

***WILLIAM
LE QUEUX***



***THE EYE
OF ISTAR***

William Le Queux

The Eye of Istar

A Romance of the Land of No Return

EAN 8596547217145

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



TABLE OF CONTENTS

["A Romance of the Land of No Return"](#)

[Preface.](#)

[Prologue.](#)

[Chapter One.](#)

[Chapter Two.](#)

[Chapter Three.](#)

[Chapter Four.](#)

[Chapter Five.](#)

[Chapter Six.](#)

[Chapter Seven.](#)

[Chapter Eight.](#)

[Chapter Nine.](#)

[Chapter Ten.](#)

[Chapter Eleven.](#)

[Chapter Twelve.](#)

[Chapter Thirteen.](#)

[Chapter Fourteen.](#)

[Chapter Fifteen.](#)

[Chapter Sixteen.](#)

[Chapter Seventeen.](#)

[Chapter Eighteen.](#)

[Chapter Nineteen.](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty One.](#)

[Chapter Twenty Two.](#)

[Chapter Twenty Three.](#)

[Chapter Twenty Four.](#)
[Chapter Twenty Five.](#)
[Chapter Twenty Six.](#)
[Chapter Twenty Seven.](#)
[Chapter Twenty Eight.](#)
[Chapter Twenty Nine.](#)
[Chapter Thirty.](#)
[Chapter Thirty One.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Two.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Three.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Four.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Five.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Six.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Seven.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Eight.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Nine.](#)
[Chapter Forty.](#)
[Chapter Forty One.](#)
[Chapter Forty Two.](#)
[Chapter Forty Three.](#)
[Chapter Forty Four.](#)
[Chapter Forty Five.](#)

"A Romance of the Land of No Return"

[Table of Contents](#)

Preface.

Table of Contents

PEACE, O READER! Constant, blessed and abundant salutations.

Of a verity the groves of my hopes have been refreshed by cooling showers from the clouds of Allah's blessing, my rose garden has been weeded of the thorns of despondency, and the tree of my prosperity has become fruit-bearing from the breeze of his bounty. He is the Giver of Gifts, the Source of Liberality, the Sovereign, the dust of whose sandals is deservedly the collyrium of the eyes of mortal men; and I, called by my fellows El-Motardjim, am the servant who, in compliance with the exalted command, have placed my finger of acquiescence on the vision of obedience. During many hopeless nights I waited for the radiation of the sun of the benefits of prosperity, and counted the stars till the rise of dawn, but, by my ill-luck and the machinations of enemies, was deprived of the felicity of penetrating the mystery of the Land Forbidden.

At length, however, on a happy day when the fire of my anguish burned so brightly that it was not easy to extinguish it with the water of patience, the Abolisher of the signs of darkness and aberration invested me with the robe of the favoured, guarded me through the calamities and vicissitudes of fortune during long journeys, directed my footsteps through the mazes of paths untrodden, and revealed unto my dazzled eyes weird and wondrous marvels stranger than men have dreamed.

Therefore, O Reader! wipe the dust of ennui and fatigue from the speculum of thy mind, withdraw the tongue of

*blame into thy palate, and lend a willing ear to this my Tarik;
for, verily, I have elucidated the secret of the mystic Land of
the No Return; I have torn the veil that hideth the Great Sin
from the eyes of men, and have gazed into the Eye of Istar.
"Imsh Allah!"*



Prologue.

Table of Contents

Thrice hath the Fast of Ramadan come and gone since the Granter of Requests last allowed my eyes to behold the well-remembered landscape, scarcely visible in the pale light of dawn. Hills, covered with tall feathery palms, rose abruptly from the barren, sun-scorched plain, and, at their foot, stood the dazzlingly-white city of Omdurman, the impregnable and mysterious headquarters of Mahdiism, while beyond, like a silver ribbon winding through the marshes, the Nile glided, half veiled by its thin white cloud of morning vapours.

Within the walled and strongly-guarded city was a scene, strange and fantastic. The air, heavy with war rumours, was rent by the deafening strokes of enormous brazen tam-tams, mingling with the loud shouts of dark-faced Jalins, half-naked negro fanatics of the Kunjara and the Dinka, armed *cap à pie*, ready for battle at a moment's notice. The excitement, which had increased daily for many months, had risen to fever heat.

Throughout the short, hot night, the great *nahas*—those huge brass war drums of the Khalifa Abdullah, Ruler of the Soudan—had been beaten by relays of perspiring negro slaves, glittering with beads and trinkets, the indescribable monotonous rhythm causing the wildly-excited populace to cry, "*Nakelkum!*" and "*Naklulkum!*" as, in the fresh, cool hour, when the Wolf's Tail—the first brushes of grey light which appear as forerunners of dawn—showed in the heavens, they seized guns, spears and shields, and rushing from their houses across the great square of Abu Anga they

congregated in the wide, open space near the Tree of Hadra, where the Raya Zerga, or dreaded black standard of the Khalifa, hung ominous and motionless in the morning air.

Wild-haired men sped fleetly to and fro, brandishing their gleaming arms and apostrophising Eblis; women left their millet unbeaten and followed, while musicians chanted war songs softly in a sad falsetto, accompanying themselves upon their little *ginkris*—those queer, two stringed guitars, fashioned from a tortoise shell, which give forth a dismal sound like the chirping of a grasshopper of the oasis. The servants of the Merciful are those who walk meekly on the earth, and when the ignorant speak to them, answer, “Peace”; and who pass the night adoring Allah, and standing up to pray unto him, and who say, “O Allah, avert from us the torment of hell, for the torment thereof is perpetual; verily, the same is a miserable abode”; and who, when they bestow, are neither profuse nor niggardly, but observe a just medium between these, and who invoke not another god together with the One Allah, neither slay the soul which Allah hath forbidden to be slain, unless for a just cause. The Dervishes were going forth to battle.

On one side of the spacious review ground frowned the castellated walls of the imposing white fortress, held so long by Faragallah Pasha against the fierce hordes of the Mahdi; on the other, the ill-built quarters of the Genadien, or regular soldiers, while the single tree in the centre was historical by reason of the head of Gordon, the brave Pasha of the Infidels, having been exhibited thereon by order of our tyrannical lord, the Mahdi. It was at this spot that the wild multitude heaped curses upon the last grim relic of the

gallant, deserted hero of Khartoum, the man whose matchless bravery and dogged perseverance were alike admired by my own co-religionists, as well as by the Infidels themselves.

But the Mahdi, Khalifat-er-Rasul—the great False Prophet, renowned throughout the world, who, by inducing us to believe that, by his supernatural influence, he could transform the bullets of the white men into water, caused us to flock to his standard and attempt to conquer the Soudan—was now dead, and the power of the Khalifa Abdullah supreme. Seven years ago had the hand of Allah's justice fallen heavily upon the hypocritical imitator of the Great Prophet, who asserted that he could part the waters of the Nile, that his body was invulnerable, and who was so successful in his ingenious impostures that the people threw themselves down frantically to kiss the spots his crimson slippers had touched, while the water in which he performed his ablutions was drunk as an unfailing remedy for every sort of malady. The very dust of his sandals was declared to be the collyrium of the eyes of men. But the struggle with the English, the fall of El Obeid, the capture of Galabat, and the defeat and death of the King of Abyssinia were events now long past and forgotten.

In this record of fact, adventure and strange marvels, I, Zafar-Ben-A'Ziz, called by some, El-Motardjim ("the translator"), on account of my knowledge of many tongues, am compelled to speak of myself. I am not a Soudanese, but an Arab, son of the Hadj Yakub Sarraf, Kaid of the Aures. I passed my childhood at my birthplace, El-Manäa, two days' journey from Batna. Then my father, having trading

relations with an Arab merchant living in London, the giant city of the English, I was sent there for two years to learn the tongue. But I cared not for the English, nor the ways of life in a city where the women go abroad unveiled and laugh in the faces of the men, where speech is carried along wires, where light is shed by two wires in contact and where carriages are propelled along the roads without horses. Of a verity, the London of the English is a city full of marvels, infidel customs, amazing sights, and the accursed inventions of Eblis himself. To the English the One Accursed has imparted the secret of his wiles and miracles, whereby they are the powerful people on the face of the earth. After two years rubbing shoulders with the white men who believed not in the Prophet, but worshipped a cross as emblem of their deity, I grew weary, for, during the whole time, mine eyes were never refreshed by seeing the interior of a mosque, although once or twice I entered their churches without removing my shoes, as is their custom.

During my absence in the land of the Infidels my mother died, and six moons after my return my father was taken into Certainty. Then life among my people, the Chawi—the beauty of whose women is world famous—had but little charm for me, born Bedouin that I am. I longed for the journeys afar by camel, the free life, the burning sun and the limitless horizon. I felt the need of the devouring heat. I sighed for the desert and the endless sands, and all my youthful dreams were radiant with rosy anticipations. Therefore, after a few months of idleness, I resolved to quit my studies and travel south across the Great Desert. At sunrise, one day, I left behind my native mountains, and,

with a camel caravan, journeyed to Mourkouk. Thence I travelled with various caravans to El Fasher, Dem Zibehr, Lado, and other places in the Soudan, on many occasions finding myself in Khartoum, where several times I saw the grave-faced Gordon, the heroic White Pasha, who was afterwards so treacherously murdered. At the age of twenty-one I had succeeded in establishing a small caravan of my own to journey between Khartoum and Suakin, but suddenly the Mahdi rose against the Christians, and all trade was stopped. Unfortunately, being an Arab from Algeria, I was an alien, therefore my camels were at once seized, and, against my will, I was pressed into military service, forced to take the *bea'a*, and bear my part in the holy war under the dreaded standard of the Mahdi. At Tamai and Abu Klea I fought the English invaders, afterwards carrying arms in Dongola, Berber, Galabat, Karkoj and Kordofan, where I fought Infidels, slave-raiders and rebellious tribes, witnessing many fierce combats and scenes of massacre too horrible to describe. "Allah encompasseth the Infidels," says our Korân. "The lightning wanteth but little of taking away their sight; so often as it enlighteneth them they walk therein, but when darkness cometh on them they stand still." I loved the brilliant nights and the ruddy splendour of the moonbeams reflected on the sands; even the sinister howls of the jackals on the plains of Kababich had become a familiar sound and no longer disturbed me.

Such, briefly, is the story how, from a student at the French Lycée at Algiers, and a clerk in a London merchant's office, I developed into a Dervish.

Now, however, as one of the renowned Ansar-ed-Din of the False Prophet's successor, I, with face seared by sun-scalds, sat my milk-white horse in the square of Abu Anga, ready to take part in the monster parade, prior to setting forth upon an expedition across the Great Desert, westward to Kano, the great capital of the powerful Sultan of Sokoto, which all knew would be fraught with many perils.

But it was the Khalifa's will; none dare demur.

In the Korân, our perspicuous Book of Everlasting Will, it is written that "Allah, the One Worthy of Praise, alone knoweth the heart of man," therefore he is aware that the profane chicanery of the Mahdi had impressed me not, neither did I admire the fanatical teaching of the Khalifa's speeches and sermons. But to speak in Omdurman against Mahdiism, or the Khalifa, meant death, therefore silence and obedience were best. Indeed, life was at all times uncertain in the Dervish capital. The Khalifa was intensely vain and proud, professing the religion of Al-Islâm, but leading an idle, dissolute life, shut up in his great white Palace, surrounded by all the pomp and splendour of a Soudanese Sultan. Cruel, quick-tempered and distrustful, he was fearful and jealous of his authority, and the smallest infringement of it was looked upon as a heinous offence, to be punished accordingly. By an elaborate system, he was surrounded by villainous, despicable spies, who all pandered to his jealous and tyrannical nature. These spies were everywhere, and besides obtaining admission to private houses in order to ascertain if the inmates were loyal, their duty was also to seek out the most attractive girls to grace their master's extensive harem. Wherever a pretty woman was found

throughout his dominions he at once received information about her, and in a very short time she was conveyed to the palace of Omdurman, where the hundred fountains were refreshing, the marble courts were cool, and the Garden of Enchantment was red with flowers and green with many leaves.



Chapter One.

Table of Contents

The Blast of the Onbeia.

We were leaving Omdurman, on an expedition to the far west, beyond the high misty mountains of Marran and the great glaring Saharan plains. Our forces, consisting of over fifteen thousand armed warriors, were assembling to parade and receive our Ruler's blessing ere we departed.

Red and fiery the sun rose, the houses shone milk-white against the intense blue of the sky, the monotonous thumping of the *nahas* continued, the yelling of the fanatical multitude increased, and the black silken standard, planted in the centre of the parade-ground, stirred by a breath of hot wind, suddenly spread itself out lazily, revealing its inscription in sprawly Arabic characters of bright yellow. The excited populace, the black-faced warriors of the Tumali, the Tegele and the Fajelu, regarding this as a good omen, shouted themselves hoarse in cursing our enemies, but a few seconds later the sound of loud trumpets echoed across the square, and a silence, sudden and complete, fell upon the multitude. Drawn up in long lines, we were facing in the direction of the Holy City, ranging ourselves in order, attending the commands of Allah and the Khalifa and celebrating the divine praise. From where I sat I had full view of the great arched gate of the Palace, which next second was thrown open as the Khalifa himself, stout, dark-bearded, and hawk-eyed, rode forth, accompanied by his officers and bodyguard. Mounted on a fine camel, and wearing a suit of golden mail armour and a helmet with

spotless plume, he was surrounded by about two hundred horsemen also clad in mail, with thick, red turbans around their helmets, their horses all wearing brass head armour to protect them from sword cuts. Four *onbeia* blowers walked in front, and, in turns, sounded the great elephant's tusk, while, headed by the dreaded sable standard and moving very slowly, came the Khalifa, stern, stately, statuesque, with drawn sword. Behind, followed the gaudily-attired *mulazimin*, or body-servants, riding, while his black guards, veritable giants in stature, formed a compact square around him.

The spectacle was brilliant and imposing. In the bright morning sunshine the spears and armour of the cavalcade flashed and glittered, and, as the Khalifa drew up his camel within a few yards of me, his keen black eyes wandered around us, as if in search of absentees. Thrice the deafening plaudits of the multitude rent the air; thrice he bowed an acknowledgment with regal gesture. With one voice the people cried, "Alhamdolillah!"—the pious expression which leaves the lips of True Believers on all occasions of concluding actions—the review began, and the wild enthusiasm and confusion knew no bounds. Remington rifles with ammunition were distributed to us, in addition to the customary three spears and sword, and, amid the endless shouting and recitation of suras from the Korân, with bows and protestations we dashed at a wild gallop hither and thither past the powerful Ruler of the Soudan, raising clouds of white dust. At length, in obedience to a long, loud blast from the *onbeia*, we halted, and the Khalifa—whose custom it was to attend the mosque five times a day and to enforce

the presence of all his principal emirs—commenced the second portion of the parade. The review, or *arda*, as it was called, was a religious ceremony, and those who took part in it were supposed to obtain special advantages and blessings.

Gazing slowly around him, with an expression of restlessness and revenge clearly portrayed upon his gross, bloated features, he waved his fat hand, with imperious gesture, exclaiming in a loud, firm voice,—

“Harken unto me, O my people! The believer doth not escape from the chastisement of Allah—whose glory be glorified,—until he leaveth four things—lying, pride, niggardliness and evil-thinking. Paradise desireth four kinds of men: the first of them are they who feed the hungry; the second, they who lend succour unto the naked; the third, they who fast in Ramadan; and the fourth, they who read the Korân. Fear ye Allah in secret, O my people!”

Every head bent low in obedient submission, every voice cried with one accord, “May the peace of Allah cover thee like a cloak, O august Ruler! O Pearl of the conch of Prophecy!”

“Our kingdom is made flourishing through justice, is protected by courage, and ruled by good government,” he continued. “Good government is that the gate of the Chief be guarded in the proper time of being guarded, and opened in the proper time of being open, and the gate-keeper friendly. Verily, the One Merciful hath servants whom he distinguisheth with his favours, and whom he rewardeth for fighting for the Faith with great rewards. To go forth into battle against the Sultan of Sokoto is necessary for the well-

being of our State, and of our people; therefore, O men-at-arms, gird your loins and sharpen your spears, so that ye may enter the great city of Kano, vanquish your enemies, trample their country underfoot, deliver it over to fire and sword, and return hither to your ease within yonder walls of this, your dwelling-place. In the darkness of night, as in the sunshine of noon, ye carry with ye upon thy wanderings the ever-anxious thoughts of your Khalifa, into whose keeping the welfare of our kingdom was entrusted by the holy Mahdi whom Allah, who liveth in Heaven, hath been pleased to remove from amongst us.”

“His name be exalted and praised!” roared the excited, dark-faced multitude. “May it endure as long as time lasts!”

“True, O my people,” continued the autocrat, with well-feigned reverence. “May our great Chief, El Mahdi, drink of the stream Al-Cawthar, whiter than milk or silver, and more odoriferous than musk, with as many cups set around it as there are stars in the firmament, of which water whosoever drinketh will thirst no more for ever. May he wander through the groves of Jannat-al-Ferdaws with the glorious Hur-al-oyun, whose dark eyes are a pleasure to beholders, and whose pavilions are as hollow pearls.”

Then, after the people had given vent to loud acclamations, he repeated, in a loud voice, two long prayers from the Korân, followed by the *khutba* for days of the Jihad, “Praise be to Allah, the One Merciful, who is the best of helpers; for we say, verily, help us against the Infidel people. He who is dissatisfied with the licentious, we ask Him, ‘Do help us against the Infidel people.’ Glory to Him who scattereth the strength of the unbelievers; so we say,

verily, 'Do help us.' He who surroundeth with His aid His grateful worshippers, help us. He whom Allah sent to give vigour unto the lukewarm, help us. Know ye that Allah, whose name be exalted, has written upon you the Jihad against the wicked. Therefore, exert yourselves and say, 'Help us against the Infidels, and may their place be in Al-Hawiyat.' And be ye patient in the fatigues of the expedition; for, verily, His help maketh bold those who watch. Then say ye, 'Help us against the Infidels. Thou art our Allah. Then help us against the people of the Infidels.'"

This concluded, he delivered a further invocation for the victory of the religion of Al-Islâm, long life for himself, and the continual success of his arms, following it up with a prayer, calling down the vengeance of Allah on all unbelievers and those who had erred from the paths of Mahdiism, especially the enemies we were about to attack, and asking that their wives and children might be given as booty unto us. At the end of the prayers he repeated the *Fatiha*, the whole gigantic assembly joining in the declaration of the Unity, loud, fervent, impressive.

Every head again bowed for a second, then wild yelling, shrill battle-cries and deafening war gongs sounded, mad, enthusiastic confusion becoming general everywhere as the Khalifa Abdullah and his black bodyguard slowly moved back along the Nile bank towards the great white Palace, the ponderous iron-studded gates of which opened wide to receive them. Men and women, giving vent to cries of "*Sidi! Khalifat el Mahdi!*" and "*Ya Sidi ana mazlum!*" threw themselves upon their faces, craving his blessing as he passed, and some of the more fanatical struggled and

fought with his bodyguard of ebon-faced Taisha in a vain endeavour to touch the hem of the garment of the Great Ruler inspired by Allah.

Thus, while the shouting multitude followed our Master, we dismounted, ate the handful of dhurra allotted to each of us, and took leave of our women and relations prior to setting forth on the first stage of an expedition to Kano, the City of the Mirage, which most probably would occupy us many months, and from which many of us would certainly never return.



Chapter Two.

Table of Contents

Sun and Silence.

Headed by the great Raya Zerga, held in awe throughout the Soudan from Assouan even unto Lado, we of the Jihadieh, two hours later, under the heat of the brilliant sun, rode forth from the city gate, amid the vociferous shouting of the women, the frantic beating of war drums, the ear-piercing blast of great *onbeias* and the encouraging yells of old men and children. Then, with a parting war-cry, our gleaming swords flourishing in air, we left the cupolas and minarets of Omdurman behind, and spurred forward in huge compact bodies towards the low, distant hills, half hidden in their mystic haze, but supposed to be the abode of the Jinns, or genii, which our dead lord, the Mahdi, declared always fought in thousands on our side. Some of my comrades-in-arms declared that they had had visions of these strange creatures, but I confess I have never seen one, and am inclined to agree with what one of the White Fathers once told us in El Obeid, that their existence is purely imaginary. But perhaps I am a sceptic. Indeed, my white skin betrayed my Arab parentage, and, because of it, I had long ago been nicknamed by my dark-visaged comrades, "The Unbeliever." Not because I had ever expressed doubt as to the truth of the Mahdist teaching, but my pale face was alone responsible for the epithet which had, in fun, been bestowed upon me.

My personal appearance, as a horseman of the great Khalifa, was, perhaps, not such as would commend itself to

the Roumis, the enemies of Allah and His Prophet. My Jibbeh, or Dervish uniform coat, was dirty and patched with multi-coloured strips of cotton; on my head was the white skullcap, called the *takia*, bound by a broad white turban; while I wore a pair of loose cotton unmentionables with a red girdle, and my bare feet were thrust into rough slippers of undressed cowhide. My weapons consisted of a circular shield which bore the deep dints of past combats, two small spears, one long one, a rifle, and a heavy sword with cross hilt strapped up under my left arm.

Light-hearted, laughing among ourselves, and eager for the fray, we crossed the hills, but saw nothing of the mysterious Jinns; then, continuing our ride into the stony, waterless desert of Bayuda, that immense country forgotten of Allah, we halted at sundown for the *maghrib*, and journeyed forward yet another three hours before encamping. The expedition was under the leadership of Ali Wad Helu, chief of the Baggara Arabs, upon whose crimson flag, borne before him, was inscribed in gold in the Arabic character, '*Nekhrib ed Dunia wa nammir el Akher.*' (We shall destroy this, and create the next world). This was his motto. A fierce and fanatical warrior, he had acted a conspicuous and unenviable part in that terrible storm of 1885 which deluged the Soudan with blood, and now thought not of sparing the lives of his men, but urged that, by dying by the sword, we should go direct to the Jannat-al-Ferdaws, where the great lote-tree throws a cool shade, and where the houris have lips of musk and eyes bright and sparkling as stars of night.

Resting during the day, on account of the furnace-heat of sunshine, and travelling during the clear, starlit nights over the sands with our black standard ever waving at our head, the hosts of the Khalifa swept onward through the land of sun and silence, like a great swarm of locusts, bent upon ruthless pillage and destruction. Day by day, week by week, we travelled over the immense plain, always in the crimson track of the dying day. Everywhere spread vast solitudes, an interminable country of desolation and sad monotony, without a plant or a vestige of life—only shifting, brown sand-hills, boundless horizons and a blinding glare of sun. Through Foja and El Fasher we passed, then over the great, bare mountains to Kol-Kol. Three journeys from that place, however, Ali Wad Helu, fearing attack by hostile tribes, sent forward fifty spearmen—of whom I was one—to act as scouts. The orders we received we obeyed promptly, and, heedless of heat and sand storms, we travelled rapidly onward to Abu Guerra, across infinite, mysterious solitudes, where the blazing heat and the loose sand retarded our advance, until, at last, we reached El-Asagga, on the shore of Lake Tsad, exactly one moon after our departure from Omdurman.

Inured as the cavalry of the Khalifa were to the burning breath and silent gloom of the desert, the privations of the march and the fatigue of long travel, we found in this journey that our horses were utterly unfit to negotiate the stony wilderness that lay between ourselves and Kano, known to the desert wanderers as the City of the Mirage by reason of the amazing mirages seen in the vicinity almost daily; therefore, on arrival at the Well of Sabo-n-Gari, four

days' journey south from the Lake, and two days' beyond the boundary of the territory of the Sultan of Sokoto, we resolved to encamp under the palms and await our main body in order to utilise the spare camels which they had brought with them in case of need. To attempt to approach nearer to the city we intended to attack would, we knew, result in speedy death.

The last fires had faded from the west; moonless night had fallen. The poison-wind blew in sharp hot gusts, the heat from the sand was reflected into one's face, black clouds hung low and ominous, and the atmosphere, laden with particles of grit, was stifling. We prayed our *isha*, ate our dhurra, and leaving three of our comrades on the alert, in case of surprise, stretched ourselves in our tents and endeavoured to snatch a brief repose. The neighbourhood of the well was not a safe place after sundown, for wild beasts came there for water, and we had seen the marks of lions on the sands. Wearied, my eyes at length closed in sleep, and I was dreaming of cool, idle hours at my mountain home in the far-off Aures, and of bygone days amid the civilisation of London, when suddenly I was startled by the quick rattle of musketry, followed by fiendish yells, while, at the same moment, there was a flash of powder as a bullet tore its way through the canvas of my little tent, whistling unpleasantly near my head. Seizing my rifle, I sprang up, and, with my comrades who had been sleeping by my side, rushed forth.

Next second I knew the truth. The place was alive with horsemen, led by a minor sheikh mounted upon a splendid grey. We had fallen into the trap against which our spies had repeatedly warned us, and were evidently being attacked

from every side by the Tuaregs. In the Great Desert there are two terrors ever present—the sand and the Tuaregs. The latter are the forbidding-looking pirates of the desert, held in awe from El Fasher to Timbuktu. It is said that ages ago they were compelled to migrate south from the fertile Atlas into the Great Desert, and owing to their eyes being unaccustomed to the terrible glare, nor their lungs to the sand storms, they adopted a head-dress with two veils. One, the *nicab*, is rolled round the temples, hanging down in front to protect the eyes; the other, the *litham*, reaches from the nostrils to the edge of the clothing, completely covering the lower part of the face. Hence they are known to-day, everywhere in the Soudan, as the “Veiled Men of the Desert,” while upon all those who do not adopt their mysterious-looking costume they bestow the sobriquet, “mouths for flies.” The veils are never removed, even at meal times, and the garb has become so much a part of them that any one, being deprived of it, is unrecognisable to his friends and relatives. If one of their number is killed in battle and divested of his veil, no one can identify him until it has been restored to its place. And this, in spite of the fact that the bridge of the nose and the eyes alone are visible. Their power is felt in nearly every part of the Great Desert, and to such an extent have they carried their depredations that until quite recently almost every town was compelled to pay them tribute. These nomads are thieves of the worst character, travellers and merchants being their principal victims. Their vague form of Islâmism they have reduced to a belief in talismans, and their chest and back are covered with bags of black and yellow, like a cuirass. Ruse is their

principal weapon, even though they never show themselves without spear or gun, a sword at their side and a poniard attached to the left arm. We, of the Khalifa's army, had bestowed upon them three epithets which epitomise their psychology—"Thieves, Hyenas, and the Abandoned of Allah."

There had been a deadly feud of long standing between us, and they, learning that a small party of Dervishes was in the vicinity, had apparently come forth to check our advance. But the horsemen of the Khalifa Abdullah, Sultan of the Soudan, know not fear, as their valiant actions at Abu Klea, Berber, El Obeid and Toski had already proved, and now, even though we saw ourselves surrounded by hundreds of yelling "Veiled Men," who poured into us a withering fire from their long-barrelled guns, not a man among us was dismayed although many bit the dust ere reaching cover.

That it must be a struggle to the death we knew, therefore, unable to mount, we obtained what protection we could among the few palm trunks, and replied to the hail of bullets with careful precision, picking off a white-robed figure whenever one showed itself. Behind every rock or tree large enough to shelter a human form a veiled man lurked, and, well-practised in the use of firearms, they proved themselves superior shots. As far as we could discern in the gloom they outnumbered us by about ten to one, and their weapons, aimed deliberately at us from the security of the ambushade, had already taken deadly effect. On every side white robes fluttered as rifles shed their weird red light, and ere long many of our men, stumbling forward,

sank upon the sand and died with fierce curses upon their lips. Unable to approach our opponents sufficiently near to effectively use our long spears we continued our erratic fire, determined to make a stubborn stand until the end. During a quarter-of-an-hour this continued, when suddenly wild piercing yells sounded above the incessant rattle of musketry as, with one accord, about two hundred Tuaregs, their villainous faces encircled by their black veils, and standing in their stirrups, swept down upon us with a ringing shout of triumph. In a moment a fierce hand-to-hand struggle ensued, for horses and riders plunged upon our spears, and dozens of the desert pirates fell impaled, their burnouses dyed with blood. One man, tall and sinewy, his breast loaded with talismans, riding a magnificently-caparisoned horse, and evidently a sheikh, I held in the grip of death, and he fell by my hand. Indeed, so strenuous was our defence that, on glancing round, I felt half inclined to believe that the fierce onslaught would not be repeated; yet, almost before this thought had crossed my mind, another shrill war-cry resounded as an additional force on foot emerged from the dark clump of trees with burnouses flying, eyes blazing, and firing as they ran they rushed together upon us in such numbers as to prove absolutely overwhelming. With rifles held high above their heads, and yelling fiercely, they sped onward, driving us from our cover, and shooting us down, although we slashed, stabbed and hacked like very demons. Prodigies of strength and valour were performed by my comrades, the Dervishes, in their last defence. The struggle inflamed them, as it ever does men courageous by nature and born brave. They sold their

lives dearly, but to effectually repulse the attack or to crave for quarter were alike futile. Alas, the soldiers of the Black Standard, who for years had fought long and fearlessly for the holy Mahdi and his successor, were now falling helpless victims to the cunning and rapidity with which the Tuaregs had delivered their terrible onslaught.

Full of breathless anxiety were those fatal moments. Elated by their success and filled with a deadly hatred against us, our enemies were evidently determined to sweep us into eternity. The ground was encumbered with dead and dying. Several of my comrades, believing that the Jinns had deserted us, and therefore resistance was useless, threw down their arms, and falling on their knees, cried, in the name of the *One* for their lives to be spared, but the Veiled Men of the Desert only jeered, and shot them down as ruthlessly as they would slaughter dogs, crying, "Kill the black-faced sons of offal! Let not one escape, or he will give warning unto the hosts of the accursed tyrant, the Khalifa. Kill the dogs! Kill them!" My comrades' death-wail uplifted, and, sharpened in soaring, hung in anguish at its height; then, like hope's expiring sigh, it faltered downward and fell mute.

Escape was hopeless; we had fallen into an ambush. Our enemies had surrounded us by hundreds. Amid the shrieks, the firing, the fiendish, exultant cries of the victors and the fierce, hoarse curses of the dying, I fought on with spear and shield, unhorsing more than one of our deadly foes. My comrades were apparently all being ruthlessly slaughtered, when suddenly a gigantic son of the desert, lithe as a deer, black-veiled, and sitting his white horse as if he were part of

it, galloped straight towards me with a loud cry, his whirling blade flourishing in mid-air ready to match me, strength to strength. In a second my spear left my hand, and striking him full in the breast, felled him to earth a corpse, but ere I could draw breath, another piercing yell sounded behind me, and I felt a sharp twinge in the left shoulder. Then a horrible, choking sensation seized me, and I have a vague recollection of a man's dark face, hideously distorted by hatred, and with a black *rawani*, or shawl wrapped around it, within a few inches of mine, so near that I could feel his hot, foetid breath upon my cheek.

A sudden darkness next instant fell upon me, and all consciousness became blotted out.

Of events that immediately followed, or of how long I remained insensible I have no knowledge. Thoughts, strange and confused, grim and pleasant, incongruously mixed flitted through my unbalanced mind, but I had no idea of place, of time, of anything. A darkness, black and impenetrable, had obliterated my senses and held me powerless, until a sharp spasm of pain shot through my limbs, and then I recollected, in a half dreamy manner, that I had fallen in the desperate fight. I tried to repeat the first *sura*, but my lips, cold and clammy, refused to utter sound. The pain increased in intensity until my whole body became racked by a torture so acute and horrible that I believe I must have fainted. Many are the scars I had received in battle, but never had I experienced such suffering. Indeed, the pain was so intense that I felt myself writhing in terrible agony, while the perspiration stood in great beads upon my neck and brow, and the tightness in my chest held me, as in

a vice, breathless, with all the horrible pangs of asphyxiation.

An interval of senselessness was followed by a brief period of calm; then gradually, with a feeling that I was struggling hand-to-hand with Azrael, the dreaded Angel of Terrors, I slowly struggled back to consciousness. Blindly enduring, I suffered alternately torments of fire and of ice. Memories haunted me, vivid, voluptuous; scenes of a passionate past recurred. I stood in a magical Hall of Echoes, where every echo seemed the voice it mocked, and through some flaw in each illusion drove the shattering spear of truth.

In the impenetrable darkness my fingers wandered involuntarily to seek the objects around. On either side I stretched forth my hands, but clutched at air. Faint sibilations, like the sound of hushed whispering fell upon my ear, and in that moment filled me with a strange fear. My resting-place seemed soft and comfortable, and as again my hands sought to discover something that would give me a clue to my whereabouts, my finger-tips suddenly came into contact with embroidered satin. I could feel the raised pattern upon the smooth, glossy surface at my side, and became aware that I was not stretched upon the sand, where I had fallen, but upon a divan. I felt the cushion upon which my aching head was pillowed. It was also of satin, soft as down. The air seemed heavy with the sensuous intoxicating odour of attar of rose rising from a perfuming-pan—a subtle scent that still vibrates my memory—and as I touched the pillow I made a further discovery. Raising my