

# LORD ROBERTS OF KANDAHAR, V.C., G.C.B., G.C.I.E.

By ARCHIBALD FORBES.

**D**URING the famine which in the winter of 1873-4 pervaded the densely populated region of Tirhoot, the head-quarters of the relief operations were at Durbungah. Day after day Colonel Burn's hospitable table was surrounded by "famine-wallahs" of all ranks and types—soldiers drawn from their military appointments to direct transport and distribute food, civilian functionaries, covenanted and uncovenanted, devising and executing schemes of relief, planters tendering their services and their carts. Most of those men I had come to know at least by name, but one evening the seat opposite to mine was occupied by a person who was a stranger to me. As he walked up to it, I had noticed that he was short and slight, square, however, of shoulder, and of a distinctly military carriage—his whole aspect denoting alertness and a wiry endurance. He had the air of quiet command one sometimes discerns in men who have seen much service when as yet they have not attained high leadership. His face was almost ascetic in its attenuation. Hollow temples indented and narrowed the lofty forehead that rose above the quick keen eyes; the lower section of the face was long, gaunt, and sallow, ending in a chin every line and contour of which betokened force and resolution.

Of poor Sir George Campbell, who sat next me, I asked whether he could tell me the name of the person who was quietly concentrating himself on his soup over against us. "That man," replied Campbell, subduing his strident voice, "is a man already distinguished, and who if he has the opportunity will distinguish himself much more. He is Colonel Roberts, officiating Quartermaster-General, come down here to arrange the methods for the distribution of famine relief. He won the V.C. in the Mutiny, and was always in the thick of everything." That same evening I was introduced to Colonel Roberts, and next day he detailed to me with singular perspicuousness his dispositions for the famine work, the execution of which he was to entrust to his chief assistant, the late Sir Charles MacGregor.

It was in the nature of things that Frederick Sleigh Roberts should have embraced the military profession. For one thing, he was an Irishman. For another, he was born in a gallant and distinguished regiment, whose bayonets have swayed the issue of Indian battles from Plassey to Lucknow. And yet again, he had for sire a noble old soldier, who began his service almost with the century, campaigned with Lake against the Mahrattas, fought through the Nepal war, marched to Cabul with Keane and Cotton, and after fifty years of Indian soldiering was still a Colonel. The son of a warrior so staunch was bound to be himself a fighting man. Born in 1832, he received part of his education at Eton, thus furnishing another illustration of the truth of Wellington's famous saying. At the end of his professional course at Addiscombe, he got his commission in that fine service the Bengal Artillery, now merged in the Royal regiment. The outbreak of the Mutiny gave young Roberts his first opportunity. Already he was on the staff in the Quartermaster-General's department, and when John Lawrence put into the field the movable column which was to dominate the Punjab under Neville Chamberlain first, and afterwards John Nicholson, he was appointed to it, until the urgent need for gunners to prosecute the siege of Delhi impelled him to hurry thither. In the hardship, toil, fighting, and glory of the arduous struggle which ended in the reduction of the Imperial city, Roberts participated in full measure, and thus early in his career he had made for himself a name as one of the most promising young officers of the Indian service.

In the column which, on the fall of Delhi, Greathed led through the Doab and onward towards Cawnpore, Roberts served in charge of the Quartermaster-General's department. He had a signal share in the hot pursuit of the fugitive mutineers from Agra, and when Hope Grant succeeded Greathed, he joined the staff of the former fine soldier. During Sir Colin Campbell's advance from Cawnpore to Lucknow, Roberts had charge of the reconnaissance service, and led the advance from the Alumbagh to the Dilkoosha. He it was who guided the column of

Highlanders and Sikhs from the Martiniere through the river-side low ground to the storm of the Secundrabagh and the desperate fighting in the interior of that enclosure. He it was, and none other, who, on the following day, in the face of a hailstorm of bullets and shot, planted on the roof of the mess house the flag which was to indicate to Outram and Havelock the position attained by the relieving force ; and who, when time after time the hostile missiles struck the standard down, replaced it as often with dauntless resolution. It was during the subsequent operations against the Gwalior contingent that, in the pursuit after the storm of the village of Khodagunj, Roberts earned the Victoria Cross by capturing a standard from two rebel sepoys, one of whom he killed with a trenchant sword-cut. After an interval of desultory fighting, he participated with distinction in the final reduction of Lucknow, soon after which he was invalided home. On his return to India he took an active and responsible part in the conduct and fighting of the Umbeyla campaign, earned distinction and promotion in the Abyssinian expedition, and was selected by Sir Robert Napier to carry home the despatches announcing his final success. His services in the Looshai campaign brought him his C.B., and on attaining the qualifying rank of Colonel in 1875 he was confirmed in the position of Quartermaster-General in India, with the local rank of Major-General.

It was in August, 1878, that Stolietoff and his Cossacks rode into Cabul ; and when a month later the Afghan major in the Khyber Pass told Cavagnari that he had orders to oppose by force the progress of Sir Neville Chamberlain and his mission, Lord Lytton made prompt preparations for the invasion of Afghanistan. Of the three commands, the smallest as regarded force, and the least important apparently as regarded apparent opportunities, was assigned to Roberts, whose appointment to any command, indeed, caused some jealousy, since, although he was locally a Major-General, his substantive rank at the time was that of a major of artillery. While Brown had the Khyber line of advance, and Stewart was directed on Kandahar with secret instructions to make Herat his ulterior objective, Roberts's commission was simply to occupy the comparatively insignificant Kuram valley. But the opportunity came to him to fight the only battle of the war, and he was not the man to let the fortunate chance evade him. The Afghan position on the Peiwar Kotal was all but inaccessible, but he found his way to its flank up the rugged and precipitous Spingawai ravine, "a mass of stones heaped into ridges and furrowed into gullies," took the Afghans by surprise in the dim twilight of the dawn, rolled up their left, shattered their centre, and finally hurled them into headlong rout ; maintaining the chase of them to the Shutargardan, from the summit of which he looked down on the Cabul plain, the head of his column within fifty miles of Shere Ali's capital. Wintering in the Kuram valley, the melting of the snow found him in the spring of 1879 again advanced to the Shutargardan, his little army of 5,000 men concentrated behind him ready for the forward order he was expecting, when Yakoub Khan rode down the Khyber, and signed with Cavagnari the treaty of Gundamak which constituted the short-lived "scientific frontier." While the war was in progress, Roberts had attained the full rank of Major-General ; when it ended he received the thanks of Parliament, and the distinction of the K.C.B.

Three months later the massacre of Cavagnari and his people in the Bala Hissar of Cabul tore the treaty of Gundamak into bloody rags. Lord Lytton promptly rose to the imperative duty with which, in the still watches of the autumn night, he was suddenly confronted. Ere day-dawn there had sped from Simla the message to Massy, instructing him to seize and hold the Shutargardan. Within twenty-four hours later, Frederick Roberts was hurrying to the front, charged with the duty of avenging the treacherous slaughter of the British envoy. India and England alike applauded the selection. The officers and soldiers who had served under him in the Kuram believed in him enthusiastically, and, what with soldiers is the convincing assurance of whole-souled confidence, they had bestowed upon him an affectionate nickname—they knew him among themselves as "Little Bobs." Ripe in experience of war, Roberts, at the age of forty-seven, was in the full vigour of manhood, alert in mind, and of tough and enduring physique. Junior Major-General though he was, even among his seniors the conviction was unanimous that Lord Lytton and Sir Frederick Haines had acted wisely in entrusting him with the most active command in the impending campaign.

He justified their confidence. A month after his tonga had rattled down the cart-road from Simla, he was in the Bala Hissar of Cabul among the wreck of what had

been the British Residency, gazing with moist eyes on the scene of heroism and slaughter, on the smoke-blackened walls, the crimson splashes on the whitewashed walls, the calcined bones in the blood-dabbled chamber where the final struggle had been fought out. Yakoub Khan was in his camp a semi-prisoner; the Afghan dead lay thick on the slopes and in the hollows of Charasiah, where Baker and White had so thoroughly carried out the tactical directions of their chief. Cabul was under his heel; he held its historic citadel; the Sirdars professed profound submission; the country lay quiet and seemed to have accepted its subjection. But Roberts was too well versed in Afghan guile to let himself be deluded into the belief that conquest was assured to him and his handful of 6,000 soldiers. In the great adjacent cantonment of Sherpur, Shere Ali had left to his hand the fortified winter-quarters which he wisely occupied and provisioned. It was not alone on his own perception, sound as it was, that he thus acted. His honoured father, during his service in the earlier occupation of Afghanistan, had strenuously struggled to prevent the terrible disaster which befell Elphinstone's army a few months after he himself had returned to India. "My father's experience," the General thus wrote to me, "was of the greatest help to me, especially in the determination to occupy Sherpur instead of dividing my force, and to collect sufficient food for men and animals, in case we should be overtaken by a 'December storm.'"

The "December storm" arrived. The old Mushk-i-Alam, the Peter the Hermit of Afghanistan, raised the banner of the Prophet, and proclaimed to the faithful the sacred duty of a *Jehad* against the unbelieving invaders. The Sirdars and Maliks merged their intestine strifes in the universal effort to crush the detested Feringhees. Cabul was the common objective. From the hills and valleys of the north, Meer Butcha led down the tribesmen of the Kohistan. From the southern regions, Logar, Zurmat, and the Jadran, levies were gathering below Charasiah. Mahomed Jan had mustered in the west the fighting men of the Maidan and Wardak, and from the western uplands was striding down towards the Chardeh valley. Roberts was prompt to realize that the projected Afghan concentration would entail serious disadvantages, and both experience and temperament enjoined on him the offensive; for he knew well that *l'audace, encore l'audace, et toujours l'audace* is the game to be played by the commander of disciplined troops against Asiatic levies, even when as now 6,000 had to confront 100,000. The gallant Macpherson routed the Kohistanees at Karez Meer, and then turned southwards to drive Mahomed Jan down on the muzzles of Baker's Martinis. But the Afghan leader was too quick for the Scottish general; thrusting through the gap between him and Baker, he fell on Massy's guns and troopers and thrust them back. Next day the Afghan standards were waving on the Cabul ridge. Once and again the resolute Baker stormed the heights with his Highlanders and Punjaubees, and the British flag floated from the Takht-i-Shah and the Asmai peak; but the cost of holding the positions was held too great, and Roberts wisely ordered a concentration within the Sherpur fortifications. After days of hesitation the Afghans at length hardened their hearts to adventure an assault. Through the mist and gloom of the winter morning rose the fierce shouts of "Allah-il-Allah," as the dense mass of tribesmen, headed by fanatic Ghazis, rushed on the slender defences behind which stood the thin line of British soldiers. Volley on volley struck them fair in the face; they recoiled, but again and again came on, and the morning was far spent before they accepted their repulse. Next morning the vast muster of tribesmen had disappeared to a man, and Roberts with his 6,000 had reinstated himself in the mastery of the situation.

Sir Donald Stewart had marched up from Kandahar, fighting as he came the fierce battle of Ahmed Khel, and winning the easier victory of Urzoo; Lepel Griffin had coaxed Abdurrahman into the acceptance of the vacant Ameer'ship; and the army of Cabul was on the eve of evacuating Afghanistan, when the news came of the disaster of Maiwand and the imminent danger of Kandahar. The duty was assigned to Roberts of leading the force which he was to conduct on that memorable march which has made his name immortal. The 305 miles of this strenuous march were covered in twenty days, including one rest day; the average daily distance accomplished was a fraction over fifteen miles. For his immunity from opposition Roberts was indebted to the stern lessons given by Stewart at Ahmed Khel and Urzoo; but it must be noted that he had no assurance of exemption from molestation, and that he marched ever ready to fight. It will long be remembered among us how, when he had started on the long swift

march, the suspense as to its issue grew and swelled till the strain became intense. For the days passed, and there came no news of Roberts and of the 10,000 brave men with whom the wise, daring little chief had cut loose from any base, and struck for his goal through a region teeming with fanaticism and bitter hostility. The pessimists held him to be rushing on his ruin. But Roberts marched light; he lived on what the country supplied; he gave the tribesmen no time to concentrate against him; and two days in advance of the time he had set himself he reached Kandahar, retrieved Maiwand by the utter defeat of Ayoub, and earned for himself undying fame.

He came home for a while to tell us some home-truths out of his experience regarding our military methods, and then went back to India as Commander-in-Chief of the Madras army. When Sir Donald Stewart's time was up, he succeeded that grand soldier in the command-in-chief in India, and promptly took up the good work of his predecessor, which had for its aim the adequate protection of the north-western frontier of our Indian Empire. His term of office has been distinguished by the reforms he has introduced, and is still carrying out; it has already once been prolonged because the master-hand is indispensable; and it is an open secret that for the same good reason a second prolongation has been successfully urged upon Lord Roberts. It seems as if, could he be induced to consent, he might have the life-tenure of his Indian command.

## TO A NEW SUNDIAL.

By VIOLET FANE.

OH, Sundial, you should not be young  
Or fresh and fair, or spick and span!  
None should remember when began  
Your tenure here, nor whence you sprung!

Like ancient cromlech notch'd and scarr'd,  
I would have had you sadly tow'r  
Above this world of leaf and flow'r  
All ivy-tress'd and lichen-starr'd;

Ambassador of Time and Fate,  
In contrast stern to bud and bloom,  
Seeming half temple and half tomb,  
And wholly solemn and sedate;

Till, one with God's own works on earth,  
The lake, the vale, the mountain-brow,  
We might have come to count you now  
Whose home was here before our birth.

But lo! a priggish, upstart thing—  
Set here to tell so old a truth,—  
How fleeting are our days of youth,—  
*You*, that were only made last Spring! . . .

Go to! . . . What sermon can you preach  
Oh, mushroom-mentor, pert and new?  
We are too old to learn of you  
What you are all too young to teach!

Yet, Sundial, you and I may swear  
Eternal friendship, none the less,  
For I'll respect your youthfulness  
If you forgive my silver hair!



GENERAL LORD ROBERTS, V.C., G.C.B., G.C.I.E.

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