

Magnificent Complete Tale.

The Captain of the Old Guard.

A TALE OF 1872.

SPECIALLY WRITTEN FOR THIS ISSUE BY ONE OF OUR MOST POPULAR AUTHORS.

THE 1st CHAPTER.

What the Black Box Contained.

There stood the old house, high upon the hill, surrounded by trees, that only added to the solemnity and solitude of the place. Jim Trevlyn—honest, sturdy, rugged Jim, whose eighteen years of life had been spent among the wild rocks and around the craggy crannies of his native Cornwall—stared at the white pile perched on the hilltop, and gave voice to a thought that had assailed him—

"I wonder who lives there now, and why the building is so closely guarded these days?" he said half aloud. "Why, I remember the bent figure of some silver-haired old gentleman, a soldier of the old days—let me see, didn't they say that he fought with the Old Guard at Waterloo?—used to hobble around the grounds. Now, how different! The place is closed against all comers. Behind every hedge-row there seems to lurk a stealthy, silent form; men rise up suddenly, as if out of the ground; the curious, as if on mischief bent, are warned away; the old hall, in fact, is as closely guarded as a fortress! And why—why, I wonder!"

The young seaman stood at the forked roads, oblivious of the fact that not three yards away a heavily built man had come upon him, and had overheard the whole of his soliloquy. But at the sound of the next step of the man the lad turned swiftly. He found himself looking into the face of a stranger—a fair-haired, blue-eyed man, clean-shaven, stern, forbidding, carrying the air of a soldier.

The boy touched his cap respectfully, for Jim was ever a well-mannered youth. At the sign the man addressed him.

"Boy, I am pressed for time. How far is the nearest station from here?" he asked pleasantly enough.

"Seven miles, sir. You'd get a trap up at Penryn's cottage on the cliff. He'd drive you," said Jim.

"Good—good!" the man muttered. "I must go. But, to save my time, will you do me a service? See, here is a shilling for you. Will you take this up to the big white house there?" He produced an oblong box, some twelve inches long, by about five deep, made of dark wood, and uncovered by any wrapper. Jim nodded, and took the box in his hands. It was heavy—very heavy for so small a thing.

"I'll go with pleasure," he replied, highly pleased at the prospect of earning what to him was so large a coin. The stranger took out his watch.

"It is now six o'clock," he said. "I want that box to be delivered by you yourself—no one else, mind you—into the hands of General Lazaire by twenty minutes past six."

Jim nodded.

"I'll do my best, sir," he answered. "But you usually find it difficult to get within the grounds."

"Don't let that worry you, my lad. Simply use the one word 'Siege'—that will pass you through. Don't forget what I have told you—the general himself, by 6.20, the word 'Siege,' and then leave the place. I must hurry, or I won't get my train. Take this for your trouble."

He slipped a shilling into Jim's palm, counselled him to carry this black box carefully to give it to no one but the French general, and then walked rapidly away. Marvelling greatly at the strangeness of his errand, the young fisherman toiled up the hill, never once glancing behind. Had he have done so, he would doubtless have been surprised; for the stranger, instead of taking the road Jim had indicated, stood a moment or two watching the boy's retreating form, then, retracing his footsteps the way he had come, vanished at the bottom of the hill.

Now, Jim Trevlyn was a smart young fellow, and the fact that his whole life had been spent among the simple Cornish fisher-folk, was quite enough to recognise that the man was a foreigner, but of what nationality he could not say. The boy was curious, too. He seemed to be in his manner towards the black box.

"That's strange," he said. "I wonder what's inside. It's heavy, too." Then, as if the mystery was too great for him, he tucked the box under his arm, and continued his ascent of the hill.

At the massive iron gates he was challenged by a short, dark man, who called on him imperatively to halt. But the word "Siege" came into his mind. The gates swung back, and he was entered. Thrice before he reached the house he was challenged again, but each time, on his giving the password, and intimating that he had business with General Lazaire, he was allowed to pass.

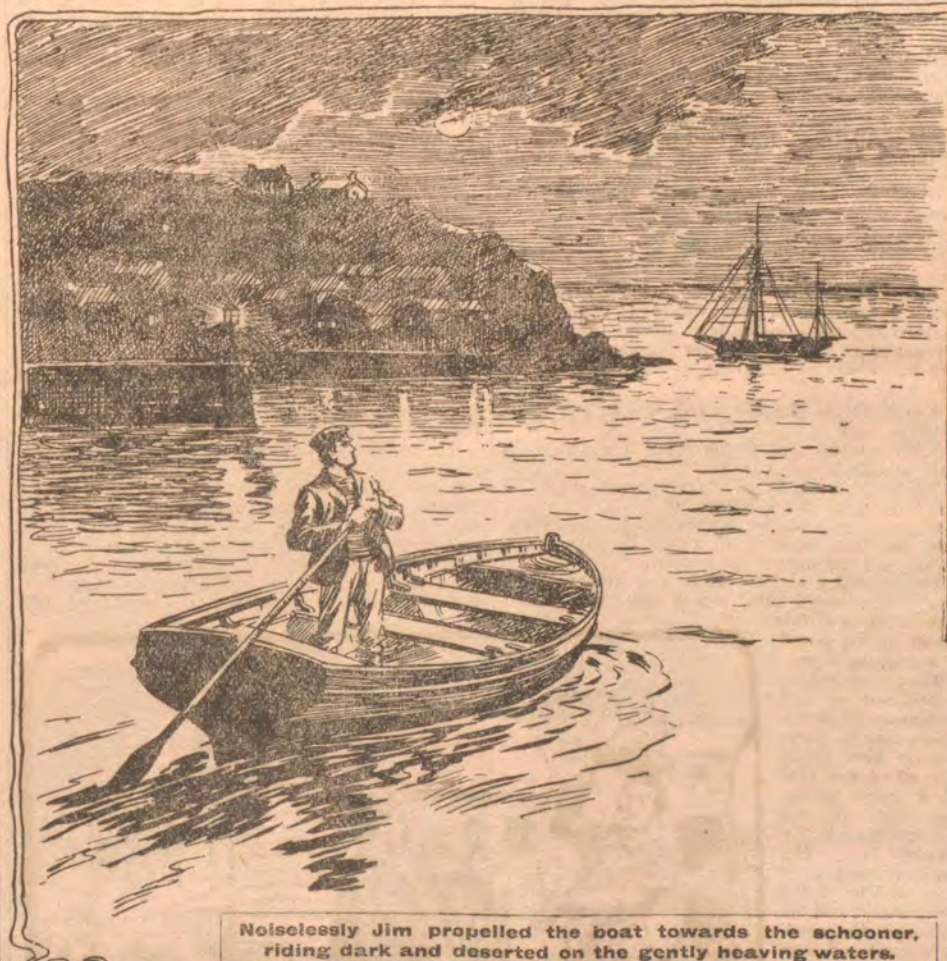
When the general was, Jim had no conception, and he and the old, bent form he used to know so well in the years gone by were one and the same.

Through deserted, silent corridors he was escorted by equally silent men. Not one questioned him as to the thing he carried. The very mention of the word "Siege" seemed sufficient to secure for him, at the hands of the foreigners, implicit obedience and attention.

Not once, but many times, as he went up flight after flight of dust-strewn stairs, did Jim Trevlyn place that mystic box to his ear. A strange uneasiness—he could not say at what—was forcing itself gradually, yet nevertheless surely, upon him. It seemed as if some premonition of evil were hovering around, telling him, urging him—nay, almost commanding him—to fly from that house of desolation and mystery. What force was it impelling him almost to set that box down and race away, as if death itself were at his heels?

But Jim Trevlyn was no coward. Putting these fancies from him he nerved himself. As his two guides drew up outside a heavy oak door, he took his hat from his head, and rapped on the panel twice.

In reply, a weak, quivering voice, that still, however, retained something of its old fire and firmness, bade him enter. As the boy opened the door and looked within, he could hardly suppress a cry of astonishment, for he found



Noiselessly Jim propelled the boat towards the schooner, riding dark and deserted on the gently heaving waters.

himself not ten feet away from the muzzle of a heavy, military pistol, held by the solitary occupant of the room. His hand went to his head, he uttered the word "Siege," and the weapon was lowered.

On the bed lay a thin, emaciated, fragile form, the same that the young sailor had seen so often before the outbreak of the great Franco-Prussian War. Jim strode across the room, the black box in his hands. But halfway he paused—irresolute, suspicious, horrified. His eyes involuntarily rested on the clock over the sick man's bed. The hands pointed to twenty minutes past six. Suddenly from the box there came a faint whirring, which grew momentarily louder—a horrible clicking sound, that somehow filled the boy with apprehension.

One quick leap forward he made; then, raising the black box above his head—why he did it he hardly knew, but prompted by the unconscious instincts of self-preservation, he hurled it with terrific force through the casement.

A bullet flashed by his head, followed by another, as the man on the bed fired twice at him. Then, above the pistol shots and the tinkling of shattered glass, there was a deafening, blinding roar that filled the place with smoke, the window was blown outwards, while, amidst showers of bricks and plaster, Jim Trevlyn was hurled senseless to the ground.

The bomb—the secret of the black box—had come within an ace of fulfilling its deadly work of destruction.

THE 2nd CHAPTER. Saving the Dispatch-runner.

THREE hours later, on the eventful evening of the bomb explosion which had almost cost the Cornish fisher-lad and the old, bed-ridden French general their lives, a small boat put off from a deserted cove some distance up the coast, and, keeping well in the shadows of the beetling cliffs, was rowed steadily in the direction of Clovelly.

The night was none too dark for Jim Trevlyn's purpose, for a fair moon rode high in the heavens. Yet, every now and then, a bank of heavy clouds would obscure the brightness, whereat Jim's spirits rose accordingly.

The mission upon which he was bent was a desperate one, brought about by as strange a set of circumstances as it is possible to conceive. As soon as the boy had recovered from the effects of the bomb explosion, he had been brought, between two armed men, before the old soldier. You may be sure it did not take Jim long to explain the incidents which had led up to such an astounding climax.

"You, my lad, have been made the unconscious tool of a vile conspiracy," General Lazaire had said warmly. Then he had explained to the boy that the man who had commissioned him to carry the black box was doubtless a German spy, one of several in Cornwall, whose purpose it was to take the general's life. "For," the old soldier had said, "the great and ever memorable siege of Paris which is now in progress, with thousands of my brave countrymen holding out against the German army, is being conducted by me. Ever since the Franco-Prussian war started, I, lying here on a bed of sickness, have arranged many of the various campaigns and battles, and I am proud to say that most of my plans have been successful. Perhaps I ought not to say it, yet I must affirm that if the French military authorities, who, over and over again, have applied to me for

flickering light his eye caught a glimpse of a small, black tin case hidden away in a half concealed recess.

Jim stepped forward, his fingers closed around the box, when there fell on his ears the tramp of feet overhead.

Already he could hear footsteps descending the hatchway. Another half minute and he would be discovered. Death inevitably awaited him. His outstretched hand touched a curtain and rattled the rings. A bunk lay there. In a second Jim was ensconced safely in it, but even as he pulled the curtain gently along, the cabin door swung back, and three men entered, one of them carrying a lantern.

By the yellow light the watching boy observed the foremost to be he who had given him the bomb to carry to General Lazaire.

"The thing succeeded admirably, Spielman," he was saying, in perfect English. "I watched from the eminence, and saw the whole bedroom blown to atoms. With Lazaire dead the siege of Paris must crumble away, and within a month at the outside, our countrymen will be within the city. Now, all we have to do is to capture the boat which left the French coast this morning bringing despatches for Lazaire. We must approach her in the guise of a private schooner, and, having boarded her, get the papers, and send her crew and all to the bottom. Hark! There's Hans Sachs getting the anchor up. We shall go out on the ebb."

Soon he could hear the wash of the waves telling him that the schooner was under full sail. The three Germans had long since left the cabin, having taken a large store of arms on deck.

It must have been close upon midnight when the silence was broken by a loud hail from the schooner's deck, and the giving of swift, guarded orders. Then Jim heard a heavy gun being dragged out and wheeled across the deck above. A faint answering "Hallo!" was borne to his ears.

"They've sighted the dispatch-runner," he muttered. "Unless something happens to prevent it, those brave fellows bringing news from France will be in the hands of the German wolves from whom they'll get little mercy. What can I do? Surely I ought to be able to warn them!"

He crept from the bunk.

Thrusting the tin case in the side-pocket of his jacket, he buttoned it over his jersey. Then, quickly removing his boots, he stole softly up the companion-way and reached the deck.

Dark figures, all holding rifles, lay under the bulwarks, while a machine gun was close to hand ready to be uncovered at a moment's notice. Jim rose to his feet. He would make one swift rush across the deck, leap into the sea, and swim to the dispatch-boat.

The first step he made brought him face to face with the German spy. The moonlight fell athwart the boy, revealing his identity instantly. With an oath the man sprang forward, a revolver gleaming in his fist. He aimed a vicious blow at Jim, who, however, dodged it, and at one swift leap reached the schooner's side. He hesitated not a second. Leaping on to the bulwarks he threw his hands above his head and dived into the heaving waters. A volley of shots followed him as he plunged in. He rose to the surface thirty yards away.

Cries and curses came from the schooner's deck. Swift orders rang out, rifles cracked, and revolvers poured a deadly hail of lead after him. All around the water was flecked with dancing columns of spray flung up by the bullets. Still Jim swam on under a murderous fire. How he escaped being hit was a miracle.

Three minutes later he stood on the deck of the dispatch-runner, waving his arm tauntingly at the baffled Germans, and in the other hand he held aloft a shining black tin case.

Of all small craft the dispatch-runner is the swiftest, and before half an hour had gone she had shown the German schooner a clean pair of heels. Meanwhile, the fisher-lad was relating his experiences to the skipper.

"I can see through the whole plot, my lad," he said at length. "Those rascals had learnt that between the bed-ridden French soldier and the military authorities in Paris a constant stream of communication was being kept up. Possibly they were engaged by their Government to put a stop to it, and at all costs to get General Lazaire put out of the way. Mind you, they say 'All's fair in love and war,' but I don't think that they've been playing the game. I'm a Britisher myself, and what I do for France, I do for the sake of General Lazaire, to whom I owe much; but you can rest assured, my boy, that this day you have not only done a great service to France, but you have probably averted a great disaster falling upon Britain."

"How?" asked Jim, in amazement.

"In this way. These papers, here, which you brought from the German spies' boat, reveal the details of a projected invasion of this country. Germany believes that, France having been defeated, she will be able to dispose of Britain in the same way, and thus make herself the ruler of the world. But the laying of these papers before our Foreign Office will speedily put an end to such a design, and Germany will strenuously disavow ever having had any intention of remaining otherwise than on a friendly footing with Great Britain. And, mind you, I should think this will lead to great things for you."

It did, too, and James Trevlyn is to-day one of the most trusted and important servants of the State. General Lazaire has long since been laid to rest; in fact, he died before the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian war, mercifully never living to hear the news of the capitulation of Paris.

THE END.

"TOM TARTAR AT SCHOOL," a story you will enjoy, starts next week.