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## FIGHTERS FOR THE FLAG

The Story of the 21st Lancers and the Heroic Part They Played Under Kitchener in Defeating the Dervishes at Omdurman.

VIII. 21st LANCERS (The Empress of India's.)

THE year 1858 is known as the Year of the Mutiny to all students of Indian history, for then the old East India Company, which hitherto had managed Indian affairs after its own commercial way found itself face to face with a problem beyond its powers and after a brief struggle had to give the rein into the hands of the Empire. But in the last years of its existence the old "John Company" made a great effort to hold its own and thus in its last throes called new regiments into being. Among these was one known as the 3rd Bengal European Cavalry—a singularly cumbersome title—which, being raised in troublous times, saw active service from the very first moment of its inception.

The story of the horrors held within that year and its successor is too well known to be dwelt on here, but through it all went the new-formed regiment. Then in 1862 the John Company ceased to exist, the great Empire of India came into being (virtually, that is: of course the actual name was not adopted until some years later), and the armies of the company became attached to the crown. Among other regiments (the Royal Munster Fusiliers, the Royal Dublin Fusiliers may be mentioned), the 3rd Bengal European Cavalry was transferred, starting a new era under the far more euphonious name of the 21st Lancers.

It was the fourth British regiment to bear the number 21 as a prefix, and to a certain extent it may be said to have been the inheritor of the laurels won by its predecessors, though they had been dragoons, not lancers. The first of these 21st Dragoons had been raised by the celebrated Marquis of Granby, in the year 1760, only to be disbanded three years later. In 1779 it was again raised, to be disbanded almost at its birth; but in 1794 for the third time it sprang into existence—a very splendid corps with pink accings. Thus it rode with Wellington throughout his last great campaign, and thus it went to St. Helena as the guard of the prisoner there.

Again it was disbanded, and the title lay in abeyance for almost half a century when, with the one alteration, it descended to this East India regiment, who still bears it.

Far back in the tenth century there arose "a voice crying in the wilderness" that a mighty Messiah would come. Abdullah was the name of the prophet, and up and down the length and breadth of Persia he went, foretelling that someday there would arise a mahdi (the word means "One guided by God") who should be "a teacher greater than Mahommed, who could lead the Faithful to victory and could conquer all the world." This mahdi would never die, but he might disappear for awhile, and then at his second coming he would rule the whole world and reconcile all differences between true believers.

Far and wide the cry of the prophet resounded, with the result that a good many mahdis arose during the centuries which followed. Syria, Persia, Turkey and Egypt have each in turn seen the scene of some huge religious revival led by one who proclaimed himself greater than Mahommed, and he most modern of these teachers was a Mahommed Ahmed, born at Dongola in the year 1843, of very humble parentage.

That he was a great man after his own style, a born leader, an impassioned orator, is beyond dispute, and it may have been that long brooding over sacred writings had induced a kind of self-mesmerism so that he honestly believed he was the Messiah he professed to be. Far in the heart of Africa he summoned thousands to his banners, and called upon them to begin a great religious war which should win for him the world-wide empire that he craved.

In the days when his voice was first heard beyond the ranks of his immediate followers, the Sudan was a very unknown land indeed. Practically this "Land of the Blacks" (the actual meaning of the word by which we know it) had been untroudden and ignored until Sir Samuel Baker penetrated its heart: when he relinquished his work there (in 1873) Gordon was offered its governorship by the Khedive of Egypt. There he remained until 1880, when he resigned, and just two years later the Western world began to hear rumours of the Mahdi and of the religious rebellion of which he was the leader.

At first the man in the street was hardly curious, then it began to dawn upon him that there in the heart of the unknown land great events were toward, and finally that same man in the street read in his daily paper that General Gordon had been asked

to return to his old governorship of the Sudan. No man better understood the native temperament or was more fitted to understand the position.

Khartoum, the capital of the Sudan, was in danger from the Mahdi's troops. If that fell the whole of the great nation might well go over to the new teacher. And meanwhile there were a considerable number of Europeans shut up in the mud walls of the city, and for them there would be scant mercy if the Mahdi had his way.

It was to save them—to save those of the native population whom he had laboured and whom he had endeavoured to Christianize—that Gordon accepted the new charge. In all history there is nothing more wonderful than the story of his return to Khartoum. He went as an envoy of a great monarch, he went to take command of ill-disciplined troops who were face to face with almost countless foes and he went alone, literally and actually alone.

The Government both here and at Cairo spoke of escorts, but he would have none of them, pointing out that one man who knew the desert as well as he did would probably get through the wastes, whereas a handful would almost certainly fall into the hands of the enemy. An adequate army was out of the question. He would go alone to gather his forces and thus await reinforcements. And so mounted on a swift dromedary, he set off absolutely unaccompanied on his long journey, and so in the end to gain the beleaguered city.

There he did his best to set his defences in order, and on the other side of the Nile, at Omdurman, the Mahdi waited with his huge army and his two lieutenants, Osmā Digna—meaning, Osmā the Ugly—once a slave dealer at Pergola, now the messiah's right hand and the other the Khalifa Abdullah. The latter was a close relation of the Mahdi's—it is generally believed he was his nephew, though some say he was his son.

The story of the long months Gordon held out waiting for the reinforcements from Britain which did not come, makes ugly reading. A long last a force was dispatched—and arrived two days too late. When the little steamer with the vanguard puff ed down the Nile to Khartoum, walls shots were their welcome, and they saw the sacred flag of the Mahdi waving above what had been Government House. Of Gordon's fate there was no news there. For long there lingered hope that he was yet alive though a prisoner, but late came definite information that he had been shot on the doorstep of his house and afterwards beheaded.

It was said, too, that the Mahdi had had Khartoum at his mercy for weeks but he would not strike the final blow until the relief expedition was at its very door. He meant the wretched garrison to taste the torture of suspense, the sick of hope deferred, and he succeeded well.

With Gordon dead, Khartoum take and the whole of the surrounding country in the grip of the Mahdi, the British decided to return, and the Egyptian Government, knowing itself too weak to grapple with the problem, left the Sudan to the Mahdi, owning that its own rule stopped at Wād-Halfa.

It was in 1886, a year after Gordon's death, that the "Gazette" had a small announcement to the effect that a certain Major Kitchener had been appointed to a command in Egypt. Major Kitchener was quick to see the folly of leaving so huge a tract of country as the Sudan at the mercy of the rebels. Besides, he had not forgotten—though most people seem to have done so—that Gordon had not been the only European at Khartoum, and that there were persistent rumours as to the survival of some of his fellows.

The trouble in the Sudan might have developed earlier had the Mahdi lived, but Mahommed Ahmed did not long survive the Englishman who had defied him. In the same year he had died of smallpox, and had been buried with great splendour at Omdurman. The command of his forces devolved on Khalifa Abdullah, who seems to have made a half-hearted effort to declare himself the messiah also, but in that he was not taken seriously. It was to his uncle's temporal power that he succeeded, not to his spiritual power as well.

A terrible race they were these Dervishes, as they were somewhat loosely called, over which he held sway. Major Kitchener was quick to realize the danger, and before the British stirred in the matter he had warned the friendly Arabs. It was they, acting under his advice, who inflicted the first defeat on Osmā the Ugly in 1887, and in the next year the Sultan of Wadai joined the Khalifa's foes, only to be defeated by the Khalifa.

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himself and obliged to fly. In 1890 it was reported that the Khalifa was "supreme and unassailable" in the south of the Sudan, though Osmā's forces were broken by desertions. So the story went on, all raids and roubles, until 1897, when the Khalifa created Osmā, Emir of Emirs and Governor of Berber.

All this time the men who knew Egypt realized the appalling danger of allowing this huge movement to continue unchecked, and at length they seem to have brought the truth to a rather reluctant Government. To quote the words of an historian:—"In 1890 Lord Salisbury's Government decided on extending the Anglo-Egyptian rule over the Sudan, and a great expedition was sent from Egypt under the command of Sir Herbert Kitchener, to Khartoum."

With that expedition, under Kitchener, went the 21st Lancers, and the story of their march across the desert is historic—it is as great and as wonderful in its own way as a story of long endurance, as was that lonely rush of Gordon's over the self-same road fourteen years before. From Abu Dis to Berber they went, and at Atbara they met the Dervish army.

Our men were exhausted, and the Arabs, swooping on them, thought to have an easy victory, yet when the lay was over the British pressed on, jubilant, victorious, to enter Berber while the Dervishes were in full flight or Omdurman to their last stand around their Mahdi's tomb.

Three thousand of their number were left dead on the desert, and we add two thousand prisoners to our credit.

On September 2nd our men came to Omdurman, and took it by assault. It is estimated the Dervishes held the city fifty thousand strong, and they were actuated not only by anger at their recent reverse, but by religious frenzy as well. But our men would not be kept back, the 21st Lancers led the mighty rush, and in the end the Khalifa fled with the remnant of his force. Our loss was twenty-eight killed and three hundred and thirty wounded (some mortally), but the Dervish loss was reckoned at ten thousand eight hundred, of whom four hundred lay dead in the city streets where our men fought them hand to hand.

Two days later the British and Egyptian flags flew over Khartoum again for the first time since Gordon had died there, and Kitchener, the victor, formally annexed the country to the Egyptian crown, while one hundred and fifty European prisoners were released, most of them from hideous dungeons and appalling slavery.

To quote again from the same historian:—"Few military expeditions have been more elaborately planned or have achieved a more brilliant success. The Sudanese forces were decisively beaten with great slaughter in the immediate neighbourhood of Omdurman, and Khartoum became henceforward the capital of the new province, which was placed under Kitchener's rule."

So the power of the last mahdi died—probably to descend upon some other "guided by God" in the future, for these old faiths die hard. The Khalifa remained a fugitive for some months, but his power was broken and he was killed in December, 1898. Osmā the Ugly remained, at large—making himself a nuisance—but no longer a serious danger—until 1900. Thus the Sudan was won, thus the power of Mahdism was crushed, and the 21st Lancers rode back in triumph to meet their reward. Because of their magnificent achievement at Omdurman they were signalled for special honours, and from Khartoum were given the royal title they still bear, "The Empress of India's Regiment."

The crushing of a German Mahdi, no less brutal and blood-thirsty than his Sudanese predecessor, is the task which the 21st Lancers have at present in hand. That Omdurman pluck and dash will win through is inevitable, and the 21st Lancers will also have the honor of helping to relegate the Kulturedd Mahdi of Potsdam to the realms of oblivion.

—The End—

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