

THE MESSENGER FROM KHARTOUM

BY ST. GEORGE RATHBORNE

Author of "Dr. Jack," "Dr. Jack's Wife," "Miss Caprice," Etc., Etc.

CHAPTER I.

"Backsheesh!" hoarsely whispered a stout, red-faced traveller, bending over a small, nervous man, who, seated on the piazza in front of the well-known Shepherd's Hotel in Cairo, Egypt, dashed off page after page of lead pencil work, aided by the lights that illumined the grand piazza.

The latter individual never raises his eyes, but with a groan and a mechanical movement of the arm, draws a plaster from his pocket and holds it up, which the stout man looks at with a look of intense interest. He does not move a muscle, but stands there at the elbow of the scribe, waiting for the interminable scribbling to be done, and meanwhile watching the lively scene upon the great square of Esbehiyeh.

It is certainly a good sight for foreign eyes, and one that will never be forgotten. Although the month is February, a delicious, balmy atmosphere hangs over the old city on the Nile. Music throbs upon the air, and judging from the gay scenes to be met with after night closes in, it would be hard to believe the Mohammedan fast corresponding to our Lent is in progress. The Koran, however, only demands observance of strict rules from sunrise to sunset, so that in all Oriental countries the devout worshippers make night a period of festivity.

Just at the present period, many lanterns and flambeaux and lamps illumine the grand square, from which arise discordant sounds, a perfect babel of confusion. Here, under a cluster of palms, a snake-charmer handles his cobras with apparent impunity, boxing their heads and causing them to do all manner of strange things. Nearby are dragomans or guides haggling with owners of donkeys, who, in turn, scold or cuff the little boys in charge of the little beasts.

Close by are fakirs, pretending to sell wonderful things for a trifle; mountebanks, dealers in turban, fess, relics and handkerchiefs, and a general conglomeration of idle, curious strollers. The lights disclose a picture that can probably be looked upon in no other city save Damascus. Here mingle Turks with their red fez and national dress; Arabs in white burnous and turban; native fellahin, or Egyptians, wearing blue gowns with long beards and skull-caps; Jews with their pointed hats and gowns; Persians, Greeks and a sprinkling of foreigners. The red coats of British soldiers give way pretty much to the sensible white that is worn in all hot countries; still there is enough to lend color to the kaleidoscopic picture.

The stout man sees all this without emotion; he seldom, if ever allows himself to be so deeply interested in anything as to forget himself. Standing just back of the tilted chair of the smaller man, who writes sheet after sheet with railroad rapidity, he puffs at his cigar and calmly waits for the time to come when his friend will have exhausted the subject or blundered all his penmanship. Everything comes to one who has patience, and this is the most prominent trait in the character of the stout tourist.

"Eureka! I have done it! Glorious description! Braving rhetoric! Do you, proud, my boy! Now, I'd give a plaster to run across."

He has hardly spoken these words, half aloud, when the man with the florid face and heavy hand deliberately raps him on the shoulder.

"Pay your debts, young man. I claim the reward by virtue of discovery. Here's one miserable French money you've shored on me. French money is preferred," he says, solemnly.

"Oh! It is you, who growed 'Backsheesh' in my ear, was it? It's a howling paradise of boggars. I go to bed with a bag of plasters—give 'em out in my sleep, I assure you, Grimes."

Sandy Barlow is the correspondent of a great daily journal in the United States, and is never known to be in any thing but a hurry. In piping times of peace he finds material to employ his pencil in various foreign countries, and his letters have been considered fine reading on account of their piquancy and crisp style, characteristic of everything the man does.

Those who know Sandy best have discovered that the war correspondent has a warm heart, and will readily go out of his way to help one whom he counts a friend. This stout gentleman whom he calls Grimes is no rumor says—the wealthy owner of several mines in Colorado, about which he occasionally speaks. He keeps his own counsel, however, and any one who is a good judge of physiognomy would have little difficulty in reading on his resolute face all the signs that go to make up a determined character.

"Are you at liberty, Barlow? If so, I'd like to have a little talk," remarks the silver king.

"Great Caesar! Why didn't you say so before? Singular man! Didn't want to interrupt the flow of genius, eh? But I'd drop even my pencil to oblige you."

"There was no great need of haste. You were the first one I thought of when old Tanner brought me the news. You know him?"

"Like a book! Gruff old party; lovely daughter, Molly. Go on! What was his news? Is England aroused at last to the emergency?"

"Just the contrary. Listen to what I say. Old Tanner tells me his dahabeah, or house boat, has just come down the river; they left it some two hundred

of there. Now we shall see what news he brings. I am ready if you are, Mr. Barlow!"

Sandy smiles as he remembers that this man, now eagerness to depart, was in no hurry before, but took things in a cool manner, as though the world was not made in a day and Obed Grimes had no need of haste. Circumstances alter cases, and the mere mention of a name has put new energy in Mr. Grimes.

Nor is the war correspondent less eager to be on the way. He has received something of a shock upon hearing Molly speak that name. Memories of the past are recalled, which take him to other scenes.

"You will pardon us for leaving you?" says the polite Mr. Grimes to the young girl.

"Certainly. Indeed, you cannot go too soon to please me. I am anxious to hear what this poor man has to say. To me General Gordon has always been the hero of heroes, and any one who comes from him demands my attention and sympathy. Go then to this poor German, see what he most needs, and if Molly Tanner or her father can in any way help him, do not neglect to give me notice."

Again the two men glance toward each other and smile, but although they see this, there is no explanation made of their actions.

Bowing to the young American girl, they turn away, leaving the piazza of the hotel.

"Remember!" floats her warning voice after them, and Mr. Grimes, turning, waves his hand.

Then they are lost in the crowd that jostle elbows in the square called Esbehiyeh, in front of Shepherd's Hotel.

Around them sound the voices of dragoman and fakir, mule driver and peddler, mountebank and camel driver, while the barking of dogs can be heard everywhere, the streets of Cairo literally running wild with curs.

"Are you armed?"

"As they cross the grand plaza and head into a street that leads from it down to the river Nile."

The silver king chuckles.

"Never go without a revolver, my boy. Learned that habit years ago," he replies.

"Yes, you Western men generally do carry a whole armory on your backs. Beastly region we have to pass through. Black as—well, Egypt."

"Let's hire a light—no getting around in this quarter without one."

They discover near by one of those link-boys, whose trade is fast dying out in Cairo since the improvements advanced by British rule. Time was, when after nightfall upon the banks of the Nile, the great city on the Nile was wrapped in darkness, and the law compelled any one moving abroad to carry a lighted lantern or flambeau.

The city being divided into three distinct quarters, separated by gates, and known as the regions of Copts, Jews and Franks, no one could pass through after nightfall unless bearing a light.

In many parts of the Nile, it is still necessary to carry a torch or lantern, unless one means to invite all manner of dangers, although the law with regard to this thing has fallen into desuetude since the English have made so many innovations in the bombardment of Alexandria in 1882.

A boy is engaged to go ahead with a light, and the two Franks, as all foreigners are called in Egypt, boldly plunge into the lower region of Cairo, fronting on the Nile.

Now and then they pass remarks and joke, for the newspaper correspondent is nothing if not humorous. The frequent mention of that singular name, "Mynheer Joe," proclaims that they are exchanging confidences regarding their experiences in connection with this person in the past.

Sandy is frank in all he says, and there can be no doubt regarding his fervid admiration for the man whom they expect to find on board the dahabeah of Demosthenes Tanner.

"It was at the storming of Alexandria I first met Mynheer Joe. I was then, as now, a correspondent, and ready to undergo all manner of dangers, in order to get the freshest news, even to holding a wire all day rather than let another man beat me."

"When the time came to land, in order to save the city from the mob, Arabi being defeated, I found myself thrown in the company of one who was a stranger to me. He came from a British war ship. Liked his looks from the first, and side by side we went through the streets of Alexandria. Firing all around us got in numerous little engagements; was once surrounded by a pack of howling native troops, who thought they could wipe us out. Mr. Grimes, you missed the sight of your life in failing to see how Gordon's friend stood off those curs. Bless my soul! I can shut my eyes and look on the whole thing yet. I never saw such a freer in action, and yet in repose Joe is as meek as a lamb."

"After that I froze to him. We saw some weeks in company—weeks I have never forgotten, because I loved that man. Then I was ordered to watch the Italian operations about Abyssinia, while Joe went to find Chinese Gordon. I lost track of him, but have never ceased to feel the deepest interest in his work, as an explorer second only to Stanley and Emin Pasha. Now you can understand my intense delight upon hearing that the man we are going to see is no other than my comrade in Alexandria, Mynheer Joe."

This is about the longest consecutive narrative Mr. Grimes has ever heard. Sandy gives utterance to which marks the power of the magical name. On his part, the silver king does not prove so confiding. He speaks of the man who interests them both as though acquainted with his past; but whether he has ever personally met him, Sandy finds it impossible to say.

Meanwhile, they have been making progress in the direction of the river. A light of some sort is positively needed in these streets after nightfall, moon or no moon, on account of the peculiar custom of building.

The houses, as a general rule, are three stories in height. As the street itself is but an alley, barely ten feet in width, and each story of the houses projects beyond the one below, it is easy to shake hands from the neighboring roofs. Even this small space is often covered with mats, to keep out the glare of day, which, reflected from the white walls, dazzles the eyes.

In these narrow streets, men stand in groups engaged in discussion or barter, now and then gently pushed aside by the nose of some camel advancing silently, the "ship of the desert" being, besides the donkey, the only burden-bearer allowed in the native section.

Here and there a light is seen moving along, as some shiek proceeds homeward; gayety abounds; but Arab and Moor believe in keeping their homes sacred from the public, and only huge piles of whitened bricks lie on every side.

As yet they have met with no adventure, and the distance between the grand square and the river has been diminished by half. This savor of rare good luck, for it is not always that a Frank can traverse this region, at such a hour, un molested.

Cairo abounds in rascals who do not fear the English law, however much they may respect the native koorbash and stocks. It is not a sin or a crime to rob a foreigner—unless caught in the act. That is the way they look at it.

Sandy knows this, if his companion does not happen to be so thoroughly pointed with regard to the customs of the city on the Nile. He continues to keep his eyes about him, and does not let the Arab who carries the flambeau stray beyond his reach, knowing that in all probability in case of an attack the first and last of the dusky rascal will be to fly and leave them in darkness to meet the law.

They have even cut down the distance to a fourth and soon the light will fall upon the waters of the river, when the war correspondent bends suddenly forward and snatches the torch from the hand of the astonished bearer.

CHAPTER II.

Mr. Grimes sees the action and does not appear to be at all surprised—indeed, he rarely deviates from the steady remark that marks him as a wonderfully nervous man.

Something glimmers in his hand—it is a revolver, and the light gives the blue steel a glow as well as a cold look. Evidently the stout tourist is ready to take care of himself.

Sandy has clutched the torch, which he at once raises above his head. Half a dozen ragged forms have sprung into a view beyond. Perhaps some Arab has secreted them until intentions, for quickly no mistaking, spreading out as if to prevent the Franks, who have thus wandered into their net, from escaping.

"Backsheesh!" they chatter like a lot of monkeys, holding out begrimed hands and scowling.

There is only one way to treat these rascals—if you comply with their demands they grow more and more importunate, until they finally proceed to openly rob their victims.

"Stand back!" cries Sandy, with a roar, as he swings the flambeau around his head.

They understand enough English to know what he is saying—at any rate, his actions are doubly significant—but believing they can rule the ranch by mere force of numbers, the ragged band continue to push forward, thus hemming the two whites in.

Although small in point of stature, Sandy is a warrior, every inch of him, and, as might be expected from his nervous manner, possessed of an indomitable temper. Within reaching distance and clutches at him with bony fingers, the newspaper man brings the flaming torch, with a resounding thump, against the top of the beggar's head. It does not affect the link, beyond sending forth a shower of sparks, but the unfortunate recipient of the blow, finding sparks in his long hair, utters vociferous shouts and dances with the fervor of a dervish.

This is deemed a signal for a general assault all along the line, and for the space of sixty seconds there is seen a spectacle rarely equalled in the narrow streets of old Cairo.

At first the two foreigners are averse to using their firearms, and endeavor to inspire terror in the breasts of their enemies by a generous exhibition of muscle.

When Sandy has to dodge a fiendish blow from a wicked dagger, he thinks it about time they proceeded to sterner measures.

Sandy opens on the rag-tag-and-bob-tail crowd, as he terms them, seeking to inflict wounds and create a diversion. He is immediately backed up by his companion. His strong, white teeth clench fast his cigar, and even as he lets drive at a dark-faced fellow who seeks to cleave him with an Algerian yataghan, the silver king puffs out a small cloud of smoke. Talk about coolness! Here you have it in a human iceberg. Sandy holds his breath while looking at this strange companion, and wonders whether he would show excitement in the heat of battle.

This sort of a reception is hardly to the liking of the cowardly curs who have appeared daring simply because numbers gave them confidence.

At the first shot most of them began to glance over their shoulders. This is a sure sign of a desire to retreat. There comes hotter work. Sandy no longer waits for them to come to him, but with his revolver in one hand and the flaming torch whirling about his head he leaps toward the footpads.

This is much for them—they break and fly with cries of terror, some springing up the street, while others go down in the direction of the river.

In a marvellously short space of time the street is empty save for one poor fellow, who, shot in the leg, is hopping off as fast as his good leg will carry him, calling on Mohammed to save him from the foreign tigers.

In any other city under the sun, such a commotion at dead of night would create an intense excitement. Not so in Cairo. The white walls shut them in, pierced by minute windows that allow little chance of street gazing. Those who hear the sounds of war are dis-

creet enough to let it if none of their business, and that they will be better off away.

"Look out behind, you, sir!" calls Sandy, and the silver king turns and darts to cover a creeping figure that has advanced from a dark-arched doorway, whereupon the most piteous jargon is heard, and behold the suspected assassin turns out to be their torch-bearer, who, having witnessed the hot little affair from a place of security, is now crawling back to resume his interrupted duties.

They welcomed him gladly, and Sandy relieves himself of the flambeau, glad to be rid of it. As there are no more footpads in view to give them battle, they again take up their line of march toward the river, fortunately close at hand.

Mr. Grimes has had explicit directions from Mr. Tanner how to reach the boat, and a suspicion has already entered his head that the ambush into which they ran may have been arranged by the reis of the sailing craft, to relieve his rich employer of superfluous wealth. These Arabs and natives are up to all manner of tricks to gain filthy lucre, and old Franks can traverse this region, at such a hour, un molested.

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