

The Three Correspondents

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THE THREE CORRESPONDENTS

There was only the one little feathery clump of dôm plants in all that great wilderness of black rocks and orange sand.



It stood high on the bank, and below it the brown Nile swirled swiftly towards the Ambigole Cataract, fitting a little frill of foam round each of the boulders which studded its surface.

Above, out of a naked blue sky, the sun was beating down upon the sand, and up again from the sand under the brims of the pith-hats of the horsemen with the scorching glare of a blast-furnace. It had risen so high that the shadows of the horses were no larger than themselves.

"Whew!" cried Mortimer, mopping his forehead, "you'd pay five shillings for this at the hummums."

"Precisely," said Scott. "But you are not asked to ride twenty miles in a Turkish bath with a field-glass and a revolver, and a water-bottle and a whole Christmas-treeful of things dangling from you. The hot-house at Kew is excellent as a conservatory, but not adapted for exhibitions upon the horizontal bar. I vote for a camp in the palm-grove and a halt until evening."

Mortimer rose in his stirrups and looked hard to the southward. Everywhere were the same black burned rocks and deep orange sand.

At one spot only an intermittent line appeared to have been cut through the rugged spurs which ran down to the river. It was the bed of the old railway, long destroyed by the Arabs, but now in process of reconstruction by the advancing Egyptians. There was no other sign of man's handiwork in all that desolate scene.

"It's palm trees or nothing," said Scott.

"Well, I suppose we must; and yet I grudge every hour until we catch the force up. What would our editors say if we were late for the action?"

"My dear chap, an old bird like you doesn't need to be told that no sane modern general would ever attack until the Press is up."

"You don't mean that?" said young Anerley. "I thought we were looked upon as an unmitigated nuisance."

"'Newspaper correspondents and travelling gentlemen, and all that tribe of useless drones'—being an extract from Lord Wolseley's Soldier's Pocket-Book," cried Scott. "We know all about that, Anerley;" and he winked behind his blue spectacles. "If there was going to be a battle we should very soon have an escort of cavalry to hurry us up. I've been in fifteen, and I never saw one where they had not arranged for a reporter's table."

"That's very well; but the enemy may be less considerate," said Mortimer.

"They are not strong enough to force a battle."

"A skirmish, then?"

"Much more likely to be a raid upon the rear. In that case we are just where we should be."

"So we are! What a score over Reuter's man up with the advance! Well, we'll outspan and have our tiffin under the palms."

There were three of them, and they stood for three great London dailies. Reuter's was thirty miles ahead; two evening pennies upon camels were twenty miles behind.

And among them they represented the eyes and ears of the public—the great silent millions and millions who paid for



everything, and who waited so patiently to know the result of their outlay.

They were remarkable men, these body-servants of the Press; two of them already veterans in camps, the other setting out upon his first campaign, and full of deference for his famous comrades.

This first one, who had just dismounted from his bay polo-pony, was Mortimer, of the Intelligence—tall, straight, and hawk-faced, with khaki tunic and riding-breeches, drab putties, a scarlet cummerbund, and a skin tanned to the red of a Scotch fir by sun and wind, and mottled by the mosquito and the sand-fly.

The other—small, quick, mercurial, with blue-black curling beard and hair, a fly-switch for ever flicking his left hand—was Scott, of the Courier, who had come through more dangers and brought off more brilliant coups than any man in the profession, save the eminent Chandler, now no longer in a condition to take the field.

They were a singular contrast, Mortimer and Scott, and it was in their differences that the secret of their close friendship lay. Each dovetailed into the other. The strength of each was in the other's weakness. Together they formed a perfect unit. Mortimer was Saxon—slow, conscientious, and deliberate; Scott was Celtic—quick, happy-go-lucky, and brilliant.

Mortimer was the more solid, Scott the more attractive. Mortimer was the deeper thinker, Scott the brighter talker. By a curious coincidence, though each had seen much of warfare, their campaigns had never coincided.

Together they had covered all recent military history. Scott had done Plevna, the Shipka, the Zulus, Egypt, Suakim; Mortimer had seen the Boer War, the Chilian, the Bulgarian and Servian, the Gordon relief, the Indian frontier, Brazilian rebellion, and Madagascar.

This intimate personal knowledge gave a peculiar flavour to their talk. There was none of the second-hand surmise and conjecture which form so much of our conversation; it was all concrete and final. The speaker had been there, had seen it, and there was an end of it.

In spite of their friendship there was the keenest professional rivalry between the two men.

Either would have sacrificed himself to help his companion, but either would also have sacrificed his companion to help his paper. Never did a jockey yearn for a winning mount as keenly as each of them longed to have a full column in a morning edition whilst every other daily was blank.

They were perfectly frank about the matter. Each professed himself ready to steal a march on his neighbour, and each recognized that the other's duty to his employer was far higher than any personal consideration.

The third man was Anerley, of the Gazette—young, inexperienced, and rather simple-looking. He had a droop of the lip which some of his more intimate friends regarded as a libel upon his character, and his eyes were so slow and sleepy that they suggested an affectation.

A leaning toward soldiering had sent him twice to autumn manoeuvres, and a touch of colour in his descriptions had induced the proprietors of the Gazette to give him a trial as a war-special.

There was a pleasant diffidence about his bearing which recommended him to his experienced companions, and if they had a smile sometimes at his guileless ways, it was soothing to them to have a comrade from whom nothing was to be feared.

From the day that they left the telegraph-wire behind them at Sarras, the man who was mounted upon a fifteen-guinea thirteen-four Syrian was delivered over into the hands of the owners of the two fastest polo-ponies that ever shot down the Ghezireh ground.

The three had dismounted and led their beasts under the welcome shade. In the brassy, yellow glare every branch above threw so black and solid a shadow that the men involuntarily raised their feet to step over them.

"The palm makes an excellent hat-rack," said Scott, slinging his revolver and his water-bottle over the little upward-pointing pegs which bristled from the trunk. "As a shade-tree, however, it isn't an unqualified success. Curious that in the universal adaptation of means to ends something a little less flimsy could not have been devised for the tropics."

"Like the banyan in India."

"Or the fine hardwood trees in Ashantee, where a whole regiment could picnic under the shade."

"The teak tree isn't bad in Burmah, either. By Jove, the baccy has all come loose in the saddle-bag! That long-cut mixture smokes rather hot for this climate. How about the baggles, Anerley?"

"They'll be here in five minutes."

Down the winding path which curved among the rocks the little train of baggage-camels was daintily picking its way. They came mincing and undulating along, turning their heads slowly from side to side with the air of a self-conscious woman. In front rode the three Berberree body-servants upon donkeys, and behind walked the Arab camel-boys. They had been travelling for nine long hours, ever since the first rising of the moon, at the weary camel-drag of two and a half miles an hour, but now they brightened, both beasts and men, at the sight of the grove and the riderless horses.

In a few minutes the loads were unstrapped, the animals tethered, a fire lighted, fresh water carried up from the river, and each camel provided with his own little heap of tibbin laid in the centre of the tablecloth, without which no well-bred Arabian will condescend to feed.

The dazzling light without, the subdued half-tones within, the green palm-fronds outlined against the deep blue sky, the flitting, silent-footed Arab servants, the crackling of sticks, the reek of a lighting fire, the placid supercilious heads of the camels, they all come back in their dreams to those who have known them.

Scott was breaking eggs into a pan and rolling out a love-song in his rich, deep voice. Anerley, with his head and arms buried in a deal packing-case, was working his way through strata of tinned soups, bully beef, potted chicken and sardines to reach the jams which lay beneath.

The conscientious Mortimer, with his note-book upon his knee, was jotting down what the railway engineer had told him at the line-end the day before. Suddenly he raised his eyes and saw the man himself on his chestnut pony, dipping and rising over the broken ground.

"Hullo! here's Merryweather!"

"A pretty lather his pony is in! He's had her at that hand-gallop for hours, by the look of her. Hullo, Merryweather, hullo!"

The engineer, a small, compact man with a pointed red beard, had made as though he would ride past their camp without word or halt. Now he swerved, and easing his pony down to a canter, he headed her towards them.

"For God's sake, a drink!" he croaked. "My tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth."

Mortimer ran with the water-bottle, Scott with the whisky-flask, and Anerley with the tin pannikin. The engineer drank until his breath failed him.

"Well, I must be off," said he, striking the drops from his red moustache.

"Any news?"

"A hitch in the railway construction. I must see the General. It's the devil not having a telegraph."

"Anything we can report?" Out came three notebooks.

"I'll tell you after I've seen the General."

"Any dervishes?"

"The usual shaves. Hud-up, Jinny! Good-bye."

With a soft thudding upon the sand and a clatter among the stones the weary pony was off upon her journey once more.

"Nothing serious, I suppose?" said Mortimer, staring after him.

"Deuced serious," cried Scott. "The ham and eggs are burned! No— it's all right—saved, and one to a turn! Pull the box up, Anerley. Come on, Mortimer, stow that note-book! The fork is mightier than the pen just at present. What's the matter with you, Anerley?"

"I was wondering whether what we have just seen was worth a telegram."

"Well, it's for the proprietors to say if it's worth it. Sordid money considerations are not for us. We must wire about something just to justify our khaki coats and our putties."

"But what is there to say?"

Mortimer's long, austere face broke into a smile over the youngster's innocence. "It's not quite usual in our profession to give each other tips," said he. "However, as my telegram is written, I've no objection to your reading it. You

may be sure that I would not show it to you if it were of the slightest importance."

Anerley took up the slip of paper and read—
MERRYWEATHER OBSTACLES STOP
JOURNEY CONFER GENERAL STOP NATURE
DIFFICULTIES LATER STOP RUMOURS
DERVISHES. "That is very condensed," said Anerley, with wrinkled brows.

"Condensed!" cried Scott. "Why, it's sinfully garrulous. If my old man got a wire like that his language would crack the lamp-shades. I'd cut out half this; for example, I'd have out 'journey,' and 'nature,' and 'rumours.' But my old man would make a ten-line paragraph of it for all that."

"How?"

"Well, I'll do it myself just to show you. Lend me that stylo." He scribbled for a minute in his notebook. "It works out somewhat on these lines —

"'Mr. Charles H. Merryweather, the eminent railway engineer, who is at present engaged in superintending the construction of the line from Sarras to the front, has met with considerable obstacles to the rapid completion of his important task'— of course the old man knows who Merryweather is, and what he is about, so the word 'obstacles' would suggest all that to him. 'He has to-day been compelled to make a journey of forty miles to the front in order to confer with the General upon the steps which are necessary in order to facilitate the work. Further particulars of the exact nature of the difficulties met with will be made public at a later date. All is quiet upon the line of communications, though the usual persistent rumours of the presence of dervishes in the Eastern desert continue to circulate. —Our own Correspondent.'

"How's that?" cried Scott, triumphantly, and his white teeth gleamed suddenly through his black beard. "That's the sort of flapdoodle for the dear old public."

"Will it interest them?"

"Oh, everything interests them. They want to know all about it; and they like to think that there is a man who is getting a hundred a month simply in order to tell it to them."

"It's very kind of you to teach me all this."

"Well, it is a little unconventional, for, after all, we are here to score over each other if we can. There are no more eggs, and you must take it out in jam. Of course, as Mortimer says, such a telegram as this is of no importance one way or another, except to prove to the office that we are in the Soudan and not at Monte Carlo. But when it comes to serious work it must be every man for himself."

"Is that quite necessary?"

"Why, of course it is."

"I should have thought if three men were to combine and to share their news, they would do better than if they were each to act for himself; and they would have a much pleasanter time of it."

The two older men sat with their bread-and-jam in their hands, and an expression of genuine disgust upon their faces.

"We are not here to have a pleasant time," said Mortimer, with a flash through his glasses. "We are here to do our best for our papers. How can they score over each other if we do not do the same. If we all combine we might as well amalgamate with Reuter at once."

"Why, it would take away the whole glory of the profession!" cried Scott. "At present the smartest man gets his stuff first on the wires. What inducement is there to be smart if we all share and share alike."

"And at present the man with the best equipment has the best chance," remarked Mortimer, glancing across at the shot-silk polonies and the cheap little Syrian grey. "That is the fair reward of foresight and enterprise. Every man for himself, and let the best man win."

"That's the way to find who the best man is. Look at Chandler. He would never have got his chance if he had not played always off his own bat. You've heard how he pretended to break his leg, sent his fellow-correspondent off for the doctor, and so got a fair start for the telegraph-office."

"Do you mean to say that was legitimate?"

"Everything is legitimate. It's your wits against my wits."

"I should call it dishonourable."

"You may call it what you like. Chandler's paper got the battle and the other's didn't. It made Chandler's name."

"Or take Westlake," said Mortimer, cramming the tobacco into his pipe. "Hi, Abdul, you may have the dishes! Westlake brought his stuff down by pretending to be the Government courier, and using the relays of the Government's horses. Westlake's paper sold half a million."

"Is that legitimate also?" asked Anerley, thoughtfully.

"Why not?"

"Well, it looks a little like horse-stealing and lying."

"Well, I think I should do a little horse-stealing and lying if I could have a column to myself in a London daily. What do you say, Scott?"

"Anything short of manslaughter."

"And I'm not sure that I'd trust you there."

"Well, I don't think I should be guilty of newspaper-man-slaughter. That I regard as a distinct breach of professional etiquette. But if any outsider comes between a highly-charged correspondent and an electric wire, he does it at his peril. My dear Anerley, I tell you frankly that if you are going to handicap yourself with scruples you may just as well be in Fleet Street as in the Soudan. Our life is irregular. Our work has never been systematized. No doubt it will be some day, but the time is not yet. Do what you can and how you can, and be first on the wires; that's my advice to you; and also, that when next you come upon a campaign you bring with you the best horse that money can buy. Mortimer may beat me or I may beat Mortimer, but at least we know that between us we have the fastest ponies in the country. We have neglected no chance."

"I am not so certain of that," said Mortimer, slowly. "You are aware, of course, that though a horse beats a camel on twenty miles, a camel beats a horse on thirty."

"What, one of those camels?" cried Anerley in astonishment.

"No, no, the real high-bred trotter—the kind of beast the dervishes ride when they make their lightning raids."

"Faster than a galloping horse?"

"Well, it tires a horse down. It goes the same gait all the way, and it wants neither halt nor drink, and it takes rough ground much better than a horse. They used to have long distance races at Haifa, and the camel always won at thirty."

"Still, we need not reproach ourselves, Scott, for we are not very likely to have to carry a thirty-mile message. They will have the field telegraph next week."

"Quite so. But at the present moment—"

"I know, my dear chap; but there is no motion of urgency before the house. Load baggles at five o'clock; so you have just three hours clear. Any sign of the evening pennies?"

Mortimer swept the northern horizon with his binoculars.

"Not in sight yet."

"They are quite capable of travelling during the heat of the day. Just the sort of thing evening pennies would do. Take care of your match, Anerley. These palm-groves go up like a powder magazine if you set them alight. Bye-bye." The two men crawled under their mosquito-nets and sank instantly into the easy sleep of those whose lives are spent in the open.

Young Anerley stood with his back against a palm tree and his briar between his lips, thinking over the advice which he had received.

After all, they were the heads of the profession, these men, and it was not for him, the newcomer, to reform their methods.

If they served their papers in this fashion, then he must do the same. They had at least been frank and generous in teaching him the rules of the game. If it was good enough for them it was good enough for him.

It was a broiling afternoon, and those thin frills of foam round the black, glistening necks of the Nile boulders looked delightfully cool and alluring.

But it would not be safe to bathe for some hours to come. The air shimmered and vibrated over the baking stretch of sand and rock. There was not a breath of wind, and the droning and piping of the insects inclined one for sleep. Somewhere above a hoopoe was calling. Anerley knocked out his ashes, and was turning towards

his couch, when his eye caught something moving in the desert to the south.

It was a horseman riding towards them as swiftly as the broken ground would permit. A messenger from the army, thought Anerley; and then, as he watched, the sun suddenly struck the man on the side of the head, and his chin flamed into gold.

There could not be two horsemen with beards of such a colour. It was Merryweather, the engineer, and he was returning. What on earth was he returning for? He had been so keen to see the General, and yet he was coming back with his mission unaccomplished.

Was it that his pony was hopelessly foundered? It seemed to be moving well. Anerley picked up Mortimer's binoculars, and a foam-spattered horse and a weary koorbash-cracking man came cantering up the centre of the field. But there was nothing in his appearance to explain the mystery of his return.

Then as he watched them they dipped down into a hollow and disappeared. He could see that it was one of those narrow khors which led to the river, and he waited, glass in hand, for their immediate reappearance.

But minute passed after minute and there was no sign of them. That narrow gully appeared to have swallowed them up. And then with a curious gulp and start he saw a little grey cloud wreath itself slowly from among the rocks and drift in a long, lazy shred over the desert. In an instant he had torn Scott and Mortimer from their slumbers.

"Get up, you chaps!" he cried. "I believe Merryweather has been shot by dervishes."

"And Reuter not here!" cried the two veterans, exultantly clutching at their notebooks. "Merryweather shot! Where? When? How?"

In a few words Anerley explained what he had seen.

"You heard nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Well, a shot loses itself very easily among rocks. By George, look at the buzzards!"

Two large brown birds were soaring in the deep blue heaven. As Scott spoke they circled down and dropped into the little khor.

"That's good enough," said Mortimer, with his nose between the leaves of his book.

"'Merryweather headed dervishes stop returned stop shot mutilated stop raid communications.' How's that?"

"You think he was headed off?"

"Why else should he return?"

"In that case, if they were out in front of him and others cut him off, there must be several small raiding-parties."

"I should judge so."

"How about the 'mutilated'?"

"I've fought against Arabs before."

"Where are you off to?"

"Sarras."

"I think I'll race you in," said Scott.

Anerley stared in astonishment at the absolutely impersonal way in which these men regarded the situation. In their zeal for news it had apparently never struck them that they, their camp and their servants, were all in the lion's mouth.

But even as they talked there came the harsh, importunate rat-tat-tat of an irregular volley from among the rocks, and the high, keening whistle of bullets over their heads. A palm spray fluttered down amongst them. At the same instant the six frightened servants came running wildly in for protection.

It was the cool-headed Mortimer who organized the defence, for Scott's Celtic soul was so aflame at all this "copy" in hand and more to come, that he was too exuberantly boisterous for a commander. The other, with his spectacles and his stern face, soon had the servants in hand.

"Tali henna! Egri! What the deuce are you frightened about? Put the camels between the palm trunks. That's right. Now get the kneetethers on them. Quies! Did you never hear bullets before? Now put the donkeys here. Not much—you don't get my polo-pony to make a zareba with. Picket the ponies between the grove and the river out of danger's way. These fellows seem to fire even higher than they did in '85."

"That's got home, anyhow," said Scott, as they heard a soft, splashing thud like a stone in a mud-bank.

"Who's hit, then?"

"The brown camel that's chewing the cud."

As he spoke the creature, its jaw still working, laid its long neck along the ground and closed its large dark eyes.

"That shot cost me fifteen pounds," said Mortimer, ruefully. "How many of them do you make?"

"Four, I think."

"Only four Bezingers, at any rate; there may be some spearmen."

"I think not; it is a little raiding-party of riflemen. By the way, Anerley, you've never been under fire before, have you?"

"Never," said the young pressman, who was conscious of a curious feeling of nervous elation.

"Love and poverty and war, they are all experiences necessary to make a complete life. Pass over those cartridges. This is a very mild baptism that you are undergoing, for behind these camels you are as safe as if you were sitting in the back room of the Authors' Club."

"As safe, but hardly as comfortable," said Scott. "A long glass of hock and seltzer would be exceedingly acceptable. But oh, Mortimer, what a chance! Think of the General's feelings when he hears that the first action of the war has been fought by the Press column. Think of Reuter, who has been stewing at the front for a week! Think of the evening pennies just too late for the fun! By George, that slug brushed a mosquito off me!"

"And one of the donkeys is hit."

"This is sinful. It will end in our having to carry our own kits to Khartoum."

"Never mind, my boy, it all goes to make copy. I can see the headlines — 'Raid on Communications'; 'Murder of British Engineer'; 'Press Column Attacked.' Won't it be ripping?"

"I wonder what the next line will be," said Anerley.

"'Our Special Wounded!'" cried Scott, rolling over on to his back. "No harm done," he added, gathering himself up again; "only a chip off my knee. This is getting sultry. I confess that the idea of the back room at the Authors' Club begins to grow upon me."

"I have some diachylon."

"Afterwards will do. We're having 'a 'appy day with Fuzzy on the rush.' I wish he would rush."

"They're coming nearer."

"This is an excellent revolver of mine if it didn't throw so devilish high. I always aim at a man's toes if I want to stimulate his digestion. O Lord, there's our kettle gone!"

With a boom like a dinner-gong a Remington bullet had passed through the kettle, and a cloud of steam hissed up from the fire. A wild shout came from the rocks above.

"The idiots think that they have blown us up. They'll rush us now, as sure as fate; then it will be our turn to lead. Got your revolver, Anerley?"

"I have this double-barrelled fowling-piece."

"Sensible man! It's the best weapon in the world at this sort of rough- and-tumble work. What cartridge?"

"Swan-shot."

"That will do all right. I carry this big bore double-barrelled pistol loaded with slugs. You might as well try to stop one of these fellows with a peashooter as with a service revolver."

"There are ways and means," said Scott. "The Geneva Convention does not hold south of the first cataract. It's easy to make a bullet mushroom by a little manipulation of the tip of it. When I was in the broken square at Tamai—"

"Wait a bit," cried Mortimer, adjusting his glasses. "I think they are coming now."

"The time," said Scott, snapping up his watch, "being exactly seventeen minutes past four."

Anerley had been lying behind a camel, staring with an interest which bordered upon fascination at the rocks opposite.

Here was a little woolly puff of smoke, and there was another one, but never once had they caught a glimpse of the attackers.

To him there was something weird and awesome in these unseen, persistent men who, minute by minute, were drawing closer to them. He had heard them cry out when the kettle was broken, and once, immediately afterwards, an enormously strong voice had roared something which had set Scott shrugging his shoulders.

"They've got to take us first," said he, and Anerley thought his nerve might be better if he did not ask for a translation.

The firing had begun at a distance of some hundred yards, which put it out of the question

for them, with their lighter weapons, to make any reply to it.

Had their antagonists continued to keep that range the defenders must either have made a hopeless sally or tried to shelter themselves behind their zareba as best they might on the chance that the sound might bring up help.

But luckily for them the African had never taken kindly to the rifle, and his primitive instinct to close with his enemy is always too strong for his sense of strategy.

They were drawing in, therefore, and now for the first time Anerley caught sight of a face looking at them from over a rock. It was a huge, virile, strong-jawed head of a pure negro type, with silver trinkets gleaming in the ears. The man raised a great arm from behind the rock and shook his Remington at them.

"Shall I fire?" asked Anerley.

"No, no, it is too far; your shot would scatter all over the place."

"It's a picturesque ruffian," said Scott.

"Couldn't you kodak him, Mortimer? There's another!"

A fine-featured brown Arab, with a black, pointed beard, was peeping from behind another boulder. He wore the green turban which proclaimed him hadji, and his face showed the keen, nervous exultation of the religious fanatic.

"They seem a piebald crowd," said Scott.

"That last is one of the real fighting Baggara," remarked Mortimer. "He's a dangerous man."

"He looks pretty vicious. There's another negro!"

"Two more! Dingas, by the look of them. Just the same chaps we get our own black battalions from. As long as they get a fight they don't mind who it's for; but if the idiots had only sense enough to understand, they would know that the Arab is their hereditary enemy, and we are their hereditary friends. Look at the silly juggins gnashing his teeth at the very men who put down the slave trade!"

"Couldn't you explain?"

"I'll explain with this pistol when he comes a little nearer. Now sit tight, Anerley. They're off!"

They were indeed. It was the brown man with the green turban who headed the rush. Close at his heels was the negro with the silver earrings—a giant of a man, and the other two were only a little behind.

As they sprang over the rocks one after the other, it took Anerley back to the school sports, when he held the tape for the hurdle-race. It was magnificent, the wild spirit and abandon of it, the flutter of the chequered galabees, the gleam of steel, the wave of black arms, the frenzied faces, the quick pitter-patter of the rushing feet.

The law-abiding Briton is so imbued with the idea of the sanctity of human life that it was hard for the young pressman to realize that these men had every intention of killing him, and that he was at perfect liberty to do as much for them. He lay staring as if this were a show and he a spectator.

"Now, Anerley, now! Take the Arab!" cried somebody.

He put up the gun and saw the brown fierce face at the other end of the barrel. He tugged at the trigger, but the face grew larger and fiercer with every stride.

Again and again he tugged. A revolver-shot rang out at his elbow, then another one, and he saw a red spot spring out on the Arab's brown breast. But he was still coming on.

"Shoot, you ass, shoot!" screamed Scott.

Again he strained unavailingly at the trigger. There were two more pistol-shots, and the big negro had fallen and risen and fallen again.

"Cock it, you fool!" shouted a furious voice; and at the same instant, with a rush and flutter, the Arab bounded over the prostrate camel and came down with his bare feet upon Anerley's chest. In a dream he seemed to be struggling frantically with someone upon the ground, then he was conscious of a tremendous explosion in his very face, and so ended for him the first action of the war.

* * * *

"Good-bye, old chap. You'll be all right. Give yourself time." It was Mortimer's voice, and he became dimly conscious of a long-spectacled face, and of a heavy hand upon his shoulder.

"Sorry to leave you. We'll be lucky now if we are in time for the morning editions." Scott was tightening his girth as he spoke.

"We'll put in our wire that you have been hurt, so your people will know why they don't hear from you. If Reuter or the evening pennies come up, don't give the thing away. Abbas will look after you, and we'll be back to-morrow afternoon. Bye-bye!"

Anerley heard it all, though he did not feel energy enough to answer. Then, as he watched two sleek brown ponies with their yellow-clad riders dwindling among the rocks, his memory cleared suddenly, and he realized that the first great journalistic chance of his life was slipping away from him. It was a small fight, but it was the first of the war, and the great public at home was all athirst for news. They would have it in the *Courier*; they would have it in the *Intelligence*, and not a word in the *Gazette*. The thought brought him to his feet, though he had to throw his arm round the stem of the palm tree to steady his swimming head.

There was the big black man lying where he had fallen, his huge chest pocked with bullet-marks, every wound rosetted with its circle of flies. The Arab was stretched out within a few yards of him, with two hands clasped over the dreadful thing which had been his head. Across him was lying Anerley's fowling-piece, one barrel discharged, the other at half cock.

"Scott effendi shoot him your gun," said a voice. It was Abbas, his English-speaking body-servant.

Anerley groaned at the disgrace of it. He had lost his head so completely that he had forgotten to cock his gun; and yet he knew that it was not fear but interest which had so absorbed him. He put his hand up to his head and felt that a wet handkerchief was bound round his forehead.

"Where are the two other dervishes?"

"They ran away. One got shot in arm."

"What's happened to me?"

"Effendi got cut on head. Effendi catch bad man by arms, and Scott effendi shoot him. Face burn very bad."

Anerley became conscious suddenly that there was a pringling about his skin and an

overpowering smell of burned hair under his nostrils. He put his hand to his moustache. It was gone. His eyebrows too? He could not find them. His head, no doubt, was very near to the dervish's when they were rolling upon the ground together, and this was the effect of the explosion of his own gun. Well, he would have time to grow some more hair before he saw Fleet Street again. But the cut, perhaps, was a more serious matter. Was it enough to prevent him from getting to the telegraph-office at Sarras? The only way was to try and see.

But there was only that poor little Syrian grey of his. There it stood in the evening sunshine, with a sunk head and a bent knee, as if its morning's work was still heavy upon it. What hope was there of being able to do thirty-five miles of heavy going upon that? It would be a strain upon the splendid ponies of his companions—and they were the swiftest and most enduring in the country. The most enduring? There was one creature more enduring, and that was a real trotting camel. If he had had one he might have got to the wires first after all, for Mortimer had said that over thirty miles they have the better of any horse. Yes, if he had only had a real trotting camel! And then like a flash came Mortimer's words, "It is the kind of beast that the dervishes ride when they make their lightning raids."

The beasts the dervishes ride! What had these dead dervishes ridden? In an instant he was clambering up the rocks, with Abbas protesting at his heels. Had the two fugitives carried away all the camels, or had they been content to save themselves? The brass gleam from a litter of empty Remington cases caught his eye, and showed where the enemy had been crouching. And then he could have shouted for joy, for there, in the hollow, some little distance off, rose the high, graceful white neck and the elegant head of such a camel as he had never set eyes upon before—a swan-like, beautiful creature, as far from the rough, clumsy baggles as the cart-horse is from the racer.

The beast was kneeling under the shelter of the rocks with its waterskin and bag of doora slung over its shoulders, and its forelegs tethered Arab fashion with a rope round the

knees. Anerley threw his leg over the front pommel while Abbas slipped off the cord. Forward flew Anerley towards the creature's neck, then violently backwards, clawing madly at anything which might save him, and then, with a jerk which nearly snapped his loins, he was thrown forward again. But the camel was on its legs now, and the young pressman was safely seated upon one of the fliers of the desert. It was as gentle as it was swift, and it stood oscillating its long neck and gazing round with its large brown eyes, whilst Anerley coiled his legs round the peg and grasped the curved camel-stick which Abbas had handed up to him. There were two bridle-cords, one from the nostril and one from the neck, but he remembered that Scott had said that it was the servant's and not the house-bell which had to be pulled, so he kept his grasp upon the lower. Then he touched the long, vibrating neck with his stick, and in an instant Abbas' farewells seemed to come from far behind him, and the black rocks and yellow sand were dancing past on either side.

It was his first experience of a trotting camel, and at first the motion, although irregular and abrupt, was not unpleasant. Having no stirrup or fixed point of any kind, he could not rise to it, but he gripped as tightly as he could with his knee, and he tried to sway backwards and forwards as he had seen the Arabs do. It was a large, very concave Makloofa saddle, and he was conscious that he was bouncing about on it with as little power of adhesion as a billiard-ball upon a tea-tray. He gripped the two sides with his hands to hold himself steady. The creature had got into its long, swinging, stealthy trot, its sponge-like feet making no sound upon the hard sand. Anerley leaned back with his two hands gripping hard behind him, and he whooped the creature on.

The sun had already sunk behind the line of black volcanic peaks, which look like huge slag-heaps at the mouth of a mine. The western sky had taken that lovely light-green and pale-pink tint which makes evening beautiful upon the Nile, and the old brown river itself, swirling down amongst the black rocks, caught some shimmer of the colours above. The glare, the heat, and the piping of the insects had all ceased together.

In spite of his aching head, Anerley could have cried out for pure physical joy as the swift creature beneath him flew along with him through that cool, invigorating air, with the virile north wind soothing his pringling face.

He had looked at his watch, and now he made a swift calculation of times and distances. It was past six when he had left the camp. Over broken ground it was impossible that he could hope to do more than seven miles an hour—less on bad parts, more on the smooth. His recollection of the track was that there were few smooth and many bad. He would be lucky, then, if he reached Sarras anywhere from twelve to one. Then the messages took a good two hours to go through, for they had to be transcribed at Cairo. At the best he could only hope to have told his story in Fleet Street at two or three in the morning. It was possible that he might manage it, but the chances seemed enormously against him. About three the morning edition would be made up, and his chance gone for ever. The one thing clear was that only the first man at the wires would have any chance at all, and Anerley meant to be first if hard riding could do it. So he tapped away at the bird-like neck, and the creature's long, loose limbs went faster and faster at every tap. Where the rocky spurs ran down to the river, horses would have to go round, while camels might get across, so that Anerley felt that he was always gaining upon his companions.

But there was a price to be paid for the feeling. He had heard of men who had burst when on camel journeys, and he knew that the Arabs swathe their bodies tightly in broad cloth bandages when they prepare for a long march. It had seemed unnecessary and ridiculous when he first began to speed over the level track, but now, when he got on the rocky paths, he understood what it meant. Never for an instant was he at the same angle. Backwards, forwards he swung, with a tingling jar at the end of each sway, until he ached from his neck to his knee. It caught him across the shoulders, it caught him down the spine, it gripped him over the loins, it marked the lower line of his ribs with one heavy, dull throb. He clutched here and there with his hand to try to ease the strain upon his muscles.

He drew up his knees, altered his seat, and set his teeth with a grim determination to go through with it should it kill him. His head was splitting, his flayed face smarting, and every joint in his body aching as if it were dislocated. But he forgot all that when, with the rising of the moon, he heard the clinking of horses' hoofs down upon the track by the river, and knew that, unseen by them, he had already got well abreast of his companions. But he was hardly half-way and the time already eleven.

All day the needles had been ticking away without intermission in the little corrugated iron hut which served as a telegraph station in Sarras. With its bare walls and its packing-case seats it was none the less for the moment one of the vital spots upon the earth's surface, and the crisp, importunate ticking might have come from the world-old clock of Destiny. Many august people had been at the other end of those wires, and had communed with the moist-faced military clerk. A French Premier had demanded a pledge, and an English marquis had passed on the request to the General in command, with a question as to how it would affect the situation. Cipher telegrams had nearly driven the clerk out of his wits, for of all crazy occupations the taking of a cipher message, when you are without the key to the cipher, is the worst. Much high diplomacy had been going on all day in the innermost chambers of European chancelleries, and the results of it had been whispered into this little corrugated iron hut. About two in the morning an enormous dispatch had come at last to an end, and the weary operator had opened the door, and was lighting his pipe in the cool, fresh air, when he saw a camel plump down in the dust, and a man, who seemed to be in the last stage of drunkenness, come rolling towards him.

"What's the time?" he cried, in a voice which appeared to be the only sober thing about him.

It was on the clerk's lips to say that it was time that the questioner was in his bed, but it is not safe upon a campaign to be ironical at the expense of khaki-clad men. He contented himself therefore with the bald statement that it was after two.

But no retort that he could have devised could have had a more crushing effect. The voice turned drunken also, and the man caught at the door-post to uphold him.

"Two o'clock! I'm done after all!" said he. His head was tied up in a bloody handkerchief, his face was crimson, and he stood with his legs crooked as if the pith had all gone out of his back. The clerk began to realize that something out of the ordinary was in the wind.

"How long does it take to get a wire to London?"

"About two hours."

"And it's two now. I could not get it there before four."

"Before three."

"Four."

"No, three."

"But you said two hours."

"Yes, but there's more than an hour's difference in longitude."

"By Heaven, I'll do it yet!" cried Anerley, and staggering to a packing-case, he began the dictation of his famous dispatch.

And so it came about that the *Gazette* had a long column, with headlines like an epitaph, when the sheets of the *Intelligence* and the *Courier* were as blank as the faces of their editors. And so, too, it happened that when two weary men, upon two foundered horses, arrived about four in the morning at the Sarras post-office they looked at each other in silence and departed noiselessly, with the conviction that there are some situations with which the English language is not capable of dealing.