

The Last Paris Commune

JOHN RUSSELL YOUNG, the eminent editor and writer was sent to Europe on a confidential mission by Secretary of State Fish in February, 1871. It was at the time of the Franco-Prussian war and he was in Paris during the last days of the "Commune," witnessed the overturning of the column Vendome, the burning of the Tuilleries and the putting down of the Commune by Marshal McMahon.

The letters describing all this were pronounced at the time by Wendell Phillips as so filled with merit that the account was lifted far out of the range of ordinary correspondence." And he added: "I should as soon have thought of grouping Channing's Milton or Macaulay's Machiavelli with common journalism."

When Mr. Young reached Paris the Germans had possession of the city, occupying the east side, but the "Commune" had reared its "horrid front" and had become so terrible that Bismarck had permitted MacMahon to take 100,000 of the French army and put it down.

Some extracts from Mr. Young's description will be of interest to readers now. Mr. Young's letter was dated May 28th, 1871. He wrote:

"We had scarcely crossed the Belgian frontier before we saw traces of the great campaigns. Here and there a few houses showed marks of artillery, while black and naked chimneys told of the war and its miseries. The country generally was fresh and winning and the farmers seemed to be busy with the soil, the railway station was in the hands of Prussians who were apparently a sober, decorous class under high discipline, attentive to their own business and apparently on good terms with their French neighbors. We had some talk with the Prussians and found them quite anxious to go home. They had 'whipped the French' and wanted to get to work.

"One handsome, yellow-haired under officer—sergeant I should think—had a brother in the United States and had notions of joining him. He had fought at Sedan, had one shot in his leg, another in his hip. He was a Saxon, but there were no more Saxons now, no more Prussians—all Germans. As for the kaiser, he was in his heart, but it was Deutschland after all."

Reaching Paris, Mr. Young wrote:

"It seemed hushed and dead. There was no traffic, the streets were silent. I strolled next day into what in peaceful times would be the busiest section, but it was like walking in the city of death.

"In that beautiful part of Paris, around the Arch of Triumph, and near the Bois de Boulogne, the shells were falling. Most of the inhabitants had gone away. The exodus from Paris had been estimated by some at half; by others at a million. The Communists held that side of Paris beyond the Arch. The other side was guarded by the Prussians, who were in force; and who, during these military operations, have acted as the allies of M. Thiers. By holding that line firmly and permitting no supplies or reinforcements to enter, they made the task of MacMahon much easier than it might have been.

"The artillery fire between the outposts of the Commune and the Versailles forces was intermittent. We generally had some sharp practice about daybreak. Sometimes in the evening there was heavy firing. Generally, however, it seemed to be intended more as annoyance than a real, steady, honest cannonade, intended to damage an enemy.

"This, in fact, is what I saw on every side during my observations of the Commune. It was a crew without a captain, manning a ship without a helm. Time meant for honest work, and very precious time, was wasted in conversation. There was no system. Within twenty paces of my hotel, on the Rue Neuve St. Augustin, it was intended to build a barricade. The operation was quite curious, and I watched it closely. First came an officer, followed by two soldiers, who paced across the street once or twice, drew an imaginary line on the sidewalk with his sword, gave some orders and left. Two soldiers sat down on the doorstep to smoke and read La Para Duchene, which happened to have an exciting article that morning in favor of banishing the priests and destroying the Tuilleries. Then came a long discussion on the Republic.

"It must be written as the calmest and best judgment upon the whole proceeding—the Com-

mune was a scandal. It was either too soon or too late. It should have been in the Bonaparte days, or after Prussia had been satisfied. The Commune took France at a disadvantage. The duty of saving the nation was immediate, and Paris should have waited. M. Thiers was doing as well as he could. He was seeking to end a war which he had opposed—for which he was in no way to blame. A Prussian army had France under its guns, and many of the fairest provinces of France under occupation, and the leaders of the Commune should have postponed everything to the work of rescuing the nation from the German invasion.

"The air is electric and feverish, and if the spectator gives way one moment to the impulses around him, he is in a panic and fears that he lives under another Reign of Terror. The newspapers do little more than scream, and you wade through column after column with much of the feeling of stumbling through a morass or a field of briars. There is really no comfort in them, and the work is weary and hopeless.

"On Sunday morning, the 21st of May, I sat up rather late conversing with General J. Meredith Read, our Consul-General. We remarked that there was little firing from the Versailles forts. The night was unusually still. Well, we thought the troops were resting.

"In the morning one of the hotel people came hurriedly into my room, with large, eager eyes, and shouted 'The Versailles troops are in Paris; the shells are falling everywhere! They are fighting on the Place Concordel!' Sure enough, there was the deep, heavy sound of musketry, with the roaring of cannon, and the strange, tearing sound of the mitrailleuse, resembling the noise made in rending a piece of muslin.

"But the work was being done. France and Paris were grappling. The destroying angel had thrown his wing over the beautiful city at last, and a hundred and fifty thousand Frenchmen were busily striving to do murder upon each other.

"Our Commune officer sent a squad along the streets with certain instructions to every house-keeper. All blinds must be opened, so no one could shoot through them. Any person appearing at a window would be instantly fired upon. Any one passing up and down the street would also be fired upon unless known to the officer; and, as the enemy might make a dash at any moment, no one could go into the street without risk. I went as far as the Boulevard des Capucines and looked in all directions. Not a soul was to be seen. Every house was closed. The Opera House barricade, at which I could only venture to peep, was dark, frowning, dead. The heavy roar of musketry was behind us, and in time we came to the opinion that the line of the Versailles advance had reached the beautiful Church of the Madeleine and was engaged with the barricades around it.

"After the warning of the Commune officer, we retired to our hotel, and we found ourselves in a state of siege.

"We were in the heart of a circle of war, and flame and death but actually safe as in Central Park.

"The night fell and we worried through as well as we could with talk and gossip. The firing was incessant, but did not advance. The result of the day was that Versailles held about one-third of Paris. It had still to fight its way into the approaches of the Hotel de Ville, Montmartre, the Place de la Bastille, Belleville, and the Pere la Chaise. Here the fight was really to be.

"For some hours of the night there was comparative quiet. Long before dawn the battle resumed its fury. The firing became heavier and drew nearer and nearer, until it swept beyond us, and we inferred that Madeleine had been taken, and that our barricades at the Opera House and the Vendome Place, which were so near us that we came to invest them with a neighborly feeling, were attacked. It was very important to have the Opera House, an immense pile in its way, and commanding the surrounding avenues.

"We could see the Opera House plainly from an upper window, where, under the eyes, some of us finally came to look upon the fight. The afternoon was lengthening; the firing had deepened into a steady, plunging volley, neither advancing nor receding. And we said: 'The attack has got into a rut, it does not move, and our little barricades are serving their masters well.' The red flag defiantly waved from the top of the Opera House. I remember well when it was raised on Vendome Column day, and in the presence of twenty thousand people. A young marine climbed to the dizzy height and pinned it to the statue, holding a lyre aloft with ex-

tended arms. How they cheered the little marine, with his steady head and nimble legs. So it waves, a fit emblem of the sad scenes it looks down upon. While it waves we know the Versailles army stands still.

"But, as we are looking, an object appears on the top of the building, and we see shortly a file of soldiers—five or six, perhaps—crouching along the roof down to the street. One of them, evidently an officer, for the sword is at his side, creeps toward the farthest statue, climbs up slowly and pins the flag upon it. We see the red, white and blue—the tri-color of France—and we know that Versailles has taken our poor barricade, and that at last the attack advances. The red flag still floats from the lyre, where my little marine with the nimble legs tied it so dramatically a few days ago—still floats defiance to the tri-color on the other end of the building. The soldiers shoot at it as if to break the staff, but the staff will not break. Evidently to climb up to it is to invite a hundred rifle shots. So they consult, and fire at it from all directions, but with no avail. And in the end, evidently with a Legion of Honor cross or a ribbon of some kind in his eyes, the officer begins to climb. One of our party thought the statue was about thirty feet in height, but I will make no guess except to say that it was many times higher than the officer and a very dizzy business at best, to say nothing of the rifle-shots, which seem to come swiftly for he climbs slowly, carefully, and keeps, as well as he can, within the folds of the flag. He reaches it at last, snaps the staff, waves it in a defiant way to those below, and rapidly descends. This was my last view of the red flag in Paris. The tri-color waved in unchallenged supremacy, and we breathed free to feel that our siege was at an end. The hour when the red flag descended was twenty minutes past five.

"The night came up with pale, lustrous skies, as soft as your New England summer. The sharp, noisy musketry, and the heavy chorus of great guns, had died away into distant, irregular, sobbing sounds. The Commune had fallen back—had certainly surrendered a third of Paris—had been driven into an inner line of defenses behind the palaces. The wing of the destroying angel had swept over our besieged dominion, and we were at peace in the lines of the Versailles army. The Place Vendome was still held by a dozen of Communists as a forlorn hope, and one persistence cannon in the captured barricade on the Place de l'Opera, continued to fire upon them, but in a fitful, feeble way, doing little more than the shattering of the shop windows on the Rue de la Paix.

"This forlorn gun, with its lonely continued fire, became a curiosity, and we climbed to the housetop, or quietly stole to the corner to look upon it as an unreasonable, shrewish creature; and we make it a jest, mocked it, and offered wagers as to the angle of its fire, and the destination of each ball as it passed; slower and slower; more and more distant, the general fire became, the echo of each volley coming back with fainter and fainter sound. The Commune was retreating; and with easy and free speech, and not without comfort we said, one to another, 'The end has come, and the morning will bring peace.'

"Suddenly toward midnight we saw from the top of our hotel, where we sat with the great city at our feet, a cloud of smoke, tinted with flame and leaping sparks. A house, or a beacon perhaps; some poor Parisian's home destroyed by a straggling shell! But the cloud of smoke became a pillar of fire; the skies reddened; the stars grew pale; the young moon died away into a shadow, and through a light which was as ruddy as the blazing noon, the dark rim of the palace was seen, and one who knew Paris said: 'It is the Tuilleries!' Surely this could not be? It is only some fancy—a vision—a deception of the shadows!

"But there it was—too true for venture or hope—the farther pavilion of the venerable and majestic palace fringed with fire, the flames unfolding it with caresses and leaping from wall to wall! This palace of Francis I., of the Fourth Henry; of Louis the Great and Napoleon; the home of so much pride and majesty and splendor; of the glories of Bourbon and Bonaparte; of the sorrows of Louis the locksmith and his Marie Antoinette; this mighty tablet upon which so much of the history of France had been engraved, had met its fate, and we saw it bend and snap and crackle, and the stately central pavilion—decorated by the cunningest artists—carpets in three rooms alone worth 2,000,000 francs—was now only a pyramid of corruscating fire.

"Terrible and fascinating was the scene, for it told us what this struggle really meant—this struggle between France the Behemoth, Paris the