

The Three Correspondents.

AN INCIDENT OF THE SOUDAN CAMPAIGN.
BY A. CONAN DOYLE.

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SYNOPSIS.

Three correspondents of London newspapers, Mortimer, of the Intelligencer; Scott, of the Courier; and Anerley, of the Gazette, are riding with their servants from the terminus of the military railway in Egypt to the advance army of occupation. They camp in a palm grove near the Nile during the heat of the day. Mortimer and Scott are veteran correspondents. Anerley is a novice. The veterans have provided themselves with swift polo ponies. Anerley has an old hack, and his lack of experience is discussed by his companions who remind him that he will be left behind in the race for the telegraph station. A battle takes place. Incidentally Anerley learns that in a contest of thirty miles or more the swift ponies of the dervishes always defeat a horse. Merryweather, the engineer in chief of the railway, rides by to the telegraph station. Presently Anerley, while the others are asleep, sees him returning in a little hollow, and does not reappear. A part of smoke indicates that he has been shot by ambushed dervishes. Anerley awakens Mortimer and Scott.

PART III.

"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 losses itself very easily among rocks. By George, look at the huzzards!" 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 heard 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 impetuous rattling of an irregular volley from among the rocks, and the high keening whistle of bullets over their heads. A palm sprig 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 defense, for Scott's Celtic soul was so astute at all this "copy" in hand and more to come that he was

too exuberantly bolterous for a commander. The other with his spectacles and his stern face soon had the servants in hand. "Tail henna! Egri! What the devil are you frightened about? Put the camels between the palm trunks. That's right. Now get the knee-tethers 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 zebra 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 '82." "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 jaws still working, laid its long neck along the ground and closed its 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 feeling of nervous elation. "Love and poverty and war, they are all experiences necessary to make a complete life. Pass over the cartridges. This is a mild baptism that you are



"SHALL I FIRE?" ASKED ANERLEY

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 kites to Khartoum." "Never mind, my boy. It all goes to make copy. I can sew 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 that back room at the Author's club begins to grow upon me." "I have some dervishion." "Afterwards will do. We're having a 'appy day with Puzzy 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 zong 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 cartridges?" "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 muzzroom by a little manipulation of the tip of it. When I was in the broken square at Tama--" "Wait a bit," cried Mortimer, adjusting his glasses. "I think they are coming now." "Yes, 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 one 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 shuddering 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.

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-haired brown Arab, with a black pointed beard, was peeping from the prostrate camel and came down with his bare feet upon Anerley's chest. In a dream he seemed to be struggling frantically with some one 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. PART IV. "Good-by, old chap. You'll be all right. Give yourself time." It was Mortimer's voice, and Anerley became dimly conscious of a long spectated face and of a heavy hand upon his shoulder. "Sorry to leave you. We'll be lucky if we are in time for the morning edition," 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 well be back to-morrow afternoon. Bye-bye!" Anerley heard it all, though he did not feel energy enough to answer. When he awoke two sleek brown ponies with their yellow-clad riders, dwindling among the rocks, his memory cleared suddenly and he realized that this 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 and abroad, though he had to throw his arm around the stem of a palm tree to steady his swimming head. There was the big black man lying where he had fallen, his huge chest packed 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 his forehead, and his eyes staring. Across him was lying Anerley's fowling-piece, one barrel discharged, the other at half cock. "Scott, offend! shoot him your gun," said a voice. It was Abbas, his English-speaking body-servant. Anerley groaned at the disgrace of it. He put 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 happened to me?" "Effendi got cut on head. Effendi caught him by arms and Scott effendi shot him. Face burn very bad." Anerley became conscious suddenly that there was a prinking about his skin and an overpowering smell of burned hair under his nostrils. He put his hand to his mustache. 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 gray of his. There it stood in the evening sunshine with a sunk head and a bent knee, as if his morning's work was still heavy upon it. What was it enough to prevent him from getting to the telegraph office at Sarras? It might be a strain upon the splendid ponies of his companions--and they were the stout and merry-looking 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 been to the wires first after all, for Mortimer had said that over thirty miles they

had 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 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 lions, he was thrown forward again. But the camel was on his legs now, and the young pressman was safely seated upon one of the flyers 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 horse's, 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' forewells 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 seat he felt as if he were riding on a cushion, 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 Makloof saddle, and he was conscious that he was bouncing about on it with a 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 spongy-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-heads 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 colors 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 trotted him self along with him through that cool invigorating air, with the virile north wind soothing his prinking face.

He had looked at his watch, and now he made a swift calculation of times and distances. It was just 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 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 message gone forever. 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 birdlike neck, and the creature's 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 the got on the rocky paths, he understood what it meant. Never for an instance 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 knees. 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 body, one heaved dull throbs. He clutched here and there with his hand to try and ease the strain upon his muscles. He drew his knees, altered the seat, never for an instance was he determined 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 from his neck to his knees. He 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. "What's the time?" he cried. In a voice that appeared to be the only sober thing about him. "It was on the clerk's lips to say that it was past twelve when the waiter was in his bed, but it is not safe upon a campaign to be ironical at the expense of kharki-clad men. He contented himself therefore with the bald statement that it was after two. "Two o'clock! I'm done after all!" said he. His head was tied up in a bloody handkerchief, and 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 new I could not get it there before four." "Before three." "But you said two hours." "Yes, but there's more than an hour's difference in longitude." "By heavens, 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 Intelligencer 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. THE END.

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