



BY HAWLEY SMART.

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CHAPTER XI.—TOM'S VISITOR IN THE ADVANCE.

In his bewilderment over night, Tom Byng had forgotten to glance at the order book which was lying on his table, otherwise he would have found that his recreations for the next day were amply provided for him; that he was detailed for a court-martial in the morning, and that in the evening he was once more for the trenches. The consequence was that he found no opportunity for that insidious cross-examination of Hugh Fleming, and it so happened that Hugh, who since the death of Grogan had been acting as a captain, was not included in the covering party formed by the — in the evening. On his arrival at the brigade ground, Byng found himself for the advanced trenches and though in those weary watches that had gone by, a man had oft-times much leisure to brood over his affairs, yet the nights had waxed much livelier of late, and those on the watch had to be so continually on the alert that they had not much time to meditate on a love-chase gone awry, or how to assuage the angry importunities of creditors whose patience was at length exhausted, two circumstances that a year ago claimed a good deal of attention from most of them. Although nothing but the occasional monotonous roar of the big guns broke through the quietness of the night, yet Tom and his comrades kept vigilant watch and ward. They were dealing with an enemy bold and energetic, who threw no chances away, and whose skirmishers stole up nightly as near as they dared, to see if too fatal a sense of security might vouch them the opportunity for a sortie which they were always seeking. However, daybreak came without even an alarm, and the sun shone brightly out over the shattered town, heralding the advent of a glorious day towards the very end of May. Byng was sitting with his back to the parapet of the trench, musing dreamily over Frances Smerdon's letter and what reply he should make to it, when he was once more recalled to a sense of sublunary matters by his more mercurial subaltern, who suddenly exclaimed—

"I say, Tom, do you remember what day this is?"

"Yes, Wednesday," replied Byng, lazily.

"Wednesday; yes, sir; the Wednesday, by Jove, it's the Derby Day, and what a day they've got for it. Do you recollect going up last year and seeing Andover win?"

"Yes," laughed the other; "and how we all backed King Tom, and saw our horse run a good second on three legs; showing that but for the mishap he ought to have won."

"Ah, yes, but what fun we had all the same. What a lunch we had with those dragoon fellows over on the hill. They were all on Andover—

drank buckets of champagne to celebrate his success, and insisted upon our drowning our losses in the same manner. Ah, we were a credit to the regiment on that occasion!—patterns of sobriety to the whole British Army!—after having been engaged in such a revel."

"*Tempora mutantur*, as they taught us at school," laughed Byng. "Last year pigeon pie, plover's eggs, and Geisler's brit were hardly good enough for us, and now I'm dying for the sight of that villainous servant of mine with the tea and cold bacon. Surely they're awfully late with our breakfast."

"No, just eight," rejoined his companion, glancing at his watch. "Listen, there go the clocks inside," and he jerked his head in the direction of the town.

A few minutes more and two or three servants belonging to the regiment made their appearance, carrying their masters' breakfast with them. Very much to the astonishment of Tom and his companions came also a French officer, in the uniform of the Zouaves, the triple row of gold lace round his *kepi*, and the elaborate embroidery on the sleeve of his smart, dark blue jacket, indicating that he was a captain, just as much as his shaven forehead, and swaggery voluminous red *pantalons* added "and of the Zouaves."

Tom raised his cap politely to the Frenchman, whose *kepi* was off instantly in return, and then could not help casting a look of enquiry at his henchman.

"The Colonel commanding the third parallel, sir, told me to bring this French officer to you. And will you be so good as to show him all there is to be seen in the advance."

The French officer with a flourish of his cap commenced a voluble speech in his own language, to the effect that if he might trespass upon the amiability of Monsieur he would wish to see what we were doing in the Front. Tom's knowledge of the French language, like the majority of his brethren in the English army, was limited in the extreme, and the quick-witted Zouave saw at once that he was not understood. He changed instantly into the Anglo-Saxon vernacular.

"Ah, monsieur," he continued, "you no like to spik French. You English all can, but you nevere will, *mon ami*. I am engaged like yourself, in this stupid *siege*, knocking our heads for months against this pig of a town. I sometimes wish I was back in Africa; chasing the Kabylès was more amusing than this. This morning I said to myself, '*Mon cher*, you *ennui* yourself, you get the rust, you get the—what do you call it—ah, bored, you require the change, you want distraction.' I said to my chief—'*Mon Colonel*, this fatigues me, these pigs of Russians will not knock me on the head,

although, *ma foi*," he continued, with a shrug of his shoulders and a grimace, "they have been making it lively enough for us lately. With your permission to-day, I will go and look at our gallant Allies. I will study the little lanes and ditches they make, and see if I like them better than our own.' And now, Monsieur, I must throw myself upon your good nature, as soon as you have finished your breakfast. Permit me to offer you a cigarette," and having handed his case to Tom, the Zouave selected one for himself, and throwing himself on the ground he proceeded to smoke and chat as easily as if he had known his companions all his life. He was very communicative about his past, he gave them to understand he was a Parisian by birth, and that Paris was the only place fit to live in. "But you do not live there for nothing, my friends; and when one has come to the end of one's resources, there is nothing for a gentleman but the Seine, or Africa and the Zouaves. I chose the latter, and *parole d'honneur* I have never regretted it. It's a wild service, ours, but it makes the pulses tingle in your veins—there's not one of us but what has won his rank at the sword's point."

Tom felt there was something fascinating about his guest, in spite of his somewhat braggadocio manner. He had the bearing, moreover, of a good who had certainly been accustomed to good society, and Tom knew that what he said of his corps was true, and that the dare-devil troops of which he was a captain had little reverence for any officers who had not won their grade under their own eyes. Breakfast over, Tom began his task as *cicerone*, and was much struck by the shrewd, soldierly criticisms of the stranger.

"Ah, yes," he said, at length, "that flank battery of our friends' opposite it is which inflames the *boyan*, which I came up between this and the third parallel; but, *mon ami*, what do you propose to do next? Your engineers must know that you can go no further; the ground is too hard. And is your advanced trench of all, I presume?" And as he spoke the French officer leaned his elbows on the parapet, lazily; "and to say nothing of the *abattis*, you're a long way yet from the Redan. He continued to stare at the great earthwork in question, alongside Tom, although more than one bullet whistled past their heads. Suddenly he sprang upon the parapet, and not to be outdone in hardihood, Tom immediately followed his example.

"*Sacré!*" said the Zouave, laughing; "mais your company is undesirable. They will think we are the leaders of a storming party." And even as he spoke, the persistent attentions of the Russian sharpshooters once more sang past their heads. "Peste!" he continued, throwing away his cigarette, and making a comical grimace at Byng. "This is getting a little too hot to remain. Adieu."