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THREE SUDANESE BATTLES

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INTRODUCTION

In 1973 a young Sudanese army officer, Major Ismat Hasan Zulfu, published a long account of the battle of Omdurman with the title Karari, as the battle is known in the Sudan. He discussed the political, social and military background of the battle and explained the tactics of the Khalifa Abd Allahi sympathetically though not uncritically. Between 1973 and 1975 I translated the book from Arabic into English. In the course of the task I had frequent and lengthy discussions with the author, and visited the battle-field with him. Much of this book relies heavily on the work and the approach of Ismat Hasan Zulfu.

In December 1974 I was asked by the Rev. Charles Bonsall to give a talk on the battle to the Clergy House Supper Club, Khartoum. This Club has no rules, membership or subscription, and the attendance is an agreeable mixture of nationalities, religions, professions and backgrounds. The third chapter of this book is a revision of the talk I gave

on 12 January 1975.

The following year I gave another talk at the same Club on General Gordon. The talk which I gave on 25 January 1976, appropriately the ninety-first anniversary of the fall of Khartoum, has been revised and appears as the second chapter.

Earlier this year I was asked to give a third talk. I went back in time and prepared one on the Hicks Pasha Expedition. This was given at the Supper Club on 13 February 1977, and was the basis for the first chapter.

For those who cannot read Arabic, accounts of the three engagements have been very much from the Anglo-Egyptian point of view. There has been little literature available that places the events in the Sudanese context. My aim in the three talks was to emphasise the local background and the practical problems faced by the combatants. The talks - and this book - make no claim to original research. I have consulted many of the available Arabic and English published sources. I have visited the sites of the battlefields and have discussed the campaigns with many friends, Sudanese and non-Sudanese. In December 1976 I discussed the battle of Omdurman with one who took part in it, Shaykh Dardiri Abd al Khaliq of Bara, Northern Kordofan. He was also a witness of the Siege of Khartoum, being a child of six in the women's quarters behind the camp of Abd al Rahman Wad al Nujumi.

I have also consulted some reports relating to the Kordofan campaign in the Central Records Office, Khartoum.

I am aware of the limitations of these three talks. They are not a military history of the Mahdiya. I make only brief allusions to the great campaigns of Osman Digna in eastern Sudan, to the Egyptian border campaigns, to the war with Abyssinia, to the internal struggles of the Mahdist state. I have deliberately said little, in the story of General Gordon, of the course of the Relief Expedition, of the campaign in the Jazira, of the battles of Halfaya and al Aylafun.

By contrast I have tried to stress the individualism of those who were involved. The period is often seen in terms of an inevitable advance of European imperialism. The final Anglo Egyptian occupation of the Sudan was not seen as inevitable by contemporaries of the 1880's and 1890's. There were many hiccoughs in the process. The actors in the drama were far more concerned with practical, detailed and immediate issues of supply, finance, morale, maintenance and repair of weapons. Hicks, the Mahdi, Gordon, the Khalifa and Kitchener were all faced with problems that had a limited range of alternative solutions.

A version of the second chapter appeared in Savage and Soldier, an American 'small' magazine devoted to colonial military history (the title is ironic) and was published in November 1976. A version

of the third chapter is to appear in The Army Quarterly in July 1977. The translation of Ismat Hasan Zulfu's book will be published by Leo Cooper in 1978.

I am grateful to many people for help of various kinds. In particular to Charles Bonsall for giving me the opportunity to prepare and deliver the talks in the first place; to Dr. Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Salim for giving me permission to use the Central Records Office, Khartoum; to Professor Yusuf Fadl Hasan for arranging publication; to Isobel Clark for typing several versions of the talks; to John Gowlett for drawing the maps. My biggest debt is to Ismát Hasan Zulfu who first aroused my interest in the subject. Accordingly this publication is dedicated to him.

Peter Clark
Khartoum,
March 1977

Postscript. During the talk on General Gordon I was rather nervous. When I spoke of Gordon's personality in the first paragraph - 'quixotic, pietistic, utterly fearless, utterly selfless' - I read the last word as 'selfish'. I was not aware of the mistake until after the talk. One of the audience told me that he thought it was going to be a Gordon-bashing evening. Another complimented me on drawing out the paradox of

Gordon's personality. But the revised version remains 'selfless'.

CHAPTER ONE

THE HICKS PASHA EXPEDITION

1883

The Hicks Pasha Expedition

The month of December 1883 was a month of panic among the foreign community of Khartoum.

For the previous two years a religiously-motivated anti-foreign movement, led by the Mahdi, had been spreading like wildfire in the west of the Sudan. Successive military expeditions had been despatched only to meet disaster. The second city of the country, el Obeid in Kordofan, had fallen, and in the course of 1883 a large military expedition was prepared and equipped. The foreign community pinned their hopes of relief from this threat on the latest expedition led by General William Hicks, an Englishman, and containing about 7,000 soldiers. On 13 November a rumour reached Khartoum that Hicks 'was supposed to have beaten the Mahdi in seven battles and to be at el Obeid'. Eleven days later came news that the total force had been annihilated. The Mahdi was reported to have 300,000 fighters with rifles and artillery. As the Times correspondent in Khartoum wrote desperately, 'We have only 2,000 soldiers, no retreat, and the town and the country to the Red Sea (is) red hot for the rebels.'

The news precipitated a flight from the capital. The French consul, M. Marquet, packed his valuables, which included mirrors, cut glass, silver, champagne, hock, green peas, asparagus, strawberries, and pineapple, and left the city. Other foreigners rushed down to Berber before the river route was cut off, and then east to Sawakin - the usual route to and from Khartoum in those days.

The news caused consternation in Cairo, the capital of the Khedive's dominions, and dismay in London. The British had recently occupied Egypt and a series of advisers were in indirect control of the machinery of government. The news of the disaster in London and Cairo led to the sending to Khartoum of General Gordon with objectives that were ill-defined, indeed irreconcilable. He arrived in February 1884. The outlines of the siege and fall of Khartoum are well known. The memory of the death of Gordon was an important driving force in the reconquest of Sudan, 1896-98, and in the British dominated colonial rule that was to shape so many things that are familiar to British visitors to the Sudan today.

In the next few minutes I wish to consider what went wrong with the expedition that was totally annihilated at Shaykan in Kordofan on 5 November 1883, and which led to such momentous events. I wish also to look at the local Kordofan background of the campaign and the individuals who fought with and against Hicks.

Kordofan was a relatively wealthy province in the early 1880's. Its capital, el Obeid, had a population estimated at 50,000. It had garrisons, a hospital, an elementary school, a church and a Combon mission. Thirty miles to the north was a second town of Kordofan, Bara, from where trade routes extended north to the Nile at Debba and north west to Khartoum. There were other small garrisons at Dilling in the Nuba Mountains, Tayyara, 40 miles east of el Obeid, al Birka and Abu Haraz, 30 or 40 miles south west of el Obeid, Khursi, 5 miles east of Bara, and Azhaf, 10 miles south west of Bara. These garrisons consisted usually of well armed regular soldiers who were generally Egyptian, Southern Sudanese or Nubans officered by Egyptians, and bashibuzuks, irregulars often from the Shaiqi tribe.

Outside these towns the Egyptian imperial authority was weak. The government was associated with the harsh recruitment of young men for military service, with arbitrary, capricious and excessive levying of taxes, with interference in trade - especially the slave trade. Tribal authority prevailed. Islamic piety was intense, and owed little to Egyptian influence. In the north the Kababish patrolled the trade routes to Egypt and maintained a distant alliance with the government. In the south the various Baqqara cattle-rearing tribes had little to gain from having anything to do with the government. The Baqqara were to provide the Mahdi with his strongest support in the early years.

In the south of Kordofan the Nuba Mountains stood out, harbouring 30 or so tribes who had avoided Islamisation and Arabisation. The Mountains provided the raw materials for the slave trade. They were also a refuge for those fleeing from taxation and justice. In central Kordofan, around el Obeid and Bara, were many different tribes including immigrants from the west and north. There were many from present day Nigeria around Khursi and Tayyara that had settled there for a century or more. Tribes from the Nile valley, most notably the Jawabara, had introduced riverain methods of irrigation and cultivation in the oases near Bara.

Kordofan was - and is - the world's most productive area for gum arabic. The other major export was slaves, collected by Baqqara and sold to Ja'li and Dongolawi merchants.

Limited government control, the ennoblement of the idea of the warrior, the glorification of fighting, led to frequent conflict between tribes, between families, between individuals. Government authority in the 1860's and 1870's, however, was improved by the development of the telegraph and the consequent speedier despatch of soldiers to trouble spots. But for the people of Kordofan, the tribesmen, the warriors, the slavers, the holy men, extra reminders of Egyptian rule were irksome. The province was ripe for revolt. The support for a charismatic and theocratic challenger to Egyptian rule was natural. In the words of Yusuf Mikha'il, a young Coptic clerk in el Obeid, the Mahdi in Kordofan 'was, so to speak,

watering parched soil.

The challenge to Egyptian rule was centred on a Dongolawi religious teacher called Muhammad Ahmad, who declared himself the Mahdi al-Muntazar, the Expected Rightly-Guided One, at Aba Island on the White Nile, 200 miles south of Khartoum in June 1881. His Call attracted attention from the White Nile tribes. The Mahdi was invited to come to Khartoum to account for himself. He declined. In August a small military force was sent to face him. The Mahdists, who had received some elementary training of attack and defence, ambushed and destroyed the force. The following morning the Mahdi with a few hundred followers crossed the White Nile to the west and migrated to Qadir in the Southern Nuba Mountains about 90 miles north of the garrison town of Fashoda. The migration was during the rainy season and started in the fasting month of Ramadan, times of maximum inconvenience to a government that might try to mobilise troops quickly. When a larger government army came to Aba they found the place deserted.

In December 1881 the governor of Fashoda, acting without instructions from Khartoum, sent an army of 1,500 men, of whom one thousand were local Shilluks, towards Qadir. On the way they were ambushed and almost all, including the Shilluk Reth or King, were killed.

Meanwhile in the Jazira the revolt spread, and for the next year the Mahdi's agents kept government troops occupied. The Jazira campaign, however, was a side show. The government's position was weakened in

May 1882 when most of the Sinnar garrison was sent, with contingents from Khartoum and el Obeid, to Qadir. The combined army was caught in a state of unreadiness near Qadir in June and the Mahdi with 8,000 men won an overwhelming victory. This was the government's third reverse and the Mahdi's most spectacular gain so far. Support in Kordofan and Darfur flocked to him.

The Mahdi had for some years been building up support in Kordofan. Before his Call he had paid two visits to el Obeid. Support came from holy men like al Manna Isma'il from the Jawam'a country near Tayyara, from dissident tribesmen like Makki Ibrahim of the Hamar, from merchants out of favour with the government like Ilyas Pasha Umm Birayr in el Obeid. All were able to mobilise large numbers of men. The Mahdi in the first year after his Call had written to these people appointing amirs, canvassing support, and urging them to come and pay him allegiance. By the rainy season of 1882, when regular troops were most at a disadvantage, the Mahdi's supporters reduced and obliterated all the isolated garrisons in Kordofan: Abu Haraz in April, Birka and Azhaf in May, Tayyara in August, Dilling in September. From June, after the failure of an assault on Bara, that town was under siege. In August the Khursi garrison was withdrawn to Bara.

The towns of Bara and el Obeid now stood out as desirable prizes. Inside el Obeid the merchant Ilyas Pasha Umm Birayr, a Ja'li related to Zubair Pasha, was at loggerheads with the governor, Muhammad Pasha Sayyid. Ilyas Pasha invited the Mahdi, then at Qadir,

to come to el Obeid.

During the summer of 1882 the Governor strengthened the fortifications of the city. El Obeid was a straggling collection of straw huts. Defences enclosing all the huts were abandoned and a ditch was dug only around the government headquarters, the mudiriya, and the garrison. A rampart of earth, nine or ten feet in height and twenty feet in thickness, was built.

As the Mahdi approached, many of the inhabitants left to join him. The loyalists rented quarters in the fortified area. The city was defended by up to 6,000 well armed men.

In July and August the Mahdi made his way from Qadir to el Obeid on foot as a gesture of humility. He settled at Kaba, about five miles south west of el Obeid on 1 September and sent two messengers to the Governor, inviting him to surrender. Muhammad Pasha Sayyid refused and the messengers were hanged. A number of prominent people of the town then defected to the Mahdi. They included Ilyas Pasha Umm Birayr.

On the following Friday the Mahdists attempted to storm the town. The Mahdi had, it is reckoned, about 50,000 men and 5,000 horse. They came over the open ground to the fortifications. As they approached dust covered the horizon and, in the words of a defender, there was a 'noise like the din of a raging sea.' When they had almost reached the city, the defenders opened fire. The Mahdi put his faith in swords and sticks, and the firepower of the defenders was able to show its

superiority. There was, even so, fierce fighting for many hours. The Mahdi and his forces were beaten off and the government soldiers, in the words of an eye-witness, 'swept the nomad Arabs away like sweeping hay. The Mahdists lost about 10,000 men.

This was a serious setback for the Mahdi. His principle lieutenant, the Khalifa Abd Allahi - it is said - proposed withdrawing to Qadir. Ilyas Pasha however, suggested that a siege be pressed. Hitherto the Mahdi had succeeded without depending on firearms. Previously they had relied on ambushes and shock tactics, making use of trees and bushes. After the regular troops were surprised, the formation of soldiers disorganised, and the advantage of firearms cancelled, the sword would win the day. Such was the theory.

Aware how vulnerable he was after this unsuccessful Friday assault, the Mahdi sent for the captured firearms kept at Qadir. He arranged for Hamdan Abu Anja, a veteran of many wars, to lead an armed battalion. This was called the jihadiya, and the soldiers in it were largely ex-slaves and Southerners. They were trained and, in years to come, were to receive regular pay. The Mahdi's army was based on numerous units of different sizes called rayas (standards). The leader of a standard was either a tribal chief, a prominent merchant, or a man with some following. Al Manna Isma'il, for example, the faqi from Jawam'a country, was able in a few months to raise a following of 10,000. The merchants of el Obeid used to have private armies of hundreds of men. The fighters formed

themselves into rows on the pattern of rows of worshippers and followed their commander as the worshippers followed their imam. The divine nature of the Mahdi's Call made fighting a religious duty, thereby calling on self-discipline, loyalty and devotion to the cause.

After the Friday battle the Mahdists tightened a siege round el Obeid, and also Bara. This depressed the defenders in both towns, for hope of relief was cut off. All access to el Obeid was severed and food became short. Some communication did exist between besiegers and besieged, thanks to the bribing of sentries. Some merchants in the Mahdist camp sold grain to the besieged at inflated prices. Meanwhile Hamdan Abu Anja's jihadiya specialised in the assassination of defenders at unguarded moments. As the months wore on, the people of el Obeid were reduced to eating skins, gum and dogs. People died on hunger, malnutrition and dysentery. One of the besieged recalled that 'the air was black with the scores of carrion kites, which feasted on the dead bodies; these ugly birds became so distended by constant gorging that they could not fly away, and were killed in numbers by the soldiers, who devoured them with avidity.'

In early January Bara surrendered. The garrison and its commander, al Nur Angara, were recruited into the Mahdist army. They came south to el Obeid and called on the besieged to surrender. On 17 January 1883 el Obeid fell to the Mahdists. Most of the garrison were merged into the Mahdist forces. One of the Egyptian officers, Yusuf Mansur, was to be the Mahdist expert on

artillery right up to the battle of Omdurman. The leaders of el Obeid, including Muhammad Pasha Sayyid, were killed. Many were relieved to have access to decent food. Some went too far and died from over-eating.

The Governor General in Khartoum, Abd al Qadir Pasha Hilmi, was blamed for the fall of el Obeid and was recalled. Abd al Qadir in fact had been a vigorous commander, and had done much to restore the government's authority in the Jazira. He constructed defences in Khartoum and recruited many more soldiers. He advised the abandonment of the west and the strengthening of defences along the White Nile. In place of Abd al Qadir three men, all new to the central Sudan, were sent. Ala al Din Pasha Siddiq was made civil governor general. The former military functions were assumed by Sulayman Pasha Niyazi. Both these men were Circassians, and Ala al Din had seen service in the Eastern Sudan. The post of Chief of Staff went to an Englishman, William Hicks, known as Hicks Pasha.

It is useful at this stage to consider the British involvement in the Sudan in 1883. In 1882 a British military expedition had occupied Egypt, defeating the Egyptian army under Urabi Pasha. The pretext was to restore the authority of the Khedive. The Egyptian army was disbanded and British advisers came to sort out the muddle and debts incurred by the Egyptian government. The structure of Egyptian administration was maintained. The British government

argued that they were responsible only for Egypt. Nevertheless they took a lively interest in the fate of Hicks, and indeed Hicks' channel of communication with his employers, the Egyptian government, was through Sir Edward Malet, British Consul General. Malet tried toconvince the Egyptian Prime Minister, Sharif Pasha, that 'Her Majesty's Government are in no way responsible for the operations in the Soudan which have been undertaken under the authority of His Highness' Government, or for the appointment or actions of General Hicks.' The Egyptian government, irked by military occupation and foreign interference, were anxious to stress their independence and tended to take a 'forward' line. They were sceptical of the British government's disinterest and anticipated financial support. The British government of Mr. Gladstone, however, had come to power after deploring the imperialist adventures of its predecessor. It was embarrassed by its own foreign adventure in Egypt, which added to its domestic troubles. Moreover, another of Mr. Gladstone's major political principles was retrenchment of the economy. When Malet sent reports on the Sudan and Hicks' shortage of financial support, the relevant documents were passed round the Cabinet. The Chancellor of the Exchequer commented, 'I don't like the look of these papers.

Colonel William Hicks had spent thirty years in the Indian army. In 1883 he was 53 years old and had seen service in a number of Indian campaigns, including the Mutiny, and in the Napier Expedition in Abyssinia in 1867-8. He became a Lieutenant Colonel in 1875 and

retired from the Indian army in 1880 with the honorary rank of Colonel, for pension purposes. Hicks was made a _farig_, roughly lieutenant general, in the Egyptian army and sent to the Sudan in February 1883 accompanied by an army and a number of European and Egyptian officers. He arrived in Khartoum in early March, and the following months was busy patrolling the White Nile. On 29 April Hicks defeated a Mahdist force at Marabi', which gave him much confidence.

During the next four months Hicks remained in Khartoum, training his men, appealing for more men, more money, more munitions, more provisions. The Mahdi was consolidating his position in Kordofan, and Hicks was under pressure from the Cairo government to undertake an expedition to the west. He was daunted by the task. 'The force we have is not sufficient', he wrote, 'to undertake the Kordofan campaign. Every ounce of food must be taken from here. We march through a hostile country, inhabited by powerful tribes. The lines of communication must be kept open, and depôts must be formed which must be sufficiently garrisoned. Each convoy will require escort. Our availably strength will be under 6,000; of these many will likely be sick after the fever season.'

Hicks felt that his authority was limited. Sulayman Pasha Niyazi was expected to defer to him on technical military matters. Hicks complained, through Malet, to the Egyptian government and, under the threat of resignation, got his way. Sulayman Pasha was

transferred to the Eastern Sudan. Hicks now, whatever his misgivings about the Kordofan expedition, was robbed of his excuse to resign. He prepared for the march into Kordofan, and moved his men up to al Duwaym, 130 miles south of Khartoum, ready to march west.

Hicks was in charge of about 8,000 men. Seven thousand regular soldiers were divided into four battalions. These soldiers were mainly Egyptian, though there were a number of Ja'li, Shaiqi and 'blacks' (Southerners and Nubans). The Egyptians were largely the remnants of Urabi's army who had fought against the British the previous year. Nearly 2,000 of them had been rejected earlier for military service 'because of slight physical defects'. They had received basic training in Khartoum, but morale was low. Supplies had been late in arriving, and there had already been threats of mutiny. The senior officers were Egyptian and European. One Egyptian, Husayn Pasha Mazhar, was in overall command of the four infantry battalions, each of which was commanded by an Egyptian. Another Egyptian was in charge of artillery and transport.

Six European officers accompanied the expedition. Hicks' Chief of Staff was Colonel Arthur Farquhar, formerly of the Coldstream Guards. He is described as 'bold and dashing'. However, he was somewhat inflexible, relying on a compass and charging through thick forest, rather than on common sense and riding round it. A German baron, Major Götz von Seckendorff, had accompanied Hicks in the Abyssinian campaign. He was fat and quick tempered. The intelligence officer was Major Edward Evans, the only

British officer who knew Arabic. He had been in business in the Red Sea and had been in the Sudan before. He used to translate Hicks' addresses to the soldiers. An Austrian, Captain Herlth, was a cavalry man. He kept a diary during the expedition. This has been lost, but was seen by a European prisoner of the Mahdi, Father Joseph Ohrwalder, who produced what he could remember of it in his book Ten Years Captivity in the Mahdi's Camp.

Among the European civilians who accompanied the expedition were two newspapermen. The Irishman, Edmund O'Donovan of the Daily News, had travelled extensively. He was once arrested in Constantinople for insulting the Sultan and arrived in the Sudan wearing Turkish dress. Frank Vizetelly of the Illustrated London News had walked from Sawakin to Khartoum and was planning to walk south through Africa sketching for his paper before he got diverted to the Hicks Pasha Expedition.

The expedition was accompanied by 2,000 civilians and camp followers. Some had official positions like Georges Bey as he is known - the Greek Gheorghis Dimitrious Douloughlu - who was chief physician and surgeon general to the forces in the Sudan. Others were brought along to help in setting up an administration in el Obeid after victory. These included Busati Bey Madani, who had been Inspector of Finances for the Sudan, Mahmud Ahmadani, an Egyptian, a former Governor of Khartoum, and Hamad al-Tilib, Chief of the Appeal Court in Khartoum. One other civilian who came with the

Expedition was Abd al Rahman Ban Naqa. His father was an el Obeid merchant who had thrown in his lot with the Mahdi. He 'had been made to accompany the expedition to use his good offices with his father and thereby to facilitate the task of the expedition.'

The soldiers were armed with Remingtons and there were four long Krupp guns, six five-barrel Nordenfeldt machine guns and ten short-range cannons. All food and much water was carried. Food included sacks of biscuits, barley and rice. Water was in iron tanks. This was to supplement water found on the route for, as one of the Egyptian officers accompanying the Expedition said, there were '20,000 water drinkers. Apart from the humans there were about 14,000 beasts. The Expedition started with 5,500 camels, but there was a high mortality rate with them. Of 5,000 horses that set out, most had died by a week before the final battle. The 3,000 mules and 1,000 donkeys were tougher, however.

The Expedition gathered at al Duwaym in September. It was accompanied by the new Governor General of the Sudan, Ala al Din Pasha Siddiq. At once disagreement broke out between him and Hicks over the route to el Obeid. Hicks argued that they should go due west to Bara and then south to el Obeid. The Kababish of Northern Kordofan were more sympathetic to the government. The route was the shortest, though water was limited. Ala al Din argued that they should go south west to the Khor Abu Habl and follow that to

the settlements where water was plentiful. This route was longer, and the tribes known to be hostile. Ala al Din Pasha's authority prevailed.

The Expedition left al Duwaym on 27 September. Hicks wanted to leave a hundred or so men at each place they spent a night at. These would guarantee a line of retreat and of supply. Again the Governor General overruled him, arguing, 'the force at our disposal is not large enough to allow of its being divided.' Hicks conceded that 'I should in garrisoning these posts be only wakening my fighting force without gaining any advantage.

At el Obeid the Mahdi operated an effective intelligence system. He had the sympathy of most people on Hicks' route. After Hicks had left al Duwaym the Mahdi sent Muhammad Uthman Abu Qirja, Abd al Halim Musa'id and Umar Ilyas with 3,000 men to dog the Expedition. They were not to engage in fighting, but to skirmish and harry the force.

The first hostilities were ten days after they left al Duwaym, though already the villages they passed through were deserted, the camps where they slept were occupied after they left, and the wells they came upon were either dry or filled up with earth.

External pressures compounded internal tension. The day after leaving al Duwaym, Hicks, irritated by some administrative blunder, threatened to quit. He was in frequent disagreement with the senior Egyptian officer, Husayn Pasha. On 8 October he was squabbling

al Birka, both about 35 miles south of el Obeid. Al Birka - the word means pool - is a large lake around which are a number of settlements. The lake could satisfy the needs of an army. The apex of the triangle is el Obeid. The lower part, now sliced by the railway, was a thick bush of kitr trees. Ten miles north of Alluba on the way to el Obeid lies the forest of Shaykan, the word being an Arabic dialect plural of shawka, thorn. The kitr bush grows thorns that are up to three inches long and very tough. About twelve miles north of Alluba is another lake which, unlike al Birka, is seasonal. This is Fula al Masarin, meaning the pool of the entrails, from a fight that took place long before the final disaster of Hicks, 'when the entrails of the slain were picked out by vultures.'

On Thursday 1 November and Friday 2 November Hicks remained at Alluba. His own scouts, in whom he had diminishing confidence, brought to him several hundred copies of a proclamation of the Mahdi in which he was urged to put his trust in God, the Prophet and the Mahdi rather than in cannons and firepower. As many of these proclamations as possible were burnt. Hicks planned to move west to the abundant water at al Birka.

His movements were reported regularly to the Mahdi. On 1 November the Mahdi left el Obeid and moved south with an estimated 50,000 men, and spent the night at Firtingul, half way between el Obeid and al Birka. He was aware of Hicks' plans and sent his right hand man, the Khalifa Abd Allahi, with Mahmud Abd al Qadir

ith Colonel Farquhar over the issue of orders.

From 10 October, stragglers were picked off. he force was obliged to stick close together and no oldier was allowed to leave the camp unarmed. The easts were unable to roam and find grass. Camels had to eat anything they could pick up in the square.' heir saddles were cushioned with straw pallets. In heir hunger the camels ate the straw. The wooden addles then chafed the skin and caused painful wounds. n 15 October over one hundred camels died from thirst, the result, according to Hicks, of incompetence in rrangements for water distribution.

Morale, already low, was made lower by a agging thirst, which was aggravated by excessive eating of ful Sudani. On the other hand, many lucky soldiers found water melons. Spirits rose a few days short of al Rahad when a Mahdist assault was fully repelled with the loss of only one man. Further relief came 'when ducks were seen hovering over a large pool.' At al Rahad the force rested for five or six days near the large tract of water that still exists. Not far away the Mahdists camped, but disappeared when Hicks moved on. Fire thickened. The Expedition was aware that the enemy's numbers were increasing daily. On 30 October they left al Rahad. The following day on a five mile march they were continually sniped at. After two days they reached Alluba.

The drama of the last five days took place in a triangle whose base is the line between Alluba and

on to al Birka. On the 2nd, while the Mahdi was still at Firtingul, Mahdist forces under the Khalifa Abd Allahi occupied the lake at al Birka. Later the same day this information was relayed to Hicks, fifteen miles away.

The following morning - Saturday the 3rd - Hicks left Alluba at dawn, heading north towards the Fula al Masarin. After ten miles they constructed a strong zariba and camped. A number of the Mahdi's allies were at Ji'aybat. When they heard that Hicks was moving north, they marched east through the forest until they 'came upon the enemy's camp fires winking ....through the trees.' They camped close by. The Mahdi, meanwhile, left Firtingul and went on to al Birka. Some of his men were not as confident as their commanding position would justify. One man, Hajj Ibrahim, said to the Mahdi,

'They are making for el Obeid to seize our women. Ought we not to go there beforehand ?'

The Mahdi answered with a riddle. He spat on his hand.

'What is that ?'

'Spittle', said Hajj Ibrahim.

The Mahdi then threw it on to the ground, where it soon evaporated.

'We are the ground and the Turks are the spittle. If a bird flies where does it land ?'

'On the ground', answered Hajj Ibrahim.

'The Turks are the bird and we are the ground. So rest assured. Believe in the power of God, not of the Turks. Monday will be the day of reckoning. If

any one of you on that day is late, because he has to repair his sandal, then he will not see them alive.'

The following day, Sunday the 4th, the Mahdi moved north and reached Fula al Masarin before midday. This was to be his main base for the next day or two. One of his companions pointed out its inauspicious name,

'This place is called the pool of guts.'

The Mahdi replied,

'The guts of the Turks will be cast out here.

On Sunday 4th Hicks' army left the zariba in a tight square although they were aware that they were surrounded. Hamdan Abu Anja, with the firing force, the jihadiya, moved into the space they had left, blocking retreat. They attacked the rear. The 1st battalion in front wheeled round and attempted to drive the Mahdists back. But their square was broken. Many camels carrying water fell outside the square. So hot was the fire that they could not be recovered. Guns too were lost for the same reason. Hicks ordered the band to play. But camels, mules and men were dropping constantly, and the feeble attempt to raise morale was abandoned. According to Captain Herlth's diary, 'We are all cramped up together, so the bullets cannot fail to strike.' Among the killed in this action was the Greek doctor, Georges Bey.

The Mahdi called off the assault. Morale in the Egyptian army was at its lowest. Some of the merchants conspired to mutiny. Already a few days earlier Abd al Rahman Ban Naqa had been caught 'writing a letter to his father, whom he knew to be with the

rebels, asking his advice as to whether he should desert. The merchants, led by Qinawi Bey, whom the Governor General proposed to appoint Governor of Bahr al Ghazal, planned to seize arms and break out of the square. This mutiny was thwarted by Busati Bey Madani. Hicks called a meeting of the officers and asked for constructive suggestions. Nobody answered. Hicks decided to trust in God.

At 10 a.m. the following morning, Monday 5 November, Hicks and his army left the zariba in three squares, forming an equilateral triangle, each square 300 yards from the next. In the middle of each was the baggage and ammunition. Hicks and his staff were in front, followed by what was left of the artillery and four cannons. Then there was the first square and after that the two others. Horsemen made a show of guarding the rear and flanks.

At the Fula a mile away the Mahdi called his amirs. He led the army in prayer and told Abu Qirja and Abd al Halim Musa'id to attack the rear. Abd al Rahman wad al Nujumi, supported by the Khalifa Abd Allahi and his brother Ya'qub, and the Khalifa Ali wad Hilu, were to attack the van.

In the general assault the fighting was fierce. Hicks' army, surrounded as they were, shot wildly, killing some of their own men. But the Mahdists lost several hundred soldiers. Hicks cut his way through to the left, and the Governor General, Ala al Din, was killed trying to reach him. The overwhelming

superiority in numbers and morale of the Mahdists left the issue in no doubt. The whole of Hicks' army, with the exception of two junior officers and about 300 men, were killed - perhaps seven thousand all told. One survivor, years later, recalled that he managed with others to flee to the south. He was pursued, but 'they were too busy collecting loot to bother about us.'

A number of days was spent looting the dead soldiers. Weapons, ammunition and supplies were taken and divided, one fifth to the Mahdi and the rest for the Mahdist state treasury. Some of the Remington rifles found their way to the Nuba Mountains where for a generation they were known as 'Hicksi'.

Hicks Pasha has been immune from criticism. He died a soldier's death and has been seen as the poor man's General Gordon - a martyr to other people's political errors. However, my narrative has shown that Hicks had considerable defects as a general. He showed little leadership and was unable to impose his will unquestioningly upon the other officers. He got involved with unseemly squabbles with his chief of staff and the senior Egyptian officer. On the eve of the battle, bankrupt in ideas himself, he appealed for suggestions to his staff. It is difficult to imagine Gordon or Kitchener, the Mahdi or the Khalifa showing such lack of authority. In some ways Hicks' inadequacy is hardly surprising. In the Indian army Hicks never rose higher than Lieutenant Colonel. He was promoted

rapidly as an aging man, without trial. His last battle experience was as a brigade major in Abyssinia sixteen years earlier. Indeed, his characteristics were those of a junior officer - anxiety to cooperate with colleagues and a fussiness over administrative detail. These traits are commendable in a junior officer, but inappropriate in a general.

By contrast the Mahdi showed considerable talent as a military leader. He exploited every natural advantage of the environment. He was able to delegate. He showed great restraint in waiting for the Expedition to get so far before delivering the coup de grace - although in this he was probably mindful of the Friday disaster at el Obeid a year before. Above all he showed qualities of leadership, never doubting his destiny, keeping morale high.

The nature of the campaign was singular. Professor Mekki Shibeika has written that, a few days after leaving al Duwaym the Expedition was 'virtually is a state of moving siege.' This vivid image helps us see how the Mahdi's tactics employed at Bara and el Obeid were applied to the Hicks Pasha Expedition.

The consequences of the battle of Shaykan were far reaching. The Mahdi was on the crest of a wave. He at once cast his eyes towards Khartoum and wrote to the inhabitants of the capital calling for their allegiance. He acquired an international reputation and received delegations from the Hijaz, from India and from Morocco.

For the government it was a further disaster. At once garrisons south of Khartoum, with the exception of Sinnar, were withdrawn. Government authority collapsed in Darfur and Bahr al Ghazal. Equatoria remained an island of Egyptian influence. The sequence of events that led to General Gordon coming to Khartoum was set in train. The memory of the disaster of Hicks and the death of Gordon was to influence the reconquest fifteen years later, after more than a decade of Sudanese independence.

In 1899 Kordofan was restored to Egyptian - or rather Anglo-Egyptian - authority. In spite of the disintegration of Mahdist authority in Kordofan in 1898-99, for several years the new Condominium government was concerned about their security in the west. In the winter of 1905-6 the Governor General, Sir Reginald Wingate, visited the Shaykan battlefield. After his visit he wrote that 'I have no hesitation in hazarding the opinion that, had the efforts to relieve el Obeid been conducted by a far more numerous and efficient force, the result would have been the same.' Two years later Wingate expressed his anxiety in a private letter: 'I shall always feel rather nervous about our situation in Kordofan: Indeed, if a similar rising to that which took place in 1883 occurred any time before the Railway is completed....it would probably be impossible to relieve our isolated garrisons with any reasonable chance of success.'

The railway to el Obeid was constructed by 1911. This line was extended to Darfur in the 1950's.

It divides al Birka from the battlefield. There is a railway station called Shaykan. The site of the battle has monuments to both sides. Where the main fighting took place a scratch on the ground uncovers fragments of bones and sometimes buttons, pieces of equipment or parts of armaments: they serve as grim reminders of the awful tragedy that took place in November 1883.

CHAPTER TWO

GENERAL GORDON AND THE SIEGE OF KHARTOUM

1884-5

General Gordon and the Siege of Khartoum

The evening of 25 January 1885 was the last spent on earth by General Charles George Gordon, Governor General of the Sudan. He was killed at about 5 a.m. on the morning of Monday 26 January at the Governor General's Palace, Khartoum. The dramatic circumstances of his death after a long siege are well known. Gordon's personality - quixotic, pietistic, utterly fearless, utterly selfless - was much admired in British and European circles. He was idealised as a Christian hero, and his death was seen in intensely melodramatic terms. His political mission and its failure were interpreted in terms of a polarisation between Christianity and Islam, between the forces of darkness and of light. Parallels between Gordon and Christ were hinted at and a flood of devotional literature was unleashed dwelling on his martyrdom.

In the next few minutes I wish to concentrate on the political circumstances of Gordon's mission.

What were his practical problems ? What alternatives was he faced with ? What was the local context ? Who were the besiegers ? Who the besieged ?

Khartoum in the early 1880's was the capital of the Sudanese dependencies of the Khedive, the ruler of Egypt. Sudan had been an Egyptian colony since the 1820's. The rule had been established to exploit the alleged mineral wealth - especially gold - of the country. In fact it supplied slaves and soldiers for the Khedive's army. Khartoum and el Obeid became important commercial centres dealing with slaves, ivory, gum and ostrich feathers. The Egyptian rule was based on a series of garrison towns and penetrated the rural areas only to extract taxes. Certain aspects of industrial Europe were introduced to the Sudan for the first time, such as steamers, postal services, the telegraph, railways and 19th century governmental practices, hospitals and schools. We must not exaggerate the sophistication of these innovations. On the other hand in 1880 a letter from Khartoum to el Fasher took 11 days and from Khartoum to el Obeid 4½ days.

Khartoum had a mixed population of about 50,000 in the early 1880's, of whom perhaps 30,000 to 35,000 were, according to Colonel Stewart, Gordon's deputy, slaves. There was a wealthy class of Egyptian merchants and officials including Copts who were clerks, accountants and traders. Many northern Sudanese from Dongola and the Shaiqi and Ja'li tribes were small traders and sailors. Slaves tended to be Southerners, Nilotics, Bari, from the Nuba Mountains, Darfur and the

Funj areas. The Europeans were a mixed bunch, a lot of Greeks, Austrians, and Italians, some British subjects, including Maltese and the odd Indian. There were also Jews, Syrians, Algerians and Ethiopians.

In 19th century Khartoum the river was far more important as a channel of communication. The best houses overlooked the river, which was dotted with small jetties where grain and other provisions were landed, brought in from riverain villages. There were, of course, no bridges, but a regular ferry crossed to North Khartoum from some point near the present Roman Catholic cathedral. The Palace, built in the 1870's, had two stories. The present palace occupies the same site and it is interesting to observe that, like its predecessor, it is designed for approach from the river, from which it can be seen at its best.

The town was mostly to the south and west of the palace. There were lots of rough narrow streets that got very muddy during the rainy season. A number of quarters were called Hilla, village, and Khartoum was a compact collection of settlements. Hardly any buildings remain from that time - the tombs in Shari' Baladiya and a wall in the buildings of the office of the Commissioner of Khartoum may go back to the 1850's.

Hillat Musa Bey was immediately west and south of the palace and was an area of offices and middle leve residences. Along the river near the present day Grand Hotel was Hillat Manjara where there were workshops for the river craft. To the back, south west of the town

was built a sandbank about three feet high, called the Taras, designed to protect the town from the White Nile floods. It marked the end of the town in that direction, and just inside were a series of small houses and mud huts, the homes of tinkers and prostitutes. Coming to the east, on the site of the present central taxi station and the Sudan Airways headquarters, was the suq and mosque area. The main Khartoum mosque was built in the 1830's and the suq must have been like the suq al 'Arabi today: some constructed markets and many small stores and displays, dealing with local produce and cheap imported luxury goods. Finally, the area now bounded by Palace Avenue, Hospital Street and Shari' Jumhuriya was called Salamat al Pasha. This was the residential area of the poorer Sudanese. It also contained then, as now, Khartoum's red light district.

Khartoum was a foreign town and represented the colonial power. The reaction to the foreigner and his ways was bitterest in matters of religion. The Egyptians introduced mosques and a government controlled hierarchy of religious officials that seemed to interfere with the popular piety of rural Sudan. Considering the innovations the regime introduced - and one of the words for innovation in Arabic, bid'a, has overtones of heresy - it is not surprising that opposition took a religious form. It became concentrated on a holy man from Dongola called Muhammad Ahmad, who declared himself the Mahdi al Muntazar, the expected rightly guided one. In the years from 1881 to 1883 he

built up a widespread popular movement based on the White Nile and Kordofan areas. Repeated military expeditions sent from Khartoum were defeated by the Mahdi and his followers. The movement had features in common with other Islamic fundamentalist movements that have emphasised the purity of the early years in contrast to the decadence of modern times. The extraordinary military successes of the Mahdi against organised and well armed soldiers seemed to vindicate his claims. In January 1883 the second city of the Sudan - el Obeid - fell to him after a six month siege.

Coincidentally with the rise of the Mahdi, Egypt fell under European and particularly British control. In 1882 Egypt was occupied by British troops and the country was indirectly ruled by the British for the next two generations. Control was through advisers, and the principal British authority was the Consul General. In the summer of 1883 Evelyn Baring was appointed Consul General and was to stay until 1907. During these years of what has been called 'the veiled protectorate', Baring, later Lord Cromer, was the effective ruler of Egypt, although the Khedive and Egyptian ministers remained as nominal rulers. In 1883 an Egyptian army officered by Britishers, led by Hicks Pasha, came to the Sudan to sort out the Mahdi. His army was massacred at Shaykan on 5 November 1883.

The news caused panic in Khartoum, consternation in Cairo and dismay in London. In Khartoum the wealthy foreign communities saw a threat to their

property and welfare. In Cairo official circles feared a spread of Mahdism in the towns and villages of Upper Egypt. In London Mr. Gladstone's Liberal government, already tottering from a series of domestic crises, was reluctantly forced to do something about this crisis in a far away country about which little was known and less understood.

In carrying out a decision in the Sudan there were now three centres of decision making - London, Cairo and Khartoum. There were three areas of divided sovereignty and indirect authority. The seeds of Gordon's destruction were seen in this politically muddled situation.

The Cairo government at once agreed on the need to evacuate the Egyptian garrisons from the Sudan. In Britain a lively popular opinion somehow saw Major General Gordon as the answer to the difficulty. A weak and divided government gave in to the demands of public opinion and tried to urge Baring to accept Gordon as an emissary in Khartoum. An untried and doubting Baring gave in to the demands of the British government and tried to urge the Egyptian government to accept Gordon as an emissary in Khartoum. The Egyptian government, hamstrung by foreign advisers, accepted with alacrity, assuming that the responsibility for any unforeseen consequences would rest with the British government. The British government, led by an ailing old man and caught between a demanding public opinion and a vigorous needling opposition, breathed a sigh of relief assuming that the responsibility for any unforeseen consequences

would rest with the Egyptian government. The Gordon mission was under way.

Meanwhile, why Gordon ? Gordon had already had considerable experience of the Sudan. From 1874 to 1876 he had served the Khedive as Governor of Equatoria. From 1877 to 1880 he had been Governor General of the Sudan. In these roles he had been an energetic opponent of the slave trade. He was a strong Bible reading Evangelical Christian and his unorthodox character and methods gave him an enormous reputation among the newly literate non Conformist lower middle classes of Britain. Gordon was now in his early 50's and most of his life had been spent as a soldier in distant parts of the globe. He was regarded as an authority in what was called savage warfare. In England Gordon had always shunned publicity but had spent a great amount of his time, energy and income on the welfare of destitute youths. All who worked with him were inspired by great devotion. Although his judgment was at times faulty and his behaviour impetuous, he was undogmatic, highly resourceful and never one to bear grudges. This was the man sent to Khartoum by two governments.

The British government charged him with going to Khartoum to report on the best methods of evacuation - an advisory role - and to accept any task given him by the Egyptian government. The latter made him Governor General - an executive role. He was to carry out the withdrawal of Egyptian troops, to employ 'the best means and arrangements which may be necessary for the safety of those troops and employees, and inhabitants and

merchants, both native and foreign,' who may wish to leave and to arrange for a successor government to the Sudan.

It is not clear who was to provide support and backing for this open-ended undertaking. Nor was it made clear what was to happen if his advisory role conflicted with his executive. Again, who was to be evacuated ? All garrisons ? Including those in Equatoria and Bahr al Ghazal ? And how binding would his advice be ?

Gordon accepted his commissions, left England in January and reached Khartoum on 18 February 1884. He immediately sought to weaken the appeal of the Mahdi by issuing some reforms. Taxation was halved. Some arrears were cancelled. Many prisoners were released. The Khedival ordinance banning slavery from 1887 was declared inoperative. By removing some of the more unpopular aspects of the government it was hoped to still opposition. Secondly, Gordon set about plans for the government of the Sudan after the withdrawal. He wanted a Sudanese of authority who would be an alternative focus of support. Zubair Pasha would be such a man. Now Zubair was a vigorous old slaver living in exile in Cairo at the time. A Ja'li from Jaili, he and his family had been the main antagonists of Gordon in his previous tours of duty in the Sudan. Zubair had been Governor of Bahr al Ghazal, was a man of wealth, influence, of military and administrative ability. Gordon's suggestion was sound. Baring supported it but

the British government, submitting to pressure from the Anti-Slavery lobby, rejected the idea. Gordon's alternative was to build up a Council in Khartoum, formed of tribal leaders, officials and merchants. He appointed the Mahdi Sultan of Kordofan, requested that he stay there and expressed a hope for cordial relations. He attempted to isolate the Mahdi further by arranging for the ulama, the religious leaders of Khartoum, to write a letter refuting the exclusive claims of the Mahdi.

So much for Gordon's peace offensives. At the same time he looked at his military resources. He had a garrison of about 5,000 regular soldiers reinforced by probably the same number of irregulars. There was a fleet of steamers which maintained his communications with the outside world. Indeed, Gordon's dependence on his steamers was a characteristic of his conduct of the siege. It reflects the importance of the river to 19th century Khartoum - the river that linked the Sudan and Cairo. As one historian has observed, 'The Egyptians depended on the Nile while the Mahdists feared it; the Mahdists built fortifications on the Nile banks (at Omdurman) but none of the desert side, while the Egyptians did the reverse.'

The fortifications of Khartoum were a mile or two from the town. They were first built by a previous Governor General, and Gordon set about repairing them. A ditch, three metres deep and four metres wide, was constructed with a parapet on the town side. The line of

fortifications went from the Blue to the While Nile. It started near the present Blue Nile Bridge and a gate, the Burri gate, was the exit for the villages of the Blue Nile. There was also a Burri fort, the site of which is in the University grounds. The parapet followed the railway line roughly (one or two small capstans still exist marking the site of the line of Gordon's ramparts) and after 3,000 metres, a little to the east of the present railway station, was another gate, the Masallamiya gate. (Masallamiya is an old town near Wad Medani.) By it was a second fort. Following the railway again, 1,500 metres further on was the third gate, the Kalakla gate. (Kalakla is a village on the road to Jabal Aulia). The site of this gate is the Hurriya bridge over the railway on the road to Shajara. There was another fort a little to the west and then 4,000 metres of ramparts as far as the White Nile. Gordon had three other forts at his disposal - Mugran, roughly on the site of the present Mugran gardens near the White Nile bridge to Omdurman; North fort, opposite the Palace, originally a private residence; and Omdurman fort, a little inland from the river to the south of the White Nile bridge.

Meanwhile, what was the Mahdi doing ? Until October 1884 the Mahdi remained at al Rahad, sixty miles south east of el Obeid, organising his forces. He issued his arrangements through a series of decrees - manshurat - in which he specified the chain of command in his army.

In the Sudan, religion calls upon powers of

discipline and organisation rarely found elsewhere. When we see Sudanese Muslims praying, men form themselves spontaneously into neat rows behind a leader in prayer, or imam. It is a most moving experience to attend an Islamic festival. A space with hundreds of men milling around will, within one or two minutes, form itself into a score of rows. The actions of praying - kneeling, bowing, standing, - are performed in as regular and disciplined a way as well drilled soldiers on a parade ground. Such groups of worshippers behind the imam formed the basic fighting unit in the Mahdi's forces. Such organisation and discipline bore fruit in the early military successes of the Mahdiya. Like groups of worshippers, the numbers of these basic units could vary enormously.

The Mahdi rejected Gordon's offers of a Sultanate of Kordofan with scorn. He remained in Kordofan for several months, directing the siege from al Rahad. It was not until October that he arrived to take part personally. His basic policy in the early months was to impose a close siege on Khartoum. He issued manshurat to tribal and religious leaders calling on them either to join him in Kordofan or to take part in the siege. His call was answered, and within one month of Gordon's arrival his telegraphic communication was cut. Gordon was faced with the problem of a blockade. The Mahdi appointed his father in law, Muhammad al Tayib al Basir, a holy man from the Halawiyin tribe in the Jazira, to the command of operations in Central Sudan. One of his earliest letters after the

battle of Shaykan had been to the people of Salamat al Pasha, the Sudanese quarter of Khartoum.

By early May it was clear to Gordon that the chances of a political solution to evacuation was fast diminishing. In that month news came of the fall of Berber in the north. He had passed through Berber three months before, on his way to Khartoum, and had set up a local administration to take over after evacuation. The appeals of the Mahdi dissolved Berber's loyalty, and Gordon's careful administration collapsed like a pack of cards. Only a military solution seemed possible. Either Gordon must defeat the Mahdi and then confront the consequent political problems, or he must receive reinforcements from Egypt or Britain. His original instructions, vague and contradictory, now became irrelevant to the situation. This was abundantly clear to Gordon, but not to Cairo or to London. Hence the slowness in appreciating the danger of the situation and the delay in sending out a relief expedition.

The following eight months of the siege can be seen as being in four phases: from May to July the Mahdi's grip tightened on the city; in August Gordon took the initiative but overreached himself; from September to December disaster followed disaster; by January the situation was utterly desperate, and the final fall came almost as a relief to the tension.

In the first phase the Mahdists took up their positions. Muhammad Uthman Abu Qirja, a Dongolawi from al Qitayna, arrived to take up command in April. He

based himself at al Jirayf. The qadi of Kalakla, who had been among Gordon's first Council, had now joined the Mahdists and faced the city from the south.. Another army settled at al Fitayhab, west of the White Nile. To the north, two men, al Tahir Muhammad Badr al Ubaid, son of a very holy man of Umm Dubban, and Mudawi Abd al Rahman, completed the blockade north of the city. (Both, incidentally, were to support Kitchener in his reconquest campaign 1896-98). Abu Qirja, after capturing a steamer and some weapons at al Mak, 20 miles south of Khartoum, built a series of forts outside the fortifications, and his Krupp guns started to fire projectiles into the city.

August saw the high Nile. This, and the rains, were to the advantage of the besieged. With their more permanent residences the heavy rains were less demoralising than for those in tents or sleeping in the open. The high river assisted Gordon's steamers, facilitated transport and awakened hope. In late August one of Gordon's most capable soldiers, Muhammad Ali Pasha Husayn, an Egyptian born at Manjara, known as the fighting Pasha, led a series of successful sorties out of the city. At al Jirayf he seized 1,600 rifles from the Mahdists. The Jirayf-Kalakla triangle was cleared, opening up possibilities for cultivation and relieving the acute food situation. At about the same time he chased Mahdists away from Halfaya and cleared the river on both banks. This gave great security for the transport of foodstuffs.

Early in September, however, the Mahdists scored a series of triumphs. The fighting Pasha was lured out to al Aylafun, 20 miles from Khartoum on the north bank of the Blue Nile. At dawn al Tahir Muhammad Badr al Ubaid and Mudawi Abd al Rahman came in from Umm Dubban and slaughtered half the Pasha's army and seized a thousand Remington rifles. This was Gordon's most serious reverse. The following day the Mahdi's ablest commander, Abd al Rahman wad al Nujumi,arrived to take over command of operations. The only chance for Gordon now was with outside assistance. Gordon decided to take advantage of the still high Nile and send one of his steamers down to Egypt with senior members of his staff to impress on Cairo and London the gravity of the situation. The only other Englishmen with him, his deputy, Colonel John Stewart, and the Times correspondent, Frank Power, left on 10 September in the steamer Abbas. It was never to reach its destination, but was captured between Abu Hamad and Merowe. All were killed and the many letters and papers were seized and sent to the Mahdi, who quoted them in humiliating extracts to Gordon.

To raise morale and foster the hope that a Relief Expedition was well on its way, steamers were sent to Shendi at the end of September to greet the Expedition which Gordon learned had been despatched. They were to wait for nearly four months.

In October the Mahdi himself arrived and settled himself at Abu Sa'd just south of the present

White Nile bridge on the west bank. He had arrived with an army of perhaps 60,000 men - so extensive that, as one participant said, 'guinea fowls were caught by hand - they could hardly fly away safely in any direction because it took half a day to walk across the width of the army.'

As the level of the Nile went down Gordon's chances slipped away. North Khartoum was again taken by the Mahdists. Gordon doubted the loyalty, not only of Salamat al Pasha, but also of the Sudanese notables. As communications became interrupted the food situation became acute. Tuti Island became a fortified granary, and periodic searches were made for hoarded grain.

Gordon's last communication with the outside world was on 14 December. The city could hold out, he said, for ten days at the most. In fact it was to last for six weeks. The final month saw Gordon's policy changing to preparing for the eventuality of defeat. He still retained hope of relief, but the military odds became more and more stacked against him.

But until the end the odds had never affected Gordon in his conduct of the siege. He had always been a commander of endless resource, for ever seizing the initiative. He used to keep morale high by regular parades. Honours and medals were sold, and with the proceeds he paid spies and messengers. Every Friday and Sunday evening after dusk jolly music was played.

He took an active interest in small human details which was excellent for his own (and therefore

the government's) popular reputation. For example, he ordered the compulsory purchase of grain and distributed it to the poor. The hospital was reorganised and Gordon busied himself with arranging games of backgammon and dominoes for the poorer patients.

He frequently turned an unfavourable situation to his own advantage. At one stage a quantity of wooden figures like soldiers was made and placed on the North Khartoum bank. The Mahdists fired at them, but then discovered the deception. They then used to try to creep up to steal the dummies' clothes, but in doing so became open targets for the defending soldiers from the Palace roof. Again, when the Mahdists dug trenches and were able to concentrate fire from a position of relative safety, Gordon turned the tables and had high towers constructed. The defenders were able to fire into the trenches.

On 5 January the fort at Omdurman fell after the commander, Faraj Allah Pasha Raghib, had resisted gallantly for two months. The Mahdi was so impressed that Faraj Allah was made a commander in the Mahdist army, and came to serve with honour in later Mahdist wars with Ethiopia. On 18th, Gordon announced that one day's service for his soldiers would count as one year's service. On 19th, several officers, unpersuaded by a 350 fold increase in their wage packet, slipped out and joined the Mahdi. Gordon invited other doubters to leave while they could. A steamer was rigged up ready to leave Khartoum with prominent citizens.

On 20th, news reached the Mahdi that the Relief Expedition had clashed with a Mahdist army sent out to face them at Abu Tilayh (Abu Klea) twenty miles west of al Matamma. The result seemed to be indecisive, for the Mahdist commander, Musa wad Hilu, was reported to be killed. The Mahdi seemed to panic and was tempted to withdraw his army, now numbering about 100,000, west to Kordofan. Wiser councils prevailed, however. It was pointed out that Khartoum was desperate. Spies and deserters numberless bore witness to that. It appeared that the British too had suffered serious losses, including one Colonel. News then came of a further clash at Abu Kru during which a British Major General, Sir Herbert Stewart, was killed. Whatever threat the British relief expedition might present, and they seemed mortal after all, decisive action was necessary. The Mahdi was persuaded to launch an assault. The timing was thus determined by the approach of the Relief Expedition. The assault and the approach were so linked that it is nonsense to talk about the Relief Expedition being 'too late'.

Gordon was well aware that the weakest point of the defences was the western part between the Kalakla fort and the White Nile. The river, which determined so much of the character of the siege of Khartoum, also determined its fall. In August, when the river had been in full flood, the water came to within a few yards of the Kalakla fort. On the west of the city the river was seen as an adequate defence. As the waters receded the old ditch, shallow and easily passable, reappeared. The Mahdists were pressing in, and harassed working

parties who sought to deepen and widen it. By mid-January there were about 1,000 yards of inadequate ramparts. The ditch was only two metres deep. Although it was muddy still, it was not sufficient to prevent a determined assault.

Strangely enough, Gordon, though aware of this vulnerability, expected the assault to come from the Masallamiya and Burri gates. Accordingly there were more troops there. However, he was aware of the sympathies many of his Sudanese soldiers might have with the Mahdi, and placed only Egyptian regular soldiers on the stretch between the Kalakla fort and the White Nile. This stretch was patrolled by two battalions of four companies each, each company containing 105 men. A squadron of irregulars including some Shaiqi was placed between the two battalions.

On Sunday 25 January the Mahdi crossed the White Nile. He addressed his soldiers. Indeed, in the words of one of them, he 'harangued us, mounted on his camel. Part of what he said, before the final oath of allegiance, was that the enemies of God had dug the ditch surrounding Khartoum very wide and deep, and had placed in it iron teeth, each with four iron spikes on three of which it stood, leaving the fourth spike upright to pierce the feet of men or the hooves of horses. Then he said, "Swear allegiance to me unto death !" and was silent for a moment, when the whole army with one voice shouted three times "We swear allegiance to you unto death."'

Soon after midnight the assault started. The

Mahdist forces concentrated their attack on the weak point of the defences. Some carried bedsteads to throw down on the soft mud to ease their crossing the ditch. One soldier walked into the mud up to his knees, and his companions leapfrogged over him to the city side, pushing him into the mud up to his waist. One man, Babikr Badri, crossed at a point so shallow and dry that he was inside before he realised it. Even so the resistance was fierce from the defenders. 'Our part of the line', recalled one Sudanese soldier, 'was also heavily attacked and though we went on firing our rifles until they were too hot to hold they finally poured over the ramparts by sheer force of numbers and anyone who remained standing was killed.'

The attackers poured in at three points - by the weak ramparts, by the Masallamiya gate and by the Burri gate, which was stormed. They tended to move inside the ramparts to a point near the Masallamiya gate, and then headed for the town. There followed a general massacre and looting of the city. General Gordon was among those killed. The details of his death are uncertain and there is dispute about the identity of his killer. Accounts of the storming are so charged with emotion, used in later years in an attempt to excite public opinion against the Mahdist state and in favour of a campaign for the reconquest of the Sudan, that they are of limited historical value.

Among those who were killed were Europeans , Sudanese, Egyptians. Let us consider two. Martin Hansal was an Austrian and had been Vice Consul since 1862. He

was a talented extrovert and a trained typographer. He used to play the piano and organ regularly at the Catholic mission, and probably performed on the mission piano that can be seen today in the Khalifa's House museum. He could play the fool. In advanced years he married an 18 year old half caste Abyssinian girl and used to join in wedding dances in an uninhibited way. General Gordon rather disapproved of him. He was reported to have been ready to make accomodation with the Mahdists - not an unreasonable stand for a diplomat to take. However, he never had the chance, and was killed in the general massacre.

Another who lost his life was Fayyid Muhammad. He was a holy man from Egypt, the leader of the Ahmadiyya sect. He was thrown to his death in a well 91 years ago. His tomb is still venerated, and can be seen on Shari' Jami'a, between the British Council and the roundabout by the Sudan Socialist Union.

But many survived the storm. Some of the soldiers defending the ramparts threw themselves among their slain comrades and waited for a safer hour. Let us consider the fate of two survivors.

Ben Zion Koshti was the son of the Rabbi of Hebron in Palestine. He came to the Sudan in about 1879 and was in Khartoum during the siege and lent Gordon money. In the words of Richard Hill, 'after the fall of Khartoum he was compelled by the Mahdists to remain in Omdurman; he soon won the confidence of the Khalifa Abd Allahi, who entrusted him with various confidential

missions, including the bartering of Sudan produce for Egyptian luxury goods imported through Sawakin.' Ben Zion, otherwise known as Bassioni, lived on till 1917 and was the leader of the Jewish community in the early years of the Condominium.

Pietro Agati was an Italian bricklayer who came to Khartoum in the 1850's. He survived the siege and lived in Omdurman with a Sudanese wife and family. He practised his craft for the Khalifa, building his house in Omdurman. Unwilling to be repatriated when the Anglo Egyptian force reconquered the country in 1898, he lived on to 1918, dying in his 90's at the Roman Catholic mission in Omdurman.

After the killing and the pillage Khartoum became a place of residence for the senior amirs. The Mahdi died in June 1885 and the Khalifa shifted the centre of gravity of the state across the river. Khartoum became abandoned and Omdurman was the capital.

The Gordon Relief Expedition, whose imminent arrival was the trigger for the final assault, reached the city on 28 January, two full days after the fall. They made no attempt to land, but retreated north, pursued by a Mahdist force. Other Egyptian garrisons in the Sudan surrendered and, apart from Wadi Halfa and part of the coast by Sawakin, the Mahdists were in complete control.

The story of the siege and fall has been seen mainly from the point of view of Gordon and the defenders. My own account has, regrettably, followed this general

approach. The death of Gordon caused acute pain to many people in England, who attempted to find a scapegoat. Mr. Gladstone, the Grand Old Man, the G.O.M., was accused of indifference to Gordon's fate. He became known as the M.O.G., the Murderer of Gordon. An attempt was made - and still is - to attribute moral responsibility for Gordon's death either to Gladstone, individuals in the Relief Expedition, or to Gordon himself.

The guilt notion begs a number of questions. It is doubtful whether Gordon would have permitted himself to be rescued. He declared that he would refuse to go, affirming his responsibility for the people of Khartoum. It is uncertain what would have happened after relief. Was it planned to abandon the Sudan suddenly ? Or to set up a successor regime ? Or to take on the new Mahdist empire ? It seems that people continually failed to understand the dynamic of Mahdism, and repeatedly underestimated its strength. It was seen as an impersonal force, and not as a collection of individuals with their own interests, moral dilemmas, divided loyalties determining their behavour.

The idea of the Relief Expedition being too late strikes me as being particularly misleading. I have stressed that their approach precipitated the fall. Had they been one week earlier it is probable that the fall would have been one week earlier. Moreover, the Expedition reached Khartoum with considerable speed. It took them five months to come from Cairo. They came in the face of hostile tribes and with Mahdism expanding.

It took Kitchener two years to come to Khartoum in 1896-98. He was far better equipped: enormous developments had taken place in European weaponry in the interval, while the standard of the Khalifa's weapons remained the same. Armed tribes in northern Sudan gave him considerable support, and Mahdism no longer had such momentum as it had had in 1884-85.

We are still ignorant about many aspects of the siege. There has been little new material that changes the story as it was known in the 1890's. There is a shift in emphasis and a more widespread appreciation both of what Mahdism was all about, and the dilemmas of Gordon. The drama of the siege made Gordon's death and the collapse of Egyptian rule in the Sudan like the last scene of Hamlet, needing only the curtain to be drawn. We must remember the continuity of history. People went on living in Khartoum and Omdurman, and their grandchildren are with us today. Indeed for the Mahdi and his Khalifa, having gained control of the Sudan, their problems were just starting.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BATTLE OF OMDURMAN

1898

The Battle of Omdurman

The battle of Omdurman, which took place in about five hours on the morning of Friday 2 September 1898, was an episode in the history of Afro-European relations. It was an incident in the general advance of European control of the African interior in the years between 1880 and 1914. The battle was fought by a joint Anglo Egyptian force, of which all the senior officers were British, against the supporters of the ruler of the Sudan, the Khalifa Abd Allahi.

Why was there a battle on the plains of Karari, four miles north of Omdurman, in 1898 ?

After the fall of Khartoum, the Mahdi's control extended over most of the Sudan. A theocratic state was established with its capital at Omdurman, hitherto a fishing village and the site of the Mahdi's camp. The regime became known as the Mahdiya. The Mahdi died in June 1885,

still in his forties, and control of the state was assumed by his successor, a Baqqara of the Ta'aisha tribe of Southern Darfur, called Abd Allahi. He was known as the Khalifa, the successor.

Although Gordon had been sent out by the British government, there was no direct British control or interest in the Sudan. A British Gordon Relief Expedition had been sent to rescue him but arrived two days after the fall of the city.

They withdrew, and Egyptian control of the Sudan was limited to Wadi Halfa in the north and Sawakin in the east. The Egyptian army had been humiliated by the rout of Hicks Pasha and was reorganised by British officers, headed by a Sirdar or Commander in Chief. The new Egyptian army thwarted a Mahdist invasion of Egypt led by Abd al Rahman wad al Nujumi in 1887, and held the frontier against irregular raids.

In the Sudan the Khalifa strengthened his rule. He brought in as his closest advisers members of his own family and tribe, and other western Sudanese. The Mahdi's family and the riverain tribes felt somewhat out of the picture and attempted to take over. The coup failed and the rule of the westerners strengthened. During these years there was much suffering in the Sudan: a run of bad harvests led to famine, the Khalifa was involved in bloody, albeit successful, wars in Abyssinia, and in civil insurrection in Darfur. However, after about 1892 the situation seemed to improve and there was a degree of prosperity and security.

In Cairo three British officials were closely watching the situation. As Consul General, Evelyn Baring, later Earl of Cromer, was effective ruler of Egypt. He was cool, intelligent and methodical, and ran the country through a series of British advisers attached to Egyptian government departments. He looked forward to a renewal of Egyptian (and thereby British) control of the Sudan, but not yet. Balancing Egypt's budgets was a more immediate priority. In 1894 Kitchener was appointed Sirdar of the Egyptian army. He was then 44, an Arabist, ambitious and highly strung. He had been attached to the Gordon Relief Expedition in 1885 and looked forward eagerly to avenging, as he saw it, the murder of General Gordon. His Director of Intelligence was another Arabist, Colonel F.R. Wingate. Wingate interviewed Sudanese traders in Egypt and built up a vast detailed picture of the Sudan, and especially events in Omdurman. He organised a propaganda campaign against the Khalifa and bombarded the War Office in London with his reports. He published a great book, Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan in 1891, to rouse British public opinion. In the following years he translated, edited, perhaps even ghosted two accounts by Europeans who had been imprisoned in Omdurman. One was by a Catholic priest Father Ohrwalder. The other was Fire and Sword in the Sudan by the Austrian adventurer, Rudolph Slatin, who had been alternately prisoner and confidant of the Khalifa.

Kitchener and Wingate sought to persuade Cromer and through him the British government to launch a campaign against the Khalifa. In the spring of 1896 things suddenly worked their way. In Eritrea an Italian army

was defeated by an Ethiopian army at Adowa. The Italians wanted a British demonstration to distract the Khalifa's attention and to shore up European morale. The British government approved a limited expedition to recapture Dongola.

By August 1896, after an easy campaign, Dongola was occupied by a combined Anglo Egyptian force. Their position was consolidated. Small expeditions were made as far as Merowe. Kitchener hoped that the Dongola expeditions were the prelude to bigger things, visited London, and secured approval for a further advance. A railway was constructed against all professional and military advice, from Wadi Halfa through the desert to Abu Hamad. As the railway advanced, Abu Hamad was seized by a force coming from Merowe, and then a group of irregulars went further south and seized Berber. Berber had been the centre of an important Mahdist garrison, and occupied a strategic point at the junction of the Nile and the route to the Red Sea. Kitchener took the risk of holding on to Berber even though his supply line was far from secure. Gunboats were brought up to Berber and by Christmas 1897 a fort was being built at the junction of the river Atbara and the river Nile.

The Khalifa in Omdurman was kept informed of the apparently inexorable advance. After the fall of Dongola he sent for his cousin, Mahmud Wad Ahmad, who was at the time crushing a revolt in Darfur. The Khalifa and Mahmud were very much aware of the route that had been taken by the Gordon Relief Expedition in 1885, from Dongola to Debba and Korti and then across

the Bayuda desert to Matamma opposite Shendi. Matamma was clearly a most important strategic spot on the junction of the desert route and the Nile route to Khartoum. The people of Matamma were asked to evacuate the town to make way for Mahmud's army. The Ja'li leader, Abd Allah Sa'd, refused. Mahmud and his army went north in the spring of 1887 and wiped them out, thereby alienating the Ja'li tribe who occupied the villages between Khartoum and Berber, providing many of the merchants who plied between Sudan and Egypt. Not surprisingly many Ja'li threw in their lot with the invaders.

In February 1898 Mahmud went further north. He was joined by Osman Digna, Mahdist amir of East Sudan, who was a veteran of many irregular campaigns against the British and Egyptian troops based in Sawakin. Mahmud aimed to take Berber. He by-passed Fort Atbara, but as he crossed the river, a force left the fort and moved one day's journey up the river. Mahmud settled himself in a huge zariba - a camp surrounded by thorn bushes. The distance from his zariba to Berber over the desert was too great for one day's march. He had to deal with the force sent out or withdraw. After a fortnight's wait, on Good Friday 1898, Kitchener moved on to Mahmud's zariba. The army of 15,000 was crushed. Osman Digna slipped away with his men to Eastern Sudan. Mahmud was taken prisoner and reached Berber, and there was displayed in chains.

Kitchener, with his army and his gunboats, waited for three months in Atbara. A second British brigade joined them. The delay was for the Nile to rise. A high Nile would facilitate the passage of the gunboats through the cataract at Sabaluka gorge.

At Sabaluka the Khalifa had constructed a series of forts at the northern entrance to the gorge. His intelligence chief, Abd al Baqi Abd al Wakil, was based here, and his men kept Omdurman fully informed of the nature, movements and positions of the invading force. Occasionally they skirmished, but generally the Anglo Egyptian force had the disconcerting experience of seeing Mahdist forces in the distance watching them, then vanishing. As Kitchener moved south on the west bank, the Khalifa ordered the abandonment of the Sabaluka forts. This seems to be one of the first major miscalculations made by the Khalifa. He feared that his own supply line would be overstretched, and dreaded another disaster to his forces, preferring to have one big decisive battle outside Omdurman. But with the abandonment of Sabaluka the way was cleared for the gunboats to advance right up to Omdurman.

At the end of August the Anglo Egyptian force advanced in full battle order. The night of 31 August was spent at Sururab. The following morning after torrential rain, they marched over the hills of Karari to al Ijaija and set up a large zariba.

On 1 September too, a large force of irregulars, largely Ja'li and Shaiqi tribesmen but officered

by British and Egyptians, moved down the east bank to present day North Khartoum. With the assistance of gunboats the Khalifa's defensive positions were stormed and sites secured for the invader's artillery and particularly for their Howitzers. Lyddite shells were despatched over the river, and smashed the roof of the Mahdi's tomb, spiritual centre of Omdurman.

While Kitchener was taking these initiatives, the Khalifa had been mobilising all his available forces. On the morning of Thursday 1 September a great army moved out from the west of the city and settled west of Surkab Hill.

Then for fourteen hours two armies confronted each other.

The dynamic for the Mahdist state had been religious - a reformed Islam, though based on traditional values. Islam has never been pacifist. The early spread of Islam was based on military conquest, and the warrior is ennobled with the prospect of bliss for himself and his kin if he falls as a martyr in a holy war against infidels.

The early campaigns of the Mahdiya, especially that against Hicks Pasha, were basically guerilla campaigns. As Hicks pushed into the west horsemen harassed his army day and night. Wells on their path were filled up. Local guides misled them and they became thoroughly disheartened. When they were dazed with thirst and frustration, the Mahdi's forces besieged them in a wood and wiped them out. The siege of Khartoum was similarly

a waiting game with the Mahdi waiting for his enemy to become weak and demoralised before finally pouncing. The campaigns of Osman Digna in the Red Sea area were marked by ambushes. The Mahdist armies had a successful tradition of irregular warfare. Only when their armies confronted another well disciplined force, as at Toski in 1889 and Atbara in April 1898 were they worsted.

By September 1898 what were the Khalifa's fighting forces ? In one sense all men were warriors supposedly ready to fight when called up. In fact the Khalifa had a full time army. The main garrison was based at al Kara, on the Omdurman side of the present White Nile bridge. This garrison was in two parts. The Mulazimin, a word meaning companion, or, today, lieutenant, had originally been the Khalifa's private guard. In 1898 they were controlled by the Khalifa's son, Osman Shaykh al Din, a wayward youth of about 24. The mulazimin were well armed, usually with Remington rifles looted from Hicks' army, from Khartoum or from Abyssinia. The rest of the regular fighting forces were under the command of Ibrahim al Khalil, a cousin of the Khalifa and brother of Mahmud Wad Ahmad. Ibrahim was a bit of a martinet, keen on endless drilling and on very bad terms with Shaykh al Din. These soldiers were trained, paid and fed by the Mahdist state.

The Khalifa's reserves were usually divided up into large forces called rayas, or standards. The Black Standard was the largest and was commanded by Ya'qub, the Khalifa's brother, a scholarly man, utterly loyal to the Khalifa, and a first rate organiser of the army and

administration - in short, the Khalifa's prime minister. The men in the Black Standard were largely from the west of Sudan, and were divided into small units based on tribe or subtribe. These small units were led - as in prayers - by either (in descending order of size and priority) an amir, a centurion (ras miya) or a captain (muqaddam). There were two other standards during the Mahdiya. The Red Standard had been made up of Dongolawis and was commanded by the Khalifa Muhammad Sharif, a younger relation of the Mahdi, but after the revolt of the riverain tribes this standard was suppressed, to be revived shortly before the battle of Omdurman. The third was the Green Standard, led by the Khalifa Ali Wad Hilu, who came from the White Nile area near present day Kosti. He had been a holy man and was one of the first supporters of the Mahdi. The standards were usually not armed with guns, and were seen as the forces that got to grips with the enemy with swords and spears.

The Khalifa and Ya'qub his brother were at the head of an elaborate chain of command that covered the state's needs. Many of the lower officials, clerks and particularly technicians, were taken over from the Egyptian regime. There was a well constructed bureaucracy, a treasury, a postal service, factories for soap, a printing press, an ammunition factory and a mint.

It is difficult to determine with precision the size of the Khalifa's army at the battle of Omdurman. Those who saw the army on 1 September reckoned the force to be about 30,000. But after the battle the official

figures issued by Kitchener and Wingate had swollen to 52,000. All historians since then have accepted this figure. Wingate based his figures on evidence found among Ya'qub's papers. But there were far from up to date, and consisted of a roll call of the Omdurman garrison dating back to before the campaign in the north.

The Mulazimin were reckoned by Wingate to be 14,000 strong. This was accepted by Churchill and others although Broadwood, who fought against them, put their number at only 10,000.

The Kara garrison that fought under Ibrahim al Khalil and Osman Azraq is generally estimated at from 10 to 15 thousand.

The Green Standard was presented by Wingate as 5,000 strong, though other sources, including eye witnesses, put it at less than 3,000.

The Black Standard's size has, following Wingate, traditionally been put at 14,000, but the commander of the British division, General Gatacre, gave the figure of 12,000, a figure also supported by other eye witnesses.

The Red Standard was about 100 strong and took virtually no part in the fighting. The other small unit, Osman Digna's men, is estimated variously between 700 and 3,700.

If we add the 2,000 men with the Khalifa's headquarters we are left with an estimate of the whole army varying between 37,000 and 54,000. There is insuf-

ficient evidence for us to state categorically the size of the Khalifa's army. However, one can assert that the hitherto accepted figure of 52,000 is open to question, and there is plenty of evidence to suggest a smaller figure. In spite of the universal conscription imposed by the Khalifa in Omdurman, we must note the many factors that hindered his mobilisation. The experience of Mahmud's army had demoralised many who sought retirement rather than an apparently futile struggle against overwhelming odds. The ravages of previous wars, in the north, in Ethiopia and in the west, had limited the capacity of the Khalifa to bring out numbers that might have been available ten years earlier. Nor must we forget that the demoralisation of the series of reverses in the north had sapped the enthusiasm and loyalty of not a few who deserted to the enemy.

The Khalifa's army was armed with Remingtons, Martini Henrys and elephant guns. Although the Remingtons were rifles and breech loaded, they dated from earlier campaigns. They had been poorly maintained and were antiquated when compared with what the Anglo Egyptian force had. The 1880's and 1890's in Europe saw a great development in weapons. Accuracy and speed had improved as well as range of fire and capacity for destruction. Ammunition was manufactured in the Khalifa's state - at four different factories. But this was not of the same quality as that taken over from the previous regime. Ya'qub forbade the continued use of the old ammunition and Shaykh al Din hoarded it for the use of his mulazimin. The Mahdists saw rifles as an inadequate substitute for

hand-to-hand fighting. Fire power was seen not as a means of destruction, but rather as fire cover for an assaulting force that was armed with swords and spears.

The Khalifa's artillery consisted of about 35 pieces - Gatlings, Nordenfeldts, Mitrailleuse and mountain guns. With the exception of two mountain guns, all were left in Omdurman during the battle, in the forts facing the gunboats, or in the armoury. It was felt that artillery should be used for piercing fortified places, and not for killing people.

Such was the strength of the Khalifa's force on 1 September 1898.

The Anglo Egyptian force is better known and can be quickly discussed. At the battle there were 20,000 men divided into six brigades and with 3 cavalry regiments, a camel corps and six artillery batteries. In the zariba, going in a clockwise direction, there is the 2nd British Brigade under Lyttelton, then Wauchope's 1st Brigade, Maxwell's Brigade consisting of one Egyptian and three Sudanese battalions, Macdonald's Brigade with three Sudanese and one Egyptian infantry battalions, then Lewis' Brigade with four Egyptian battalions. At the back was Collinson's all Egyptian Brigade looking after field hospitals, baggage and ammunition. On the river were six patrolling gunboats. The artillery both on the gunboats and round the zariba consisted of the latest models - Maxims and 5 inch Howitzers. The infantry was armed with up to date Lee Mitford rifles.

The scene of the fighting was bounded by the

river in the east, the desert in the west, the city in the south and the hills of Karari in the north. The battlefield was dominated by Jabal Surkab, called by British writers Surgham, about 300 feet high with a ridge extending eastwards to the Nile. The plain sloped gently to the river with a large number of khors, dry water courses, that were at the time of the battle still damp and muddy.

Kitchener realised that he had a great advantage if there were to be a daytime engagement. His modern weapons with their accuracy and long range would be able to deal quickly with an army advancing over the clear open country in front of his zariba. On the other hand man to man combat would offset these advantages. When the Khalifa stopped to the west of Surkab and smoke was seen rising as the Mahdist forces prepared food and brewed tea, Kitchener feared that a night offensive was probable. This was indeed the Khalifa's intention at the time, and a council held in the early afternoon by the Khalifa and his closest advisers confirmed this.

Kitchener's intelligence, however, managed to secure a couple of individuals who went over to the Khalifa's camp and spread the word that Kitchener was going to attack at night. Night fell with each side expecting and fearing an assault from the other. Kitchener's army had some searchlights which scoured the plain, another infernal weapon that bewildered the Khalifa.

Late at night the Khalifa held another council. Doubts were expressed about a night offensive, and argument was polarised between the Khalifa's cousin, Ibrahim al

Khalil and his son, Shaykh al Din. Ibrahim al Khalil had spied out the land and felt there was a good chance of a successful storming of the zariba with his well trained soldiers. Ibrahim was supported by Osman Azraq and Osman Digna. Shaykh al Din opposed this. A quarrel flared up between them. Shaykh al Din felt that the Black Standard, full of irregular and ill-trained soldiers from the west of the Sudan could not be controlled. He had his comparatively well armed force and wanted a day assault so he could direct his firepower over the plain. 'Let us not,' he said, 'be like mice or foxes slinking into their holes by day and peeping out at night' The Khalifa backed his son, and a night offensive was abandoned.

In making this decision, the Khalifa lost the battle. In his thirteen years as ruler he had never been a commander in the field, and had lost any sense of the development of modern weapons and tactics. His last experience had been with the slow firing rifles and cumbersome cannons of Hicks, nearly all of which had a limited range of fire. He had never been able to assess the effect of Maxim machine guns. He had seen no shrapnel with its splinters showering down on soldiers. He did not know case shot with its capacity for destruction at short range. Finally, he was not to know that a direct assault in broad daylight without strong cover was suicidal after the introduction of the Lee Mitford rifle, with its capacity to produce a vast amount of concentrated fire.

In arguing to make use of his mulazimin fire in daylight Shaykh al Din was playing into Kitchener's hands, with the irony that Kitchener preferred a daytime fight for the same reason.

After the council, the Khalifa developed a plan for a daytime assault. It was to be in two stages. The enemy should be persuaded to come out of the zariba and away from their fortified position. This would be done by a direct assault by the professional soldiers of Osman Azraq and Ibrahim al Khalil. Then the Black Standard would rush on the Anglo Egyptian army and - it was hoped - cut them to pieces, sheltered by the fire of the mulazimin of Shaykh al Din. But things were to work out differently.

Now this is where the story really begins. Before dawn Kitchener sent his cavalry out to look for the enemy. At 5.55 am they reported that the Khalifa's army was advancing, and withdrew to the zariba. Ibrahim al Khalil brought troops over the ridge, and for nearly two miles charged over the open ground at the zariba. At the same time, Osman Azraq with about 6,000 men went north of Surkab and charged at the centre of the zariba. At 6.45 am the 32nd Field Battery opened fire and a few minutes later the Anglo Egyptian infantry opened fire with long range volleys. An awful massacre followed. One unit of Osman Azraq's force managed to find cover among the winding depressions and bring down a few of the soldiers in the zariba. The field battery was brought to concentrate on them and they were wiped out. Otherwise

this first assault was completely destroyed. The attack was over by 8.20 am.

While this was going on Shaykh al Din's mulazimin had advanced to the Karari hills and there was a clash with the Anglo Egyptian cavalry commanded by Broadwood. Kitchener ordered Broadwood to return to the zariba. Broadwood sent the camels back. They stumbled over the rocky ground and were almost overtaken, but for the timely arrival of a patrolling gunboat that destroyed the attackers. Broadwood defied Kitchener and retreated to the north, drawing with him Shaykh al Din and the mulazimin. Thus the Khalifa's most effective fighting force became literally hors de combat.

At 8.30 am there was a lull. One third of the Khalifa's army had hurled itself against the new artillery. One third had withdrawn from the battlefield in useless pursuit of Broadwood's cavalry. One third remained intact quietly behind Surkab. It is not clear how far Kitchener at this time was aware of the situation. The plain was strewn with slain men, wounded men, and others struggling and heading for Omdurman. Kitchener now wanted to get to Omdurman before these soldiers, and accordingly sent out the 21st Lancers to clear the plain. The Lancers were to fall into a trap.

Khor Abu Sunt is a deep khor running from just south of Surkab to the Nile. Osman Digna with his Hadendowa spearmen occupied this khor. Reinforcements were joining him from west of Surkab. Osman Digna planned the trap. The 21st Lancers, a proud cavalry

regiment seeking glory, trotted out of the zariba. Osman Digna placed a few hundreds of his men on the north of the khor. The Lancers saw this row of men and the commander, Colonel Martin, thought it would be easy enough to scatter them with a text book charge. They lined up, a drum roll signalled and the Lancers' charge began.

The cavalry spurred on their mounts and rushed at the enemy. A great yell broke from the long line of horsemen as they charged confidently towards the khor.

But as they approached the situation changed dramatically. They suddenly realised that the enemy was not just a line of men, but a throng of several hundred fighters within the body of the khor. It was too late to check the horses in the charge. The Lancers forced their way through the khor but not without a grapple between equally matched combatants. There was no opportunity to demonstrate superior firepower. It was sword against sword and man against man. The troop on the furthest right confronted the mass of reinforcements at the thickest point and were almost totally annihilated. Another troop led by Lieutenant Winston Churchill charged and broke through the less dense ranks of the Hadendowa. But the troop on the far left rushed ahead and broke through with ease.

The survivors of the regiment reached the far side. They were harried, but succeeded in shaking off their enemy and after a short gallop got some hundreds of yards out of range.

The clash caused more casualties to the Anglo Egyptian army than any other part of the battle. Twenty one out of the 27 British killed were killed in this engagement. The Lancers' charge captured the imagination and was seen as a great feat of arms instead of the fatuous blunder it was.

Around 9 am Kitchener sent the Brigades out of the zariba. They spread out and faced south. The far right was occupied by Macdonald and his Sudanese battalions. Macdonald was a Scot, a Highlander who had risen through the ranks, and who was an exacting trainer of Egyptian and Sudanese soldiers. As the army advanced Macdonald stretched further into the west. At about 9.30 am he spotted the Black Standard behind Surkab facing him. They were waiting for fire cover from Shaykh al Din and the mulazimin. But the latter were several miles to the north fruitlessly pursuing Broadwood. The idea had been for the firepower to cover an assault. Ya'qub had kept his Standard concealed and it remained quiet. Maxwell's Brigade also spotted the Black Standard after storming Surkab. Kitchener quickly swung the brigades around. Maxwell and Lewis prepared to fire on the flank of the Black Standard. Wauchope's British Brigade was sent to fill up the gap between Macdonald and Lewis.

Ya'qub waited impatiently for Shaykh al Din. At last at 9.50, after the advantage of surprise given by the Standard's concealment had been thrown away, the Black Standard launched its offensive at Macdonald's

battalions. It was fired on by the brigade ahead of it and from the hill on the right. It had no fire power of its own and was not covered at all. Inevitably it was a desperate and suicidal assault.

At 10.15 am as the Black Standard assault was dying away, the mulazimin reappeared, and with the Green Standard a second assault was launched on Macdonald's Brigade. Macdonald with great skill managed to order his battalions to wheel 90^{o} to face the new threat. The months of drill were vindicated and the new assault was parried with the assistance of extra fire from a battalion of Wauchope's Brigade.

By 11.30 Kitchener ordered a cease-fire. Successive waves of courageous but desperate offensives had all been smashed. The Brigades continued to march towards Omdurman. They rested by Khor Shambat for an hour or so, and entered the city facing minimal resistance. By nightfall Kitchener and his staff were camping in the Khalifa's mosque. The battle was over.

Eleven thousand of the Khalifa's army were killed on the battlefield, 16,000 wounded. Among the dead were Ya'qub, Ibrahim al Khalil and Osman Azraq. The Anglo Egyptian forces lost 56 dead and 434 wounded.

The Khalifa himself managed to get away from the battlefield. He entered the city and then vanished to the south and the west. For over a year he evaded capture and wandered around Kordofan, joined by the Khalifa Ali Wad Hilu, his son Shaykh al Din and by Osman Digna. At one point he had an army of 6,000 men. Eventually in November

1899 he was cornered by an expedition led by Wingate. He put up a token resistance and was killed at Umm Dibaykarat, about 30 miles west of Aba Island. The Khalifa Ali Wad Hilu was killed with him. Shaykh al Din was wounded and taken prisoner to die in captivity. Osman Digna slipped away once again but was captured in 1900 in the Red Sea Hills. He lived in captivity to a great age and died at Wadi Halfa in 1926.

Did the Khalifa have a chance ?

The reasons for the Khalifa's defeat have become clear in the course of the account. Kitchener's army was better drilled, better organised, better trained and better armed than the Khalifa's. Yet the advantages Kitchener had were made even greater by a series of miscalculations on the part of the Khalifa. The withdrawal from Sabaluka, the choice of the open plain of Karari as a battlefield, the decision to fight by day, the failure to impose a sense of responsibility on Shaykh al Din all assisted Kitchener. When the two sides engaged, as they might have done in a night attack, as they did in Khor Abu Sunt, as they could have done in house to house fighting in Omdurman: then the advantages Kitchener had were reduced and the proportion of casualties would have been more equal.

The Khalifa had a rational plan of fighting the battle. It can be argued that his organisation was not resilient enough to support such a plan. Shaykh al Din allowed himself to be dragged away from the battle field. There was no means of communication between the

units more effective than a string of gallopers. Thus the Black Standard's assault was an isolated venture, and hence easily dealt with.

The Khalifa's failure can be seen in a broader strategic context. He seems to have been paralysed by Kitchener's relentless advance with all the terrible tricks of 19th century technology - railways, gunboats, searchlights, new weapons. Yet Kitchener took some great risks that made him vulnerable. His supply line for food, ammunition and reinforcements was one single track railway line. Why was this not blown up ? Why was the Anglo Egyptian force not harried more with the assassination of isolated sentries ? A kind of psychological warfare was practised in the evacuation of places just before the Anglo Egyptian forces arrived - at Dongola, Berber and Sabaluka. But the final stand was made at a site favourable to the enemy. Guerilla warfare, intelligently conducted, can exhaust and occupy the attention of a large army. By Mahmud's massacre of the Ja'liyin at Matamma potential guerillas were alienated.

The Khalifa lost another opportunity when he declined to withdraw from Omdurman altogether to the west. The Khalifa would have been in the area of his greatest support. If Kitchener had been dragged out to Kordofan the cost in money and men would have been fearful. His mobility would have been limited and his gunboats useless. But the Khalifa, it seems, had elected to be a secular leader with a capital round the Mahdi's tomb. The strength of the early Mahdiya had been its

mobility. Loyalty was to an idea, to a tribal leader, not to a place. The Khalifa had, as it were, inherited the machinery of the old Egyptian regime without any compensating gain.

Kitchener's political bases were not secure. The campaign was being run on a shoestring, and he was keen to get returns for every penny spent. If the Khalifa had been able to spin out the campaign, he would have eroded Kitchener's political bases both in Cairo and in London. The support that the Khalifa, after his defeat and humiliation at Karari, received from Kordofan for more than a year is an indication of the potential resources the Khalifa failed to exploit.

But such speculation is idle. In history it is hard enough to find out what happened, without wondering what might have happened. There seemed an inevitability in the Anglo Egyptian victory. British interest in Egypt pressed for control of all the Nile waters. From a European political point of view the British were unhappy to leave a potential enemy, a possible ally of the French, astride the Nile.

The control of the Nile settled the political map of Africa for two generations until, in 1956, Sudan became the first of African nations to become independent of European imperialism.

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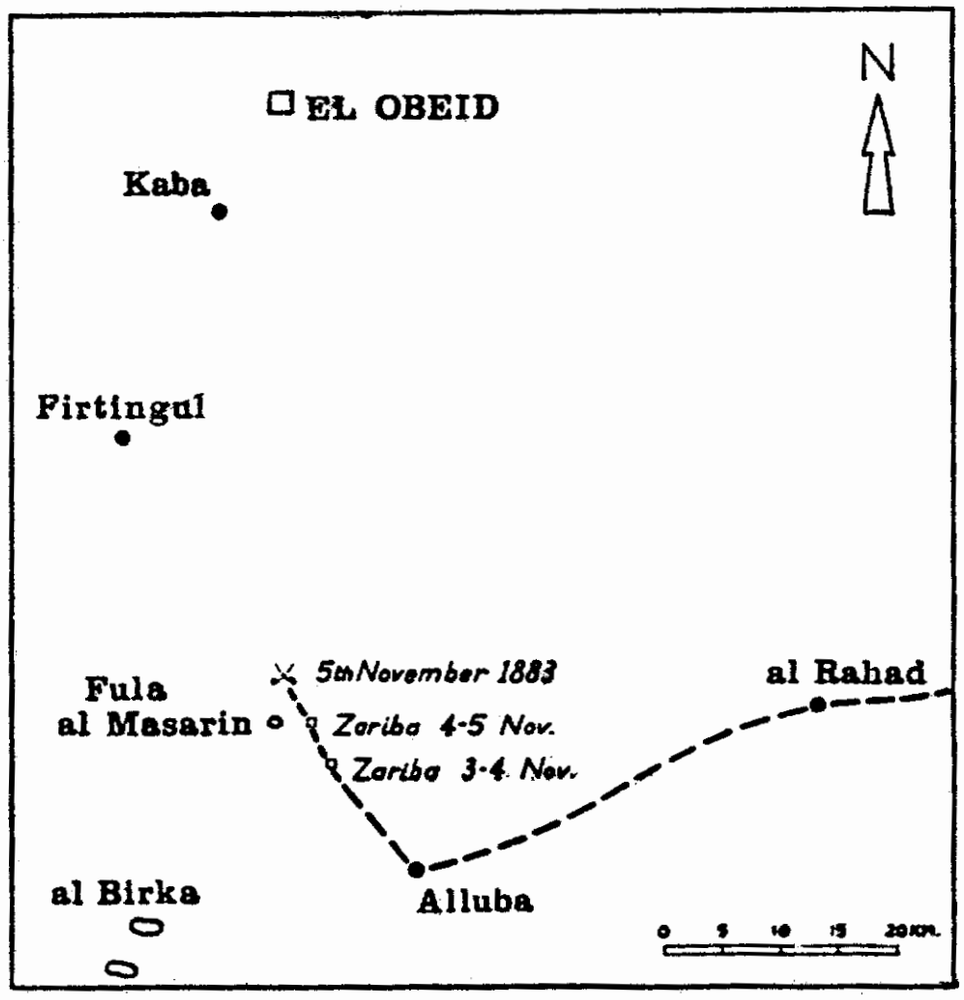
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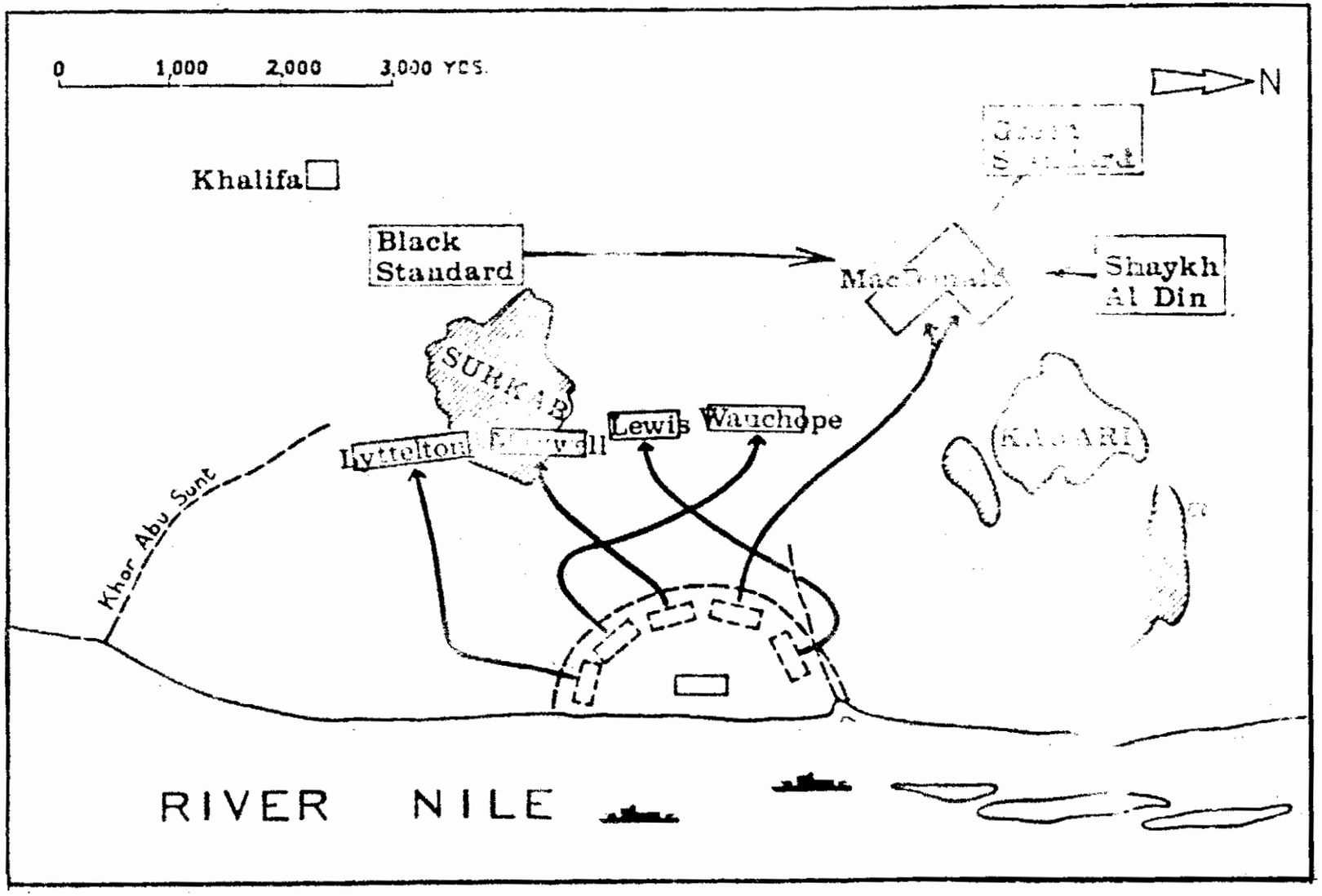
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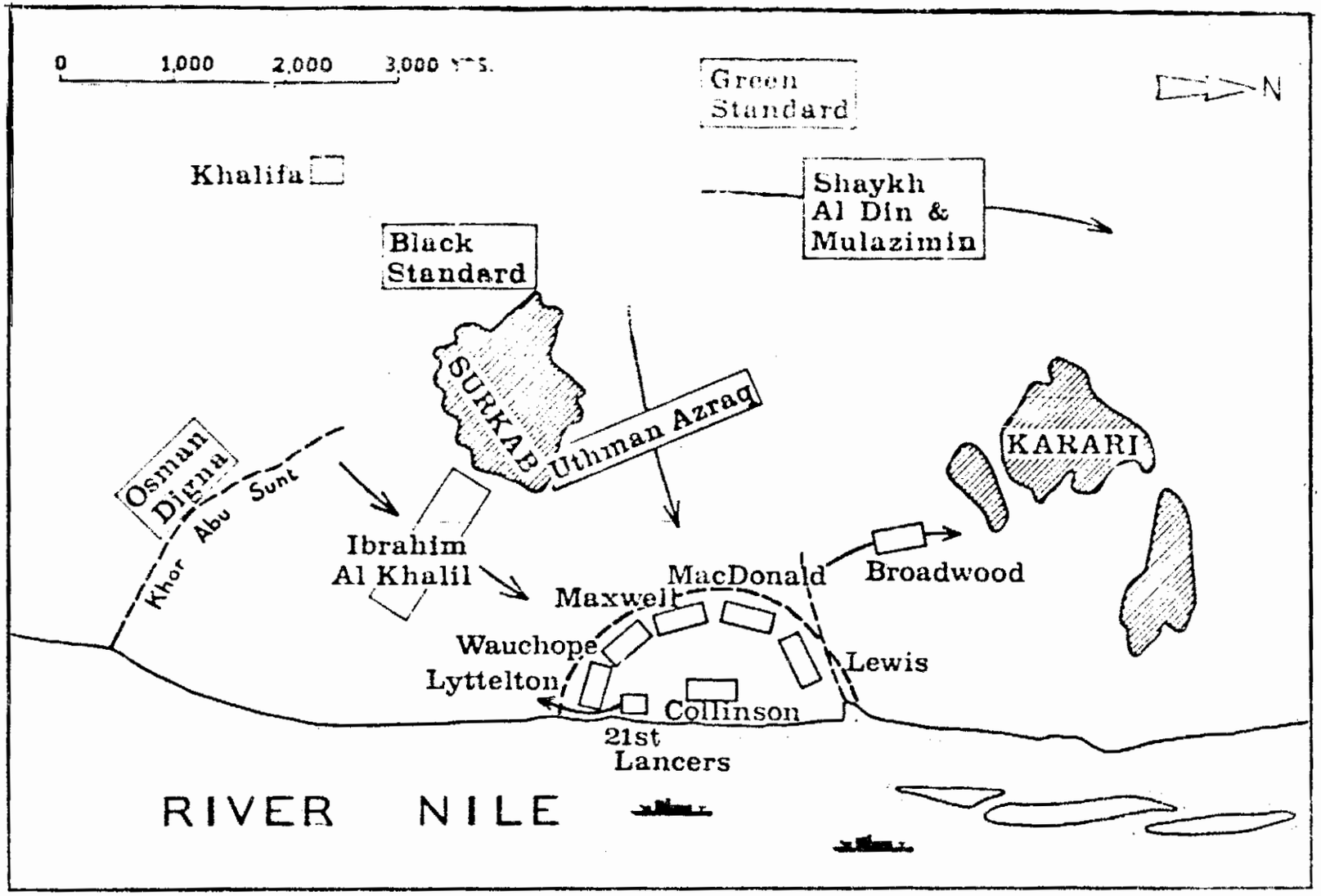
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Broadwood
Maxwell
Wauchope
Lyttelton
Lewis
Collinson
21st Lancers
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