

HOW WE TRIED TO RESCUE GORDON.

A WAR CORRESPONDENT'S STORY.



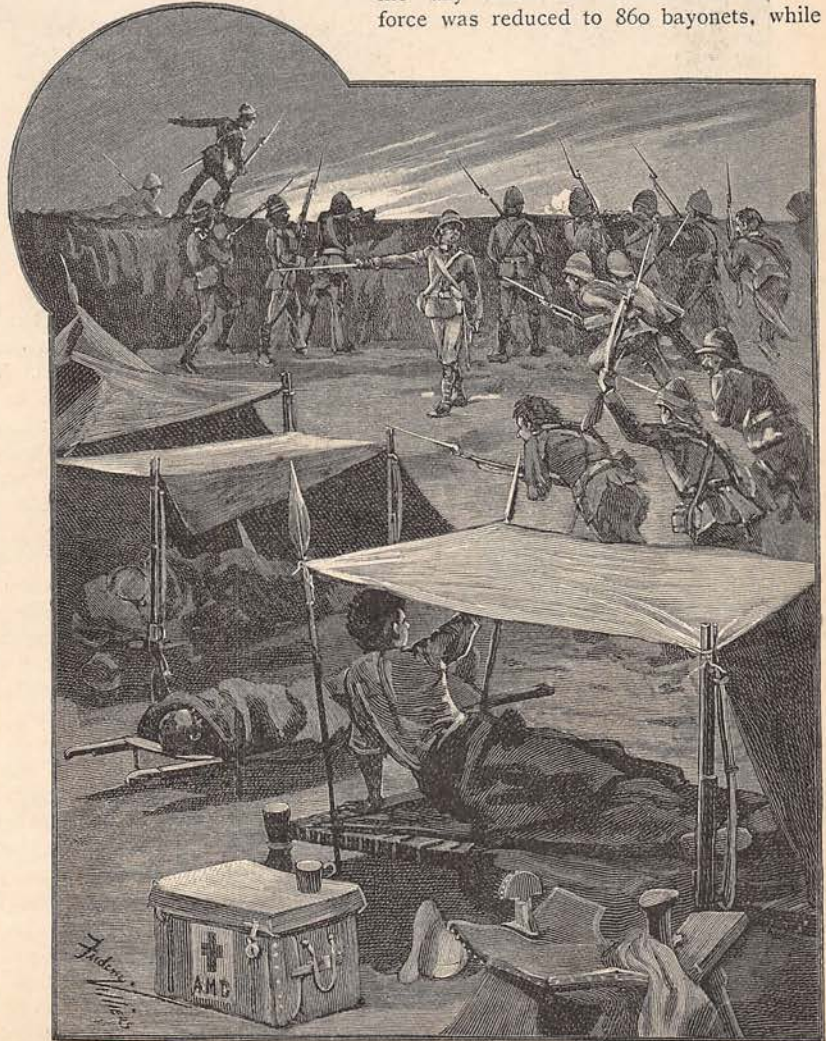
OUR Desert Column, under the command of Sir Herbert Stewart, after two severe conflicts with greatly superior forces, numerically, of dervishes, after it marched out from Jakdul, occupied Abu-Kru, near Metammeh, and ninety miles below Khartûm, on January 20th, 1885. Only part of Lord Wolseley's orders had then been carried out, for Sir Charles Wilson was now to proceed to Khartûm by one of the steamers which Gordon had promised to send

to meet the expedition; Colonel Burnaby was to take over the command of the post here after his departure; and Stewart was to return to Jakdul with the Heavy Camel Corps, and to forward stores, which had been accumulated there, to Abu-Kru—or rather, to Metammeh—which was, however, left in possession of the enemy.

Stewart had been severely wounded in the action of January 19th; Burnaby had been killed in that of the 17th; and by our losses in these engagements our force of 1,685 men had been literally decimated. It was also now threatened by fresh troops of the Mahdi coming up and down the river to attack it. Under these circumstances, which had been unforeseen by Wolseley when he despatched our column across the Bayuda Desert to establish a post here, Sir Charles Wilson, on whom the command devolved after Stewart was wounded, was placed in a most trying position. But he showed himself equal to the emergency, not only by the measures he took for the defence of the post so hardly and gallantly won, but by his determination to open communication with Gordon at all hazards. Though somewhat cheered by our success so far, those of us who were

best informed could not but regard his departure for Khartûm on the 24th as a forlorn hope. The captain of one of the four steamers which met us at Abu-Kru on the 21st was one cause of this anxiety; for on leaving Khartûm on December 14th, Gordon told him that if he did not come back in ten days with English troops, he need not return at all, as all would be over. The last entries in his journal, brought down by this captain and written up to that date, were not re-assuring. Omdurman, we knew, had been captured by the Mahdi a few days after we occupied Jakdul on January 3rd, and we also learned from this captain that the enemy had guns in position below Khartûm. It was, therefore, uncertain whether Sir Charles would be able to fight his way past them in the frail craft in which he had sailed.

By the despatch of a convoy to Jakdul for provisions the day before Sir Charles left us, our force was reduced to 860 bayonets, while



"WE WERE UNDER ARMS ALL THAT NIGHT" (p. 540).



“ THIS TIME ITS SHELL EXPLODED AMONGST THE BAGGARAS.”

ten times that number of the enemy hovered round us. Still, no man's heart failed him, and we stood confidently to our guns, hoping against hope for the best.

On the 28th, or fourth day after Sir Charles had left us, our equanimity was disturbed by cannon and rifle firing and a display of bunting at Metammeh. What could it mean? Had the reinforcements of men and artillery, which we heard they expected from Berber, arrived? Little did we suspect then, what proved eventually to be the case, that it was rejoicing over the fall of Khartûm.

We were under arms all that night, with doubled outlying pickets. Some uneasiness was also caused by the delay at Metammeh in opening the nightly tom-tom concert. It was 9 p.m. before it began, and its music, softened by distance, and rendered sometimes *forte* and sometime *piano* by the evening zephyrs, came to us like the soothing strains of an Æolian harp.

Next evening, after dark, several signal rockets were fired off to guide our expected returning convoy from Jakkul, in case of its approaching our camp after dark.

And thus matters went on with us until the morning of the 31st, when, about 10 o'clock, the dervishes were reported coming out in force from Metammeh. Hurrying up to the signal station, I saw them through my glass forming up as if for attack, and noticed a squadron of Baggara horsemen on the ridge between the village and the position held by the Guards on the plateau

above the camp. Then came the report of a gun from the direction of the desert, followed by that of the explosion of a shell. This was followed by another gun, and this time its shell exploded amongst the Baggaras, sending three of their horses galloping off riderless. We now knew that our convoy was at hand, and the “assembly” was sounded, in order, if necessary, to aid in repelling any attack by the enemy on it or to defend our position if it was assaulted.

Soon after the second gun the Baggaras fell back, and the masses of the enemy disappeared in patches behind the concrete loopholed walls of Metammeh.

It was now evident that the enemy had not received reinforcements from Berber or elsewhere, and that our fears on that account had been groundless. The convoy brought us not only commissariat supplies, but half a battery of guns and fifty of the Naval Brigade. It also brought us the contents of the three mails from England, which had been received at Korti after we had left there. All things conspired to make us jubilant that evening, and, under the additional sense of security supplied by even our small reinforcements, we had a good night's sleep. It was the first for several that I as well as all the others had slept with our boots off.

But we were destined to a rude awakening; for at 4 a.m. Lieutenant Stuart-Wortley, who had accompanied the expedition to Khartûm, arrived at the camp in a small boat with four men of the Royal Sussex

Regiment, and told us that when they reached their destination they found the town in the hands of the enemy, and that it had fallen on the 26th. Both steamers he stated were wrecked coming down the river—the last some thirty miles above the camp—and that Sir Charles Wilson and his party had landed upon an island. He also repeated a report received from a man that Gordon had taken refuge in the Mission Church, which we knew he had prepared for such an emergency: a report which Sir Charles had discredited, chiefly on the ground that no Egyptian flag or any other flew over it. Unfortunately, this statement reached Korti before Sir Charles Wilson's more careful report, and no doubt led Lord Wolseley, in his grief over the failure of the expedition, to the unwarranted conclusion that it was attributable to the alleged delay of Sir Charles in starting for Khartûm after we reached Abu-Kru. As an eye-witness and cognisant of what occurred, I had no hesitation then and none now in contradicting this statement. Sir Charles Wilson might, it is true, have left us on the 23rd, if he had not gone down the river on the 22nd to reconnoitre in connection with the report that a large force of dervishes had come up to attack our literally decimated force; but if he had then started, he could not possibly have reached Khartûm until the 27th. Even if he had arrived there on the 26th, he was not in a position to avert the blow under which it fell. I have already given my readers several facts relative to its condition, and Gordon's fears that, unless English soldiers put in an appearance by the 24th of December, they

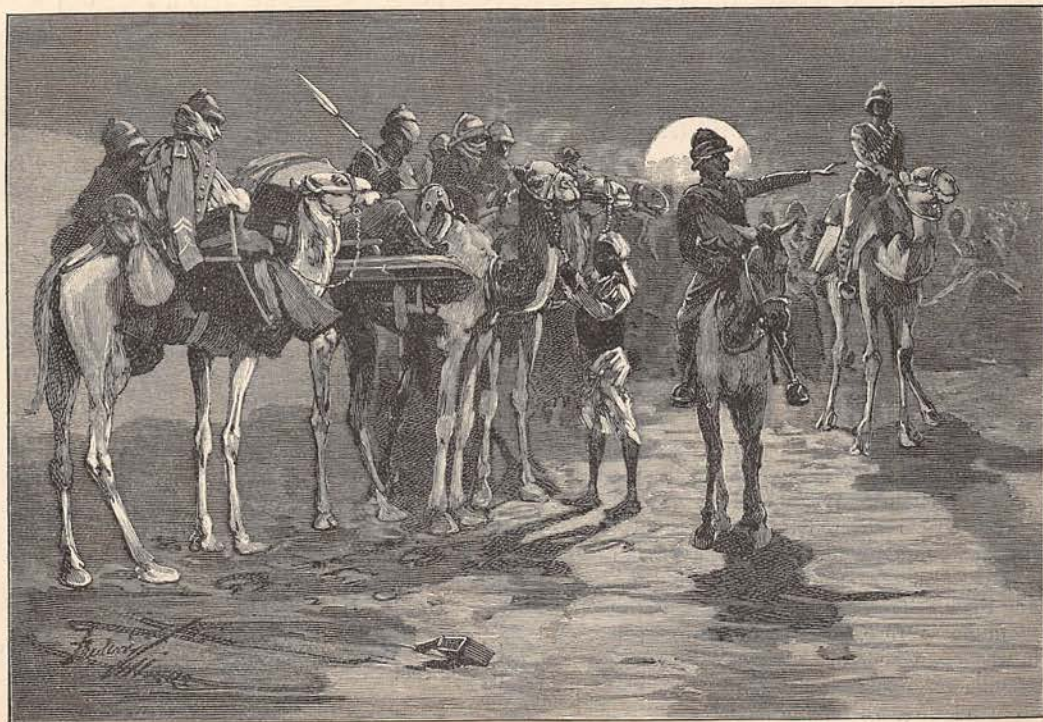
would be too late; and nearly a month had elapsed since then.

No words of mine can describe the depression of heart and soul this sad news brought upon us. Thoughts would arise that if so and so had been done this catastrophe would not have happened, and, as her Majesty the Queen wrote to the late Miss Gordon, the honour of England would not have been stained by it. To the blunders in the conduct of the Expedition which contributed to its failure already mentioned I venture to add another, which had had a disturbing effect on other minds beside my own. And it was this:—

On November 14th Lord Wolseley received a letter from Gordon, dated ten days previously, in which he stated that he could hold out for forty days with ease, but that after that it would be difficult for him to do so, and that the Mahdi was only eight miles off.

The first detachment of troops, going up the cataracts in boats laden with two tons of stores, had only left Gemai—twelve miles above Wady-Halfa—on November 5th, and when this news was received, had made such slow progress as to discourage any anticipation of Wolseley being able, on his plan of procedure, to be in time to aid Gordon, whose word "difficult" I construed to mean "desperate."

Taking this view of the case in a conversation with two officers of the staff stationed at Wady-Halfa, I was told by one of them that if Gordon could hold out for six weeks, he could do so for six months, and that there was no cause for anxiety about our



"JUST AS THE BROAD DISC OF THE MOON HAD CLEARED THE HORIZON" (p. 542).

efforts to relieve him. Lord Wolseley seemed to be of the same opinion, for in reply to a telegram from the Minister of War as to what he intended to do in view of this news from Khartûm, he wired back that it would make no change in his plans. Nor did it; for the slow advance by the boats was, as we now felt, fatally adhered to. In fact, the Camel Corps, as stated by the Minister of War in Parliament, when discussing the supplementary estimates for the expedition, had been formed so as to enable us to meet just such an emergency as Gordon indicated in his letter might be expected to occur after December 14th. Eight years since then have failed entirely to eradicate the depression, chagrin, and sorrow caused by the news brought to us by Lieutenant Stuart-Wortley on that morning. The graves left behind us in the Bayuda Desert, the groans of the wounded and the dying in the field hospitals at Abu-Klea and here at Abu-Kru, and the massacre at Khartûm and Gordon's sad fate, are memories which will haunt those of us who were at Abu-Kru as long as life lasts. And the saddest thought of all is how easily the catastrophe might have been averted by the measures which Lord Wolseley had failed to adopt.

Our position was also a perilous one, for the fanatical hordes of the Mahdi, flushed by victory, might now swoop down on us before relief could possibly be sent from beyond the 176 miles of intervening desert between us and Korti.

At a council of war held immediately after the reception of the news, it was decided to send immediate relief to Sir Charles and his party, and Lord Charles Beresford left at 2 p.m. on our only ironclad to rescue them. It was then decided to send back all our camels to Jakdul, as they would be needed in bringing us reinforcements, and with them also all of our 104 wounded who could be moved. In order to keep open my own communications with the Press, after some anxious consideration I resolved to accompany this convoy.

It was ordered to march when the full moon rose—about 8 p.m.—and was formed up outside of our ramparts in a thick darkness, so that, while the stars were visible over you, you could hardly see your hand before you.

Just as soon as the broad disc of the moon had cleared the horizon, off we moved, with Lord Dundonald as our guide, and who directed our course by compass. We had with us sixty odd wounded, carried in *cacolits*, slung one on each side of a camel.

For the first two hours of our march considerable anxiety was felt lest the enemy, becoming informed of it, would attack us. We, however, passed safely through the ordeal covered by that period. But not so the poor wounded fellows who lay, some of them in agony, on account of the movement of the camels carrying them. They had to run the gauntlet of the thorny mimosas through which our route led, and which was often so narrow between these trees that their blankets were often brushed roughly off, and pain caused in colliding with the branches.

Riding my horse with them during this period, and, in fact, until we reached the Shebecat wells further on, where the road led through an open country, I did what I could to mitigate their sufferings. Sometimes I replaced the disturbed blankets, and then blew up the men who had each in tow the three camels carrying them for their bad steering.

The distance between Abu-Kru and Abu-Klea was twenty-three miles, and our pace about two and a half miles per hour. Before we cleared the Shebecat wells a Metammeh woman, her daughter and slave boy, were met and captured by Lord Dundonald, and they were now obliged to join our march as far as Abu-Klea. She had with her fifty goats, which were requisitioned for the use of the wounded. This did seem hard, but was a case which, it was alleged by the captors, came within the legitimate rules of war.

At 7 a.m. we halted within a couple of miles of Abu-Klea to rest the wounded and give them some much-needed refreshment. The wind was very high, and blew the sand about us in clouds, mixing it with our food.

As Lord Dundonald was to hurry on after we reached Abu-Klea to Korti with despatches, I finished mine, describing what had happened to us after the battle of the 19th, and, this being handed at once on his arrival to Colonel Swaine, Lord Wolseley's military secretary, was initialled by him as Press censor, and, being immediately telegraphed, was the first Press despatch containing the news which reached London.

We found the garrison at Abu-Klea under arms, from suspecting that we were a force of the enemy approaching to attack the post. Here we left those of our wounded who could not bear any further transport, carrying on to Jakdul with us others who had been in hospital at Abu-Klea since our battle here of the 17th January. After a two hours' rest we again proceeded, and crossed the battle-field of that day, where many of the corpses of the enemy still lay unburied, and some of them with all the flesh picked off their leg bones by the vultures. We bivouacked that night on the plain of Messala-mi-eh, where we arrived on the morning of the 16th, and where we learned that the wells of Abu-Klea were held by the enemy, and whence we marched out to fight them. On the second day, about sunset, having, with Prior, of the *London Illustrated News*, and Pigott, of *Reuter's*, left the column, I arrived safely at Jakdul, from which three weeks previously we had marched out full of hope for Gordon and Khartûm. But it had been sunshine and cloud with us. Going, we had sung the beginning of the song Tennyson puts in the mouth of the little nun in his "Idylls of the King"—

"Late! so late! but we may enter still."

Coming back from Abu-Kru, after the eventful days passed there, our song then was the refrain—

"Too late! too late! ye cannot enter now."