

THE HOUSSA FORCE.

A correspondent of the *Times*, writing from Freetown, August 13, describes the Houssa Force which has received so much marked praise for their gallantry in Colonel Festing's despatch from Elmina, as the "English Turcos." The force is of a very recent origin having been first raised about eight years ago by Captain John Hawley Glover, the late administrator of Lagos, who in organizing a force conferred a benefit on all the West Africa Settlements which ought not lightly to be forgotten.

"The Houssa tribe, from which these troops came, are an independent race of Mahomedan negroes, who inhabit an extensive district which commences about 200 miles inland to the northeast of our settlement of Lagos, and extends between latitude 11 deg. and 14 deg. north, and longitude 4 deg. and 11 deg. East. They are very numerous and are a most warlike race, being nearly all soldiers, disdain any other pursuit or occupation. They hire themselves out as mercenary soldiers to all the surrounding peoples. Captain Glover, being struck by their military capabilities, and having had numerous opportunities of satisfying himself of their desperate courage, conceived the idea of forming a corps of them and drilling them in English fashion. The experiment has turned out a wonderful success. At first there was great difficulty in drilling the earlier recruits, but now the new recruits, with the example of their already trained fellow-countrymen before them master the routine with wonderful rapidity.

"They are all pure blooded negroes, and, as a rule, are fine, tall, soldierly looking men. Like many of the other Mahomedan tribes on the coast, they walk with a good deal of swagger. They are light limbed and somewhat spindle shanked, but in this climate can, without injury, go through an amount of hard work and marching which fatigue any other known force. Some officers now on the coast who have seen service in India have been much struck by the many points of resemblance between the Houssas and the Sikhs. Although all Mahomedans, they are what are popularly called on the west coast of Africa "Salt-water Mahomedans." This term is most usually applied to the Mahomedan tribes on the sea, who, from their intercourse with the whites, have relaxed their principles, at least, on the point of not partaking of intoxicating drinks.

"Their uniform consists of a short jacket and loose Zouave trousers, which reach to the knee, both made of blue serge and trimmed with red braid. Their headdress consists of a red fez, and they wear a large red scarf round their waists. They go barefooted and barelegged from the knee downward. They are armed with a Snider rifle and bayonet. They, as a rule carry one or more dagger knives in their belts. These knives are their own property, and are not given to them by Government. In action at close quarters they hardly ever use the bayonet, nearly always using their clubbed muskets, which they use with terrible effect. When going into action they generally advance in loose skirmishing order with tremendous yells, invoking Allah and the Prophet. They indulge in the most extraordinary antics, jumping and bounding about in the wildest way and brandishing their weapons, and appear to feel a stern joy at the prospect of battle. Although admirably suited to this coast, the Houssas would not, probably, succeed if opposed to regular troops armed

with breechloaders. They cannot be kept in hand, and, regardless of all obstacles, of the nature of the ground or of the want of cover, rush on to decide matters at close quarters.

"At Elmina, after their encounter with the Ashantees, they returned to their quarters singing a wild but martial air with a stirring chorus, at each repetition of which they threw their rifles into the air. They unfortunately, still retain many of their savage tastes, notably a custom of decapitating the bodies of those they kill in battle. They look upon it as a great grievance that they are not allowed to ornament their drums with the skulls of those they slay. After the engagement at Danquah they cut off the heads of a number of the Ashantee dead and brought them back to their camp, where they kicked them about as footballs for some time, and were with difficulty stopped by their commander, Mr. Loggie. The Houssas are all fatalists, and firmly believe that as you are predestined to die at a particular time it is quite useless to try and avoid death. This may account for their complete disregard of danger. It is always necessary for the officers commanding them to be on good terms with the Mahomedan priest attached to his command. The privates are paid 13s. a day. Except when actually in the field, they require neither rations nor any assistance from the Commissariat. They procure their own food. They are capital foragers, but have somewhat loose ideas on the ownership of stray goats, sheep, or turkeys they may meet with. Goat's flesh is their favourite meat, but their principal food is the cassava root beaten up into a thick paste called *dombah*. They always have some women with them—about half a dozen to each hundred men—to do their cooking. They look upon it as undignified for soldiers to do their own cooking. They require little barrack accommodation as, except in the rainy season, they always sleep out in the open air on a simple mat, even on moonlight nights. They repudiate with indignation the title of policemen. Recently at Elmina when they found that in an official publication they had been described as 'Houssa Police,' they threatened to lay down their arms and return to Lagos overland through the bush, a distance of some hundreds of miles if they were so called again. They said they were the Queen's soldiers, and glad to fight for her, but were not policemen. The elder men among the Houssas enjoy great influence with the younger comrades. Few among the Houssas, even of the non-commissioned officers, can speak English, probably not more than about five or six men in each company. The words of command are given to them in English, and they understand them. A recruit takes but a very short time to master the different words of command. They also display great quickness in mistaking the different bugle calls and go through the manual and platoon with a steadiness which would do credit to a Line regiment. Some of them have received some instruction in gunnery from Mr. Loggie, and at a push could work the guns in the forts. They are very obedient and are orderly enough, except that they are noisy in the ranks, cannot be prevented from chattering and talking. They require to be ruled with a very firm hand. If they like their commanding officer and have confidence in his courage and fairness, he can do anything with them and they will follow him anywhere. On one occasion recently the officer in command of a detachment of them believing that one of the Houssas under his

command had been guilty of a very gross breach of discipline, beat him very severely with a stick while he was in the ranks on parade; afterwards discovering he had been mistaken as to the identity of the culprit, he publicly apologised to the man he had beaten on the next parade. This gave great satisfaction to the Houssas, who were loud in their praises of their commander's justice. None of the Houssas hold higher rank than that of sergeant-major. All their officers are English. They are very fair marksmen, but when under fire they became so excited that they throw away very many shots.

"All the Houssas now on the Gold Coast have been formed into one corps, and placed under the command of Captain Brett, of the 2nd West India Regiment, who has had good experience of bush fighting, and distinguished himself greatly in the Quiah war. He appears admirably suited for the post, and has gained to a remarkable degree the confidence of the fierce and stern soldiers he commands. In any future engagements Brett and his Houssas are sure to give a good account of themselves. It is no easy task to find an officer whom the Houssas willingly obey. On several occasions they have declined to be commanded by officers selected for the post, having their own ideas as to who are fit to command them and who are not. Among those who have commanded them, none have obtained greater ascendancy over them than Mr. J. C. Loggie, the Inspector General of the Sierra Leone Police. They require no commissariat, and but little barracks accommodation and are not only fine fighting men, but admirable soldiers to march or undergo severe fatigue. A force of them, well disciplined and armed, and commanded by men of the stamp of Brett and Loggie, will be sure to add to the prestige of the British arms on the West Coast, and with proper discipline and time, could be easily broken from the ferocious practices which know disgrace their bravery.

Since the above was in type, the following letter has appeared containing an important correction and some additional information:—

"Sir,—In the *Times* of to-day, as well as in notices in other journals I observe that whatever credit there may be in the raising and organisation of the Houssa force has erroneously been given to Commander John Hawtry Glover, who succeeded me as Colonial Secretary and Lieutenant Governor of Lagos in 1864, when I was obliged to return to England on account of a gunshot wound in the head received in a severe skirmish at Epé, when I was in command of the Lagos Houssa Corps, which force I raised, organised, armed, drilled, and led in a successful action which proved their metal, as they attacked and repulsed a native force some thirty times their number. An account of this appeared in the *Times* of the 13th of April, 1863, and again in the official report laid before Parliament by Mr. Chichester Fortescue, June 16, 1863. I was the first officer on the West Coast of Africa who found out and reported to Government the amenability and special physical characteristics of the Houssa race for military service, which opinion I formed from the stanch bravery of the run away slaves of that nation who formed my hunting gang in several exploring expeditions into the interior, and I was the first who suggested their employment and enrolled them as a military force. I was the first Colonial Secretary and Lieutenant Governor appointed to Lagos after its cession