

CAPTAIN TOM.

A NOVEL.

BY ST. GEORGE RATHBURN.

Author of 'Doctor Jack,' 'Doctor Jack's Wife,' etc.

CHAPTER I.

HOW THE SHELLS FALL IN THE QUARTIER LATIN.

At exactly one o'clock on the morning of the ninth of January, 1871, a great shell hurled from the Prussian stronghold at Chatillon drope upon the roof of a house in the Quartier Latin in doomed Paris. A mournful, rushing sound is instantly followed by a ripping and tearing, in a second by a muffled explosion, then comes a dreadful silence.

In a corner of the upper room a man fully dressed has been sleeping on a cot. The tremendous shock arouses him; he flings back the covers and sits up, looking around with a coolness that is amazing. Darkness everywhere save above, where a ragged hole in the roof marks the route taken by the iron intruder. The man gives a whistle to indicate his surprise.

'A close shave, by Jove! That was meant for me. Confound those Prussian gunners, to break my rest in this way. Ugh! that is a cold wind coming in through the new entrance. It is impossible to sleep longer. Perhaps I may find something to interest me outside.'

Listening, strange sounds come to his ears. The French forts answer the Prussian guns. Mont Valerien is aflame, and the thunder of artillery makes the very earth tremble. Besides there is heard the weird shriek of passing shells, their awful bursting, with perhaps the falling of innumerable bricks or stones.

Astonishing as it may seem, this man takes a match and lights a candle with a hand that never so much as trembles. Surely he must be made of ice, or have nerves of steel, to show so little emotion during such a tumult.

Shielding the flame as much as possible from the current of air that rushes in through the rent in the roof, he surveys the desolate scene. The rafters hang downward, plaster lies broadcast over the door, which in turn is torn and wrecked where the iron sphere passed downward.

A fine dust fills the air; the house would perhaps fall only for the support given on either side. As it is, the building is ruined.

While the cool inmate of the upper floor thus surveys the wreck of his quarters, the light falls upon his own face and figure. It reveals a tall, well-knit form, and an American countenance, more remarkable on account of its firmness than because of any claims to manly beauty, although Captain Tom Pilgrim has never been accounted a homely man.

Satisfied that his den is no longer habitable after this remorseless visitor from the Prussian guns at Chatillon has ploughed a passage through it, the American dons an outer coat, together with a felt hat, and picking up a few little articles, such as a revolver, etc., walks toward the staircase.

He remembers for the first time that there are others below, and wonders whether the iron monster has done more than bring damage upon the property.

On the stairs he meets Monsieur Blanc, his host, a small but voluble Frenchman, who denounces the Prussians for ruining him, and expresses gratitude that 'monsieur le capitaine' is safe, all in one breath.

Everywhere is seen wreck and ruin, for the shell seems to have dropped as perpendicularly as though coming from the clouds.

Even the door is out of plumb, and only by a muscular effort does the American tear it open.

He passes out upon the streets. The Quartier Latin is receiving an undue proportion of the enemy's projectiles, and on this night in particular the citizens are fully aroused to a realisation of their perilous situation.

Until recently the Parisians have laughed at the siege—they saw so little of its horrors as the battles have been fought at a distance—and the official reports published each day predicted a Prussian retreat immediately.

Now the bombardment was begun, and houses, bridges, and churches lie in ruins. Starvation is not the only foe that threatens. There is a terrible death rattling in the air, accompanying each hurrying bomb. The humour of the populace has changed, and actual fear is seen upon many a face.

The streets are not crowded, but here and there stand squads of men and women, discussing the last terrible phase of the siege, barring this way and that to note

the devastation caused by a bursting shell—perhaps to collect relics at the same time, for their fear has not entirely overcome their curiosity.

Lights are seen; for the great city is not yet reduced to darkness. Fires burn in three distinct quarters, but a herder caused by bursting bombs or through the carelessness of pillaging vandals, it is impossible to tell.

Captain Tom saunters along, taking in the strange sights to be met with on this night of the hottest bombardment yet experienced, and keeping a watchful eye for friends, of whom he has a number in the beleaguered city.

Several cabs rattle along the paved streets. Each bears the significant red cross, and, no doubt, contains a wounded man from the front—an officer of rank,

perhaps—whose position entitles him to a bed in the Necker Hospital on the Rue de Sevres, though from the reckless manner in which the shells descended it would probably be safer to have kept the wounded leaders in the forts outside the city.

Here and there are men hastening to give their assistance to the wounded, each under the protection of the red cross.

The scene is full of excitement. He is a house in ruins, just beyond a shell tears a gaping hole in the street, sending the debris all around in confusion, and killing several citizens who chance to be near. Through a side street that debouches upon a boulevard a company of mobiles march amid the cheers of the Parisian crowd, which is nothing if not demonstrative.

The glare of a bonfire lights up the scene, and glints upon the polished chaises.

ports carried upon the shoulders of the soldiers from the provinces. All around are evidences that the war has come home to you, thoughtless Paris, and yet her citizens, he l started as they are, never dream but that it is a hideous nightmare, and a mere fine morning the enemy will awaken to find him—if in a trap—when the army of rescue that is always coming, but never arrives, reaches the scene.

Then sauntering along, the American finds that he has reached the Boulevard des Capucines. Now by towers the hotel generally sought, after the Louvre, by foreigners, and known as the Hotel de la Paix.

Even in this quarter Paris is alarmed. The Prussian gun-never capable of reaching every point in the city, and at any hour the deluge of iron may be hurled upon this section. Indeed, one shell has already shattered a house not a stone's throw from the courtyard.

Captain Tom has had an object in heading for the boulevard. His looks into each face he meets, as though under the belief that here he will find the one he seeks. Sometimes it is a well dressed citizen, again a man of the loureese stamp, wearing a blouse and Tyroese hat, or perhaps a military individual, strutting along with the importance that only a French petty officer can assume.

Who is thus engaged he reaches the hotel, and a hand presses his arm, while a voice says:

'What does this mean, Captain Tom. You declared you were bound to sleep the night through in spite of the bloody racket, and yet here I find you on the boulevard.'

The speaker is, like himself, a foreigner, but his voice and language bespeak the Briton. Others besides the daring American have allowed themselves to be shut up in Paris, from motives of curiosity, love of adventure, or something else that may be developed later on.

Captain Tom laughs. It is a cheery sound, and has won him many a friend in time past.

'I give you my word, Lord Eric, I slept as sound as a dollar as long as the air was confined to screeching and smashing all about in the Latin Quarter, but when a beauty shell dropped into my room, and left me exposed to the weather, I drew the line at that, and concluded that there might be some queer things to be seen on the streets. Something—I can't explain what—drew me to your hotel. Perhaps it was because I saw our friend, Colonel Julius, being carried in an ambulance to the hospital, or it may have been just a notion on my part.'

'Pardon me, my friend, it was more. Yes, even the hand of fate.'

'I am far from being a fatalist, Lord Eric,' returned the American, at the same time giving his companion a queer glance, for he hardly knew how to take a man at times; 'in fact it is a peculiar combination—a puzzle to those who know him.'

'Listen! At this very moment I have issued from the hotel here with my mind set upon seeing you. Behold! the first person against whom I run is Captain Tom. What do you call that but fate?'

'It is a queer coincidence, certainly—I admit that; but what has occurred to make an interview with me so essential? Has anything happened since I parted with you at nine at the Champs Elysees?'

The Englishman twists his neck around as if to make sure that there is no one near to spy upon their movements. Then he takes no heed of his companion's pleas and draws him into a niche formed by the hotel wall.

It not only screens them from the observation of passers-by, but serves to keep off the chilly January night wind that sweeps down the elegant boulevards.

There is something mysterious in the very action of the Briton, and the adventurous Captain Tom anticipates a revelation that will arouse his suspicion. The man has seen so much of life in his time that ordinary events do not move him.

Having fully satisfied himself with regard to their security, in fact speaks, and even his voice seems to be full of deep mystery, so low and strained is its tone.

'What I have to tell you concerns a certain lady friend of yours. Perhaps you can give a guess as to her name.'

'Let me see. Is it the fair Albatian, Linda?'

'Hit it the first shot! Shows where your heart must be, captain. I have not come any too soon to warn you.'

'Bah! I have passed unscathed the battery of bright eyes from hers. Linda a beautiful girl, reminds me to play the gallant or ce in a while, though I am sure at home in the woods, or on the deck of my twenty little yacht, than in the presence of ladies; but as to warning me of the danger, my good friend!'

'Wait! You do not understand me, captain. It is no danger from her eyes, of which I warn you. The peril comes from another quarter, but in connection with the fair Albatian.'

Captain Tom pulls at his cigar while his companion thus speaks. He seems to be pondering the words.

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