POOR COPY



## Romolo Gessi.

**The Strange and Stirring Story of an African Traveller's Life—His War Upon the Slave Chiefs.**

[Rome Cor. New York Evening Post.]

Romolo Gessi, one of those Italian heroes of African exploration who have honored the Italian name, is dead. He was born at Ravenna, and pursued his military studies at Neuwienerstadt, but the news of his dreadful death was carried to his family, residing at Trieste. He had been absent from them three years, and the sole hope of his last days was, after infinite hardships and perils, to reach home. But that hope was not realized, as he died in the hospital at Suez. Gessi was the friend of the negro race and the enemy of slavery. Appointed by the English Pasha Gordon who was then in the service of the Khedive, to subdue the rebel slave chief, Suleiman, his success in that enterprise was rewarded by his appointment to the governorship of Bahr-el-Ghazal. In two years and a half he disciplined and armed his own soldiers, and in twenty battles destroyed the army of Suleiman, which consisted of nearly fifteen thousand men, with eight thousand in reserve. Suleiman, who was the chief negro dealer in Africa,—Gessi calculating that he exported fifty thousand slaves annually—was killed, together with other slave dealers.

"The trade has now become impossible," wrote Gessi to the Geographical Society of Rome in 1879. "I have armed all the negroes, and they can now defend themselves." In the decisive battle where he overthrew Suleiman he had two thousand well-armed rebels opposed to him, while his own force was only one thousand men, many of them being also slaveholders, and therefore not in sympathy with him. But he succeeded in defeating Suleiman and in

LIBERATING ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND SLAVES.

He made roads, opened schools, regulated the tax on ivory and gum, and tried to reduce that distant African possession of Egypt to order. But the Mussulmans there could not forgive the destruction of their trade in slaves, and they rendered his position so disagreeable that when Pasha Gordon lost his office Gessi also lost his and left Bahr-el-Ghazal.

Worn out with fatigue and mental distress he embarked on the Safia with his people, consisting of five hundred men, women, and children, in September 1880. But his voyage on the upper Nile was destined to become known as one of the most tragic events in African history. The vessel, which was not strong enough to force its way through the masses of aquatic plants which incumber that portion of the river, became tangled in them and remained there three months and a half. This sudd, an aquatic plant which grows in equatorial latitudes, transforms the stream into a vast impenetrable marsh and stops navigation as completely as the ice does in northern regions. All the efforts of Gessi, who set his men to work with hatchets and spades to liberate the Safia and the four barges attached to it, were unavailing. To the horrors of his strange imprisonment were soon added intense sufferings by famine. About half of the people with Gessi died from fever and famine, and many of the survivors who were rescued by another vessel which went to their relief also died after reaching Khartoum, a city of about eighty thousand inhabitants, capital of the Egyptian Sudan.

The dead bodies of the women, the children, the weak, and the old, who first succumbed to these miseries, lay putrefying for weeks on the strong branches of the dreadful plants that held them in a giant embrace. Several of the dead bodies were devoured by the survivors, and Gessi relates in his report to the Italian Geographical Society that the moral effect of these scenes upon his own spirit was more dreadful than even his sufferings for want of food. The people, also, to alleviate hunger, cut up the skins in which their effects were wrapped into strips, soaked them in water over night, and then

BOILED AND ROASTED THEM.

The fruit of one of the plants near them, resembling the artichoke, was eaten, but could not be found in sufficiently large quantities. Added to the hunger and fatigue occasioned by working in the water to liberate the ship, was the torment of mosquitoes at night. Many of the sufferers walked the deck all night, and sometimes in turning put their feet on the sleepers, when groans and screams and often fighting succeeded. At one time in the early part of this period of torment the Safia was within half a mile of open water, and Gessi hoped in three days to be able to reach it, but a tempest, followed by two hours of hail, drove them back into the green wilderness of branches. After that they could not see the pure water even from the masts.

The night before the rescuing vessel arrived, Gessi wrote: "I felt myself dying; I felt languor and emptiness, and my strength was leaving me. I cannot describe what passed through my mind that night. I had escaped death in so many battles, from so many betrayals and conspiracies against my life, and I must die at last in the middle of a river from the same cause that had killed thousands and thousands in Niam-Niam or in the burning desert of Darfur." When his friend, the German traveler Marne, reached him on board the ship Bordeen, Gessi was reduced to a skeleton. The strong man whom his friends had always compared to a lion, the brave soldier who feared neither enemies nor death, was as weak as a child. He was lifted on board the other vessel and was soon partly restored, but the sufferings had been too great, and a fever ensued, which ended his life soon after.

The journal kept by Gessi during his imprisonment among the barrazzi was sent to the Geographical Society of Rome after his liberation. The intrepid spirit of this Italian traveller faces death with calmness as he nightly keeps the record of his suffering. "We are constantly laboring," he says, "at one plant about

TWELVE THOUSAND FEET LONG,

and every day the work is more difficult for my people, because they are half immersed in water. We are surrounded as if by a strong wall. It is as difficult to go back as to advance, and we can not send messenger or relief, as both the shores are populated by warlike and savage enemies who are not friendly to us." At the end of the second month he writes: "The moment is critical. There is no hope of salvation. All begin to abandon themselves to desperation, and, seated on deck with their heads down, wait for death."

On the last day of December: "This is the most terrible day. I remember nothing like it in all my life. To-morrow is the new year—a sad day for me I think of my home, of my wife, my children, who in their play know nothing of the terrible situation of their father. So ends the year 1880, and I am led to this extremity because I was not fortunate in my campaign against slavery. The influential men of Khartoum had condemned the war against Sulieman as it injured their own interests."

New Year's day he greets with: "The day is dawning, and in thought I send best wishes to family, relatives, and friends." On the 4th he writes: "If help does not come to-morrow we shall be dead: Hunger has exhausted all the strength and every hope of my people." But on the 5th of January they hear guns and see the vapor from a steamer. "It is the Ismailia. Great God be thanked!" Tears fall from all their eyes, and the lion-hearted Gessi himself weeps as all of these suffering creatures go up one after another to kiss his hands and feet. "God be thanked, We are safe!"

Home, and wife, and children, and friends seemed near again to the weary traveller, who, after three years of African life, longed for rest with them. But the strain had been too great even for his iron constitution, and he died without seeing them.

Thus perished one of the noblest martyrs of the crusade against slavery. Victim of the cupidity of the Arabs of Khartoum, who saw the destruction of a chief source of their wealth, he was recalled by their influence from his work of liberation in Bahr-el-Ghazal and Darfur. He was accused of wishing to exclude the Arab element and make use of the negroes in his administration and of teaching them to assert their independence.

Bahr-el-Ghazal and the provinces adjoining were the centre of the African slave trade. Twenty thousand Arabs were occupied in his traffic, and at least eighty thousand slaves were captured and exported annually. This is the veay lowest calculation, and the number was probably twice as many, if not greater even than that. Every Arab settled there had

FROM THIRTY TO TWO HUNDRED SLAVES,

and from Jessuf Pascia Gessi took three hundred. Even the poorest Arab kept about twenty huts made of straw and encircled with thorns, within which the slaves were kept fastened to each other by a long chain. Gessi destroyed all these places of wickedness and let the slaves go free.

The neighborhood of Bahr-el-Ghazal was, not long ago, inhabited by two hundred thousand families of a tribe called Dgangey. The Arabs preferred to hunt for slaves here on account of the numerous flocks of sheep in the land, and the Dgangey were soon reduced to thirty thousand families. These moved to some land inaccessible to their tormenters on account of the pestilential air and the marshes, but only after the triumph of Gessi over Suileman were they persuaded to return to their own land.

The death of Gessi will revive this terrible scourge in that part of Africa, as even while he was there the Arabs only awaited his departure to revenge themselves on the negroes who had assisted him. He believed, however, that with four or five stations directed by honest persons slavery could be abolished.

Romolo Gessi was of medium stature, thin, with chestnut hair and beard.—His vivid glance, quick speech, great activity, and indomitable energy early marked him as one adapted to great enterprises. The last will make his name forever remembered among the unhappy negroes of Central Africa as a liberator and benefactor. But he was known previously for his explorations in the upper Nile, and for his circumnavigation of Lake Albert.

This lake had already been discovered by Samuel Baker, but Gessi was the first to circumnavigate it, which he did in 1876. For this exploit, the honor of which Henry Stanley contests with him, he received a gold medal from the Italian Geographical Society.

"If the voyage were not perilous it would not charm me," he said, but this was dangerous enough even for his bold spirit. One of his companions was eaten by a crocodile; one died from fever which he himself had also: the white ants destroyed their goods: they were drenched with rain and at night tormented with mosquitoes. With the aid of one thousand men hired by the Egyptian government he transported three boats over very high mountains destitute of roads. The boats were thirty feet long and were manned by eighteen mariners and twelve soldiers. Gessi was accompanied by another intrepid Italian traveller—Carlo Piazza,—and although the season was unfavorable on account of heavy rains and the natives were hostile, yet he succeeded in exploring this lake. He considered it a great reservoir, but not the source of the Nile, which is Victoria Nyanza.

Here also were those growths of vegetation which four years later became the source of his death. "Numerous floating islands of vegetation of immense size move about the waters and for days prevent navigation. The stalks rise twelve or fifteen feet in height, and sometimes the wind moves them as if they were sails. They go at the rate of four or five miles an hour, and the waters are continually changing their aspect."


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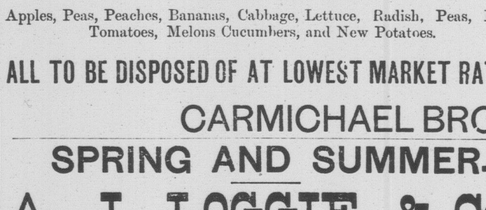

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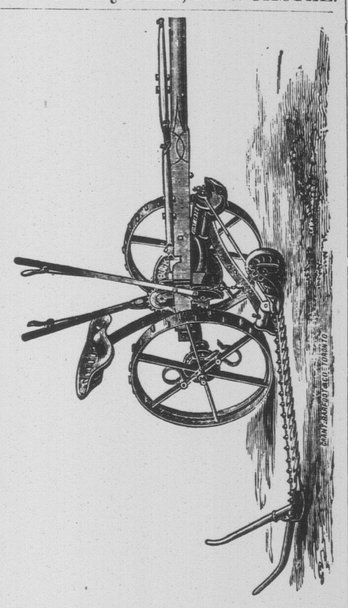

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