

BROTHERS
at ARMS

Treasure & Treachery in the Amazon

BROTHERS *at* ARMS

JOHN J. HORN



Brothers at Arms
Copyright © 2017 Grace & Truth Books
Third Printing: 2023

All rights reserved. No portion of these materials may be used or reproduce in any form without written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations within articles and reviews.

Published by
Grace & Truth Books
815 Exchange Ave. Ste. 101
Conway, AR 72032
www.graceandtruthbooks.com

Cover Design and Photography by Daniel R. Prislowsky

ISBN: 978-1-930133-46-4

Printed in the United States of America

To my brother by blood, who has
always been there for me.

To my brother by marriage, for the
adventures the future holds.

To my brothers by friendship, for the
many memories shared.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	5
Chapter 3.....	15
Chapter 4.....	21
Chapter 5.....	25
Chapter 6.....	35
Chapter 7.....	41
Chapter 8.....	45
Chapter 9.....	49
Chapter 10.....	53
Chapter 11.....	57
Chapter 12.....	61
Chapter 13.....	65
Chapter 14.....	69

Chapter 15.....	75
Chapter 16.....	81
Chapter 17.....	85
Chapter 18.....	89
Chapter 19.....	95
Chapter 20.....	101
Chapter 21.....	105
Chapter 22.....	109
Chapter 23.....	115
Chapter 24.....	119
Chapter 25.....	123
Chapter 26.....	129
Chapter 27.....	135
Chapter 28.....	139
Chapter 29.....	143
Chapter 30.....	153
Chapter 31.....	157
Chapter 32.....	161
Chapter 33.....	167
Chapter 34.....	173
Chapter 35.....	179
Chapter 36.....	185
Chapter 37.....	191

Chapter 38.....	195
Chapter 39.....	199
Chapter 40.....	209
Chapter 41.....	215
Chapter 42.....	219
Chapter 43.....	223
Chapter 44.....	229
Chapter 45.....	233
Epilogue	239

Chapter 1

I grasped the cold pistol handle and squinted at the target. The little wooden sparrow swung in the wind, a cord looped round its neck and tied to the old oak above. It looked very volatile, dangling there, and very small.

“Do you want first or second shot?” asked my brother, Chester.

“I don’t want any shot at all, Chester. You know how little accustomed I am to firearms.”

Chester chuckled. “Yes, I know, that’s why I loaded for you. But you must learn sometime. What if some gent insults your favorite philosopher? At any rate, I’ll take first shot to show you how it’s done.”

I gladly stepped aside. He looked the sportsman, as he cocked the hammer, and leveled the barrel at that swinging bird, but he was still a boy. Only two days before he had come to me to ask how many eggs were in four dozen.

“Two points for a head shot, one for a body, and none if you miss,” he said.

I knew the shot was coming, but I still jumped at that unnerving crack. The smoke cleared quickly, but the string was empty, and the headless bird lay at the foot of the old door that Chester had propped against the hillside. A ‘bullet-catcher,’ he called the door.

“That would be two points.” Chester grinned at me as he looped the string round a new carving. “Your turn.”

I gulped. The pistol I must use lay on a table, alongside the powder, bullets, oily rags, and other assorted paraphernalia.

The moment I leveled the pistol it became illogically heavy. The barrel simply would not point straight, and the moment I thought I had it reasonably centered, that ridiculous bird would swing away. I thought about measuring the trajectory, but the effect would have been nullified by the target's incalculable swinging.

A pebble was under my right boot. I nudged it away and planted both feet firmly in the wet grass.

I closed my eyes, tried to close my eardrums, and pulled the trigger.

Crack. The acrid sulfur smell attacked my nostrils.

Chester coughed. "That would be none."

I opened my eyes. The sparrow was still swinging.

Chester strode to the door and scraped his knife-blade over the scarred planks. "Lawrence, these are all old. You missed the whole double-door!"

I pressed the pistol back into its case and fished for my handkerchief. "I suppose there is a reason I don't come out here very often."

Chester snorted. "There isn't a reason for that, that *is* a reason, the reason you can't hit a double-door at ten paces! Why, you couldn't have done worse if you had closed your eyes and fired blind!"

I stiffened. "Well, I suppose you might say that in a way, I did." I found the handkerchief in my waist-coat pocket and used it to wipe stray powder grains from my hands.

"What are you talking about?" Chester asked.

"I had my eyes closed."

Chester's expression resembled that of a fellow who is having an elephant stuffed down his throat.

"But—but—you can't do that!" he spluttered.

"I just did."

"But—but—you can't!"

"Chester, I both can, and did."

He scowled at me as he stroked his pistol with an oil-blotched rag.

Our home's chimney stacks poked over the gentle hill behind us, beckoning to my cozy, mahogany-paneled room and the open book laying on my desk. Chester was still scowling and muttering. Perhaps I could spare a moment to give him a lesson.

"Look here, Chester."

He scowled.

"Now, in the eighteen years of my life, I can remember firing a pistol no more than five times. You shoot every day. If you want a comparable competition, I will be happy to take any test you like in mathematics, history, philosophy, theology, or science."

"You can take the test for both of us." Chester dropped the pistol into its case and slammed the cover. "You go back inside and stick with your school books, and become some stuck-up philosopher professor. I intend to have adventures, not walk around in black robes and wish for the days of Socrates."

The world has greatly advanced since the days of Socrates, but I didn't bother to say so. It was the same old argument, and Chester showed no signs of succumbing to logic. Still, one might hope.

"Good pistol-shooting and fencing won't make you a famous man, Chester. Look at Alfred the Great, or even Alexander, who you like so much—he had an adventurous life, but he also knew geography, mathematics, necessary sciences—"

"Oh, bother. I don't want to be Alexander the Great. I want to be Chester the Great." He leaned on the pistol case and stared at me, eyes wide. "You be patient, Law, old boy, and perhaps, when I've tired of astounding the world and exploring new places, I'll send you some real birds to shoot at from Africa."

"You?" I shook my head. "Stop deluding yourself. You have no self-control, no concept of the deeper things of life, and no interest in aught but exercise and foolish novels."

"No self-control?" He clenched his fists and slammed the table. "How dare you?"

His outburst surprised me. He rarely paid attention to my words.

Chester stepped closer. "Do you think rising at six each morning to ride, and

standing still for hours to perfect my shooting stance, and fencing till I vomit, requires no self-control?”

He swept up the pistol-case and tucked it beneath his arm. “Can’t make a name for myself, eh? You wait, Professor. Some day you’ll hear the name Stoning and know that you’ve something to live up to.”

“Indeed?” I yawned. “Do let me know when the day arrives.”

“It’ll be sooner than you think.”

Chapter 2

The next day, I stood in the hall outside my father's study. I summoned my courage, eased the door open, and peered inside. The late-afternoon sunlight penetrated the window in the wall on the right and lit the room in a dying glow. Slanting columns of dust particles floated in the sunbeams. My father sat at the far end of the table in his usual red velvet chair, pen in hand. Jagged stacks of books coated the polished mahogany, which flashed little stabs of light at me.

I cleared my throat. "I'm afraid that I have some bad news for you, Father."

I stepped to the near end of his table and clasped my right wrist with my left hand.

He blinked at me. "Oh—Lawrence—how are you? Please, shut the door, it disturbs my concentration. Much better. What were you saying?"

"I have bad news, Father."

"Bad news?" He set down the pen and folded his hands. The room smelled of sherry and sweet ink. "A philosopher must be prepared for any possibility, whether he finds it to be advantageous or disadvantageous to himself. What is your news?"

"Chester has run away."

"Run away? Do you mean that he is exercising, or do you mean that he has left this place of abode with no intention of returning?"

“The latter, sir.”

My father raked thick fingers through his oily hair and wiped an inky sleeve over his forehead. “Hmm. I hadn’t thought much of it before, but now that you mention it, he has been somewhat restless recently.”

He pulled a five-inch stack of papers out of the top right-hand drawer and scratched a line of words on the top sheet. He mumbled something, then began the next line.

I coughed.

He glanced up. “Ah, you’re still here. What reasons did Chester give for departing?”

“He didn’t honor me with his confidence, sir, but if I may conjecture, I expect it has something to do with last night’s altercation.”

“Altercation? Oh, that.” He frowned at me. “Lawrence, I have told you that altercations are unworthy of philosophers.”

“You have, Father, but as Chester is not a philosopher, I believe that he is quite capable of altercations.”

His wrinkled forehead contracted farther. “Chester is a hot-headed, impetuous boy.” He thrust a pinch of snuff into his left nostril and sneezed. “He kept asking me about adventure, or some such nonsense, and he had the impudence to scorn the immortal phrase of Socrates—‘I know that I am intelligent, because I know that I know nothing,’ when I offered it during our philosophical disagreement.”

I could easily imagine Chester’s reaction to the oft-repeated quote.

“Most likely, Father. At any rate, he left on the early coach this morning for Liverpool. He placed a note on his dresser, stating that he intends to join the British Auxiliary Legion, which is forming there.”

“A soldier!” My father struggled to his feet. “War!” He reached stiffly for his glass of sherry and drained half of it. The glass shook as he put it down.

“A soldier. But—that cannot be. He! A soldier.” He eased back into his chair and looked at me over the book-stacks. “Lawrence—he can’t be a soldier.”

I shook my head. “Not to dispute the point, Father, but I believe that he can. He’s eighteen, old enough to join, and he shoots, and fences, and boxes all day, so he should be physically acceptable.”

My father's hands played with his books mechanically, but his eyes were looking at me—or rather through me. I switched to clasping my left wrist. “Father?”

His eyes focused. “Oh, yes, Lawrence, you're here. You said—you said that Chester is a soldier?”

I narrowed my eyebrows. Surely, this wasn't my philosophic father, always calm, never ruffled. “Yes, sir, he intends to be one.”

“Oh, but you must stop him.”

“Sir?”

He waved his arms. “You must stop him! He cannot be a soldier. The army has destroyed our family.”

I frowned. “But—no one from our family has been in the army.”

“No, no, my brother is in the army. He could have done so much with his life, and instead he joined the army. He was a corporal—he still is, I'm told, in Siberia.”

“Oh. I didn't know.”

“And my sister. She married a soldier, a colonel.” He sighed. “She died, and I'm told that her husband went mad. He was a respected man, and grew up with our family.”

“I'm sorry, Father. You never told me this.”

He shook himself, as if waking from a dream. “Have I not? No, I suppose not. Little human tragedies should not affect a philosopher.”

He clasped his hands behind his back and paced the far end of the study. “Socrates said that ‘wars and revolutions, and battles, are due simply and solely to the body and its desires.’ Socrates was a great man. No good can come from fighting.”

“Then why did you let Chester fence, and box, and shoot?” I asked.

“Because he wanted to, of course. It is all for the experiment, my son, a generational experiment.” That scientific gleam entered his eye. He fingered the stack of papers. “I have told you many times, Lawrence, that you are an experiment. So was I. I was raised strictly, and my brother William was allowed to do as he liked. What he liked was to become a soldier, and he has since done nothing for the good of mankind.”

I nodded. "Yes, sir. That's why you've raised me strictly, and let Chester do as he liked. But, is not letting Chester go to war a part of the experiment?"

He fumbled with his cigar-box, lit a cigar, puffed, and tossed it absentmindedly onto the carpet. I extinguished the burning end with my boot. He would probably burn the house down some day.

"No." His voice was firm. "He must not follow his uncle's path. You must bring him back."

My spirits fell. "Bring him back, sir?"

"Yes, bring him back. Lawrence, this will be an excellent occasion to prove your responsibility and intelligence. I commission you to follow your brother and bring him home safely. Do not return without him, and ensure that he comes to no harm. If you should experience any troubles, write me immediately, so that I may make record of them."

I unclasped my wrist. "Yes, sir."

The usual dreamy, absent look slowly settled back on his face, and he waved me away.

"Go now, Lawrence, and have the butler bring in my lunch."

"I'm sorry, sir, but it's supper-time."

"Is it? Very well, then have him bring supper."

I hesitated. "Don't you think, Father, that it might be beneficial to let him seek adventure, and realize the realities of the world?"

"The butler?"

"No, Chester."

"Oh, Chester again." He shook his head decidedly. "No, I don't. He shall not be a soldier."

I retired. I expected to be sent after Chester, but it was very inconvenient, as I was deeply engaged with Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Chester always picked the worst times for his adventures.

I found our servant, James, and ordered him to saddle my horse.

"Yes, sir." He bowed respectfully. "Do you wish me to notify your mother?"

"Where is she?"

“Visiting the new occupants of the Halmond estate, sir.”

“No, there’s no need. Even if she returns before us, I doubt that she will notice our absence.”

We waited on the highroad for the Liverpool coach until twilight. A gusty wind blew, flecked with droplets of rain. Thunder rumbled in distant counties. Finally, the rumbling was varied by rattling, and the coach appeared.

James took my horse’s bridle, and I paid the fare and entered the coach. Sweat and tobacco fumes thickened the air, sharpened by a tangy odor. A rotund gentleman in a tight waistcoat sat with his back to the rear wall, clutching a leather bag between ample calves. He looked to be a professed patron of the pastry maker’s, and as there was hardly room to spare on his seat, I chose the opposite bench, half-occupied by a lean foreigner.

“Be careful for the peels.” The foreigner nodded at a pile of orange-peels on the vacant seat.

I brushed the soggy mess off and turned to sit down. The rotund man stared at me through a thick monocle.

His voice was high. “You’re not a robber, are you?”

I paused, half-sitting, half-standing. “Excuse me, sir?”

Crack. The driver’s whip cut through a thunder-roll and the floor slipped away from my feet. I clutched empty air and bowled head first into the fat gentleman’s stomach.

“Help! Help!” he squeaked, clawing my face. “Robber! He’s got me!”

The lean man snorted, and I hastily clambered back to my seat.

“Don’t touch me!” the fat fellow cried. “I’m armed!” He thrust his arm into his bag and struggled with some lengthy object inside, while his monocle bounced around in his eye-socket but somehow managed to stay attached. After a few minutes of rooting, his arm emerged holding a rusty pistol and presented it at my face, two of his fleshy fingers trembling around the trigger.

The lean man snatched it away.

“What are you doing, fool?” His voice was shrill.

The pastry-patron stuffed himself into the corner and pointed at me. “He assaulted me! Did you not see his brutal assault?”

“The carriage jolted, and he was thrown onto you. I feel very much like myself throwing on you!”

The fat gentleman blinked. “Doing what?”

“Oh, I apologize.” The foreigner laid the pistol down and performed a sitting bow. “I sometimes reverse my words. My meaning was that I would not mind to throw myself on you.”

The fat gentleman coughed. “I—I’m sorry, but I am rather nervous. You see, I’ve been reading of the highway-men and their methods of robbing unsuspecting victims.” He tried to smile at me. “Please accept my apologies, young man.”

I was heartily tired of the whole affair, so I accepted his apology and arranged the lumpy cushions as best I could. The headrest was slick with a generation of hair oil.

The next hours passed quietly inside, though the thunderstorm quickly broke and the elements raged outside. Lightning flashes sporadically lit the interior, usually showing the fat gentleman occupying himself with a black flask.

The foreigner offered me an orange.

“Thank you.” I peeled it and bit into the juicy fruit. “Very fresh. Pardon me for being inquisitive, but I interpret your accent as originating in Spain. What part of the country are you from?”

He smiled. “Basque country. I am an archeologist, I travel the world, but Spain is my home. Men call me Sabas, because I love old things.”

Another lightning-flash lighted his face. It was sharp, centered by a somewhat beakish nose, and his cheeks looked pinched and unhealthy, but he appeared to be in good spirits. I judged that he was between thirty and thirty-five, though his back hunched like an older man’s.

“Your language is beautiful, and in my opinion is superior even to French and Italian. It is quick and passionate, but also regal.”

“You know my language?” Sabas raised his eyebrows, showing a pair of piercing dark eyes. “You surprise me. What is your name?”

“Lawrence Stoning.”

“Ah! This gentleman was just speaking of that name.”

The fat gentleman rapidly tucked the bottle behind his back. “Oh, yes, why,

I was but repeating the common talk.” He coughed. “Your—your father has *quite* a name, young man.”

His words had a deeper meaning, but I pretended not to notice. “I suppose you mean as a philosopher?” I asked coldly.

“Oh, yes, of course, and, as a man with—er, unique tastes.” He tapped his nose.

I frowned. “I doubt my father would wish for his tastes to be discussed in such a public manner.”

“Oh,” Sabas interrupted, “I am sure he meant no harm, he simply was making—what is the word? conversation, on this lonely road.”

“Lonely?” Fabric rustled, as if the fat gentleman was scooting on his seat. “Yes, it is lonely. And dark.” He thrust his head out the window and tried to screw his neck upwards, but his thick jowls hindered the move. “Do you think the guard above is trustworthy?” he asked, pulling his head back in.

Sabas shrugged his bony shoulders. “How should I know? Do you have money with you, that you are afraid so—so afraid, I mean?”

“Money?” I couldn’t see his face, but his voice sounded pale. “No, no, I have no particular money with me, why do you ask?”

Sabas shrugged again. “Oh, no reason, but you seem to be so fearful of robbers.”

The gentleman coughed and laid a pudgy hand on my knee. “If—if there were to be any—any problems, young sir, would you be capable of defending this coach with a pistol?”

I thought about the shooting match. “I can pull a trigger, but I have very little experience with firearms.”

“Then—you don’t have a pistol in your bag?”

“No. Much better, I have Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.” I stroked the book’s smooth leather binding. I should be at my desk, annotating the volume.

Someone shouted outside the window. There was a sharp crack and a flash of light, less bright than lightning, and something heavy thudded on the roof. I groped for the window sash, but a horse neighed and the carriage scraped to a halt, catapulting the fat gentleman into me. Something wet poured down my face. *Blood?*

I licked the corner of my lip. *Rum*. That explained the black flask.

The door flung open and a lantern thrust inside.

“Oot!” barked a rough voice. The light blinded me for a moment, but I caught glimpses of a fellow with a dirty rag tied beneath his eyes. “Oot o’ the coach, all of ye, if ye want to see the light o’ day again!”

A pincer-like hand gripped my forearm and wrenched me out the door. I threw up my left arm to protect my head and plowed thick mud. Slime filled my nostrils. A boot struck my side and I rolled over, pain shooting through my ribs. I was in shock. *God, help me!*

I raised my face from the mud and looked desperately around for a way of escape. All was black save for the lantern’s flickering circle of light.

Sabas stepped out calmly, but the fat gentleman blubbered over his bag and stuffed himself into the coach’s farthest corner. Our driver, pale and trembling, leaned against the coach with another masked man standing next to him, pistol in hand. A groan from the roof explained the first shot, and the guard’s absence.

“Git oot!” shouted the first robber. The fat gentleman whimpered. The robber leaned inside and stuck his pistol barrel an inch from his victim’s nose. “Ye know what it’s loike to ‘ave ‘ot lead rip through ye skin?” The fat gentleman clutched his bag and cowered deeper into the corner. “Ye’re about to if ye don’t git oot right now!”

The fat gentleman sniffled and crawled toward the door. With a brutal laugh, the robber grasped his collar and heaved him into the mud.

“I says, Bill, slim pickin’s tonight,” the second robber growled as he peered into the empty coach.

“No names, ye fool.” The first ruffian scowled at me and jerked his thumb up. I struggled to my feet, grasping my side to subdue the fire within.

The robber grinned at our fat friend and pulled him up. “This gent ain’t slim. Drop the bag, guv’nor.”

“No—no—no! This is a dream! Robberies don’t happen anymore!”

“Don’t they, now?” The other ruffian laughed. “Then this niver happened neither. Drop the bag.” He grabbed a corner of the satchel and tore it from the gentleman’s hands. A stream of guineas splatted in the mud.

“That’s more like it!” The first robber scooped them up, his fingers trembling with eagerness. “Check the next ’un.”

Sabas glared at them. “*Esto es una indignidad!*” he said angrily, arching his back to his full height.

“I says, Bill, he’s a foreigner.” The robber grabbed Sabas’s watch chain and swung it beneath the lantern until the light sparkled on the polished gold.

“I said no names, fool. Check his pockets. Gold is gold, foreign or no.”

Sabas spouted a string of Spanish protestations, but the robbers paid no heed. I ground my canine teeth and prepared for the coming indignity. *Wait! What’s that Sabas is saying?* He wasn’t simply arguing with the robbers, he was talking to me!

“*Derribe al hombre.*” Brilliant! He was telling me to knock down the robber closest to me. I cautiously swiveled my head. Both robbers were focused on Sabas. I looked at him, and he returned my gaze, then shut his eyes.

What should I do? If I remained still, they would probably rob me and let me go in peace. If I fought back—*where’s Chester the one time he would be helpful?* I sucked a mouthful of air to soothe my aching ribs. I wanted to strike the villain, but something kept me from doing it. My heart was hammering. A deeper fear grasped me. Was I a coward?

They finished rifling Sabas. Hot vapor, almost tears, clouded my vision. I felt so impotent. What to do? The robber next to me turned. *I mustn’t be a coward.* I squeezed my eyelids shut and tried to lash out with my right arm, but my blood seemed to freeze, and I toppled into him instead with my arms round his neck. We fell.

Crack. Lightning and a pistol flashed together. The robber cursed and dug his elbow into my stomach. My ribs contracted, fighting for air, and he wrenched free from my grasp. A moment later he collapsed onto me, this time without a quiver. Sabas grabbed my hand and pulled me up.

“You think quick, boy, but you fight much more slow. I said knock, not grab. Next time, hit your man.” He flashed a smile at me and wiped his muddy hands on the robber’s trousers.

I shook my whirling head. “I—I suppose I’m not much accustomed to knocking men down. Thank you for rescuing me.”

Raindrops dripped down my nose. My coat was filthy, wet with mud and falling rain. Somehow, it all seemed far away, a slight inconvenience, compared to what I had just survived.

“How were you so calm?” I asked.

Sabas smiled again. “I am from Spain. Many are the robbers there. This was a practice for good—good practice, I mean, for I am traveling home now. Perhaps I will meet more robbers soon?”

The driver was already petting and soothing his horses, and our fat friend had crawled back into the coach with his torn satchel clutched to his stomach. The first robber lay in the road, blood oozing from a hole in his forehead.

My stomach churned. “Was it really necessary to kill the fellow? Couldn’t you have simply disabled him?”

Sabas shrugged. “What is one more dead robber?”

The dirty rag had fallen from the man’s face. He was young, clean-shaven, with wisps of blond hair curling out beneath his cap. I shuddered.

“Once again, thank you. If I may return the favor at any time, it will be my pleasure.”

“Thank you, but I think that cannot be. I have a long job in Spain. Unless you would like to come there, I do not think I can use you.”

“Then I’m afraid that you won’t be able to use me. I’m searching for a prodigal, and the moment I return him, I must make up for lost time with my books.”