and bushes through which he had rushed, and red scratches were left by the thorns across his face. One scarlet line led into his mustache, from the black point of which the blood fell slowly, drop by drop, upon his chest.

Illustration:

Jasper

A little strength returned, and with a certain coolness Morgan began to calculate his chances. He decided that they were much against him, but he had no thought save to carry the case to the final issue. He looked up at the tremulous air, the coppery sun, the bleak mountain-side with its alternate rocks and bushes, and then rising, stretched his sore muscles again. As he did so he saw the tops of the bushes on the far side of the brook quivering, and he knew that if he lingered now it would be at the risk of immediate death. He paused no longer, but bending slightly over in the customary attitude of one who runs for life, and drawing his breath in deep gasps, dashed along the mountain-side. A single shout, a long yell, half a cry, half a hunting call, came from the men behind him, and all the blood flew to Morgan's head. He knew that the Jaspers, with whom the Morgans had been so long at feud, would never cease their pursuit, when chance seemingly had delivered to them the best rifleman of their enemies. The opportunity his, he would not have spared one of them, and he did not expect mercy for himself.

He heard another shout behind him, half a cry of triumph, half a hunting call, and his heart swelled again with the sense of shame, felt before, when he was reminded so forcibly that now he was the hunted, and not, as usual, the hunter. He looked back and saw their heads appearing above the bushes, a dozen men, strong, brown, and wild like himself, nothing modern about them save the repeating-rifle of latest pattern which each carried. He perceived clearly that they were gaining upon him. In a few more minutes they would be within range. How he cursed his ill fortune in being surprised without his own rifle, and he felt that perhaps he deserved this mischance for such carelessness!

The men spread out like a fan in order to prevent his turning from a direct course, and, recognizing now the futility of such an attempt by him. Morgan kept straight on, drawing his breath with pain, and staggering often as his feet struck

against a stone. The shouting of his pursuers ceased, and presently he heard a sharp report like the cracking of a heavy whip, which, taken up by the mountain, echoed through every gully and ravine, until it died away under the horizon. There was a faint whistling sound, like the buzz of a bee, past his ear, and Morgan knew that the first bullet had missed him only a few inches.

He resorted to a plan of which he had heard many speak, but which he had never thought himself to use. He began to wheel from right to left and from left to right, following a zigzag line in order to confuse the aim of his pursuers and avoid the many bullets which he knew would follow the first. The rifles cracked rapidly and he heard the whizzing of the lead around him, but he was untouched, and, thankful for his agility and presence of mind, he raced on.

His attention was suddenly drawn by the familiar aspect of the ground, and he remembered now that just beyond the little slope stood the cabin of Aaron Jasper himself, the leader of the Jaspers; his flight was taking him directly towards the home of his chief enemy, but he could not turn aside now, and he plunged on up the slope, three or four rifle bullets singing around and near him, telling him for the twentieth time that it was not well to linger.

He reached the crest of the slope, and there before him in the clearing on the other side stood the log cabin of Aaron Jasper—a little brown, ugly building, with its clapboard roof and shuttered windows, a light coil of smoke rising from the mud chimney.

At the sight of the cabin a fierce joy drove the despair out of Morgan's heart. The door stood wide open, and in a field a woman, who must be Jasper's wife, was working. What a triumph to use Jasper's own house, at the last moment, as a defence against him! He turned his head and sent to his pursuers a cry of defiance, a shout in which he gave them back their own taunts. Then he dashed straight for the open door, with their bullets pattering around him.

Morgan slammed the door and drew into place the heavy bar that fastened it: then he fell upon the floor and drew his breath in gasps as terrible as a sob. The momentary strength poured into his brain by the reaction from death to life was gone, and the exhausted heart contracted more painfully than ever. For a moment he was blind with weakness and lay prone, his limp fingers fluttering like the fins of a dying fish. Then as his breath came back, and his will with it, he struggled to his feet and looked about him. Over the fireplace, on its accustomed hooks, lay the rifle which he expected. He took it down, his malignant joy swelling when he remembered that he was using not only Jasper's own house against him, but a rifle of his, too, with plenty of cartridges to supply it, ready on the mantel. Everything—the house, the rifle, the ammunition—seemed to have been arranged for his benefit, and he was duly and wickedly grateful.

Then he hastened to the single window that the room contained, and, opening the heavy shutter slightly, looked out at his enemies. They had stopped in the edge of a little wood beyond rifle-shot and seemed to be talking. Then he closed the shutter, and, fastening it, looked about him again at the little fortress which had come so opportunely in his way, rejoicing in its strength and its completeness for defence. It was in its construction only an ordinary mountain cabin of stout logs, too thick to be penetrated by any rifle bullet, but the room showed some signs of neatness, though all the articles of furniture were rude and common. He knew

that this household order and cleanliness were due to Aaron Jasper's wife. A sun-bonnet of hers hung in a corner, and some prints from illustrated papers were tacked on the walls.

The house, like most of the mountain cabins, had but the single room, but in one corner a small door led to a place that seemed to Morgan to be an alcove or a large closet. He would examine it soon, but for the present he confined himself to the room. He went to the cupboard and found cold meat and bread, which he ate with an appetite increased by the knowledge that he ate food furnished him by his enemy. Then he drank from the water-pail, and shook himself like a great animal as the strength poured back into all his veins and muscles.

The bar that held the door was strong, but for further precaution he dragged the cupboard against it, and tearing some strips from a quilt, put a double fastening on the window. Then he opened the door of the alcove, pausing until his eyes could penetrate the dusk. As the half darkness thinned and he saw, Morgan moved slightly in surprise. Varying emotions expressed themselves on his face, but presently he shut the door softly and went over to the bed. There he lay down, placing the rifle by his side, and laughed long and with intense enjoyment, a kind of deep, silent laughter, internal, but expressive of the keenest delight.

He rose in a few minutes, and opening the window for the third time, he looked out at his enemies, whom he saw yet under the distant trees. His eyes caught the flutter of a woman's dress, and he supposed that Martha Jasper had joined her husband and his men. If he wanted revenge on her as well as her husband, certainly he could have it. She must be half insane at that moment, and he wondered why she did not cry out and shriek to him for mercy.

He ate a little more of the cold food that he had found in the cupboard, drank some water from the pail, and his nerves felt steadier. He was about to walk to the alcove again, but when halfway stopped quite still, every nerve tingling and the blood leaping in his veins. He heard distinctly a continuous shuttle and rustle like the tread of many feet, and the scrape of an object against the walls. The noise increased. They seemed to be heaping something against the house. Presently he heard a faint crackle, and a belief, incredible at first, formed itself and gained strength in his mind. The crackling increased, submerging other sounds, and he knew that the warning of his fears was true. Jasper and his men had set the house on fire. He was sure of it; he could hear the blaze eating into the wood, and crackling in delight as it leaped from one log to another. He was as helpless as the baby that lay smiling in its sleep in the alcove. Surely it was not Martha Jasper whom he had seen in the fields, and perhaps Aaron Jasper did not know!

Yet of three things there could be no doubt—the house was on fire, he was inside it, and so was the child. If he should open the door and rush out, the men waiting under the trees would fire upon him at once, with an aim too good to miss. His sense of utter helplessness made him cry out, and he threw upon the bed the rifle which now seemed so useless.

The fire was increasing fast, and the rush of the flames made a roar that he heard distinctly. Shreds of smoke, creeping through invisible crevices between the logs, began to enter the room, and once a live spark coming in with the smoke lay for a moment upon the floor, and then died.

A faint cry from the alcove drew Morgan's attention. He opened the door and looked in. The baby, a boy of two years, was sitting up, and gazing at him with wide and frightened eyes. Morgan regarded the boy with a kind of malignant triumph, and found a certain pleasure in seeking a resemblance to Aaron Jasper. But as he looked more closely, he saw only the likeness of the child to his mother. She had been a pretty girl. He had never forgotten that. Morgan became troubled.

The flames reached the roof, he could hear the boards crackling, and smoke and sparks were coming down the chimney. The fright of the child increased, and he cried loudly. The smoke, entering the room gathered in the alcove as if something drew it to that corner. A thrill of sympathy passed through the heart of Morgan. He did not like to see one so small suffer; he had been slightly mistaken in his estimate of himself. He raised the child and took him out of the alcove into an atmosphere which was a little clearer. The boy cried more loudly, the wild figure of a man adding to his fright, but ceased in a few minutes, and began to show a friendliness that embarrassed and offended Morgan. He did not want any child of Aaron Jasper's to be making a fuss over him.

Illustration:
A smoke-filled room

The boy was holding him by the collar in an attitude that was almost an embrace; he pushed off the hands, but the boy seemed not to notice the hostile nature of the act, and put them back; Morgan did not think it worth while to take so much trouble about a small matter, and let the hands remain.

The smoke crept into the child's eyes and mouth and he began to cough. Morgan found a little water in the pail and made him drink it. The heat in the room was growing intense, and Morgan wiped the moisture from his face with his coat sleeves. The little boy had become quite pale and his lips were dry; he did not cry again, but, baby though he was, gazed at Morgan with a look so full of appeal and confidence that every fibre in the wild mountaineer responded. The child must not die; his own life had become a petty thing, and he was ready to sacrifice it for the little form that clung so confidently to him.

He drew his coat over the boy's face and figure, covering him completely, while he held him in place with his left arm. The flames were running across the roof now, and burning boards fell upon the floor. He lifted the bar and threw the door wide open. A blaze of sunlight, cool, glorious, and dazzling, flashed into his face; then he saw a group of men standing under the trees, with rifles in their hands. Claspng the little boy securely in his arms, he ran towards the group, a wild and frightful figure.

Some one levelled a rifle at him, and some one else, who saw the burden in his arms, struck it down. Then he fell fainting at the feet of Aaron Jasper.

But the unhurt boy, pushing aside the coat, looked up and smiled.

