

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-going camels 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 haste. Merryweather 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 loses 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's head 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 rattle 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 defense, for Scott's Celtic soul was so aflame 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 hist 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. Quiet! 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 he 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 spearsmen."

"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

undergoing, for behind these camels you are as safe as if you were sitting in the back room of the Author's 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."

"That 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 sew the headlines—'Raid on Communications: Murder of British Engineer,' 'Press Column Attacked.' Won't it be ripping?"

"I have some dervishion."

"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."

"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 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-barreled 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 barreled 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 '82—"

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

"Yes, come," 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 at 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 zebra as best they might on the chance that he sound might bring up help. But, luckily for them, the African had not 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 him 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-furred 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.

AGAIN HE STRAINED UNAVAILINGLY AT THE TRIGGER.

behind another boulder. He wore the green turban which proclaimed him hadji, and his face showed the keen nervous exaltation 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 black battalions from. As long as they get a fight they don't mind who its for. But if the idiots had only sense enough to understand they would know that the Arab is their hereditary enemy and we their hereditary friends. Look at the silly jugglins 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 to his heels was the negro with 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 galabehs, 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 the 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.

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"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.

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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 spectacled 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 to back to-morrow afternoon. Bye-bye!"

Anerley heard it all, though he did not feel energy enough to answer. When he was asked 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 would not forget it. He would have to have it in the *Courier*; they would have it in the *Intelligencer*, and not a word in the *Gazette*. The thought brought him to his feet, 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 he had forgotten to cock his gun; and yet he knew that it was not fear but interest which had so absorbed him.

"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 hand 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.

"Where are the two other dervishes?"

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

"What happened to me?"

"Offend! got out on head. Offend! catch him by arms and Scott offend! shoot 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? The only way was to try and see.

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 messenger 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 chance 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 the birdlike 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.

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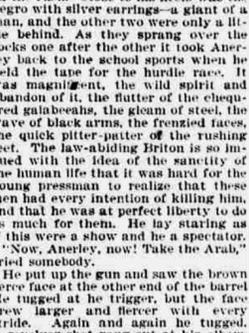
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"SHALL I FIRE?" ASKED ANERLEY



AGAIN HE STRAINED UNAVAILINGLY AT THE TRIGGER.



"SHOOT, YOU ASS, SHOOT!" SCREAMED SCOTT.