

THE HERO OF TOURNAY

BY TOM HALL

A fantastic tale of an encounter in a public library. Forgotten Hawkins, his story of the self sacrificing death he died, and the plausible explanation he received of why posterity had neglected to mete out to him the honors he merited.

IT was the dreary end of a winter afternoon. I had been reading for hours in a snug corner of the Astor Library and had fallen into a half somnolent revery which, in a short time, would have induced actual slumber, when my attention was attracted to the figure of a man dressed in a manner so grotesque (at least to my eyes), and who bore such an evident air of antiquity that all the vagrant fancies of my day dream were banished in an instant.

I turned to scrutinize him more closely, but in so abrupt a manner that I attracted his attention in turn. Fearing that my bruskiy displayed curiosity might have offended him, I dropped my eyes quickly to the volume I had been reading and began to glance over the pages at random.

Much to my embarrassment the strange gentleman approached me, evidently with the intention of rebuking me or of drawing me into conversation—which would have been, in either case, a disagreeable development of the situation.

To be frank, I am diffident with strangers, especially with strange strangers. But, being guilty of the first lapse of decorum, I resolved to be polite in any event.

Perhaps my natural diffidence was augmented by the fierce appearance of the stranger, for he was large, erect, and to all appearances hardy and muscular. In fact, he seemed to be a rough sort of a soldier, although the uniform that he wore was at that time unfamiliar to me.

The only weapon he carried was a primitive sort of a bayonet. I have since found, after much research, that the costume he wore was the uniform of the Foot Guards of Queen Anne. And is the only verification I can make even to myself of the narrative that is to follow.

Ignorant entirely of the costumes of the time, I could hardly have dreamed of seeing, and conversing with, a soldier of the army of the great Duke of Marlborough. That I did, however (or-at least with the immortal spirit of one), is an accepted fact with me, and I care not whether I be believed or derided.

“Good sir,” said the stranger to me, in a dialect which, though evidently English, was as strange to me as his costume, and which I would not attempt to imitate or describe, “can you read?”

His question can be considered, I think, as startlingly silly. To ask me, a graduate of a college, a confirmed student, even a writer of books, if I could read—how absurd!

“Do you not see,” said I, somewhat testily, “that I am reading?”

“I thought it was possible,” replied my unwelcome questioner,” but I have never seen one read, and I was not sure.”

“I can read,” I said simply.

“Have you read much?” he continued.

“That is a matter depending entirely on comparison with the reading of others,” I answered. “For an average man I have

read a great deal.”

“Then,” said he, and his face brightened with intense interest, “you have read of the great Duke of Marlborough?”

“Most assuredly,” I replied; “I have read a great deal about him. I can describe to you minutely the battles of Blenheim—”

“I was there,” he broke in.

“Ramillies, Oudenarde—”

“I was at both, and all the sieges between.”

“Malplaquet—”

“Nay, I was not there. That must have been after I became famous as England’s bravest soldier.”

“Indeed!” I exclaimed, becoming greatly interested. “You are then England’s bravest soldier? That is a title that has been aspired to by many, and they say fairly won by many, too. May I ask, sir, who you are?”

“I, my good sir,” he answered, solemnly and impressively, “am the famous Henry Hawkins.”

I laughed aloud. Of English descent and inspired with a great love and respect for England as the worthy mother of still greater America, I always prided myself on my knowledge of English history and tradition. But I had never heard of England’s bravest soldier by the name of Henry Hawkins.

I made no answer, for I would shrink from wounding the susceptibilities of even a ghost; but he was watching me narrowly, anxiously, I could see, and as he saw my effort at suppressing my laughter, his proud and confident demeanor changed to one of abject misery.

“Is it possible that you have never heard of me?” he asked.

“Very,” I answered.

“You have read of the siege of Tournay?” he continued.

“It occurred late in the summer of 1709,” I answered. “Both town and citadel were eventually captured by the Duke of Marlborough, after the fiercest of fighting, while Prince Eugene held off the relieving army of Marshal Vallars.”

“Right,” he interjected. “Your history is right in all that, but does it make no mention of Henry Hawkins?”

“None whatever. Did this Henry Hawkins—yourself, I presume—have a title?”

“He was to have had at least a posthumous title,” answered my strange friend. “Whether he has or not I have been unable to determine. I have oft-times looked at the book of peerage, but, being unable to read, it was of no use. Neither can any of my contemporaries, who were learned, read the book on account of what they call the ridiculous spelling of the present day. Nor can I find my bust in Westminster Abbey. But I have supposed that was because of the bad likeness. You have no idea how terribly famous men are misrepresented by artists and sculptors.”

“Oh, yes, I have,” said I; “I had my photograph taken once.”

“But it seemed to me that history must have recorded the noble achievement of Henry Hawkins in the mines of Tournay.”

“I am afraid,” I answered, “that it does not. But what was this achievement?”

“I am a brave man, sir, or perhaps I should say I was a brave man, and it would ill befit me to speak of my deeds of daring; but from what you say, sir, I know that I must have been forgotten, and perhaps the world will as soon forget my lack of modesty in telling you. The fact is, sir, if I had known earlier how soon the world forgets I would have had a good deal more fun with the lassies of Alnwick, and lived a

good deal longer, too, I make bold to think.”

“You are a Northumbrian, then?”

“I was,” he answered. “I enlisted in my youth to serve for good Queen Anne. I was a ’prentice hand at Blenheim, a tried soldier at Ramillies, and a veteran in experience, if not in age, at Oudenarde. But from long service and no promotion, I got discouraged. I had plenty of wounds, but no money. I wanted a commission and at the end a title, and I was willing to do anything to get them.

“Dying, to my mind, was a cheap price for such distinctions, but to win such a thing the act had to be committed under the very eyes of the great duke himself. Otherwise, some superior officer would claim the credit. Well, the chance came at Tournay. You know what a terrible siege it was, sir. I have no doubt that the awful carnage there put a stop to war forever.”

“No,” said I; “there have been many wars since.”

“You do not mean it!” he continued. “Why, they blew us up from below, and blew us down from above, and blew us off into eternity from all sides. Those accursed French engineers sank pockets of gunpowder in the ground everywhere and a brave man had no chance at all.”

“There have been many deadlier contrivances introduced in war than mining and countermining,” I interjected, “and they have none of them prevented human beings from slaying each other.”

“I do not wish to dispute you, sir,” he continued, “but human bravery could stand nothing worse. Well, we had taken the town of Tournay, and were attacking the citadel, and on the long glacis of the citadel were the mines that sent so many brave fellows to the world I live in, as I may say.

“We would be working along quietly in an approach, when ‘boom!’ half of the slope of the glacis would go up into the air and a hundred men or so with it.

“Why, when we reached the ditch of the town, before the garrison retired into the citadel, they used to blow out the bastions on us and bury battalions at a time. Well, we finally found that to fight moles we had to become moles ourselves, and then occurred the strangest fighting ever known. The French dug mines and we dug tunnels to find out where their mines were. They dug mines to blow up our tunnels, and so it went on.

“There was one fight under ground, when one of our tunnels ran into them while they were digging a mine, that lasted two whole days. We won that fight, and slowly but surely we fought our way, underground as you might say, up almost to the scarp of the citadel.

“But it was hard work getting men to fight that way. They offered us money and promotion time and time again. That was my chance. We had a tunnel that ran up, as near as we could calculate to within fifty yards of one of their bastions, when our men refused to work any longer. They had got to within a few feet of a French mine, and through the earth they could hear the Frenchmen making it ready.

“No doubt the enemy heard us also and were preparing to blow us up as soon as it suited their convenience. I was standing near the entrance to the tunnel, when the Duke of Marlborough rode up to inspect it.

“‘A captaincy and undying fame,’ said he, ‘to the man who will go into that tunnel, dig through to the mine and cut the fuse.’”

“‘Henry Hawkins will do it,’ said I, grabbing a pickaxe and running into the tunnel.

"I could hear the cheers of the men as I went, but I kept mighty quiet myself, for I did not want to be heard by the enemy. Well, how I managed it, and how I found the strength to dig through to that mine alone I know not, but at the end of a terrible labor I worked down till just a thin screen of earth separated me from it.

"I made a small hole and looked through. I was surprised to find it quite light in the mine—the French were much smarter than we were at such things, and they were throwing sunlight into it by means of mirrors. I could see that I was just in time. They were almost ready to fire it, and only one man was in the entrance. That man was attaching the fuse to the powder.

"My Frenchman, I'll have you," I said to myself, and, drawing my bayonet, I threw my weight on the screen of earth I had left between us, and dropped down on him.

"He may have been surprised, but he did not show it. On the contrary, he fought like a soldier. But I was a soldier, too, and, after I had stuck him a few times with my bayonet, he gave up. He called out a lot of things in French I did not understand, though, and immediately the light was shut off, and the Frenchman and I were left in utter darkness.

"That did not matter to me, however. I felt around, found the fuse and cut it. I even destroyed it for several yards to make sure. 'I'm a captain and I'm famous,' said I to myself. And then—"

"And then?" I broke in.

"And then I died—was killed," he answered.

"How?" I asked.

"I was killed so quickly I never knew," he continued. "I have always supposed that it was the Frenchman who did it. I had not killed him, probably, and

he got a weapon and killed me. But I did not care. I knew they would find my body and know that I had cut the fuse, and I would be called Captain Hawkins and be famous any way."

"But he could not have killed you instantly with any weapon he had at hand, and with the little strength he had left, after you had wounded him so many times with your bayonet."

"That's so," he said; "I never thought of that—and I've had plenty of time to think about it, too. But who else could have killed me? There was no one else around."

I must say that I felt rather queer at telling a man who had died nearly two centuries before how he had been killed. But I thought I could make a shrewd guess at the solution of the problem.

"You know," said I, "that the French had mines under their mines? In other words their mines were double, so that if you English should capture a mine they could blow you up while you were in it."

"No, I didn't know that," he answered slowly. "What fiends they were!"

"Well, they did, and used them many times, but probably after you were killed. So that accounts for your not knowing about them. Now, you say this Frenchman called out. He was probably telling his comrades that the English were in the mine, supposing that there were more than you. They, of course, sprang the under mine, and that would account for what I may call the suddenness of your taking off. That will account also for the fact that your name is not inscribed on the roll of fame, for how could the Duke of Marlborough know that you had succeeded in cutting the fuse?"

My strange acquaintance mused

over this proposition for a long time and with a gradually saddening countenance.

“I think you are right, my good sir,” he said at last. “In fact, I am thoroughly convinced that you are. I will cease my search for fame this very moment.”

He turned and began to fade through the side of the building. Just as he

was almost enveloped by the white wall, however, he looked around and said:

“I think that after all I did, though, sir, it was very rough luck on me.” And he disappeared entirely from my view as I answered:

“I think so, too.”