The Fashoda Incident

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THE FASHODA INCIDENT.

BY LIEUTENANT WINSTON SPENCER-CHURCHILL.

It is with great pleasure that I avail myself of the invitation which has been courteously extended to me, to write for an American magazine some explanation of the views and intentions of the British people in respect of the territories which are drained by the Nile River. Every nation, every community, has its own troubles and perplexities to face. These absorb its energies and occupy its attention. There is but little time and very often but little inducement to study the affairs of others. Yet the people of the United States, drawn perhaps by the dramatic story of the loss and recovery of the Soudan, certainly by the reciprocal feelings of cordiality which are entertained on both sides of the Atlantic, have evinced a remarkable degree of interest in the progress of what is now known as "The Fashoda Incident" and the events that have preceded it. To endeavor to gratify, and by gratifying to stimulate, that interest, is an agreeable task; and since antipathy often arises out of ignorance and sympathy cannot exist without knowledge, it is perhaps a duty for a citizen of the Great Empire to speak freely and fairly to the citizens of the Great Republic.

The French Government have, after due consideration, almost after undue consideration, determined to evacuate Fashoda. It is scarcely necessary for us to inquire in what proportion they were influenced by motives of justice, and in what proportion by motives of prudence. It is sufficient that they have gone or that they are about to go. After their departure negotiations are to be opened upon the subject of the wide area known as Bahr-el-Ghazal. That is the present position of affairs. But it is necessary, in order to properly appreciate the present, to examine the past; and from the past we may perhaps discern the future.

In the dark and inglorious days of 1885 the Government of Mr. Gladstone, frustrated in its tardy attempt to rescue General Gordon, decided to abandon the Soudan. They advised the Egyptian Government to this effect, and their advice could not well be disregarded. The tide of Mahdism was rising swiftly with impatient waves. The British soldiers hurried homeward across the desert sands, and presently the whole vast region of the Soudan was submerged by a deluge of barbarism. Then the busy modern world turned its attention elsewhere. The telegraph wires no longer carried tales of devastation, of suffering, of death, to the polite nations of the earth. No special correspondents chronicled the unregarded miseries of the peoples of the Nile Valley. Yet those who knew the character of the Mahdist movement and the nature of those who inspired it, did not need to be told what was going on underneath the storm clouds.

It is possible, almost probable, that but for one memorable fact the condition of things described in Slatin Pasha's "Fire and Sword in the Soudan" would have been allowed to continue indefinitely. That fact was the death of General Gordon. Deep in the hearts of the people of these islands lurked the feeling of dissatisfaction and of discontent which must ever result from failure, however explicable, however disguised. To this emotion the name of Gordon gave expression. The private character of that remarkable man has made a profound impression on the people of Great Britain, and perhaps in some degree on the people of the United States. His death at the hands of infidel savages transformed him into something like a martyr. The idea of revenge, ever attractive to the human heart, appeared to receive the consecration of religion. Even Western civilization is not free from fanaticism. And, as the years passed by, there continued an undercurrent of public opinion which ran almost in the direction of "a holy war." To this influence other forces, known to most communities, were added—the desire to restore the ancient boundaries of civilization; the appetite for military enterprise; the expansive force of Jingoism. Thus, although British interest in the Soudan slumbered and slept it did not die; and many people of many conditions continued to cherish the idea of "going back and getting quits."

The unscheduled cycle of events brought the question of the Soudan before men's minds after the lapse of a decade. Circum-

stances were propitious. A ministry had come into office supported by a majority which was so strong that there seemed little reason to expect a change of government for six or seven years. The British ministers were likely to be able to carry any projects they might devise to a definite conclusion. They belonged to that party in the state which had consistently assailed Mr. Gladstone's Egyptian policy. Here was an opportunity of repairing the damage done by their Radical opponents. The comparisons that would follow the accomplishment of such reparation were self-evident and agreeable even to anticipate. And the Cabinet was strong. In Egypt, too, the situation was favorable. Through the careful economy and wise administration of Lord Cromer the finances of that country were in a greatly improved condition. By the perseverance and military knowledge of British officers, it was believed that the Egyptian army had been converted into a formidable fighting machine. That belief has since been justified. Besides all this, public opinion in England had been powerfully stirred by the publication of books like those of Slatin Pasha and Father Ohrwalder. If it were ever desirable to reconquer the Soudan, the year 1896 should see the beginning of the enterprise.

It was for many reasons, which it is impossible even to enumerate still less to discuss in this article, desirable to reconquer the Soudan. And it was desirable to do it quickly. The British Government possessed most complete and accurate reports of the French movements toward the Upper Nile. It was a case of "Now or Never."

In the spring of 1896 the country was astonished by the news that the Government had authorized a forward movement southward in the direction of Khartoum. The Radical leaders at once denounced the project in scathing terms. But the nation, although far from relishing its former experiences in the Soudan, was influenced by the undercurrent of opinion I have described, and acquiesced—timidly. The diplomatist said: "It is to forestall the French." The politician said: "It is to score over the Radicals." The ridiculous person said: "It is to restore the Khedive rule in the Soudan." But the man in the street—and there are many men in many streets—said: "It is to avenge General Gordon." Thus the expedition was launched.

Warlike operations began forthwith. The British General in Egypt—Sir Herbert Kitchener—had made the desert warfare the

study of his life. Within a month the news of a success arrived. Before the year was out the Dongola province was recovered.

The encouragement of success created a volume of feeling throughout England which few have estimated and many have sadly underestimated. It had always been a duty to reconquer the Soudan. Now the path of duty was likewise the path of interest and pleasure. The operations were watched with extravagant attention, and while they progressed the earnestness of the nation increased. As the tides of barbarism were gradually driven back, the old sea marks came one after another into view. Names of towns that were half forgotten—or remembered only with sadness—reappeared on the posters, in the despatches, and in the newspapers. We were going back. "Dongola," "Abu Hamid," "Berber"—who had not heard of them before? Now they were associated with triumph. Great armies fought on the Indian frontier. There was war in the South and the East and the West of Africa. But England looked steadfastly towards the Nile and the expedition that crawled forward slowly, steadily, unchecked, apparently irresistible.

The year 1898 came and with it the scale of the war largely increased. The Anglo-Egyptian army was now within two hundred miles of mournful, far-famed, never-to-be-forgotten Khartoum. It was within two hundred miles of the mysterious and terrible city of blood and filth, that had grown up on the other side of the great river—Omdurman. The interest of the nation, already intense, was stimulated to enthusiasm by the newspapers. Nor were the actual events inglorious. On the 9th of April a great Dervish army, under a famous Emir, which had advanced to drive back the invaders, was destroyed on the Atbara River at a cost of 600 killed and wounded. There followed a summer of waiting till the Nile should rise. At length the waters swelled and the steamers could move freely. Then the final advance began, and with surprising swiftness the climax arrived. On the 2d of September, amid the thunder of sixty guns, the rattle of twenty thousand rifles and the wild whirl of a cavalry charge, the Dervish domination fell in utter and irretrievable ruin, and the people of Great Britain, moved far beyond their wont, sat themselves down to give thanks to God, their Government and their General.

There are no great differences between the moods of a nation

and of individuals. In the hour of triumph few men will tolerate insult. Who, going finely arrayed to a marriage feast, will think amicably of the street boy who throws mud upon his coat? The force of a revulsion of feelings had often been dilated upon. It was now to have a striking instance. The energies which might have been devoted to rejoicing were turned to wrath and disgust. What was the cause?

Two days after we had taken Omdurman, a strange rumor began to circulate in the camp of the victorious army. "The French," they said, "are at Fashoda." It was reported that the crew of a captured Dervish gunboat had declared that the Khalifa had ordered them to proceed to Fashoda; that on arrival at Fashoda they had seen a strange flag, and that thereafter white men had fired at them with small bore rifles, killing nearly forty. The report proved correct. On examination, small bore bullets were dug out of the wood of the steamboat. The camp received the news with a shrug. If there was to be more fighting, let them given the word at home, and——.

It was not so in England. Astonishment and wonder were succeeded by suspense, and when suspense ended in the certainty that eight French adventurers were in occupation of Fashoda and claimed a territory as large as France, it gave place to a deep and bitter anger. There is no Power in Europe which the average Englishman regards with less animosity than France. Nevertheless, on this matter we were all agreed. They should go. They should evacuate Fashoda, or else all the might, majesty, dominion and power of everything that could by any stretch of the imagination be called "British" should be employed to make them go.

I would ask an American to imagine, for an instant, the spectacle of the soldiers that stormed Santiago de Cuba entering the town in triumph, only to find a German flag hoisted over the Government Buildings, and an intimation from a single German officer to the effect that he was in "effective occupation," but that they were welcome to the protection of the German flag. It is not difficult to imagine what such a situation would have led to. It would have led to more shooting.

The people of England were deeply stirred by the successful conduct and triumphant close of the campaign on the Upper Nile. They were suddenly confronted with the fact that a "friendly

power" had, unprovoked, endeavored to rob them of the fruits of their victories. They now realized that, while they had been devoting themselves to great military operations in broad daylight and the eye of the world, and prosecuting an enterprise on which they had set their hearts, other operations—covert, deceitful, behind-the-back—had been in progress in the heart of the Dark Continent, designed solely for the mischievous and spiteful object of depriving them of the produce of their labors. And they have firmly set their faces against such international doings.

France is a great nation ; a nation of brave and brilliant men ; of witty and beautiful women. She has long filled a splendid place in history. She is one of the Great Powers of the earth. If she had desired to prevent the British occupation of the Nile Valley, it was easy for her to protest against that occupation and to make it, if she thought it worth while, a *casus belli*. Then we could have discussed the matter. But it was as much below the dignity of a Great Power, and beneath the courtesy practiced by educated nations, for the French Government to embark on this vile intrigue as it would be for the German Emperor to write a facetious and insulting letter to the President of the United States, criticising the color of his hair or the length of his nose. One of the mushroom ministries of France—a thing that to-day is and to-morrow is "conspued"—had made the great nation, that capriciously amuses itself by being governed in that way, ridiculous and impolite. That is not our affair. I will not venture to suggest improvements to the French nation in their form of government. The true democratic principle is that each community should judge for itself, has the right to judge for itself, and is bound to judge for itself. We cannot consider the internal state of France. We must look to our own concerns.

First of all, this country was determined to have Fashoda or fight. Had we not possessed what we believe to be a legal claim, we should have said that it was ours by right of conquest, and that great nations justify their actions before God, not men—a convenient theory for a strong nation to adhere to and one which, after the recent war between Spain and America, we could not claim any originality in adopting. But we possessed a legal right so indisputable that the French Government have bowed to it with wisdom and with propriety. The field is open for negotiations. What should be the true policy of Great Britain ?

I do not myself believe that our generation will get much value out of the Nile Valley. For in what does the Soudan consist? It is, as it were, a single thread of blue silk drawn across a great brown nugget; and even the blue thread itself is brown for many months in the year. Where the waters of the Nile soak into the banks, there grow thorn bushes and poisonous weeds. Where the inhabitants splash the water over their scrappy fields—perhaps fifty yards square—there are hard-won crops. This belt of vegetation is rarely more than a few hundred yards broad. And the rest is desert—miserable, aching, desolate desert. There is plenty of room to lie down and die in. But it is no place for a man to live in.

The question will readily occur: Why worry about such barren places? It must not be forgotten that the sources of the Nile are physically as much an integral part of Egypt as the roots are an integral part of the tree. The river is also the great waterway of North Africa—the artery by which alone the land can derive nourishment and faculty of development. The French, it is said, are anxious to have "a door on the Nile," a commercial port through which they can introduce their commerce to the riverain peoples. But we English are a free trade nation. Our doors are open. It is as easy for the French to send their merchandise up and down the Nile as it is for the English or the Egyptians or the Americans. Nevertheless, it is clear that the more traffic that passes up and down the Nile, the better for the peoples that dwell on its banks; and if the possession of a door of their own would encourage the French to increase the traffic on the Nile, there does not appear to be any reason why they should not be given their "door"—at a fair price.

We are arrived at a question of price—after all the "motor muscle" of most human transactions. What is the price that France should pay for so good a gift as "a door on the Nile?" It is scarcely likely that we should be so stupid as to abandon the substance of Bahr-el-Ghazal for the shadow of Fashoda. We do not mind how much French merchandise passes up the Nile, provided that the French will recognize that that river flows between banks on which the Union Jack is firmly planted. If France is prepared to recognize that our occupation of Egypt is likely to be indefinitely prolonged, and as an earnest of that recognition will abandon her power to interfere in and obstruct the financial ar-

rangements of that country, then we may perceive the groundwork of a bargain, which might not only be satisfactory to both high disputants, but will also enable us to avoid the employment of that superior physical force, of which we are so reluctant to avail ourselves, but which is undoubtedly at our disposition. If, however, the French Government insist on making political capital out of their raid on Fashoda, then it is impossible to guess what terrors and tragedies the obscurity in which the future is shrouded may contain. Two facts, one moral, the other material, should, however, be held in view. There is a volume of opinion in Great Britain favorable to the maintenance of the Egyptian territories on the Upper Nile wholly disproportionate to the value of those regions. The construction of the Soudan Military Railway has brought Omdurman to within a fortnight of London, and enables the British Government to send very speedily an army of 40,000 men into the heart of Africa and feed them for as long as may be necessary or even desirable.

I have written thus with frankness what are the views of a very great number of Englishmen. I venture to think that they will not seem unreasonable or unjust to another great community with whom we are united by the sympathy of a single language and consciousness of a common aim.

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