



A Persian Roseleaf by Lt. Col. Andrew Haggard.

CHAPTER V.—(Continued.)

"Because I want to charge the enemy and run a dash through the body to-morrow—and then perhaps they will mention me to the Sirdar."

CHAPTER VI. Brave Men Fighting.

An hour or two before dawn the troops were afoot, for it was intended to take the Derwish army by surprise if possible. There were in large force in a long straggling village called Ghinnes, stretched out along the right bank of the Nile among date palms, and held a strong advanced post in a hamlet, fortified with several guns, about six hundred yards from the fort which the Cameron Highlanders had constructed at Kosheh. Opposite to this fort, on the other side of the Nile, about twelve hundred yards away, half of the Black Battalion were entrenched along a work which went by the name of Borrow's Zariba. In front of Fort Kosheh, and covering the Derwish advanced post, was the celebrated "black rock," where the 1st Brigade of the Anglo-Egyptian force was, or even of what various units it was composed. It was not for him to know things but to blindly obey such orders as might be given to him by every other officer and man in the force.

He found this starting off of the troops in the dark before proceeding into a battle a very weird and solemn sight. De Clinton had impressed upon the strictest silence was maintained among the officers and men.

Despite, however, all attempts at silence, a sort of confused murmur vailed to rise into the cold night air; vague forms were seen, and the sound of a dull tramping was heard—it was a regiment moving off; a rattling and clanging of chains next attracted his attention, and he saw a man passing. No one said an unnecessary word, no matches were struck, no pipes lighted; orders were given in a low tone and passed on quietly from company to company. A soft rose and heavily filled air, which was so sweet to the nostrils, Rothiemay realized, there was moving a grim, resistless force of men, going on to death or glory, controlled by the love of honor and the iron hand of discipline. He felt that the sensation permeating his whole being was a grim and peculiar thrill of subdued excitement, a sensation worth having lived to have experienced, because it was like nothing else in existence. Half an hour later the guns had been brought up, the 2nd Brigade was in position upon some rocky heights, and the derwish army was beginning to dawn, the derwish army was opened upon this 2nd Brigade of the Anglo-Egyptian force, which was entirely separated from the 1st Brigade, who were a mile away, turning the flank of the main Derwish camp. Rothiemay was now under fire in earnest; the air seemed full of bullets, while the red flashes from the enemy's rifles and howitzers lightened up the gloom in the derwish camp in a continuous but irregular fire.

As the guns on the heights flashed forth their reply, and the various regiments, deployed into line, opened fire with company volleys, the din became terrific. Presently an exciting scene was witnessed as the light increased; the rest of the 2nd Brigade, consisting of the Cameron Highlanders, with half of the Black Battalion, led by Borrow and Gregorie, on their right, now swept forward from the fort at Kosheh, crossed the ravine, and stormed the hamlet at the point of the bayonet.

The advanced force of the Derwish now slowly gave way, the troops on the heights advancing and attacking them in flank. In the distance also the roar of battle was louder and louder, as the 1st Brigade under General Butler became hotly engaged with the ferocious Derwish, who charged up at them along the ravine and got among the Egyptian Camel Corps, commanded by Marriott.

After the first five minutes of the battle, the young Viscount had entirely forgotten that he was under fire himself. Even the derwish men moving about to pick up the wounded, he did not affect him, as, with the coolness of a veteran, he sought to carefully control the regularity of the fire of the left half battalion of his corps during the halts after each succeeding advance.

Presently, as the Blacks emerged from the hamlet and pressed onward along through the date palms, as the Highlanders too advanced gallantly across the fire-swept plain, the remainder of the brigade pushed also steadily down from the heights, and a large force of the derwish followers of the Mahdi was forced to give way before their onslaught. They did so, however, while resisting desperately. Suddenly, however, it was realized that owing to the eager advance of the Soudanese, a large party of the enemy had been left in possession of the fortified houses of the hamlet.

Two companies of the Camerons, left behind to finish off what had at first been imagined to be but a few men, and found that they had far more to reckon with than they expected. Each time they advanced in the open towards the houses, they had men shot down from the loopholes, while being able to inflict no damage on their return. They had been compelled to retire again behind a ridge of rocks a few hundred yards away from the houses, whence they kept up a steady but ineffective fire upon the loopholes. This fire had however the effect of preventing the Derwish from leaving the hamlet, even supposing they had a mind to do so.

Behind the house" gasped De Clinton, half-strangled: "the door! go in!"

The order being in Arabic, neither Warburton nor Rothiemay took it in at first. Moravany, both were slightly confused. The plucky young interpreter was, however, unharmed, and, quick as lightning repeating the order clearly in Arabic, headed the relieving party, rushed round to the door, which had indeed been left open when the six Derwish had come out.

Shouting "Hujum! Hujum—Charge! Charge!" Fehmy dashed in, followed by the corporal, the sergeant and their followers. Moritadda Efendi was now bringing up a company at a smart run. De Clinton, who had recovered his wind, took command of these and led them quickly round behind the building, all of which he had already discovered to be connected with each other. Rothiemay and the English sergeant followed, just in time to see a body of Derwish intercepting them, and escaping from a side door opposite to that by which Fehmy and his party had entered. A number of them were shot down by men who had been posted to watch the ravine, but there was a hand-to-hand fighting, and the bodies of the Derwish, with a few of the Egyptians, soon dotted the plain in all directions. As there were already bodies of some of the Soudanese near the Black Battalion lying here and there, and a few of the Derwish whom they had killed at the dawn of day, the scene round the hamlet now resembled a bloody shambles.

It was now nearly mid-day, and all the rest of the army had moved several miles away in pursuit of the retreating foe. This animated scene was closing by the issue of Ibrahim Efendi Fehmy, followed by his men, with dripping bayonets from the houses, and a few Derwish, who met De Clinton and his following as they came out, when an officer came riding up at a gallop. It was the Brigade-Major of the 2nd Brigade, who had been sent back to see what was going on, and he arrived just in time to come in for the lively finish. De Clinton and Rothiemay, with their white uniforms dripping with blood, had remounted their horses, and like the sergeant who had lost the top half of his ear, presented a somewhat sorry spectacle. They soon assured the Brigade-Major, however, that they looked far worse than they felt, for in the joy of victory they did not indeed know that they were hurt. The Brigade-Major rode round to see where the six men had been killed in the hand-to-hand tussle, and, after congratulating De Clinton upon his escape and the good behavior of his men, he communicated the Brigadier's instructions. These were that the Commanding Officer was to march his men to join the rest of the army as soon as he could. At the same time he communicated the joyful information that the victory of the Anglo-Egyptian force had been complete, that Abdel el Majid el Saghair, the Derwish leader, had been killed and his head had been taken. Four guns had been captured, and the cavalry were pursuing the flying foe up along the banks of the Nile.

Before the Brigade-Major left, De Clinton said to him, "I wish to make three presentations to him; and he called out the names of Major Viscount Rothiemay, Sergeant Warburton and Lieutenant-Interpreter Ibrahim Efendi Fehmy.

"Major Dickson," he said, "I wish to present to you three brave men, who have fought like heroes, as I wish you to be kind enough to inform the Brigadier."

"Nothing," if you please," replied De Clinton, smiling. "This was too much for young Fehmy. With a convulsive sob, the Interpreter burst out: "Oh, sir! please tell the General that the Bey has fought like—fought like God! sir."

"I thought you did not believe in a God, Fehmy," said Rothiemay—"that you were the Battalion Freethinker!" "I have resigned that position, sir, for ever," retorted the boy, smiling, "I do believe in a God, now, sir, for He has saved all our lives to-day!"

Dickson rode off to make his report, and, after De Clinton had buried all his dead officers and men in an Arab cemetery in the desert close by, he marched his weary battalion after the Brigade-Major, and joined the victor's army at their campment beyond the village of Ghinnes.

CHAPTER VII. Doing the Commissariat Job.

After the battle of Ghinnes, when the Derwish had followed the retreating Egyptians as far as Abu el Nili, it was the ardent hope of the army that they might be allowed to proceed still further and recapture the fertile province of Dongola. Mr. Gladstone, however, who then ruled the destinies of Great Britain, decided otherwise, and at Suakin, after the battles of Tamal and El Teb a year or two earlier, the forces were recalled after many brave men had shed their blood absolutely uselessly. The Soudan was abandoned to the Khalifa Abdullah, the Mahdi's successor; only one British corps and some Egyptian troops being left entrenched near the now ruined Nubian village of Ghinnes.

This spot, some hundred and twenty miles south of Wady Halfa, was declared to be henceforward the frontier between Egypt and the vast territories of the fertile Soudan, which had belonged to Egypt until the uprising of that false Messiah, the Mahdi.

The Soudan Bey being left in command of the Egyptian contingent of the main regiment, a detachment of the Camel Corps and some Soudanese, established his headquarters in the old Arab fort of Mograkkeh. There he had with him about three hundred of his battalion, the rest of which, under various officers, he posted in detachments at Firket, Sarkametto and Agasheh to his rear.

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He retained with him, making of the Bantehis militia-men his practical second-in-command at the frontier post. It was a horrible gulf of fort, containing within its high walls a quantity of mud huts full of numberless flies. These huts were roofed in with old tents and palm branches, but in spite of the discomfort of the Bey and the Viscount soon recovered of their respective wounds. Both had been offered by the Sirdar the opportunity of returning to Cairo, to recruit, but neither of the plucky fellows would consent to remain absent from duty for so much as a day. It was, perhaps, without a certain amount of heart-burning that they witnessed all their friends, including Sir Herbert Merklind and Effingham, march past their encampment in the following order: Poor Beaumont did not go back; alas! with a bullet in his head he had been buried in the desert!

Sir Herbert, whom they had seen almost daily since the battle, rode back quickly round behind the building, all of which he had already discovered to be connected with each other. Rothiemay and the English sergeant followed, just in time to see a body of Derwish intercepting them, and escaping from a side door opposite to that by which Fehmy and his party had entered. A number of them were shot down by men who had been posted to watch the ravine, but there was a hand-to-hand fighting, and the bodies of the Derwish, with a few of the Egyptians, soon dotted the plain in all directions. As there were already bodies of some of the Soudanese near the Black Battalion lying here and there, and a few of the Derwish whom they had killed at the dawn of day, the scene round the hamlet now resembled a bloody shambles.

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They were called back, whereas, had we gone on them, Khartoum would never have been taken. The magnificent field-marshal, Lord Gordon, would have been alive to-day. It makes me positively sick to think of such folly! But what can we do? Yes, we shall no doubt have the Camel Corps, but if we do not, it will be the Derwishes who take Egypt next. But it will be a bloodier job than ever next time, and as the chances are that the British government won't move until forced to, at all events while Gladstone is at the head, you will very likely have Abdullah's men coming down here to look you up and do the forcing. There now" added Sir Herbert, pointing towards the walls, "you see those huts and those date palm trees, between you and that dry ravine, which will be full of water when the Nile next rises? You should have everyone of them blown up. They afford splendid cover to an enemy, and although it seems an awful pity to sacrifice the date palms, which belong, I suppose, to some poor devils of Nubians, they must be demolished. Yes, they must."

"Yes," retorted De Clinton, "the wretched owners of those trees have been impressed into the Mahdi's army, and will probably try to desert now to come back to their homes; but I see a military necessity of what you say. I will level the houses and cut down the palms, although they are absolutely useless as fuel, and that is what we shall want a lot of. There are some mimosa here and there, you notice—they will burn. We shall have to cut down all there are left of them, but we shall have to depend chiefly for fuel upon what we can get up on camels and mules from Akasheh. But do you know, Merklind, they have left me most miserably off for transport? I have got nothing but a few sore-backed camels and mules, and can never lay in a supply of wood enough to provide against a possible siege. Fodder I have in abundance, which your troops have left behind; supplies of biscuits, beans and lentils, too, which my men can, if necessary, live on without meat; also loads of tinned 'bully-beef' for us few Englishmen—the Egyptians will eat it—but nothing else, hardly any fresh meat in the way of cattle or sheep, although I could feed a lot of them too, if I had them."

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"But here is someone who can choose to say so. I could give you on with Herbert at once to-night, if he will give me a blanket at his camp, and then go on with him to-morrow; and, if you will send down twenty men of the Camel Corps, will bring back the transport myself and the devil himself shan't stop me. I'll take the desert short cut back to make sure."

And so it was arranged—and the Commissariat Johannes were done.

CHAPTER VIII. Pretty Teeth and Fine Eyes Be D—!

There was plenty to do to pass the time. Drill early every morning, and the improvements in the fortifications and cleaning up of the fort at other seasons, gave plenty of occupation. As owing to his office work, De Clinton was kept in the orderly room but very often when Rothiemay was unemployed, he deputized the latter as shikari or huntsman to the fort. A capital shot, he proved very successful in keeping the larger predators off the premises of the beautiful Soudanese gazelles, which came down at dawn from the ravines of the granite mountains to feed on the crops which the natives had planted in the fertile strip of alluvial soil near the river.

Lord Rothiemay proved also an adept in stalking the splendid wild Egyptian geese, to do which he found himself compelled to resort to strategy. These splendid fowl, although wary to a degree, were not so much afraid of man as uniform, seemed to have no fear of the ordinary natives of the country, by whom, eternally employed in the occupation of raising water for irrigation from the river bed, they had never been molested.

With blackened face, clad in a filthy turban and Nubian cotton dress, Rothiemay, with Mahmud Omar, his orderly, similarly attired, would pretend to work one of the water-raising machines called a shaduf, until the unsuspecting geese approached. Then, while Omar went on with the monotonous occupation, Reginald would himself let go of the long wooden beam of the shaduf, seize his gun and let fly. When a wounded goose made off down the river, Omar, who could swim and dive like a duck, plunged in after it. Utterly fearless of crocodiles, of which there were a few about, he never left the water without his prey.

In his spare hours the Bimbashi devoted himself closely with Fehmy Effendi to the study of Arabic; and as he had a natural aptitude for languages, and a real soul in him, he was able to master the gutturals, he made the most marvellous progress colloquially, and, moreover, learned how to write the Arabic characters. What was harder still, he learned to write in himself, he acquired the art of deciphering what others had written, studying the reports and letters of the Egyptian officers, written in a flowing hand.

The only Arabic book which he had read was a copy of the Koran, but this he studied assiduously, with the assistance of the regimental imam or Machedan Arabic, giving the proper inflection to the vowel sounds in a manner quite beyond the art of Fehmy, who only pronounced the Oriental language after the manner of modern Egypt. Under the Imam's tuition, Lord Rothiemay soon learned to repeat the passages of the Koran, which he by heart, while swaying the body to and fro after the fashion of the "fikis" or religious readers. The so-called "readers" are, by the bye, named on the Lucas manuscript as "sincipitels," since, when engaged to amuse the company at marriages and other ceremonies, they never read from a book but only recite.

To hear Rothiemay beginning a long passage with "In the name of Allah, the most Gracious, the most Merciful," and then to see him utter a few words of the Koran, which he had learned to repeat by heart, while swaying the body to and fro after the fashion of the "fikis" or religious readers. The so-called "readers" are, by the bye, named on the Lucas manuscript as "sincipitels," since, when engaged to amuse the company at marriages and other ceremonies, they never read from a book but only recite.

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And so it was arranged—and the Commissariat Johannes were done.

CHAPTER VIII. Pretty Teeth and Fine Eyes Be D—!

There was plenty to do to pass the time. Drill early every morning, and the improvements in the fortifications and cleaning up of the fort at other seasons, gave plenty of occupation. As owing to his office work, De Clinton was kept in the orderly room but very often when Rothiemay was unemployed, he deputized the latter as shikari or huntsman to the fort. A capital shot, he proved very successful in keeping the larger predators off the premises of the beautiful Soudanese gazelles, which came down at dawn from the ravines of the granite mountains to feed on the crops which the natives had planted in the fertile strip of alluvial soil near the river.

Lord Rothiemay proved also an adept in stalking the splendid wild Egyptian geese, to do which he found himself compelled to resort to strategy. These splendid fowl, although wary to a degree, were not so much afraid of man as uniform, seemed to have no fear of the ordinary natives of the country, by whom, eternally employed in the occupation of raising water for irrigation from the river bed, they had never been molested.

With blackened face, clad in a filthy turban and Nubian cotton dress, Rothiemay, with Mahmud Omar, his orderly, similarly attired, would pretend to work one of the water-raising machines called a shaduf, until the unsuspecting geese approached. Then, while Omar went on with the monotonous occupation, Reginald would himself let go of the long wooden beam of the shaduf, seize his gun and let fly. When a wounded goose made off down the river, Omar, who could swim and dive like a duck, plunged in after it. Utterly fearless of crocodiles, of which there were a few about, he never left the water without his prey.

In his spare hours the Bimbashi devoted himself closely with Fehmy Effendi to the study of Arabic; and as he had a natural aptitude for languages, and a real soul in him, he was able to master the gutturals, he made the most marvellous progress colloquially, and, moreover, learned how to write the Arabic characters. What was harder still, he learned to write in himself, he acquired the art of deciphering what others had written, studying the reports and letters of the Egyptian officers, written in a flowing hand.

The only Arabic book which he had read was a copy of the Koran, but this he studied assiduously, with the assistance of the regimental imam or Machedan Arabic, giving the proper inflection to the vowel sounds in a manner quite beyond the art of Fehmy, who only pronounced the Oriental language after the manner of modern Egypt. Under the Imam's tuition, Lord Rothiemay soon learned to repeat the passages of the Koran, which he by heart, while swaying the body to and fro after the fashion of the "fikis" or religious readers. The so-called "readers" are, by the bye, named on the Lucas manuscript as "sincipitels," since, when engaged to amuse the company at marriages and other ceremonies, they never read from a book but only recite.

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