

THE JAMAICA EARTHQUAKE.

The 14th of January, 1907, will long remain a sad retrospect in the annals of this island. The present generation can never forget it, and those which immediately follow will have it related to them with all its horror and heartrending details. It is, perhaps, better that I should write my experiences and impressions after some short lapse of time, for one's nerves have somewhat recovered and rendered it less difficult to calmly recount the many scenes of that awful tragedy.

It was one of those sunny and cheerful afternoons so characteristic of tropical life, and I was engaged in my official duties in the Colonial Treasury. The city was full of visitors from both England and America, including several Members of the English Parliament and nobility, and everything seemed to point to a great advancement of our material prosperity, when suddenly, without warning of any kind, I heard a terrific crashing of timber and the dull thud of heavy brickwork. I ran into the street for safety, for I was in an old wooden building said to have been erected by the South Sea Company as an office and storehouse. This building, however, although having been officially pronounced unsafe for some time prior to the earthquake, now remains the only one intact in the business portion of the city, to give the lie to its detractors, and to be an object lesson to the local builders.

In my flight I could, with difficulty, keep on my feet, owing to the undulations, and on reaching the street I was stopped by a thick and impenetrable pall of dust. I stood in a small space, not knowing what fate awaited me, and, as I attempted to move, I ran into fallen walls, and again up against a horse which had broken loose from a van, the animal was trembling with fear, but was held at bay by the blinding dust. I waited in this position for some rift in the cloud, frightened and panting and choking with dust, without hat or jacket, I made every attempt to escape from it all, for I felt that the very ground under me was not safe as the tremors and shocks still continued, and it seemed to me that the complete destruction of all human life was intended. There

were many dead and dying round me, but the impulse of self-preservation was so strong that I did not hear their groans or cries, or cannot remember that I heard them. Soon the slight breeze cleared the dust and showed a gleam of light, I then realized that this old and despised building had preserved my life, and, scrambling over the wreckage, ran for home to see if my wife and children were safe, for I feared that they were in the city, and I almost gave up all hope of finding them alive. All traffic was suspended, and it was an anxious journey for over a mile. I was not alone in my flight for there were streaming crowds, all dust-begrimed, the white faces blackened beyond recognition with the blood from their wounds coursing down. All were dazed and silent, and friend looked at friend without a remark or a salutation, the scene was too appalling and the occasion too awe-inspiring for speech. On my way home I came upon a poor native boy who was pinned beneath a building, with both legs broken, he cried for help and I struggled, single-handed, until I obtained assistance, and at last released him, but he lay there in agony, and I have often hoped since that he was rescued from the approaching fires.

On my way home the sight of the dead and the mingled groans of the dying, with the shrieks of the wounded as they lay under the wrecked houses, made my heart sick and faint, and it was only the thought of my own dear ones at home and their possible sufferings that gave me false strength to struggle on. On reaching home I found that my wife and children were safe but had passed through an anxious time awaiting my arrival. They had no injuries, as my house had, by some wonderful chance been preserved, and is to-day one of the very few which have escaped substantial damage. My younger boy of nine who had been playing in the garden had been thrown violently on the ground so great was the movement of the earth, and was consequently very nervous. Although out of the city they experienced to a lesser degree the same crashing sound of the falling houses in the neighbourhood—and as there was no dust—the added distress of seeing them fall. In fleeing from the city I left behind me a state of things which has yet to be described and which will form the saddest chapter in this story. The fact of reaching my home and finding my immediate family preserved created a short respite, but even here I was surrounded by upsetting occurrences,

for the military hospital at Up Park Camp, which is quite near, was destroyed and was on fire, and the account of the dead and injured which soon reached us, and the dread of the spread of the fire kept up our misery. During this time the fires in Kingston rapidly increased, and as darkness wore on gave to the night a hideous glare; the fire at the hospital, however, soon subsided. At this time my lawn was converted into a camp of refugees composed of relatives and friends whose homes had been destroyed.

The shocks of earthquake continued, and no one would approach a house, all feeling that outside under the canopy of heaven, was the safest place; consequently, all spent that night in chairs watching the city burning and picturing the awful scenes being enacted there. One lady and her daughters waited for tidings of the head of the family, but as night wore on it was only too evident that he had perished, and so it was—it was too sad—home and husband gone. That night was spent in watching, and I may say, waiting for our doom. Kingston was burning; the earth was in a state of unrest; everything in nature seemed in an angry mood; the very stars above us as we sat with sleepless eyes upturned to the heavens, seemed to threaten us in their very brightness, and we felt like poor, helpless creatures awaiting an unknown fate. It was nerve-racking to say the least of it, but morning came at last and removed the horrors of the night.

The sun rose on the surrounding city and somewhat lessened our gloom, but there were more nights to come, and each succeeding sunset brought its own misery. With a people so overwrought it is easily understood how a sudden panic may arise, and I will here relate an incident which apparently absurd, threw us on the second night after the earthquake into a still more disturbed state of mind:—We had arranged our chairs and roughly improvised shelters for the night, when we heard the sound of hundreds of feet tramping along the roads leading to the hills. On enquiry I was told that the Governor of the Colony had sent a message round to the effect that a tidal wave was expected, and that all persons must leave the city and places near the coast and get as far inland as possible. No one stopped to reflect, and come to the reasonable conclusion that a tidal wave would not occur twenty-seven hours after an earthquake, or that it could not do any damage to

our shores which were protected by a land-locked harbour ; but they were prepared to believe anything, and an endless stream of humanity consisting of the old, the young, the sick, and the feeble of all ranks of life was making its way to the hills or higher lands. The city and suburbs were emptied, and there must have been great suffering from exposure that night. It passed however, without incident, and many returned next morning to their homes, but it was a cruelly false rumour, and no one will ever know the author of it. It added to the awfulness of the night, and every sound that was heard from the refugee camp at the Race Course near by, where thousands were singing and praying, created the strong conviction that the tidal wave was approaching and had partly engulfed the town. In every sad story there is a comic element, and it brings a welcome smile to one's countenance to think of the awful meaning which was given to the very crowing of the cocks in the country round about which was taken in all seriousness to be the human cries of distress at the approaching sea, and also to the usual and normal rush of water in the culvert which supplies the city, and which, in the still early hours of that dreadful morning played upon the imagination with the resultant belief that the very waves were at our feet. This closed an incident which was amongst not the least of our miseries in those awful hours which followed the earthquake. Although our house was habitable we could not face it, for the shocks continued with alarming frequency, and it had in its construction those awful bricks which had been the cause of all the sorrow and suffering in the city. And the very thought of being in close proximity to them was terrifying, I, therefore, erected a rude wooden hut in which I and my family slept, or tried to sleep for three weeks, with a loaded rifle near me as a means of defence against possible attack from the dangerous criminals, and still more dangerous lunatics, who had escaped from their shattered cells.

The sight of the burnt city, with its partly cremated dead, now awaited me. Those whose duty compelled them to face all danger, such as the police and firemen, assisted by a noble band of citizens, were on the spot immediately after the earthquake, and can best describe the piteous appeals for succour from these poor creatures who were imprisoned beneath the ruins, and who knew that the flames were

fast approaching. Many a heart-rending farewell was said as the poor souls saw that all human effort was in vain, and that they must perish by that most excruciating form of death. I had several valued friends whose last moments were subjected to such torture, but it will ever be a satisfaction to me that I did not witness it, and I try to forget what has been told me.

As soon as the fires had ceased to rage and the cordon of military and police had somewhat relaxed their vigilance I walked through the burnt city. The work of clearing the streets and removing the dead was being carried out, many were charred beyond recognition, the whites being distinguished from the blacks by an occasional tuft of straight hair ; other bodies that were covered by many feet of bricks were only baked, and identification was not difficult. In cases where removal was impossible, they were burnt on the spot with the horses and mules, but the others were sent off in carts to the cemetery without any distinction as to class. In this work of urgency the rich and poor shared alike, and in their last resting place we are reminded of the Christian teaching of the equality of souls. To witness all this, and to see the mortal remains of men—proud of riches, proud of success, proud of display, being carried to their graves unnoticed and unwept, was a striking instance of the vanity of life.

The Marines from the American Squadron gave valuable help in the work above described and in removing dangerous walls. These men were doing good work and we all felt grateful to them, and for the part they took also in quelling a threatened mutiny among the convicts in the General Penitentiary where four dangerous criminals had already escaped through a breach in the wall. Without referring to the international issues of this incident, I am compelled to say as a member of a terrified community, that the presence of these powerful ships in our harbour had a good, moral effect, and did much to calm the fears of the people.

It may be interesting to those who have the good fortune to be unacquainted with earthquakes, if I here describe what appeared to me to be the peculiar movements of the earth with their effect on the buildings. The first experience was a shock or blow, then a pause for a second or two, then the terrific shake accompanied by an upheaval. The earth-

quake took the form of a great wave passing rapidly over the city—the buildings falling in quick succession like a pack of cards, or with the rapid sequence of volley firing. The destruction to property has been great and our death roll heavy, perhaps the heaviest of all the recent great earthquakes; but whilst profiting by the lesson in rebuilding our city and our houses, we must try to forget that the very earth on which we live and move is unstable. It is a terrible thought, and I only hope that those happy dwellers in the north will never have their lovely homes and dear ones laid low by such subtle and fitful forces of nature.

E. W. A.
