

## *HOW GENERAL GORDON WAS REALLY LOST*

THE attention of the English-speaking world has recently been again called to the failure of the expedition sent out by the government of this country for the purpose of rescuing General Gordon from the perilous position in which he had voluntarily placed himself while endeavouring to maintain a stronghold of civilisation on the remote banks of the Nile. As in other discussions relating to questions affecting large areas of public interest and public sentiment, most of the disputants have taken widely contradictory views of the management of the expedition, and the precise cause of its lamentable failure to effect the main object for which it was called into existence. Accordingly, it has occurred to me that the recollection of a non-combatant officer, who was present during the principal events of the campaign, and who is not personally interested in either politics or journalism, might throw a little further (uncoloured) light on its painfully disastrous termination. This appears to be all the more desirable for the undoubted fact that the most important feature of the final catastrophe has been completely omitted or overlooked in the course of the recent discussion which has arisen on the subject.

The origin of the expedition requires but little notice in this connection. General Gordon had volunteered his services to the English Government in the best interests of civilisation and social progress. Having obtained discretionary powers he entrenched himself in a remote and perilous position, with the resolution—heroically made and heroically maintained—of devotedly defending it to the last, and of freely risking his life in the endeavour to still the surging waves of barbarism and rapine which then threatened with fearful force to overwhelm the wide region on either bank of the distant Nile. After many warnings had been received of the accumulating dangers which were daily concentrating themselves upon Khartoum, the English Government at length decided upon taking active measures for the rescue of their countryman. The best advice was sought as to the difficulties to be encountered and the best means of overcoming them. The relative advantages and disadvantages of forwarding the requisite reinforcements by land or

by water were thoroughly investigated. The most elaborate attention was paid to the choice of the most eligible officers and men. The result is too familiar to the public to require any detailed account to be furnished at this date. A relief force was told off to proceed up the Nile and overcome the mechanical difficulties of the cataracts as best it could. An auxiliary land expedition was also organised. Both were liberally equipped with the necessary supplies and sinews of war. No expense was spared by the representatives of the British nation in preparing the material required for the relief of a valued servant who had so bravely held his post during a period of such trying responsibilities and hourly danger of sudden and violent death.

I left Cairo for the front on the 10th of October, 1884. With other members of the expedition I was conveyed to Wady Halfa in steamers supplied to the Government by the contract made with Messrs. Cook and Son. I arrived at this station on the 3rd of November. The expedition boats, built in England, and brought to this destination at enormous expense, took us from Wady Halfa to Korti, which I reached on the 31st of December. There I was immediately attached for duty to No. 1 Field Hospital, in connection with which I performed the necessary professional duties till the 7th of January, 1885, when I started with the convoy for Gadkul under Colonel Stanley-Clarke. Four days were spent in the transit. The principal feature of the march was the scarcity of water. The supply with which we had furnished ourselves when leaving Korti was conveyed in leather bags (mussuck), and, as these were not always waterproof, the quantity—far below what was requisite for drinking and cooking, to say nothing of washing—was seriously diminished by the physical processes of leakage and evaporation during the four days of our desert march. It was known that deep wells existed along the route, and a Royal Engineers' pump had been provided to draw water for the use of man and beast; but this engine, unfortunately, got out of order, and proved to be unable to exercise its functions, and we all suffered sadly in consequence. The members of the reading public who have taken an interest in the African campaigns of recent years are now well aware how little foundation there is for the mythological descriptions of the camel's powers of endurance, which had for centuries been furnished to non-travelling Europeans by poets and other similarly well-informed authorities on this interesting subject.

On the 13th of January I left Gadkul in medical charge of the Naval Brigade, under command of Lord Charles Beresford, and had the first sight of the enemy on the 16th. The engagement at Abu Klea gave me ample employment in attending to the wounded on the 17th and 18th. The battle of Gubat (or Abou Kru) on the 19th was still more trying. The mortal wound received by Sir H. Stewart had, of course, the effect of throwing everything into confusion,

although the news of this disastrous event was kept as quiet as possible. The force was posted on an eminence for over ten hours, during the whole of which time we were thoroughly within range and fully exposed to the enemy's fire. The effects of the enemy's missiles gave me more than sufficient work to do all the time, but I was fortunate enough to preserve a whole skin through it all.

The most destructive calamity which occurred in connection with these engagements was certainly the jamming of the Gardner gun, which occurred at the critical moment of the Arabs' attack on our square at Abu Klea. This horrible accident occurred exactly at the moment when the services of the machine gun were most required—just as the Arabs were rushing on the dismounted square in a furious attack, goaded on as they were by the extreme fanatical enthusiasm of their new faith, and to it I entirely attribute the fact that of the four officers of the Naval Brigade, two were killed in the charge of the infuriated disciples of the Mahdi, and two others were severely wounded.

Fortunate indeed was it for us on the night of the 16th, when we occupied the valley of Abu Klea, that the followers of the Mahdi displayed the peculiarity which, so far as I have had an opportunity of observing, appears to prevail among the hostile tribes of Africa—*i.e.* a pronounced disinclination for active nocturnal warfare. Situated as we were in this valley, well hedged in by surrounding hills, all of which were occupied by the enemy, whence all our movements could be completely controlled, and well within whose range every member of our force was placed, a well-organised attack on our position that night would, to an absolute certainty, have meant complete annihilation. There was no outlet for escape which could not have been easily shut off, and in the darkness and confusion of such an attack many of our men would have been killed by the bullets of their comrades, as identification would have been impossible, while the reckless enthusiasm of the Mahdi's troops would have been entirely in their favour if they had utilised such an opportunity.

From time to time the enemy was heard wandering about close to the zeriba, and the order was then always given, 'Stand to arms;' but no attack followed, and the foe thus lost his best opportunity. I managed to get some sleep, preparatory to which I had succeeded in ensconcing myself alongside my camel, whose knees were securely lashed. After the animal lay down my head was protected by placing it in the receding angle between the abdomen and hind leg. Yet I found, to my disagreeable surprise, on awaking, that my living shield had moved off during my (evidently) sound sleep, leaving my person well exposed in the open. I considered myself favoured by the protecting hand of Providence; for, although no organised attack had been made upon us, the enemy's bullets had

from time to time during the night, popped into all parts of our zeriba. During the whole of this night Lord Charles Beresford never slept; he was on the alert all the time, muffled in his opera-cloak-like cape, and moving about wherever a fresh disturbance seemed to indicate increasing danger. No wonder that the exertions of these nights and days resulted in a severe illness immediately following the worry and exposure of this march and its two exciting engagements.

On the day after the battle of Abu Klea (the 18th of January) all the wounded and other impedimenta were brought up to the hospital, which had been hastily pitched on our line of march, close to the wells, for the purpose of securing for these helpless victims an easily accessible supply of water.

The night of the 18th, occupied as it was by a forced march towards the Nile, was one of the most trying of the whole expedition. Strict silence was enjoined; no light was allowed to be seen; all orders were communicated and passed on in whispers. Our poor camels, worn out, starved, and loaded as they were, lagged behind and dropped out in all directions, and could not be made to keep up without the incessant application of violent measures. The rear transport had to be hurried up almost continuously, and the inevitable result was that the whole expedition became terribly entangled, and was by-and-by thrown into a state of almost inextricable confusion. The state of things which ensued elicited from Sir Herbert Stewart an expression of extreme astonishment that the men of the 'Bearer Company,' who were entrusted with the conveyance and protection of the wounded, were not supplied with carbines or other light arms—such as the Winchester rifle—with which they could protect themselves and those entrusted to their care, as they were the only members of the expedition who were in this way left to the mercy of fate, and were unsupplied with the means of fighting for themselves or their helpless charges, so that they could have been at any moment cut to pieces by the merciless followers of the Mahdi, if the latter had fallen upon them at any stage of our march. Even apart from the consideration of their being unable to do anything to defend themselves against the enemy, their assistance was very much needed in the interests of the remainder of the expedition, on account of the fact that in the presence of a fanatical enemy our numbers had already been greatly reduced by death and disabling wounds, so that every man able to handle a rifle would have been a valuable acquisition in forcing our way on to the Nile. It did seem, indeed, a strange miscalculation that the authorities should have seemed to regard the Geneva Cross as a sufficient protection for each member of the Medical Staff Corps, or to think that its presence would have been recognised by the enthusiastic disciples of Mohammed Aghmed.

The fatal wound of Sir Herbert Stewart was a terrible blow to the members of the expedition. Sir Charles Wilson, being next in order of seniority, now succeeded to the command of our sadly diminished force, and we pushed on for the bank of the Nile. The 'father of waters' was but four miles off, and it was reached on that same evening. I remained at the zeriba with the wounded during the night of the 19th, and moved down to the river with them the next day. Food, water, restoratives, and stimulants were all rather scarce; new supplies could not be procured in any way; the climate, with its sharp alternations of diurnal and nocturnal temperatures, was excessively trying, and altogether the experience was not one likely to be forgotten by any of those concerned.

On the 21st Sir Charles Wilson directed an attack on Metammeh. A square was formed and moved about, feeling its way in different directions, till the exciting news was brought in that Gordon's steamers were in sight, which was soon followed by the appearance of the contingent of Gordon's men who had safely descended from Khartoum. In company with this reinforcement the square moved on towards the west end of Metammeh. The advance was very cautious, and the men several times received the order to 'lie down'—when the enemy's fire became markedly effective. After a good part of the day had been spent in these manœuvres, and no apparent impression was made on Metammeh, after a considerable loss of officers and men, the force was retired to the position already occupied by the wounded and the reserved portion of the force. There were some small mud huts here, and these were immediately fortified, as it was feared that the unsuccessful attack on Metammeh might have the effect of encouraging the enemy to act on the offensive at any moment. I did not go out, as I was assisting Surgeon-Major Briggs all the time in a long series of major operations, and there were more of them than we could well get through. Lord Charles Beresford was there himself, an invalid, and occupied a hut with three other officers. One of the latter had had his leg shattered, and we were obliged to amputate it near the hip. Lord Charles had an opportunity of witnessing all the details of the operation, which was performed by Briggs, while I gave the chloroform. He was greatly interested by the fact that no blood was lost, as we had applied Esmarch's bandage carefully. I may here add, and it makes a pleasing recollection to be able to do so, that the result in this particular case was gratifying to the last degree, and that since my return to England I have often seen the former owner of the amputated limb enjoying pedestrian exercise in London thoroughfares, with the aid of a cork leg, and in such a way that a casual observer might well fail to notice the existence of so serious a loss.

The arrival in safety, after their hazardous voyage down river from Khartoum, of General Gordon's four steamers (the 'Bordein,'

'Safieh,' 'Tewfikia,' and 'Telahawiyeh'), and the excellent fighting condition in which the men proved to be, was, of course, an inspiring event at the time of its occurrence. It was the next best thing to having reached the beleaguered general himself, and raised high our hopes of being still able to effect the main object of the expedition. Perhaps the illusive hopes thus raised had a share in the effect of prolonging the stay at Metammeh. The next and following days were, at all events, spent in reconnoitring, collecting fuel for the steamers, &c. &c.; and the 'relief' did not proceed towards Khartoum till the 24th of January. Sir Charles Wilson sailed in the 'Bordein;' she was accompanied by the 'Telahawiyeh,' which took in tow a nigger laden with dhura, and some Soudanese soldiers.

I did not accompany this expedition to Khartoum, as my duties lay at El Gubat. The heroism of Gordon's own soldiers was well attested by the fact that I had the opportunity of treating many of them here who had been carrying bullets, pieces of iron, &c., in their flesh for months; and no better testimony to their loyalty to their chief could, I think, have been furnished than the fact that they continued ready and willing to fight bravely and unflinchingly for him throughout, although they might have gone over at any moment to the forces of the Mahdi, who would have received them with open arms.

On the night of the 31st of January I occupied a straw hut with Mr. Melton Prior close to the river-side. The whole camp was quiet and still in the small hours of the morning of February 1, when my attention was attracted by the movement of a boat approaching our bank, and immediately after Lieutenant Stuart Wortley<sup>1</sup> stepped on shore, bearing the sad news that Khartoum had fallen, that its brave defender had almost certainly perished by a violent death, and that of course our expedition had failed to accomplish its object. That calm, still morning on the banks of the Nile was one of sadness and disappointment. Officers and men, the healthy and the sick, the whole and the maimed, every one was affected by the depressing tidings that the object of all our exertions had eluded our grasp, and that, when actually within attainable distance, the glory which would have resulted from the rescue of one of the most remarkable men of the age, and the happy consciousness that we had successfully performed a noble duty, had been irretrievably lost to us. No details of Gordon's fate had been procured, but there was no reasonable doubt that the worst had happened.

The story of our retirement and return journey need not be entered upon here. It has nothing to do with the failure of the Gordon Relief Expedition. The broad facts to be considered now are that this expedition was organised by the leaders of the British Government at a vast expenditure of British money, and entailed

<sup>1</sup> Now Major.

considerable loss of life and much hardship and privation even to those who were fortunate enough to survive its trials.

A hideous outcry has been raised, chiefly by those interested in party politics, against the then leaders of the State for having so long neglected sending out a sufficient force to effect the rescue of one of England's most devoted subjects. An outcry, on a smaller scale, was raised, and has been recently resuscitated, against the leader of England's army for having mismanaged the details of the trust reposed in him, and having wasted so much time in the preliminary preparations. All these criticisms may have appeared very important in the eyes of the judges by whom they were advanced, but when it comes to the central question of the relief of General Gordon, for which the whole expedition was called into existence, the naked fact remains that we had reached Metammeh quite in time to effect its object.

Our entire force arrived at this station on the morning of the 21st of January, 1885 (the greater portion having reached here on the evening of the 19th), and four steamers sent down by General Gordon himself, and manned by apparently devoted troops, arrived at about 10 A.M. on the same day. Sir Charles Wilson left Metammeh for Khartoum (under 100 miles) about 8 A.M. on the morning of the 24th. If even one steamer had returned to Khartoum on the 21st with a contingent of British sailors or soldiers the success of the object of the Gordon Relief Expedition would, to a certainty, have been attained. The troops who had descended had bravely run the gauntlet. Sufficient fuel for one steamer could have been procured in a short time, and the naval brigade could have effectively assisted in the difficulties of the ascent of the river, and could have well been relied on as a sufficient force to relieve the beleaguered city.

As the ill-fated hero had himself again and again pointed out, all that was required was to let the enemy see by the presence of even a few British soldiers that the long-promised relief was not all a delusion. As it was, Khartoum fell on the 26th; the steamers reached it on the 28th, even after an ominously slow ascent. If a steamer had left on the afternoon of the 21st, as she certainly could easily have done, she would, at the same slow rate of progress, have relieved Gordon on the 25th, and the fall of Khartoum would not have gone down to posterity as one of the blots of British history.

The singular power of imagination which made Mr. Gladstone answerable for every detail of failure in this ill-fated expedition was a somewhat ghastly source of amusement to all non-political persons who took an active part in its movements. The heads of the British Government considered and debated for a long time, it is true, before deciding on sending out the expedition; but the truth is none the less certain that the early stages of its advance were far from being 'too late.' Even after all the subsequent delays and

disappointments, the majority of which I do not understand, and, accordingly, could never attempt to explain, the indisputable fact remains that our force arrived at Metammeh, and was actually met there—as if by intervention of Providence—by Gordon's steamers, within such a very short distance of the beleaguered city, five whole days before the latter yielded to the enemy.

Having regard to the exertion made and the danger incurred by our leaders in the enterprise, it would be harsh indeed to assert that each did not act in what he considered the best interests of the expedition, according to the lights afforded by his best private judgment, but that a deplorable error of judgment was the immediate cause of the fall of Khartoum and the melancholy fate of its heroic defender no unprejudiced witness can attempt to deny.

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