THE WINNING OF THE SUDAN
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By

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P. C.
THE WINNING OF THE SUDAN

CHAPTER I

THE RETIREMENT FROM KHARTUM

The fall of Khartum left Sir Charles Wilson and his heroic little band of Englishmen in dire straits. They had dashed forward from Gubat in the vain hope of bringing relief to Gordon. They had sought, a flying squad, to annihilate distance and to wipe out time in an endeavour to save the besieged Briton standing alone amid a sea of black faces. Ninety odd miles separated them from the advance guard of the British forces. Two Nile "penny steamers" carried this chosen few. Sir Charles Wilson was aboard the Bordene. With him were Captain Gascoigne, of the Yorkshire Hussars, ten non-commissioned officers and men of the Royal Sussex Regiment, and one petty officer of the Royal Navy. The Talahewiyah followed with Captain Trafford, ten non-commissioned officers and men of the Royal Sussex, Lieutenant Stuart-Wortley of the King's Royal Rifles, and one Naval petty officer. A small contingent of native officers, non-commissioned officers, and privates made up, with these twenty-six Englishmen, the entire strength of the expedition.1

It was Gordon's personality that had held together the forces opposed to Muhammad Ahmad. As soon as he fell, all resistance to the Mahdi crumbled. This meant that the Dervish hordes could be concentrated against the two steamers; it also implied that the twenty-six English officers and men were menaced not only by the enemy but also by the possibility of treachery from the black troops on board the boats. And added to the perils of the British position was the

fact that hazardous cataracts accentuated the risk of navigation on the return journey from Khartum to the army base at Cuber.

Sir Charles Wilson was placed in a doubly difficult position. He and Gordon had been not only brother officers, but personal friends. "For months," wrote Wilson, "I had been looking forward to the time when I should meet Gordon again and tell him what everyone thought of his heroic defence of Khartum—it seemed too cruel to be true. I think I should have collapsed like Khashm El Mus if I had not had to think of getting the steamers down the cataracts, which I knew, from what the captains said coming up, would be a difficult if not dangerous business."  

The commanding officer suppressed the lump in his throat. He took a final glance at Khartum and, remembering that he was an Englishman, and that duty came before sentiment, gave the fatal order to steam northward. His decision was one of those nerve-destroying resolutions which the personal equation makes even more difficult. It was a courageous admission of failure, made all the more reluctantly since Wilson knew that he had not faltered. He was, nevertheless, conscious that in retracing his steps he was opening up a new chapter in history: and he was.

The Arabs on shore caught the significance of the command to retire. They opened fire upon the steamers. Wilson recorded in his diary on 28th January, 1885: "When we got clear of the last guns it was past four o'clock, so that for four hours we had been continuously engaged with the enemy's batteries; luckily for us their gunners were such bad shot." *

If the Arab gunners were bad shot, some of their men knew how to aim. This is evident from Wilson's story—

"We all had narrow escapes. I was struck above the knee by a spent shot which got through a weak point

1 From From Korti to Khartum, by Sir Charles Wilson, Edinburgh, William Blackwood and Son (1886), p. 181.
2 Ibid., p. 170.
3 Ibid., p. 178.
in the turret, and my field-glass, an old friend of twenty-five years, sent out to me in America, was broken in my hand as I was resting it on the top of the turret. . . . The Talahawiyah was struck by a solid shot, and a shell, bursting just in front of the deck-house, sent in a shower of fragments which played much havoc with the fittings, but hurt no one. Another shell burst overhead."

Darkness gave the Englishmen a respite from shot and shell; but it accentuated the peril of their position. They could not navigate by night. They had to make fast to an island in midstream and wait for dawn, conscious that the Mahdists knew approximately where they were and could concentrate their forces for attack when the steamers came to the treacherous cascades. The wounded were looked after as soon as obscurity stopped the enemy fire. There were no medical men aboard, and the two English lieutenants did all that they could to meet the emergency. Fortunately there were no very severe cases, and, as Wilson put it, "the negro is really like a bit of India-rubber." As a result, everything was ready for an early start the next morning.

Kismet willed, however, that the steamers should not get away with the lark. The float of one of their paddles got loose, and the iron rod that held it was bent; it took some time to straighten it. The result was that the clock registered seven before the boats got under way. An hour and a half later the Bordene struck a sand-bank. Half an hour was lost in getting her afloat. At eleven o'clock the cataracts were reached. The native captains felt the persuasive effect of pistols at their heads and steered their craft safely through the first zone of these dangerous passages only to run the Talahawiyah into a sunken rock as soon as the entrance into open water released the pressure of cold steel. This is how Wilson described what took place —

"It appears that the rock lay in midstream in front of a sand-bank, and the accident was caused by a dispute between the captain and the rets as to which side of . . ."

\[1\] Ibid., p. 177.
the sand-bank they should take the steamer. The captain held up his hand one way, the one the other, and the helmsman, puzzled what to do, kept on straight and hit the rock. I asked Trafford and Wortley whether they thought there had been any foul play; and they both said that, as far as they could judge, it was a pure accident. Afterwards, however, events gave it a different appearance. The water rushed in quickly, and the steamer settled down between the two rocks. There was no panic.  

There was but one thing to do: to abandon the *Talahawiyah*. Trafford and Wortley managed to get the men, the two guns, the men's arms, kit, rations, and some boxes of small-arm ammunition into the large nuggar they were towing, and before sunset they dropped down to the *Bordene*. All the gun ammunition and much of the small-arm ammunition were abandoned. No lives were lost. This was most fortunate, as the Dervishes fired on the boats and on the nuggar while the transfer was taking place. But the attack was more or less desultory.

It was not until evening that the mildness of the assault was explained. It appeared that the Mahdi felt that he could destroy the British force whenever he wanted and that he preferred to afford them an opportunity of embracing Islam before so doing. It thus came to pass that when night fell and the *Bordene* was tied up, Sir Charles Wilson was told that a messenger from the Mahdi wished to come on board with a letter from his chief. As the Englishman wanted to know what had happened at Khartoum he determined to receive the man, and was "much struck by the quiet manner, the business-like way in which the herald performed his mission and his belief in the righteousness of the Mahdi's cause".

The letter was dated 12 Rabia II, 1302 (corresponding to 28th January, 1885). It began:

"In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate.
Praise be to the Bountiful Sovereign, and blessings be
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upon our Lord Muhammad and on his family. From the servant who stands in the need of God, and on whom he places dependence, Muhammad the Mahdi, son of Abdullah, to the British and Shagiyah officers, and their followers: God direct them to the truth. Surrender and you will be spared. Do not disobey, else you will rue it. And I will briefly inform you, perchance God Almighty may put you upon the path of the righteous. Know thou that the city of Khartum and its surroundings are like the garrison of a stronghold; God has destroyed it and other places by our hands; nothing can withstand His power and might; and by the bounty of God all has come into our hands."

And, as if to show that he knew that he could destroy the little British force whenever he wanted, the Mahdi added:

"As you have become a small remnant, like a leaflet, within our grasp, two alternatives are offered to you. If you surrender and prevent the shedding of your blood and the blood of God's creatures who are under your leadership, well and good: grace and security from God and His Prophet and security from us will be upon you. But if you do not believe what we have said, and desire to ascertain the truth of the killing of Gordon, send a special envoy on your part to see the truth of what we say: and to your envoy is given the security of God and His Prophet, till he comes to us and sees and returns under a guard from us, to see and to be warned of God.

The letter then offered Wilson and his followers the hand of fellowship if they would accept the faith of Muhammad the Prophet. It ended with this practical admonition:

"Do not be deceived and put confidence in your steamers and other things, and delay deciding until you rue it; but rather hasten to your benefit and peace before your wings are cut. Much reasoning will not convert; for it is God who converts, and He who les go astray, and thou wilt find no ruler over Him."
What has been said is enough for him who has been reached by Providence. 1

With the frankness characteristic of an English gentleman, Wilson at once declined to reply to the letter. But the Shagiyah officers looked at the matter from a different angle. They pointed out that the communication was courteous in form and called for an answer. They also urged that the more dangerous cataracts had not yet been traversed, and that military exigencies required that advantage should be taken of the opportunity that Allah had placed in their hands when He inspired the Mahdi to send such a missive. And, to clinch the matter, Khashm El Mus, the native whose name has already been mentioned, offered to go and survey the field under Muhammad Ahmad’s safe-conduct. He further brought out the fact that before he could get back the Boriene would have traversed the cataracts and have passed beyond certain perilous turns in the Nile. He therefore emphasized the necessity of giving such an answer as would gain valuable time.

"I could not help seeing that the slightest opposition in the cataracts would be fatal to us, and felt deeply the responsibility I was under for the safety of all those on board; but for a long time I could not consent to such an answer being sent," wrote Wilson. "At last, however," he continued, "feeling sure of Khashm, who was too deeply compromised with the Mahdi to give himself up, and believing that by holding pistols to the captains’ heads we could force them to run full speed past the battery, as Khashm El Mus promised to do, I allowed him to send any answer he wished, on condition that we English were not implicated in the ruse." 2

Wilson did not see the letter that Khashm wrote. While it was being prepared the Mahdi’s messenger told the British officers that Khartum had been taken without fighting, but that the garrison on Tuti, opposite that city, having refused to submit, had been put to the sword. He made the significant statement that the Mahdi was going to Cairo, then to Stambul, Rome, and

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1 Ibid., p. 307. 2 Ibid., p. 190.
eventually to overrun all countries. Wortley remarked that that would take a long time. The Arab neatly replied that time was no object—they could wait any number of years. And, having thus made clear to his hearers, but without any braggadocio, the world-wide mission of his Master and the peril which immediately menaced England and Egypt, he exhorted the Englishmen to become Muslims and no longer attempt to oppose the irresistible power of the Mahdi.

While the visit of Muhammad Ahmad's messenger assured the little band a peaceful night, daybreak was welcome. Preparations were made for descending another bad stretch of the cataracts. The Bordew was lightened by throwing overboard every ounce of food-stuff that could be spared, for the most critical waters were ahead and a strong wind was blowing. There were moments when disaster appeared imminent. There were seconds when even hope was lost, but a cool head, the hypnotic influence of a trigger held by a steady finger, and propitious fate steered the "penny" man-of-war to safety. The Shagiyah officers and men played their part in the nerve-racking ordeal, encouraged no doubt to remain loyal by the fact that word had drifted to them during the night that the English had taken Metamma, near Gubat, and were swarming across the desert like ants. 1

On the morning of 31st January the Bordew began the descent of the last narrow "gate" or passage of the cataracts. The persuasion of firearms again produced happy results. Wilson and his fellow-officers had, however, hastily finished congratulating themselves on their good fortune, and had just begun to speculate on their chances of running past an approaching battery without serious injury, when the steamer ran on a sunken rock with a crash that shook everybody. A hurried inspection told the fatal tale. "It's all up; we are wrecked and the ship is sinking fast," announced the commanding officer. They were then alongside a sand-spit, which turned out to be the end of a small

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1 Ibid., p. 199.
wooded islet about 50 yards from the larger island of Mernat. And quick as a flash officers and men, whites and blacks, were landing the guns, ammunition, and stores.

An immediate reconnaissance convinced Wilson that both the small wooded islet and the larger island were unsuited for defence purposes. He therefore decided to make a forced march down the right bank by moonlight with the Sussex and Sudanese soldiers and to send a nuggar with the sailors and a small guard. He had in the meantime ordered Wortley to pick out the best boat and boat's crew he could find, and have everything ready to start for Gubat as soon as it was dark. Instructions were given that officer to explain the situation, the fall of Khartoum, the two wrecks, and the fact that Wilson was going to march down the river and desired that a steamer should be sent up to meet and support him.

It requires no stretch of imagination to picture the perilous position of these two groups of Englishmen. They were but twenty-six all told. They were surrounded by enemies. They had grave reasons for doubting the loyalty of the blacks who accompanied them. They were now forced to separate into two units. One had to face the uncertainties of a long march through hostile lands; the other was called upon to brave the mysterious Nile, conscious of the fact that discovery meant death or an imprisonment that was worse than death.

Wilson thus described the initial difficulties with which he was confronted:

"When the order was given to prepare to start, we could get no one to move. The officers were worse than useless, and the men, in spite of a little kurbashing, would not, or perhaps could not, help us. The blacks had lighted fires, and were cooking unsavoury messes, from which nothing could tear them. I saw at once that it would be near midnight before we could reach the mainland and make a fair start; and that we should the next morning be in a hostile country, over twenty miles from Gubat. Besides, the men appeared to have
become much demoralized by the events of the last few days. They and their officers were in a state of collapse, and I did not know how far I could depend upon their loyalty. I therefore decided to remain where we were, and had just time to let Wortley know the change of plan before he started.\footnote{A court of inquiry was held at Gubat to investigate the charges of treachery made against the two captains and one of the Reises of the wrecked steamers. The Reis was condemned to death but recommended to mercy an amount of being brought down Wortley in the boat.}

Lieutenant Wortley left at 6.45 in the evening. It was quite dark. His crew consisted of four English soldiers and eight natives. They rowed down the river until they reached a point near Wad Habashi. The Mahdists were known to have a battery at that place. Wortley's orders were to float past the danger-spot. They came so close to the shore that the Lieutenant could hear the Arabs discussing whether they saw a boat or not. Just then the moon rose. The enemy caught sight of them and fired three volleys. The boat was, however, already below the battery and, in a few moments, out of danger. As soon as he perceived that he had been sighted, Wortley gave orders to take to the oars once more and to row for dear life. The soldiers did so. In fact, the men in the boat worked so well that they reached Gubat the next day at three in the morning.

While Wortley found encouragement in his effort to wipe out space, Wilson, Gascoigne, and Trafford were glued to one spot. They had no relaxation for their pent-up nerves. They knew that treachery stalked around them and that enemies surrounded them. But they could do nothing but await the dawn and keep a ceaseless vigil.

The first thing that they did on the morning of 1st February was to move the entire detachment, except a guard of twenty natives, to the larger island. The Nile had fallen very low, leaving a steep, almost inaccessible bank, from 25 to 30 feet high, along the top of which ran a thick of low bush two or three yards wide, except at one spot, where there was a fairly easy
descend to the river. It was there that they landed. A rude path was soon made by the men carrying up the guns and stores. The line of bush acted as a good screen from the enemy’s riflemen on the left bank of the stream. Here Wilson determined to build a temporary fortification which he called a zebiba.

The only man upon whom he could depend, apart from the Englishmen, was an Egyptian named Ibrahim, who had fought against the British at Tel-el-Kebir. He had been the friend of Arabi. He was “a small man. Of curious appearance, with large projecting eyes, a cool manner unusual in an Oriental, and a persuasive tongue, coupled with a way of making himself ubiquitous which was really remarkable.” He had proved his pluck at Abu Klea and Metamma, and had shown himself so attached to his commanding officer that Wilson felt certain of his loyalty. It was upon this man that the British officers largely depended “to control a lot of wild Sudanese”, while the Englishmen were busily engaged in buttressing their position.

The 1st February and the next day passed with no untoward incident, though every hour increased the risk of treachery from within and added to the danger of attack from without. Finally, when 3rd February had not yet reached its eighth hour, the report of a gun downstream was heard. The effect was electrical. There was a general shout of “Inglis! Inglis!” Everyone’s spirits rose a hundred per cent. Confidence replaced despondency. A man was sent up a high tree. He screamed down that he could see a steamer—it might be two—keeping up a fire on the fort. Gascoigne then hurried over to the wreck to hoist flags on the Bordene so as to show their exact position. This awoke the enemy on the left bank from their lethargy, and they opened fire on the zebiba. The besieged replied with their Remingtons. The result of all this firing was that Trafford soon reported that he had seen a steamer, enveloped in smoke, and that he feared that she had met with a serious accident. Wilson, on the other hand,
had observed a steamer swinging at anchor and keeping up her fire on the battery.

It was impossible for the Englishmen on shore to make out what had happened. It appeared as if one boat had been crippled and the other had anchored to engage the battery and draw off the fire from her consort. But it was certainty that was needed. Wilson therefore determined to break up the zariba and march at once down the right bank so as to effect a junction with the men on the steamer. He felt sure that whatever had occurred there the united forces would be a match for the enemy.

No time was lost in executing this decision. When the marching column came opposite the steamer it was seen that she was anchored and that something had gone wrong with her machinery. She soon began to signal. She was the Sofia, and alone. Her message real that she had been hit in the boiler, but that the damage could be repaired before morning. She was under the command of Lord Charles Beresford. A rendezvous was fixed for the next day, and Wilson and his party zaribbed for the night. It was bitterly cold, and nobody slept a wink.

As daylight approached on 4th February it was still distressingly chilly, and there was little to warm anybody in the frugal breakfast of "corn-cobs" and Nile water. All eyes were turned towards Wad Habashi. The increasing light just enabled the little band to see the Sofia when the first shot was heard. For a few moments the firing was continuous. Above the sound could be heard the sharp grunt of the Gardner, which told that the steamer was responding nobly. A few seconds later she was under way in midstream and still keeping up her fire on the battery. After some tense moments she had run the gauntlet of danger and was safe. Hurrying to her point of rendezvous she picked up Wilson, his comrades and men, white and black, and at 5.30 the same afternoon reached Gubat.\(^{1}\)

\(^{1}\) Ibid., p. 261.