



RONALD BASSETT RIFLEMAN AT THE READY

A NOVEL OF THE EXPEDITION TO ABYSSINIA



Rifleman at the Ready

Ronald Bassett

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

To many of us, neglectfully taught, history suggests an uninspiring list of kings and queens, dates, corn laws, the Industrial Revolution, and other similar subjects in a vacuum. History, however, has little to do with kings and queens. It is about ordinary people, with ordinary emotions, fears, ambitions and sins — not very different from the ordinary people of today.

And so also with military campaigns. Once dispositions and tactics have been decided upon, they are fought by ordinary soldiers, not generals. Wellington knew it. Asked how his impending battle of Waterloo would result, he pointed to a scrubby redcoat private and said, 'It all depends on that object.' It did indeed.

Joseph Dando, whom we have already met in *Dando on Delhi Ridge* and *Dando and the Summer Palace*, was very ordinary. He had never heard of the playing fields of Eton, of Sandhurst or the Staff College. He had cost the Queen a shilling, which must have been the most incredible bargain in history, because he more than doubled the size of the British Empire during Victoria's reign. He was rewarded with a pittance, atrocious neglect, vicious discipline, and the studied contempt of the very people he had raised to world dominance.

Still, Dando had his moments. He lived his day, swilled his ale, enjoyed his women, caroused and blasphemed — and his tramping, dusty boots have left footprints across the pages of history that can never be erased.

In Canada, Egypt, India, Africa, Afghanistan, Russia, China, Persia, Burma — you name it; Dando was there.

CHAPTER ONE

He stood, shoulders hunched and hands thrust deeply into pockets, staring into the leprous fog that lay blanket-like over the filth-encrusted Thames. He was cold, and the upturned collar of his thin coat was damp and itching against his unshaven cheeks. And he was hungry, bleedin' hungry.

From only yards away came the bark of a steamboat's horn. It would be the penny steamer from Greenwich, he knew, hidden by the fog but groping for the steps at Westminster, three hundred yards further. He clenched his eyes. In the steamboat's smoky saloon there'd be ale and porter, hot mutton pies, stewed eels, hot sausages, baked potatoes, with a free clay pipe for every passenger who spent twopence. Christ, he was hungry.

It was too early for Billingsgate or Covent Garden. In Billingsgate he could dispute with other vagrants a gutter harvest of rotten shrimps and similar offal, while in Covent Garden there would be mouldering oranges and cabbage leaves — garbage over which ragged men and women fought like animals. But midnight was still two hours away, and neither market would be functioning before three. If he had a single copper he might share a filthy mattress with several others in a common lodging-house, stifled but dry. His pockets, however, had been empty for days.

Joseph Dando sniffed and spat. This was what a man got after serving the bleedin' Widder for ten years and fighting two wars. In Gosport they'd given him a week's pay and a suit of clothes which, they jested, had belonged to a man hanged at Winchester for murdering his wife and two children. Dando had tramped a cold, wet road to London, his face lowered from the rain.

Well, tramping was no hardship after ten years in the 60th. He'd marched

his feet bloody in India, from Meerut to Delhi, and soddin' near every yard of the Grand Trunk Road, with dust in his teeth and the men shouting for the *bhistie's* water-bag. But he'd had good steel-shod boots to his feet then, not these broken-toed wrecks that gave no better protection than sodden paper. Dando hawked and spat again, angrily. It weren't bleedin' right. A hansom gritted past, its puny lamps just visible in the fog and the horse's feet clip-clopping on the dank cobbles. It was near ten o'clock, and in the barrack-room the candles would be snuffed and the men snoring — Edwin Wilson and Moss Rose, and Garvin, Jamie Bathurst, and O'Toole, whose socks stank. And Patrick Holloran.

No, not Holloran, b'Christ. Like Dando, Holloran had taken his discharge in Gosport. The two men had emerged from the barracks gate together, in their cheap, ill-fitting clothes and avoiding each other's eyes. 'Dando, me jewel,' said Holloran, and then stopped. 'Bedad, we've hed some good foights — Benares, whin the Fusilier spat in ye beer, an' Hong Kong, wid the China Fleet.' He paused again. 'Thim wuz bloody good foights.'

Dando had experienced an odd reluctance to speak at all. This was worse than Delhi Ridge, where he had buried Tom Brownlow, his old rear-rank man, and as bad as Taku, where he'd abandoned Yü, his Chineese girl, with a handful of crumpled dollar notes. It made a man's gut twist like wet string and put a fist-sized lump in his gullet.

'Wid I be tellin' ye, me ol' Dando,' Holloran insisted. 'Shure, theer's no more Reveille et foive-thirty. Ye kin slape till the sun's burning out ye eyeballs. No more bloody colour-sergeants spittin' purple wid rage about dirrty gun-barrels, see? And ef ye mate thim in the strate, faith, they calls ye *sorr!*' The effort was too much for even Patrick Holloran, and he fell to silence, eyeing the empty road.

Dando had choked. 'Sod orf,' he achieved. 'Git festered.' The London road

stretched remorselessly northward, and he wanted no pantomime of emotional farewells. ‘Sod orf, Irish.’

Holloran shrugged. ‘Ef ye’re iver in Letterkenny, me ol’ darlint —?’

‘Git festered,’ Dando repeated. ‘Pigs under the bleedin’ bed?’ He drew a deep breath. ‘I told yer before, Irish. It’s a donkey an’ cart, see? Pineapples first, then song sheets an’ litercher. Then yer *expand*, see? There’s men wot starts wi’ a shilling’s worth o’ brass rings, selling em’ fer gold. It’s easy, see. Yer walks along, then *prertends* ter pick up a gold ring. “My word!” yer sez, orl innocent. “My word — a gold ring! Is there some lady or gent as would give me five shillings fer a gold ring, wot’s worth a sovereign?” ’ He paused. ‘An’ yer kin buy brass rings, wi’ a gold hallmark, at twenty fer threepence.’

‘Shure,’ Holloran nodded, ‘but who buys bloody gold rings en Letterkenny?’ Every day in the life of a rural Irishman was another battle for survival, with every ha’penny spent before it was earned, and many families hopelessly in debt to the gombeen man, the money-lender. Holloran did not recall ever seeing a gold ring in Letterkenny, but neither he nor Dando was likely to confess to the other a complete bewilderment regarding future activity. It was debatable which situation was worse, that of a serving soldier or of a newly discharged one. There was no war, during which a redcoat’s social standing was marginally improved. There was a war in the United States, the French were fighting in Mexico, and Garibaldi was sabre-rattling in Italy, but Britain’s forces were strangely idle, which meant they were an unnecessary burden to the taxpayer and the inevitable victims of contempt and abuse, until the next threatening shot was fired. The Queen was a recluse at Osborne, and the latest whispered gossip told of the Prince of Wales’s latest amorous escapades with ladies of a certain type at the Curragh Camp.

Dando had broken an embarrassed silence. ‘I’m goin’ that way,’ he pointed. ‘London 78, Fareham 5, an’ it’s goin’ ter start pissin’ wi’ rain any bleedin’

minute, Irish, so yer'd better sling yer 'ook.' In the barrack-room they had both boasted confidently of civilian prosperity to come, but now, with the guardhouse behind them, and each fingering the florin and two pence in his pocket, that confidence had diminished.

Holloran nodded again. 'Faith, an' theer's nothin' else ter tork about, me jewel. I've heerd there's sheps from Bristol thet goes ter Cork, fer recruitin' miners an' railway-diggin' men.' He glanced about for a clue to the whereabouts of Bristol, but could see none. 'Et can't be far, bedad, ef they can't be bothered wi' wroiting et on a sign-post.'

From behind them, beyond the gate, came the sudden bugle notes of Company Call, and they stiffened, then grinned. 'Whit did I tell ye?' Holloran chortled. 'Theer's orl thim young bloody sodgers stampin' an' shoulderin', salutin' iverything thet moves, wid boiled beef and peas six toims a wake, an' the canteen shut et nine' — he patted his shoddy pea-jacket — 'whoil you an' me es *gentlemen o' independent manes*. Did ye hear whit the officer sed, me ol' Dando? "Her gracious Matchesty wid be playzed ter accept yez fer a forther ten years' sorvice, bein' men ev exparience an' good character!" ' He chuckled. 'An' thet es after the last ten years ev bein' told we wuz the worrst bloody sodgers en the intire ridgement!'

There was another lengthy pause, with both absently tapping their feet, neither wishing to be the first to move off. 'It's goin' ter start pissin' any minute,' Dando said again, sucking his teeth. 'They oughter give us greatcoats. Any ignorant sod knows it's always bleedin' rainin' in April.'

'So et is, bedad,' agreed Holloran. 'I wuz thinkin' the same thing. In April, faith, et kin rain orl the bloody toim. Did I iver tell ye, me ol' Dando, ev the day Rory O'Brien dug the grave fer ol' Donovan the knacker? Jasus, et rained loik the Flood orl noight, an' they hed ter kape the wake goin' fer foive days, till they cud *foind* the hole again, an' not even the *prayst* wuz

sober —’

‘We can’t stay ‘ere orl bleedin’ day,’ Dando ventured.

‘Shure, an’ who wid want ter stand et the barracks gate orl bloody day? Only bloody *sintries* stands et barricks gates, me jewel.’ He fingered his florin and twopence again. ‘Wid ye be thinkin’ thet a quart o’ ale moight sweeten ye spit fer the road, me ol’ Dando?’ ‘That’s wot I keep tryin’ ter say,’ Dando retorted, ‘but yer ain’t bleedin’ listenin’, see — ?’

* * *

Where was Holloran now? Had the genial Irishman reached his native Letterkenny, his pigs, praties and potheen? Or was he digging a railway cutting in the Midlands, or even shrugged over the reins of a growler somewhere in this filthy London fog? It was possible, if the prospects of a discharged soldier were as bleak in Ireland as they were in England, that Holloran had reenlisted. Dando snorted. He had considered the possibility often, but only briefly. The Army was worse than soddin’ prison. Convicts had legal rights, soldiers had none. Pentonville Prison, with its hammocks and bathhouses, regularly inspected by the belligerent ladies of the Purity Alliance, was a luxurious haven compared with the damp, vermin-infested barracks of the Army. It made yer want ter spew.

Christ, he could never face the 60th Rifles again — not that the 60th were better nor worse than any other bleedin’ regiment, but a man had soddin’ pride, hadn’t he? After Meerut, Ghazi-ud-din Nagar, Delhi, then Taku and Peking, with nothing to show but a penny brass coin on a ribbon, a man expected something more from a grateful country, didn’t he?

Christ, but he was bleedin’ hungry. Bleedin’ hungry. And cold.

He’d swept horse-droppings from crossings, laid out the dead Parish poor, sold firewood, and trotted after carriages for miles in anticipation of a copper for opening its door on arrival. He hadn’t begged yet. Not yet.

Two days before he had achieved a half-quartern loaf from the workhouse in Holborn, but they'd not give him a second in the same week. There was Paddington or Southwark, where he'd see the familiar queue of destitute, the faces grey and pinched with malnutrition, the undersized waifs with their spindly legs and enormous eyes, old in their years of hunger, and the shuffling, whining women. But Paddington and Southwark were long tramps away, and he was not sure that he had the strength.

There'd never be a donkey and cart now. A donkey would cost four or five pounds at Smithfield and a cart the same. Then he'd need stock, and the animal had to be maintained. He recalled that, as a child, his costermonger father, Matt Dando, attached more importance to his donkey's welfare than to that of his own family — or even his own ale and baccy. No, the possibility of acquiring such sums of money was as remote as the moon — or even more so. A bloke could Weedin' see the moon, couldn't he?

He'd been hungry before, as an orphan ward of the Society for the Relief of Destitute Young Persons and, later, during the Siege of Delhi in '57, but it was this cold and wet that made it so much soddin' worse. There were well-meaning organisations, he knew, that pleaded for charitable donations to help feed the starving masses of India, but in India the starving masses had warm sunshine every day, and required no more protection against the elements than a scrap of straw matting and a loincloth for decency. It wasn't so bad being hungry in the sun and, anyway, the blacks didn't need anything more than a handful of Weedin' rice. What they didn't know they didn't soddin' want, did they?

Come to think of it, India might have been a good place to have taken his discharge. Things had changed since the Crown had assumed John Company's responsibilities, but there were opportunities for military-trained men on the railways, the tea and lumber estates, the cotton factory floors and

the docks. He might have got himself a half-caste *karanie* woman, or a soldier's widow, and lived like a *gora-log* with a couple of servants. But it was too Weedin' late now.

Christ, but he was soddin' hungry. He raised his cold, cupped hands to his mouth to breathe through them, but nauseating faintness drenched him, and he swayed. Soddin' hell, he mustn't faint. He'd never Weedin' get up again. There was another clatter of hooves in the murk, and iron-shod wheels gritted past, inches from his feet and splattering the puddles. It was a private brougham, lit within, and he saw, fleetingly through the steamed window, a man in an opera hat and cloak, heard the tinkling laughter of a woman, before the vehicle rumbled into vagueness and then disappeared.

Scalding anger rescued him from desperation. The bastards. They were all the same, these Weedin' toffs. He'd known them, as a ragged orphan, as a youthful below-stairs domestic, as a common soldier. The soddin' women were worse than the men — like the Colonel's Lady, Mrs. Finnis, and Chaplain Rotton's wife, Captain Muter's wife, and Colonel Custance's governess, who had once told him he needed his mouth washed out with Weedin' carbolic soap. The split-arsed bitch.

The women toffs were worse all right. Their husbands, if they were active officers, knew something about the vicissitudes of a colonial campaign, had shared salt beef, choke-dog biscuit and foul water with their men. Their bleedin' women knew nothing except how to sign a chit at the Europe Shop, pour tea gracefully, exchange vitriolic gossip, and speak to a soldier as if he was something nasty that had crawled through a crack in the floor. Sod 'em. Sod 'em all. They'd spend half a sovereign on a single meal, when a half sovereign could maintain a family of three for two weeks. Christ, it made yer want ter spit. It made a starving man want ter bleedin' do something.

It was suddenly lucidly clear. It was incredible that he had never thought of

it before.

The incidence of street robbery in London was declining as a result of the increasing efficiency of both uniformed men and detective officers of the Metropolitan Police, but was still widespread. The commonest method was by ‘swinging the stick’ — the stick being a weighted cudgel, a narrow sandbag, or a two-pound iron shot in a thick stocking. Actual assault was not always necessary; a victim, sometimes decoyed by a woman, and confronted by one or more ‘rampsmen’ in a dark lonely street might well empty his pockets without further persuasion, and be relieved to do so. In any event, the rampsmen had to be quick and quiet, and make an escape unrecognised before his victim raised an alarm. It was the last requirement that provoked Dando’s concern. Several months of near starvation had taken the strength from his legs, but it would have to be done — tonight, or not at all. Tonight, b’Christ, he had to eat.

He had never robbed before — at least, not in the accepted sense. Filching extra rations or finding a bottle of beer in an officer’s tent wasn’t robbery. It was just bleedin’ winning. This time it could mean the Old Bailey and a year’s stir.

Big Ben, fog-muffled, was tolling. He counted ten. There would be few pedestrians on the Embankment at this hour, but all the better. He didn’t need much — two pence would buy a generous basin of soup, taters and bread, a shilling feed him for two days. He swallowed.

He searched the cobbles about him for some kind of weapon, but visibility was limited to a few yards, and several minutes passed before a probing foot struck something metallic. It was a battered, rusting kettle, devoid of spout. Dando weighed it in his hands thoughtfully. Patrick Holloran, he recalled, had once felled a gombeen man with an iron stewpot, and an iron kettle, he supposed, was no bleedin’ different. All he needed now was an unsuspecting

victim, preferably non-belligerent.

He waited with his shoulders against wet brickwork, sniffing mechanically at a cold-clogged nose and listening for approaching footsteps. Two hansoms and a growler passed, and then a small, bedraggled dog which halted to stare at him before scampering, droop-tailed, into the fog. The penny steamer should have disembarked its passengers at Westminster by now, but he didn't want more than one at a time, bugger it — and Christ help him if his potential victim was a prowling Peeler. That would mean a Pentonville stretch for bleedin' certain. Upriver, Big Ben struck the quarter hour, and he sniffed again. Well, in Pentonville there was skilly and a soddin' blanket, wasn't there?

He tensed suddenly. Someone was approaching from the direction of Blackfriars — a single person, humming unmelodiously. It might be a drunk, which could be either good or bad. A drunk could be compliant or he could be noisily trenchant. Dando lifted his kettle.

The man who emerged from the swirling fog was young, slight, hatless, but otherwise impeccably attired in evening frockcoat and white bowtie. His coattails were locked behind his hands, thrust deep into his trousers pockets and, as he approached Dando, he jiggled a hopscotch measure on the greasy paving. Then, confronted by Dando and his threatening kettle, he halted. 'By Jove!' he enquired. 'Darjeeling or China?'

Dando brandished his kettle. 'Arsk another bleedin' silly question like that,' he threatened, 'an' I'll fill yer mouth wi' teeth, see?' He glanced in both directions. 'Turn out yer wallet, smartlike, wi' no noise, an' yer'll be orlright.'

'Wallet —?' The young man's eyes widened, and then, comprehending, he laughed. 'Great Christopher! You're a footpad, dammit! A real, live footpad!' He leaned forward confidentially. 'You're a bit *diminutive*, aren't you, old

chap? And, I mean — a *teapot*?' He shrugged. 'Really!'

'It's a soddin' *kettle*,' Dando gritted. 'An' never mind the bleedin' names. Jes' turn out yer pockets before I lose me temper, see. If I lose me temper there'll be guts an' blood orl over the soddin' pavement.'

The young man sobered suddenly. 'My dear fellow. If you had accosted me only one hour ago you might have been the richer for four thousand pounds.' He paused. 'My *last* four thousand pounds — the final remnants of a fortune that has been steadily gambled away for two hundred years. Do you know' — he pointed — 'how long it takes to lose four thousand pounds at baccarat?'

Dando did not. He was simply incredulous. 'Four thousand pounds? *Lorst*?' Incredulity turned to suspicion. His own monetary calculations were confined to pennies and shillings, extending, on rare occasions of extreme affluence, to a pound or two, but never hundreds. There was no such sum as four thousand.

'I'm tellin' yer fer the larst bleedin' time, matey,' he growled. 'Shut yer face an' turn out yer pockets. I'm tellin' yer — if I git bleedin' nasty —'

For answer, the other plucked out the linings of his trousers pockets, then of his frockcoat, and finally of his white waistcoat. They drooped sadly empty. 'Not a bean,' the young man shrugged. 'And I gave my watch to the head waiter — for excellent services, now terminated, old chap.' He shook his head regretfully. 'If you'd only met me an hour ago, at White's, dear boy —'

'White's? Wot's White's?'

'Ah!' the young man nodded. 'Well may you ask, old scout. Well may you ask. What's White's, indeed? A rendezvous for bored gentlemen who hazard a thousand pounds on the turn of a card.' He shrugged again. 'And when you're wrong four times in succession, well, that adds up to four thousand. It's ridiculously simple.'

It was incomprehensible. 'Four *thousand*? Ain't yer got any *real* money? I

mean, ain't yer got shillin's an' florins?' Shillings and florins were more tangible.

The young man frowned. 'I never carry small change, old chap. It spoils the hang of a well cut suit. D'you know Henry Poole of Savile Row? You don't? I can recommend him. Naughty with his prices, of course, but damn cunning with the jolly old tape-measure, what?' He eyed Dando's creased and threadbare pea-jacket and breeches, the broken boots, then applied himself to pushing his pocket-linings back into position. 'However, as one gentleman of the road to another, dear fellow, what do we do now?'

'We? We?' Dando choked. 'If yer ain't got nothin', then sod orf. I ain't got time ter waste on a bleedin' pauper. I've got ter *eat*, see?'

The other considered. 'Eat? You're damn right, old chap. I haven't eaten since two —'

'Then yer'd better sell yer weskit,' Dando retorted. "'Corse yer don't git vittles for bleedin' nothin' —'

'I've got cufflinks,' the young man offered doubtfully, 'if you know where to sell them. They're gold.'

'*Gold?* Gawd strewth, why didn't yer soddin' say so? Sell 'em? Christ, there's Sawney's jerryshop over the bridge, in the Marsh. 'Ee's a bleedin' shark, but 'ee's open orl night, an' don't arsk questions.' He had forgotten his predatory role. 'An' there's a cookshop next door — pies, 'ot taters, tripe, chops, cow 'eel —'

'By Jove, you'd not get better from Monsieur Nicol at the Café Royal, what?' The young man laughed, fumbling at his shirt cuffs. 'Let us have words with Mr. Sawney. D'you suppose he'll recognise cufflinks from Carrington's? The Prince of Wales has the same, y'know —'

'The Prince o' Wales? Yer ain't saying yer something ter do with 'era, are yer?'

‘We were both members of the Holford’s shooting party last year,’ the other said, casually, ‘and I attend the St. James’s levees.’

‘Pardon me fer bleedin’ arsking,’ Dando snorted.

* * *

Sawney was an old Jew, with a stoop, greasy ringlets and black, birdlike eyes that examined the cufflinks expertly. A legend on the shop door announced ‘Money Lent Upon Every Description of Valuable Property’, but there was little of value among the festoons of old clothing, strings of second-hand boots and shoes, the trays of tawdry trinkets. The cufflinks had quickly disappeared into a heavy iron box bolted to the floor. ‘They been vamped?’ Sawney enquired.

‘If you mean dishonestly acquired,’ the young man said, ‘certainly not. They came from Carrington and Company, Crown Jewellers and Goldsmiths, of Regent Street.’

‘That’s right,’ Dando confirmed. ‘They’re real bleedin’ jemmy, see.’

Sawney nodded disinterestedly. ‘Selling or lumbering?’

‘Sellin’,’ Dando responded.

‘Half a quid.’

‘Git festered. Them’s gold, see, not slum — worth a bleedin’ finny.’

‘Not to me, they ain’t. Fifteen’s yer lot.’

‘A quid. Don’t yer know the Prince o’ bleedin’ Wales —’

Sawney passed over a sovereign with surprising alacrity, and the pair emerged into the street with Dando jubilant. ‘A quid! Ol’ Sawney must be gittin’ bleedin’ senile!’

‘A quid? You mean a pound?’ The young man groaned. ‘My dear fellow, Sawney’s just got the biggest bargain of his wretched life. Still’ — he laughed — ‘did you mention pies and ’ot taters?’

Forty-five minutes later Dando placed down a half-gnawed pig’s trotter

with a reluctant sigh and licked his fingers. ‘Gawd, one more mouthful an’ I’ll spew orl over the soddin’ floor —’

The young man winced. ‘I presume the comment indicates satisfaction.’ He paused. ‘It’s time we introduced ourselves, dear fellow. I am the Honourable Grosvenor Harrington-Crewe, late of Dovercourt and Curzon Street. And you?’

‘Joseph Dando,’ the other contributed, then stared. ‘Yer wot? The ‘Orrible Grover Wot?’

‘To be accurate, dear boy, the Honourable Grosvenor Charles Spencer Gervais St. John Harrington-Crewe. Those mashed oysters were superb, old chap — and only eight-pence a dozen!’ He glanced around at the sleazy eating house, the dirty table-tops and the floor littered with food debris. ‘Not the Restaurant des Ambassadeurs, mark you —’

‘Yer a *Lord*?’ Dando asked.

‘No, my father is the Earl of Dovercourt, old scout. The family’s held the Tendring Hundred, in Essex, since 1108 — a long line of undistinguished cabbage-heads, of whom I am the last, and likely to remain so. The old man has cut me off without a penny, dear lad — and tonight my remaining petty cash disappeared quicker than you’d flip ace-king-queen.’

It was not very clear to Dando. How could a son of a bleedin’ earl be penniless? The idea was preposterous. Gentry — particularly titled gentry — always had an unlimited supply of money. He had never considered where such wealth originated — probably something to do with Parliament and taxation — but it was the established order of things. ‘Ain’t yer got friends?’ he enquired. ‘I mean — the Prince o’ Wales?’

‘Friends?’ Harrington-Crewe made a wry face. ‘In fair weather, my dear Dando, friends are thick on the ground. This morning I called on the Marquess of Londonderry, Lord Wimborne, and Viscount Tredegar. Oddly,

they were all out of town. And the Prince?’ He sighed. ‘I confess our acquaintanceship is somewhat flimsy — and he is up to his own royal neck in trouble, in a drawing-room at Windsor.’ He grinned.

It was intriguing. ‘Then wot yer goin’ ter do?’ He could not visualise a son of an Earl sweeping crossings or burying the Parish dead.

‘Ah — a question to which I have given thought, my dear Dando, and found an answer.’ He paused triumphantly. ‘Where is it — he wagged a finger — ‘that a man can be regularly fed, boarded, clothed, with an opportunity for advancement, and be *paid*?’

Dando had not the remotest idea. Whatever it was, it was not for the likes of Joseph Dando. ‘Orlright,’ he said, ‘I give in.’

Harrington-Crewe was smiling broadly. ‘The Army, old son, don’cher know? The thin red line and God Save the Queen, my lad, that’s what!’

Dando’s jaw had dropped. ‘The *Army*! *Yer goin’ ter* join the soddin’ *Army*?’ He couldn’t be hearing correctly. ‘Yer don’t mean an ordin’ry fourpence-a-day slogger, do yer? Yer must be bleedin’ *ghazi*!’

‘Ah, but I do have a few useful acquaintances, old sport — friends at court, so to speak, what? There’s Freddie Burnaby, in the Blues, Valentine Baker of the 11th Hussars, and Willie Cumming in the Guards — the Coldstreams, I think. There’s the Duke of Cambridge, of course’ — he waved a deprecatory hand — ‘but the old jack-boot’s never been fond of me —’ He hummed a few discordant bars of ‘The British Grenadier’, tapping his foot thoughtfully. ‘Napoleon, my dear Dando, said that every soldier carried a field-marshal’s baton in his knapsack.’ He peered at Dando. ‘What the deuce is a knapsack?’

‘Gawd Orlmighty!’ Dando exploded. ‘Yer don’t know bleedin’ nothin’! Nothin’! Yer don’t know wot the soddin’ Army’s like, fer a start — an’ I mean even fer gutter-scum like me, see — not fer a gent! It’s rot-guttin’ food an’ watered beer, wimmin poxed ter the eyebrows, ’corse that’s orl the

wimmin yer'll git — jig-jig short time against a soddin' wall before Retreat.' He snorted. 'Even fer men like me it's ten years o' bleedin' purgat'ry, ten years o' sweat an' stink, o' bullyin' sergeants an' snotty officers that don't care an' don't even know yer bleedin' name. Theres beer 'ouses wot won't serve soldiers, an' yer kicked out o' music 'alls 'corse yer only an animal, see? Then there's troopships' — his eyes narrowed — 'where yer git twenty inches o' sleepin' space; the officers' 'orses git six feet. A gallon o' fresh water a day — drinkin' *an'* washin' — an' nets ter stop men jumpin' over the soddin' side when yer crosses the Equator.' He shook his head. 'Then there's foreign service. Cholera, malaria, dysentery, smallpox, typhoid, or snake-bite. An' if they don't git yer, a Paythan bullet will, or if yer left wounded, the native women come out ter carve orf yer privates an' stuff 'em in yer mouth.'

'I say, old chap,' Harrington-Crewe protested, 'aren't you piling it on, what?'

'No I ain't!' Dando retorted. 'An' fer gentlemen rankers it's ten times worse, see. Yer jes' don't soddin' fit. The men avoid yer 'corse yer talk la-de-da, the sergeants are down on yer 'corse yer better eddicated an' makes 'em look iggerant, an' the officers don't like yer 'corse yer one o' them that's let the bleedin' side down.' He sniffed. 'I've seen gentlemen rankers, orlright — out o' place like a fart in chapel, an' most of all soddin' lonely. In the end they goes ter drink, an' likely the sweeper finds 'em in a monsoon ditch with a rifle muzzle in their mouths an' their bleedin' brains blown out.'

Harrington-Crewe was silent, toying with the buttons of his waistcoat. Then he brightened. 'It would be different, of course,' he calculated, 'if I had a chaperon, my dear fellow.'

'If yer 'ad a wot?'

'A chaperon — someone who knew the ropes, old bean, and could help a chap with a bit of advice here and there until he was broken to harness, what?'

When I rode with the Quorn —’

Dando had resumed gnawing his trotter, reluctant to abandon a scrap before leaving. It could be a long time before he had another full belly. He raised his eyes, amused at the other’s suggestion. ‘Wot yer needs is a good time-expired man wot’s done it orl, see — drills, campaigns, India an’ China — an’ knows the way round the cook ’ouse an’ the barracks canteen. After ten years in the Rifles yer git ter know a few things, I kin tell yer — like me, fer instance —’ He halted, and his eyes widened.

‘You’re right, old scout,’ Harrington-Crewe nodded, grinning. ‘You’re absolutely right.’

Dando placed down the pig’s trotter for the second time. ‘Not on yer bleedin’ life!’ He spat. ‘Not fer nothin’, see! I ain’t *never* goin’ back ter the festerin’ Army — an’ yer kin tell that ter the Duke o’ bleedin’ Cambridge when yer next see ’im. *Never!*’

CHAPTER TWO

It took them several hours to find an itinerant recruiting sergeant. They might have gone directly to a barracks — Knightsbridge, the Albany, or the Tower — but Dando needed a little time. There were other places, particularly taverns, he said, where recruiting sergeants tended to congregate, such as The Clarence, off Scotland Yard. The Northumberland Arms, The George in Southwark and the Leather Bottle in Holborn. Besides, given time, some less horrifying prospect than the Army might present itself and, in any case, with a ten or twelve years' attestation threatening, one more day wouldn't make any bleedin' difference. They wouldn't miss much soddin' promotion.

There was no war in progress, or even threatened, when sergeants with pockets jingling with Queen's shillings prowled the streets looking for ragged unemployed. The snug of The Clarence was empty of uniforms, but a furtive, sallow-skinned little man offered them quarts of ale, enquiring if either had military experience, and when Joseph Dando confessed that he had, suggested immediate service in the cause of Don Carlos Maria de los Dolores, with a free passage to Marseilles in readiness for the Carlist invasion of Spain across the Pyrenees. Dando carefully drained his tankard before retorting, 'Git festered.'

They found their quarry in the Old Shades. He wore a scarlet frock-tunic with brass buttons and blue facings, over black breeches and heavy, polished boots. On his arm were four gold stripes surmounted by a crown, and his helmet, laid aside on the bar, was the modified Albert shako of the line infantry. 'A staff sergeant,' Dando muttered disgustedly. 'Soddin' brass an' pipeclay' — and in that moment he thought of the Sunday morning, thirteen

years earlier, the year of the Great Exhibition, when he had pushed open the door of The Trafalgar in Chatham's High Street. It had been a sergeant in green on that occasion, who had signed him for ten years in the 60th Rifles, the transport *Simoon*, India and the Mutiny, Meerut, the horror of Delhi Ridge. He remembered Holloran being flogged like an animal at the Hindun crossing, and Brownlow killed in the smoke of Hindu Rao's — minor incidents in a campaign that had earned the Battalion seven Victoria Crosses in exchange for 389 killed and wounded. That was bleedin' India fer yer. And they'd given every soldier a bounty of thirty-six rupees and ten annas. The bastards.

The staff sergeant's eyes rose towards them, flickered over Harrington-Crewe, rested momentarily on Dando, and then returned to the frothed surface of his beer. He had not spoken.

Harrington-Crewe coughed. 'I say, old chap —' He halted, then began again. 'Sergeant —'

'Sergeant-Major,' the other rumbled. He took a mouthful of beer.

'Would you be looking for a pair of fine, upstanding young fellows, full of fighting spirit and all that, to join your lot?'

The Sergeant-Major turned slowly and ominously. 'It ain't a *lot*. It's the King's Own Royals, the Fourth o' Foot — Barrel's Blues, see! And I ain't looking fer recruits. They're lookin fer me!'

'Ah, yes — exactly,' Harrington-Crewe nodded. 'Well, then if you've got the jolly old shillings ready, old scout — Sergeant-Major — we're ready to do or die, by Jove. God save the Queen and damnation to the French, what?'

The Sergeant-Major transferred an expressionless gaze to Dando. 'And are you wantin' ter' list as well?'

Dando hesitated. There was still time. He was bleedin' *ghazi*, an' no mistake. He nodded. 'Yes, Sar'nt-Major.' The soldier studied him for several

seconds, frowning, then pursed his lips. 'I've seen 'undreds of recruits, see — an' I kin always tell.' He paused and leaned forward. 'Yer ain't, by any chance, served in a line regiment before, 'ave yer?'

Dando shook his head. 'No, Sar'nt-Major.'

The Sergeant-Major pondered, then pushed his tongue into his cheek. 'No, yer ain't, an' that's the truth.' He was calculating. 'It was the 60th or the 95th, weren't it? Yer don't swing yer right arm, see, fer a start.' He reached for his beer. 'Time expired or deserter?'

Joseph Dando bridled. 'Bleedin' time expired! Gosport, 'Sixty-two.' He fumbled in a pocket for a medal on a crumpled ribbon. 'Ere — see this. Delhi 1857, ain't it? Then the soddin' Taku Forts an' Pekin!' He snorted contemptuously. 'Deserter, yer arsk? Christ, wot 'ave the bleedin' Royals done since the Crimea?'

'Orlright, orlright!' The other raised a conciliatory hand. 'I wasn't goin' ter tell on yer, either way. The 60th, eh? The bleedin' Sweeps.' He could not resist a grin, then lifted his hand to unbutton a tunic pocket. 'I'll sign yer, lad — at least ter see the Surgeon-Lieutenant — but yer'll need ter swing that right arm in the Royals, see. An' there's another thing. Since you was fightin' Sepoys an' Chinamen we've got a new breech-loadin' rifle — the Snider. An' yer form four deep, not threes, see.' He winked, then nodded in the direction of Harrington-Crewe. "'Ow did yer manage ter get mixed up wi' an object like *that*?'

'Ee's with me,' Dando explained. "'Ee's an 'Orrible.' He turned to Harrington-Crewe. 'Say it again — wot yer said in the cookshop.'

His companion nodded. 'Of course, dear boy. I'm the Honourable Grosvenor Charles Spencer Gervais St. John Harrington-Crewe.' He smiled at the Sergeant-Major. 'But the chaps at school usually called me Charlie.'

The Sergeant-Major choked on his beer. 'Gawd strike a bleedin' light!' He

glared at Dando. 'Yer ain't brought me a soddin' gentleman ranker?'

Dando was apologetic. 'I told 'im, see. But it's like talkin' ter a bleedin' screw-gun mule.'Ee don't even understand the soddin' langwitch!'

'Yer don't mean he's *illiterate*, do yer?'

Dando shrugged. 'I wouldn't say that, Sar'nt-Major. 'Ee's gentry orlright, an' gentry get bleedin' married, don't they?' Whether or not Harrington-Crewe had been born in wedlock was a matter of complete indifference.

'Westminster and Christ Church,' Harrington-Crewe volunteered, 'until I was sent down. And I can play the violin.'

'Recruits don't play violins,' the Sergeant-Major barked. 'Only officers, see. Recruits play *fiddles*.' He licked the stub of a pencil. 'Orlright, Gawd 'elp me, I'll sign yer. Charlie Crewe, see. First, yer'll go to the India Depot at Chatham, 'corse the Regiment's in the Colaba Cantonments, near Bombay, and that, if yer don't know' — he looked at them both — 'is in bleedin' India.' He paused. 'Do yer want ter spend yer shilling's now, or later?'

'Now, my old Sergeant-Major!' exulted Harrington-Crewe. 'Let us apply ourselves to the uncontrolled licentiousness of brutal and insolent soldiery!'

'Soddin' 'ell,' Dando groaned.

* * *

Chatham had not changed in thirteen years. There were the same smells, of hemp, black shag, ale and yellow soap, the same shabby High Street with its taverns and narrow shops, tattooists and livery stables, the strolling soldiers, marines and blue-jackets, the provost patrols, the prostitutes, and even the same tired tinkling of a mechanical piano from the bar of the Trafalgar. In the Medway were the funnels and yards of moored warships, barges, with gulls wheeling over the grey, wind-whipped water.

There was a grin on the face of the sentry at the depot gate as the knot of recruits for the 4th Royals, 38th, 64th and 84th trudged untidily past the

guardroom. 'Wot's this lot, Sar'nt? Russian prisoners? Or are they closin' down orl the bleedin' work 'ouses?' But Dando could feel the gravel of the drill-ground through the thin soles of his boots and hear the familiar, distant tramp of marching feet, shouted commands, and then the urgent teeter of an invisible bugle. Officers' Mess. He experienced a sickening compulsion to turn and run for the gate and the freedom of the street beyond, but a large, florid man in immaculate scarlet and gold, with swagger stick under arm, was eyeing them distastefully, briefly. 'Get these men into the bath-house, Sergeant. By God, they need it.'

With hair shorn from scalps, naked and shivering, they stumbled from the clothing store, with difficulty clutching the regimentals thrust at them by an irate corporal — shako with ball tuft and shako plate, forage cap, tunic, breeches, shell jacket and overalls, grey kersey greatcoat, blanket, boots and socks, flannel shirts, equipment braces with ammunition pouches, expense pouch and water bottle, haversack, razor, towel, soap, boot blacking, brushes...

'Fer a start,' Dando instructed Harrington-Crewe, 'don't volunteer fer bleedin' *nuthin*, see. An' if the barrack-room corporal wants ter show yer the inside o' the canteen, tell 'im yer a member o' the White Cross Society, an' arsk 'im ter sign the pledge. Keep quiet about playin' the fiddle, or yer'll be pumpin' the soddin' organ on church muster fer months, see.' He paused. 'If yer find somethin's stole from yer kit, don't holler. Nail the same from some other sod, quick. Keep yer money in yer belt, an' always sleep wi' it on. Always be perlite ter the Chaplain's lady when she's bringing roun' the seedy cakes, but *never* go ter tea ter be saved. That's Weedin' punishment. Don't keep callin' the Sergeant ol' bean. Jes' call 'im Sar'nt an' keep yer 'ands ter the seams o' yer breeches. Yer kin call 'im a bastard later, see, an' there's no pack-drill.' He paused again. 'Most important. If yer kin see there's goin' ter

be a fight, *yer must 'it first*, then orf wi' yer soddin' belt an' wrap it round yer fist so's the buckle's over the knuckle, see.' He sighed. 'Christ, if yer'd ever met an Irish clod named Holloran, wot kept pigs under the bed —'

From the far side of the thronged barrack-room there came a joyous bellow.

'B'Jasus! An' is thet the music ev angels I'm hearin'? Shure, et's me ol' darlint himself — Dando, me jewel! Et's a bloody miracle, so 'tis!' It was Patrick Holloran, tunic unbuttoned and face explosively elated, flinging himself from his bet-pallet. 'Bedad, an' theer'll be all Hell let loose in the ol' canteen tonight, wid the beer an' the foightin' an' orl!'

'By Jove,' Harrington-Crewe enquired, 'is the chap mentally deranged?'

'Something like that,' Dando nodded.

CHAPTER THREE

Even by the 1860s relatively little was known of the interior of Ethiopia, the legendary kingdom of Prester John lying in the north-east corner of the continent of Africa. Since the 15th century the territory had been visited by European missionaries, explorers and traders, but few had remained, and information was scanty and of doubtful authenticity.

Being mostly more than 5,000 feet above sea level, the climate was warmly temperate, but except for the valleys the terrain was arid and rugged, unsuitable for agriculture. Wild animals included lion and leopard, the two-homed rhinoceros, hippopotamus, crocodile, giraffe, monkeys and zebras.

The people were of mixed origins and language, and the country was additionally divided into a feudal network of sub-kingships owing a loose allegiance to the King of Amhara — the King of Kings — whose authority, however, was constantly in dispute. About half the population were Gallas, occupying the south. More influential were the Amharas of the central highlands, whose language, Amharic, was the court tongue. They had been Christians, of the Coptic Church, since the 4th century, but the establishment of Islam in northern Africa had cut them off from Christian civilisation for 800 years. Some of the Gallas were Christian, also, some Moslem, others pagan. The northern Tigréans were Christian, the Somalis in the south-east Moslem, while the Falasha, north of Lake Tsana, were of Jewish origin. Finally, in the deep south-west, were the tribes of Negro and mixed blood.

All emperors of Ethiopia claimed direct descent from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, but in the case of the Emperor Theodore the claim was spurious. He had been born Liz Kassa, in 1818, the son of an obscure

headman in the province of Kouara. He might have considered himself fortunate when, in due course, he succeeded an uncle as provincial governor, but Liz Kassa was, in modern terminology, a schizophrenic. A taste of local power was sufficient to plunge him into the maelstrom of petty insurrection, intrigue and assassination that characterised Ethiopian political relationships in the 19th century. A combination of luck, extreme ruthlessness, astuteness and near-madness found him, at the age of 37 in 1855, in a position of considerable authority, and he proclaimed himself Emperor Theodore III, King of Ethiopia, King of Kings and the Chosen of God.

Theodore was a man of impressive appearance and forbidding behaviour. Brown-skinned almost to blackness, he was well-built and muscular, with a broad, high-boned face already deeply lined. A prominent forehead and overhanging brows surmounted keen, quick-moving eyes and an aquiline nose. His lips were thin, teeth white and perfect, and he wore his hair in three heavy plaits from the forehead to the neck.

Theodore's personality was complex and completely unpredictable. He could, at one moment, be courteous and logical but, at the next, a mentally berserk savage.

There was only fragmentary knowledge of his fortress capital, Magdala, captured from his inherent enemies, the Moslem Gallas. Four hundred miles from the coast — the Red Sea — from which it was separated by incredibly difficult terrain, the location was itself an eagle's nest, reputedly impregnable. Descriptions of the imperial residence suggested a large, bam-like building, of little architectural merit but substantially constructed, housing, as might be expected, every degree of furnishing from priceless treasures, Bohemian glass, Sèvres china and Persian carpetry to trumpery rubbish that could be purchased by any sailor for a few piastres in Port Said or Alexandria. Gold and Silver filigree, damascene, magnificent velvets and

leathers shared place with cheap daguerreotypes of French and Italian scenery, Birmingham knickknacks. There were stories, too, of Magdala's prison, into which hundreds of political rivals had been thrown, never to emerge.

Theodore, also possessing only a vague knowledge of the world outside Ethiopia, was becoming convinced that he was the chosen champion of Christianity, destined to destroy all infidels and to lead a crusade to recapture Jerusalem from the Turks. However, several campaigns against elusive Moslem neighbours resulted in failure, and Theodore had to reluctantly concede that, before his ambitions could be achieved, much within Ethiopia must be modernised, including the equipment and training of his army. He began to recruit European technicians and advisers.

Britain's interest in Ethiopia was slight, but a consul, Walter Plowden, had been appointed in 1842, and was favourably regarded by Theodore. Plowden was murdered in 1860, during one of a series of revolts against the Emperor's increasing tyranny. As a replacement, Lord Palmerston's government despatched Captain Charles Cameron, late of the Indian Army.

Cameron presented himself before Theodore, at Gondar, in February 1862, bringing, as gifts from Queen Victoria, a rifle and a pair of handsome, engraved percussion pistols. The Emperor was delighted, and immediately penned a letter of thanks to the Queen, which began, 'In the Name of God the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, one God in Trinity, chosen by God, King of Kings, Theodoros of Ethiopia, to Her Majesty Victoria, Queen of England. I hope your Majesty is in good health. By the power of God I am well.' The letter also announced Theodore's intention of establishing an embassy in London, and the Emperor, not doubting that Victoria was also dedicated to the overthrow of Islam, specifically asked that the Ethiopian delegation be afforded protection against arrest by the Turks during its

journey.

The letter was received in London on 12 February 1863, to be immediately pigeon-holed by the Foreign Office without even a formal acknowledgement. The oversight was inexcusable, despite distractions nearer home. The war in the United States was resulting in unemployment for thousands of Lancashire millworkers. There was trouble in Ireland and threatened trouble in Poland and Schleswig-Holstein. Prince Alfred, the Queen's second son, had been offered the vacant throne of Greece, had declined it, and then compromised himself with a lady in Malta. A letter from some obscure and dusky king could wait, and it did. It was not presented to Parliament until 1866.

In the meantime Theodore, thousands of miles away in his mountain fastness, was awaiting a reply from his royal sister, Victoria. Nothing happened, and the Emperor, his mental condition deteriorating, was becoming angrily irrational. The British Consul, Cameron — a no-nonsense army man lacking his predecessor's diplomatic expertise — did little to alleviate the situation.

Later in 1863, Cameron received a despatch from Whitehall which, ignoring Theodore's letter, instructed him, Cameron, to visit the Sudan to investigate the cotton-growing potential of the region and, as a sop to the vociferous anti-slavery faction in Britain, report on the slave trade situation. Cameron obeyed instructions, but Theodore chose to interpret the mission as a liaison with his Moslem enemies, aimed at his downfall. His simmering suspicions were not soothed when, in November 1863, a young Irishman, Kerans, arrived at Gondar to assume the duties of Captain Cameron's secretary. Kerans carried despatches from the Foreign Office, but none referred to Theodore's letter to Queen Victoria. The Emperor was incensed.

Cameron was arrested, and then Theodore turned his attention to the other Europeans in Ethiopia. These now numbered about sixty, mostly male but

including a few wives and children — diplomats, missionaries, artisans and adventurers. The largest denomination was German, followed by British, a handful of French, and one Pole. With the exception of those employed in the manufacture of artillery and other armaments, all were seized and confined. 187 house-servants chose to share their detention.

Several months elapsed before news of Theodore's behaviour reached London, where the Foreign Office refused to attach any great importance to the situation. However, the Emperor's original letter was rescued from the files, an acknowledgement formulated with, in addition, a polite request for the prisoners to be released. This belated reply was forwarded to a Mr. Hormuzd Rassam, Assistant Political Resident at Aden, for onward despatch to the Emperor Theodore.

Rassam, an Iraqi, did not hurry. He left Aden in H.M.S. *Dalhousie* on 20 July 1864 for Massowah, from where he sent messengers to Theodore requesting an escort. There was no response, and in May 1865 Rassam was still at Massowah, where he was joined by Lieutenant Prideaux of the Bombay Staff Corps and, subsequently, a Dr. Blanc. On 15 October the trio began their journey into the interior, finally to deliver the Foreign Office letter to Theodore, in Damot, on 25 January 1866.

But two years had passed since Theodore had imprisoned the Europeans in Ethiopia. His treatment of them varied widely from day to day — sometimes threatening to cut off their hands and feet and then, hours later, sending them gifts and abject apologies. Several had suffered physical torture, and the British Consul, Captain Cameron, had been in chains for the entire two years.

The arrival of Rassam and his companions found Theodore, fortuitously, in good humour. The Emperor confessed himself satisfied with the Foreign Office apology, and announced that all captives would be immediately freed. If they so wished, they could leave Ethiopia forthwith and without hindrance.

Mr. Rassam had little time in which to congratulate himself on the success of his mission. Within hours the Emperor's decision was reversed, and all Europeans — including Mr. Rassam and his party — were once again arrested.

Theodore's next letter to London thanked the Queen for her last consignment of gifts, then went on to ask for the despatch of British artisans and machinery for the manufacture of ammunition. The Foreign Office did not pigeon-hole this letter; it caused considerable annoyance but, with no obvious alternative presenting itself, it was decided that compliance would be tried once more. Volunteer workmen were recruited and sent as far as Aden, while a conciliatory letter from the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord Stanley, was despatched — with rather more alacrity than the last — to Theodore.

The Emperor had now congregated all his captives at his fortress capital of Magdala where, although adequately fed and accommodated, they were in daily fear of his unpredictable moods. Theodore again expressed satisfaction with Lord Stanley's communication, but made no move to liberate his prisoners. The British workmen waiting at Aden, he informed the Political Agent, should be sent to Magdala immediately.

London was now losing patience. Orders were telegraphed to Aden, detaining the workmen — who were eventually sent home — and a stern warning note, dated 16 April 1867, presented to Theodore. This, yet again, proved ineffective and, shortly afterwards, Aden reported that all communication with Magdala had been cut. It had been heard, however, that Theodore's captives were once again in chains and, faced by mounting insurrection in the provinces, the Emperor's atrocities were increasing. Villages, crops and churches were being destroyed, torture, executions and floggings were common, and in one month more than 3,000 people had been

killed or burned alive. It was time, the Foreign Office decided, to do something more than write letters.

But what, indeed, *could* be done? Ethiopia was remote; the nearest point over which a British flag flew was Aden — an arid, volcanic rock, short of water and totally unsuitable as a springboard for an expeditionary force. Even if this initial difficulty was overcome, the interior of Ethiopia was said to present impossible obstacles to a European army. Newspapers were inundated with correspondence offering warnings and advice. *True John Bull* declared that not a man of the army would ever return from the country, and *Hertfordshire Incumbent* asserted that the rains would sweep away every trooper into the sea. Ethiopian ravines were four thousand feet deep, claimed *Cambridge Student*, and could not be crossed without massive bridgeworks. There was, it seemed, no known danger or disease to which an expedition would not be exposed. The tsetse, the cerastes, scorpions and poisonous spiders would infest the soldiers' clothes and blankets. Doctors warned of a certain pink-headed fly, condemned the consumption of wild honey and water from wells, predicted widespread ophthalmia, recommended a flannel belt around the waist, and advised medication for diarrhoea.

At the other extreme there were those who considered that a rescue operation could be mounted with very little inconvenience, and several gallant souls offered to penetrate the Ethiopian hinterland alone and unaided, to release the captives. Even *The Times* suggested that a determined dash by a single squadron of cavalry could accomplish the whole business in less than a month. Overriding all, however, was a growing public resolution that *something had to be done*. Britannia was being blackmailed by a half savage black potentate who could not even speak English. British subjects were in chains, including accredited representatives of the Queen, and the nation's honour was at stake. Something simply had to be done.

For the Government the problem was real. The usually successful device of sending a gunboat could not be applied; only a military expedition would suffice. Military operations were painfully expensive, and the taxpayers who today demanded action would be the same tax payers who, tomorrow, angrily disputed another penny in the pound. Either way, taxpayers were voters.

The problem also had international ramifications. Ethiopia was surrounded by Moslem countries whose cooperation might have to be sought, and the Government did not wish to appear allied to Moslem powers against what was, after all, a Christian country. Finally, any military excursion on Britain's part would invoke cries of protest from every chancellory in Europe, all suspecting yet another expansion of the British Empire. Was all this worth a handful of Europeans who could be killed by Theodore within hours of a British army landing in his country?

With the Suez Canal not yet opened, sending an expeditionary force from Britain was considered unwise for a number of reasons, both geographical and political. India was nearer, and the port of Bombay was eminently suitable as a starting point. In the vicinity, also, were several regiments of acclimatised British troops, while the Bombay sepoys were less opposed to overseas service than those of Bengal or Madras. Here, then, was a possible solution. Mr. Seymour Fitzgerald, the Governor of Bombay, received a telegraphed despatch enquiring how soon, and on what terms, an equipped and provisioned force could embark for active service in Ethiopia. Mr. Fitzgerald, in turn, referred the enquiry to the Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the Bombay Presidency, Sir Robert Napier.

CHAPTER FOUR

Joseph Dando and Patrick Holloran were applying themselves to the military education of Charlie Crewe.

‘Ef ye see a monocle wid a man behind ut,’ advised Holloran, ‘bedad, ut’s a bloody officer. Salute ut.’

‘If yer see *anythin*’ in a funny ‘at and queer clo’es, an’ it moves, yer kin salute it. It’ll be a Weedin’ officer, orl-right.’

‘Shure, me ol’ Charlie. An’ ef ye meet a red face wid whiskers, shoutin’ “Eh whot!” and “Haw-haw!” — thet’ll be ’es honour the bloody Colonel, an’ ye kin run loik M’Ginty’s auld goat.’

‘That’s right,’ Dando nodded, taking a mouthful of beer. ‘An’ if yer sees a young toff wi’ a swagger cane, marchin’ stiff like a Weedin’ Grenadier an’ mutterin’ about “damn civilians” — that’s a soddin’ subaltern, jes’ joined yesterday, see. Yer salute ’im twice.’

‘Did I iver tell ye, Charlie me bhoyo,’ embarked Holloran, with a wealth of experience to impart to a new listener, ‘ev the noight Dando spewed en the geraniums outside the officers’ mess? “Whit the blazes es thet?” sez the Officer ev the Day. “Bejabers,” sez I —’

Dando broke in hastily. ‘I knew this place,’ he announced, ‘when it was only a Weedin’ Jug and Bottle.’ He glanced around the bar of The Trafalgar. ‘I ’listed ’ere, see, in ’Fifty-two —’

Holloran grinned. ‘Shure, an’ don’t I remember, me jewel — wid Katie Lawrence, the Corporal’s woif, soapin’ ye socks ter kape ye fate from blisterin’ an’ orl.’ He shook his head, sorrowfully. ‘Whitever happened ter Katie Lawrence whin we went ter bloody India?’

* * *

Left on a Gravesend jetty when an unpitying Regiment had sailed for India, homeless, and with three small children clutching at her skirts, Katie Lawrence had turned to whoring. It was that or starvation. Thousands of women, with far less justification — factory girls, housemaids, shop-girls — resorted to prostitution, either to supplement meagre wages or because of a promise of bright lights, fine clothes and gay living, and it was said that a smart, well-shaped woman could earn as much as twelve pounds in a single week in the Haymarket or Pall Mall.

Katie Lawrence never achieved the pavements of Pall Mall, or anything remotely approaching twelve pounds. She confined her activities to the darker streets of Woolwich, to the attention of artillerymen, bluejackets and bargees who were less discriminating than the loose gentlemen of London's West End. Katie's neat, almost prudish qualities inspired an odd carnal curiosity in men of coarser tastes. Slowly she prospered, if only modestly, escaping syphilis and other hazards more serious than occasional bruises, and the children were fed and clothed.

In the beginning, Harriet had been six, William three, and Beatrice two. The early years had been hard and bitterly humiliating, but her determination had not weakened. In smoke-clogged taverns, in sleet and fog, ignoring her jeering rivals at the gates of the dockyard and barracks — many of them immigrant German, French and Belgian — she accumulated her shillings. In 1857 she heard of the Sepoy Revolt in India and the horrific losses of the 60th Rifles, George Lawrence's regiment. If ever Katie Lawrence had contemplated a reunion with her husband, she never did again. Now, she was irredeemably alone, with the children.

And the children, Katie resolved — particularly the two girls — would never be exposed to the degradation resorted to by their mother. No drunken

soldier or lascar seaman would foul the innocence of Harriet or Beatrice. When it happened, daily, to herself, she could clench her eyes and detach herself from the sweating, convulsive episode, devoid of any emotion as her body mechanically responded and encouraged. No, her two girls would never walk dark streets, offering themselves.

She had tried hard to insulate them from the visual sordidness of her occupation, and it was a long time before the two younger children questioned the arrival and departure of so many different men, but Katie had underestimated the growing sagacity of little Harriet.

Exactly when Harriet began to interpret her mother's daily transactions, Katie never knew — nor by what evidence the child achieved an understanding of the physical process of a sexual exchange — but she had been only twelve years old when she brought home in a tightly-clutched hand the first two florins she had earned from an afternoon of street-corner soliciting. 'There's easier ways than sewin' shirts, ain't there?' she whispered. 'Like your 'n.'

Katie had stared blankly, and then comprehension had come, like torture, and, with it, nausea flooding her throat. 'Yer filthy little bitch,' she spat, and her hand lashed into the other's face. Harriet shrieked, flinching, and the two smaller children began crying apprehensively. 'Yer' twelve years,' Katie gritted, 'an' yer a whore!' The florins lay on the floor. 'Tour shillin' — an' ye're a dirty pavement slut, droppin' yer breeks for any ol' lecher that gives yer a wink!' She stooped, picked up the coins, and flung them with all her strength at the grate. 'It's dirt money, see! Dirt! An' what yer've sold, yer can never git back, see. Never! Yer can sew a shirt fer tuppence-ha'penny, an' likely it's sweat labour. Likely yer'll starve — but a woman's got only one thing that's her own. Jes' one thing, whether she's a duchess or a guttersnipe — an' she saves it, see. She holds it tight, like somethin' sacred, until the

time comes that's right an' *special*,' She paused, the flare of her anger subsided and her eyes flooding. 'Yer'll know when the time comes, wi' a good man that yer'll worship, and yer'd slave fer, an' die fer — a man yer want ter be the father o' yer children, see, 'corse he's *special*.' She took a deep breath. 'Yer'll know, orlright, 'corse when he's with yer, yer'll 'ave a feeling o' *content*, but when he's not, there's somethin' inside yer that's missin' — like ye're *empty*!' She reached forward, weeping, and pulled Harriet into her arms. 'Yer only a chick, see. Yer *don't know*. Women are cattle, an' it'll never be any different, see. Yer 'ave ter *wait*, an' hope, an' keep yerself nice until the time comes —' She sobbed.

Harriet had been tearfully repentant. She did not know, she pleaded, that it was wrong. How could it be wrong? Did not Katie, her own mother, resort to it every day? Her lowered gaze was reproachful, the response of a martyr. The men who had given her the florins for a few minutes of inexplicable animalism under the ferry steps were not as drunkenly repulsive as some of the patrons entertained by Katie. It had hurt, and her petticoat was soiled, but it was soon finished, with two florins at the end of it. How many weary hours, sewing shirts in the puny glimmer of an oil lamp, were necessary to achieve two florins?

The two florins, untouched by either, remained in the hearth for days until, inevitably, the two smaller children decided that such scorn for money was unforgivable, and appropriated them, to enjoy a spree of glorious spending. Such opportunities did not present themselves often. Harriet, for further days, was unresponsive and morose, applying herself to her shirt-sewing with punishing diligence. In a single day she earned tenpence — her highest achievement — while Katie, plagued by a complex mixture of anger, maternal frustration, shame and self-reproof, could contribute little towards establishing a happier understanding. Something had happened, and nothing

would be the same again. *Harriet had taken men*, and the relationship between Katie and Harriet could never, thereafter, be that of mother and obedient daughter. Almost, Harriet was a rival.

Following a long day of abortive pavement walking in Gravesend, Katie came home, weary and ill-tempered. Harriet's head was bowed over her sewing, but Katie knew immediately.

'Yer've done it again, ye bitch!' She tore off her bonnet. 'Ye're piddlin' an' pretendin' wi' sewing, an' yer've done it again'! Don't yer *understand*?' She grasped viciously at Harriet's shoulders. 'Don't yer *see*? Fer Chris' sake listen! I'm a whore, see. I'm a whore becorse I want yer ter be something different, see! I don't care if yer scrub steps, or sell watercress!'

Harriet gazed back at her, this time with no shame in her face. 'It's no good, see.' She shook her head. 'Like yer said, yer can't get it back, an' I ain't goin' ter try.' She glanced down at her mother's dusty shoes, then up at a streak of hair on her moist cheek. 'It's gettin' harder for yer, all the time, ain't it? Ye're turned forty, an' the men ain't so quick wi' their shillin's when there's quick young drabs that'll do all the things you won't. They want young'uns, that they pretend is fresh, not women that's wearin' a bonnet an' three petticoats, an' old enough ter be a gran' mother.' She paused. 'How much 'ave yer earned terday?' She sniffed. 'Nuthin'. Yer couldn't even find a drunken Belgie, stinkin' wi' beer an' fish an' garlic, that's too sodden ter unbutton his own breeks.' She smoothed her bodice nervously. 'I've found meself an orficer, see. An *orficer* an' a *gentleman*. He's goin' ter *set me up*, he sez. The Prince o' Wales, he sez, has ladies that's been *set up* —'

'An officer? Wot officer?'

'Captain William Burridge.' Harriet, not entirely sure of herself, and her eyes wary, tossed her head. 'Captain William Burridge of the Fourth Regiment, the King's Own, that's wot. A regular toff, see, that don't drink in

the bar wi' the crowd. He *insists* on a private room an' a waiter, wi' a *whole bottle o' wine*, lobster, kidney, poached rabbit, scalloped taters —' She sighed. 'Gawd. It must o' cost him arf a quid — *and*, a tip —'

* * *

'Officers, now,' Dando lectured Charlie Crewe, 'come in all different kinds. Take Lieutenant Heathcote o' the 60th, fr'instance — a real bleedin' gent that looked at yer feet after every soddin' march, wrote letters for yer, shared yer baccy an' rum, an' never ordered men into any fightin' that 'ee didn't lead 'imself. If yer was in trouble, yer could *talk* ter 'im, see, an' 'ee'd listen, serious. That's a gent for yer. Then there's the other kind —'

'Bedad, theer's the other bloody kind,' affirmed Holloran, 'thet thinks thet St. Michael an' orl his angels es singing holy music out ev theer arse —'oles. "Thet man!" they sez —'corse they don't bloody know ye name. "Sargint! Take thet dishgustin' article's name! Sivin days' pack drill an' loss ev pay!" they sez — then theer off ter the mess ter drink thimsilves bloody *ghazi*!'

'My faith in the divine right of blue-blooded British aristocracy is dwindling, old scout,' Charlie Crewe sighed. 'I'd always thought that officers were like fathers to their men — protecting and guiding, sharing their vicissitudes and all that.'

'My ol' man thrashed me every bleedin' Saturday, regular as clockwork,' Dando said.

'Faith, an' Phadrig Holloran, the bastard,' retorted the Irishman, 'walked out ev the house wid every ha'penny in the auld pewter pot, leavin' a quarter's rrent ter pay from two acres o' praties thet hed turned ter stinkin' glue.'

'Actually,' commented Charlie Crewe, 'my father once took a horse-whip to a stable-boy for ruining a hunter's mouth. The poor devil was never the same again.'

‘An’ he wudn’t be, bejapers, after a bloody whippin’,’ Holloran nodded. ‘Whin I wuz whipped et the Hindun, es Dando’ll tell ye —’

‘The *horse* wasn’t the same, not the boy,’ Charlie Crewe said. ‘Dammit, the horse was worth six hundred guineas, the boy only ten pounds a year and keep. There are priorities, old chap.’

‘Priorities, es ut?’ Holloran mused. ‘Jasus, fer six hundred guineas ye cud whip me any toim ye bloody loik. ‘Whin I hed fifty lashes I wuz *fined* eighteen pence fer the cost o’ the cat.’ He shook his head. ‘Thim wuz the days. Ef ye argued, ye wuz flogged fer insubordinayshun. Ef ye kept ye bloody mouth shut, ye wuz flogged fer soilint contempt, so ye wuz.’

‘Soddin’ officers,’ Dando grunted. ‘They wouldn’t be so bleedin’ cocky about clean boots an’ brasses if they ’ad ter do their own buggers. Anyone kin be spit-polished like a bleedin’ fairground pimp if ’ee’s got a soddin’ batman.’

‘Charlie, me darlint,’ Holloran offered. ‘A bhoyo loik yeself, now, wid book-learnin’ an’ long words an’ orl — shure, ye cud be an officer from the ranks.’ He calculated. ‘Ef ye wuz an officer, Charlie, ye cud be passin’ a few bottles o’ *bhang* ter ol’ Dando an’ me from the bloody officers’ mess. Jasus, I’ve seen thim bottles — port an’ brandy, an’ furrin’ stuff loik Scotch an’ Noights o’ George. They don’t pay, see. They jes’ soigns bloody chits. “Orderly!” they sez, “Chota peg, *ek dum!*” Now, me ol’ Charlie’ — he pointed a finger —’ef ye wuz an officer, an’ ye made Dando an’ meself bloody orderlies —’ He raised ecstatic eyes. ‘Bedad, it’d be loik heving ye own beerhouse.’ Even the thought was intoxicating. ‘Ef I hed me own beerhouse, me ol’ darlint, I’d lock the bloody door from the inside, an’ lay meself on the floor surrounded by bottles. Faith, I’d not wait ter fall down.’

Charlie Crewe was not impressed. ‘Dash it, there’s no future for an officer, my old Hibernian oracle, if he hasn’t got a jolly old bank account, what? It’s

like getting married, dear boy. Marry anyone you like — fat and fifty, false teeth and henna — *so long as she's rich*, old scout. True love doesn't pay tailors' bills, and a dear little Venus in the bed, with no more to offer than a handful of boobies and buttocks, dear boy, doesn't help when you're leaving the house by the back stairs to escape un romantic tradesman.' He wrinkled his nose. 'Take Captain Burrridge, old fruit —'

* * *

In 1854 Queen Victoria had ordered that, in recognition of the gallantry of her soldiers in the Crimea, one man from the ranks of every regiment involved should be promoted to officer status, and each of these should be given £100 to cover the cost of his kit and regimentals. It was an impractical action on the part of a woman insulated from everyday life, utterly ignorant of the difficulties that would be met by any man plucked from the ranks to receive the Queen's commission. She had seen her soldiers only on set-piece occasions, in drilled ranks, immaculate, in Hyde Park, or Windsor, or woodenly standing in the courtyard of St. James's. It seemed a generous, queenly gesture, and her generals had bowed, clutching their feathered hats to their chests and withdrawing backwards. The shabby Prince Consort, equally ignorant, had nodded his approval from the Queen's shoulder. Like his royal wife, he did not appreciate that three of five of the gallant rankers were illiterate, had no income apart from the pittance of their army pay, and entertained no more loyalty to the Queen's service other than as it provided food, clothing and a dry billet. The Army and Navy were marginally preferable to civilian unemployment and starvation. But only marginally.

Quartermaster-Sergeant William Burrridge was not illiterate; he was a steady-living, good-service bachelor who had probably achieved his promotional ceiling, and had resigned himself to another ten or fifteen years of spartan but acceptable livelihood. He was efficient, and his officers knew

it. He was the sort of NCO that officers depended upon to cover up their own shortcomings. BurrIDGE, in fact, was ‘a good man’.

When the Queen’s directive was received by the Royals there was mild consternation. The gulf between officers and rankers was almost impossible to bridge. On one side were gentlemen and, on the other, cattle. The thought of an ex-ranker in the officers’ mess was vaguely uncomfortable. There were things which couldn’t be described. But there were things.

A decision, however, had to be reached, and of several possible candidates BurrIDGE was eventually considered the least offensive. He was of careful appearance, was not foul-mouthed or drunken and, although well-considered by the other ranks had no close associates who might prove an embarrassment to his new status. Further, he was unmarried, which meant no ill-bred soldier’s wife on Ladies’ Night — although, b’God, it was unlikely that BurrIDGE would afford many nights in the mess. His ensign’s pay of four and sixpence per day would exactly cover the cost of batman, breakfast, dinner, and dinner wine — and all the better. What he would do when his hundred pounds’ worth of regimentals had worn out would be his problem. Probably he would have to resign his commission. Again, all the better. BurrIDGE, by common consent of the Royals’ officers, was to be the Queen’s elected.

For BurrIDGE the prospect was explosively frightening. Almost overnight he found himself utterly friendless. True, as a sergeant he had not mixed well, but he was accepted by his fellows and had provoked no ill will. He had tolerated an occasional carousal, had paid his corner, dutifully sung his song and suffered the encircling arms of less sober comrades. BurrIDGE was a quiet ol’ sod, they agreed, but ’ee weren’t bad, see. There was lots worse than ol’ BurrIDGE.

Now, in an instant, he was of another species. An officer. Other ranks

didn't converse with officers. There was no common ground, no interests shared. Before an officer, a ranker stood with thumbs to trouser-seams and spoke in regulated, staccato phrases, with both anxious to terminate the exchange as quickly as possible. A ranker couldn't converse with an officer, he simply wished to be quit of his vicinity. And if BurrIDGE had become one o' Them, then sod 'im. The ranks closed together, exclusively.

'Your first duty, BurrIDGE,' the Colonel informed him, 'is to the Regiment and its officers. An officer disgraced means the Regiment's disgraced, d'ye understand? You have received your Royal Warrant by the gracious pleasure of Her Majesty; most others have purchased theirs. Remember, BurrIDGE, that officers do not enter beer-houses, music halls, or stroll the streets, in the Queen's uniform. They do not drink ale or smoke shag. They do not discuss ladies, religion, politics, or military matters in the mess, and they do not criticise the Horse Guards in the presence of civilians. Avoid controversy like the Devil, BurrIDGE, but if some other fool involves you, remember the Regiment's reputation can be at stake, and your brother officers will support you — but, by God, you'd better have a good case, BurrIDGE, or I'll have you broken.' He considered. 'You, BurrIDGE, will never bring a lady into the mess, d'ye understand. If a consort is considered desirable, she will be selected for you. Similarly, don't contemplate matrimony until you have consulted me.' He paused, again considering. 'There are also several offences, representing conduct unbecoming an officer, for which I shall demand your resignation — cheating at cards, the issue of bad cheques, or an improper relationship with the wife of a brother officer.' There was no reference, BurrIDGE noted, to an officer's responsibilities towards his men.

For William BurrIDGE there began eleven years of loneliness and constant humiliation to which, in time, he became inured. He was the Regiment's oldest ensign — indeed, he was older and with longer service than many of

his superiors, a disparity that became progressively more pronounced as later-commissioned subalterns purchased promotion over him. He lived, day by day, on a financial razor's-edge, carefully debating the expenditure of every penny while the pockets of his colleagues jingled with sovereigns. His regimentals, the minimum necessary, were scrupulously preserved, shoes mended instead of replaced, and shirt-tails, which could not be seen, renewing cuffs, which could. His brother officers had underrated him. Burridge did not resign; he clung on.

He was not the victim of deliberate unkindness or disdain. Indeed, as the years passed he became regarded with amused goodwill, but his absence from the mess and regimental social occasions, and his inherent reluctance to compel attention, meant that he remained a background figure, an anomaly, repeatedly overlooked not by design but simply because nobody remembered Burridge until it was too late.

His lieutenancy, however, came at last, and with it a welcome increase of pay to 5/3d daily, which meant that, when he had met his obligatory daily mess expenses, he was left with a balance of 9d, or 5/3d per week. Life became slightly, very slightly, easier. This, he decided, must be his ultimate achievement. The regulation cost of his next step in promotion, to captain, was £1,300, but in practice was nearer twice that figure, and such a sum was impossible. Alternatively, Burridge could not visualise further promotion by merit, so painfully slow in peacetime, while he was still of serviceable age. He counted his blessings, persuaded the regimental tailor to turn his frockcoat and add new lace, and resumed once more his accustomed role of mediocre adequacy, beyond criticism but unnoticed.

But there were surprises still for William Burridge. The depot training of recruits was a duty disliked by most officers. It was time-consuming and restricting for a young man who expected to spend half the year on furlough,

or at least enjoying the delights of London rather than be tethered to a shabby place like Chatham. Burrige, sometime sergeant, and with neither desire nor means for high living, offered a heaven-sent solution. Old Burrige could be relied upon to be dressed and shaven by 5.30 am Reveille, with no thick head and no distractions in the form of grouse-shooting, Ascot, or a lady in St. John's Wood. It was worth a captaincy to be permanently rid of the chore, and William Burrige, mildly bewildered, was promoted to captain, with the luxury of 8/4d per day.

He was lonely still, and it was too late to establish relationships in the mess he had shunned for years, but he could now afford a little more than the barest necessities. Following tentative experiment he chose to spend his brief leisure periods away from Chatham and Rochester, where he might be recognised, and make visits to London, in whose crowded environs he could play the part of an officer and a gentleman, watch a show at the Coburg, enjoy late-night chops and Sauterne at Simpson's or Gatti's. He still could not afford the more exotic of London's West End entertainments, and soon turned his attention to places like Greenwich and Woolwich, where a tavern would offer a private room for the price of a bottle of wine. It was in the Admiral Hardy, in Greenwich, that he met little Harriet Lawrence.

* * *

Little Harriet Lawrence was completely different to the self-assured officers' ladies who talked but never listened, who eyed him with undisguised condescension and whispered to their husbands behind their fans. 'May I have the pleasure o' paying my addresses to you, sir?' she had whispered, without assurance. The incongruous formality of the question, and the childish voice, had halted him at the tavern door. Incomprehending, he had nodded, and she followed behind him, almost eagerly. There were knowing leers in the tap-room as they passed through it, and the barman had brought

the wine, winked, and then made a show of closing the door firmly as he departed.

Harriet was softly young, pink and white, neatly dressed and clean, with her hair clumsily pinned up — but most of all she was inexperienced, a failing she revealed immediately by drawing up her dress to her thighs before BurrIDGE had poured two glasses of wine. ‘It’s a florin if you only wants to dip yer wick, sir,’ she said. ‘If you wants more’ — she cupped a small breast in her hand — ‘you can have me naked as Eve for four bob, and take your time, sir.’ She reached forward to touch the front of his breeches. ‘If you want special, see, like the French, it’s seven an’ six.’

BurrIDGE, for all his army years, was mildly shocked. His unspoken invitation for her to accompany him had been made in a fleeting moment of aberration, without any real intent and almost immediately regretted. In any case he was sober, and sobriety was not a fit condition for a situation like this.

‘Dammit, girl, put down your clothes.’ But he was aware that the vision of her white legs had disturbed him. She was young. He’d seen plenty of the women who followed the drum, thronging the barracks gate and haunting every street of a garrison town. Under the law, twelve years was the age of consent, but he also knew there were many younger prostitutes, down to the merest infants who satisfied perverted appetites. BurrIDGE offered the girl a glass, then took up his own. It was damn odd. Even if indifferent towards women, he wasn’t celibate, but he had never, in his entire life, seen a completely naked woman. He considered the illusion — breasts, thighs, pubic hair — then drained his glass and reached again for the bottle. Harriet sipped, her eyes lowered.

‘What’s your name, girl?’ he asked. ‘And how old are you?’

She glanced up quickly. ‘Harriet, sir. Harriet Lawrence. And I’m sixteen.’

She didn't like the wine. It seemed sour — not at all as she had anticipated. And she had never been in a tavern before, far less a private room. She was apprehensive.

Burridge didn't believe she was sixteen, but she was at least twelve, and that was enough. He refrained from committing himself until well into his second bottle, of which Harriet reluctantly consumed a further glass, but by which time his qualms had disappeared. He examined her surreptitiously. Aye, she was a sweet little handful, and she'd strip like a fresh peach. And why not? If not for him, it would be for somebody else. He poured himself wine again. But not here, blast it. Not in the shabby backroom of a tavern.

'Have you got a place?' he enquired.

Her eyes jerked up to him again. 'A place?'

Burridge frowned. 'A room? Accommodation? A lodging?'

Harriet swallowed, feeling her cheeks hot. There was only the house, and the children would be there. Still, her mother would almost certainly be absent, and the children had seen many men come and go —

'It'll be extra,' she claimed. 'A place is extra.' She calculated. How much extra? If she made the price high, perhaps he'd decline, and that might be the best thing. He was a toff, this one, and she was afraid of him. She would prefer a convulsive ten minutes in the darkness of an alley, with someone she could not see — even if it only meant a florin.

He held up a sovereign between finger and thumb. 'I could buy me a lady in the Haymarket with that — with feathers and garters — let alone a little dollymop' — he paused — '*sixteen?*'

She had never held a sovereign in her hand during her whole life. How many shirts equalled a sovereign? Had Katie Lawrence ever been paid a whole sovereign? Harriet gulped at her wine, coughed, then nodded. 'It ain't far, sir. There's a clean bed in a locked room, an' close to the cabs in

Woolwich Road.’ She’d heard her mother say that, often. ‘If yer’d like to follow me, I’ll pretend I’m not with yer.’

He had run the gauntlet of the eyes that followed him in the taproom, into the cold of the street. It was almost unbelievable that he was about to purchase carnal experience of the trim, childish figure that walked ahead of him, that it had been so easily agreed. It was like a dream, but he could sense the wine on his own breath and, if it was a dream, then he didn’t wish to awaken yet.

He had quickly lost his bearings in the succession of narrow streets. In the house, two children — a girl and boy — had stared at him speculatively without comment, but Harriet had ushered him into a tiny bedroom and turned the key in the lock behind her.

* * *

‘This Snider,’ opined Joseph Dando, ‘is bleedin’ all right. It’s easy on the teeth, see. When yer’ve bit open forty Enfield cartridges and yer ain’t ‘ad no water all day, yer mouth’s like the arse-end of a soddin’ Bengali gun-bullock wi’ the flux.’

‘Shure,’ said Holloran, ‘an’ ut tastes bloody poison, so ut does. Did I iver tell ye, me ol’ Charlie, ev the toim O’Toole wuz on picquet, an’ left his dirrty socks in the tent? Jasus, we knew *whit* it wuz, an’ *who* it wuz, but we cudn’t bloody foind *where*, bedad —’

‘An’ there’s no bleedin’ muzzle-rammin’,’ Dando continued. ‘Even in the Rifles yer can’t bleedin’ ram without raisin’ yerself on a elbow — an’ the Paythans wait fer it, see. Then *spit!* — an’ yer brains is all over the sand, like soddin’ raspberry jam.’ Charlie Crewe winced.

The Snider-Enfield was the British Army’s first general issue breech-loading rifle, but it was also a hybrid. In 1864 a Select Committee, faced with the task of recommending one of several score of different, but largely

unproven, breech-loading actions, was reluctant to completely abandon the existing, and comparatively recent, Enfield muzzle-loading rifle which had given excellent service in every part of the world. As an interim measure a conversion system designed by Jacob Snider of New York was adopted. A section of the breech of the Enfield was removed, and a solid, hinged breech-block fitted. The percussion hammer was retained, but this now drove a plunger diagonally through the block to strike the brass base of a new centre-fire cartridge. There were minor shortcomings in the conversion; the gun had to be turned upside down to shake free an expended cartridge but, by and large, the Snider-Enfield was a good weapon, accurate and easy of recoil, and a sensible stopgap before the proving of the next generation of breech-loaders, the Martini Henry.

Charlie Crewe took to the Snider quickly and naturally. It wasn't, he conceded, quite the same as his James Purdey with the hand-finished stock of satin walnut, measured to his shoulder, but it was an honest gun that did all that was claimed for it, and Charlie Crewe, to the surprise and chagrin of Sergeant Creedon, Instructor of Musketry, was a superb shot — better even than Creedon.

Dando and Holloran, the veterans, suffered from too much experience. With the earlier Enfield their clockwork manipulation and economy of effort achieved a fire-rate of four rounds a minute when the musketry manual required only three. It was difficult, now, to forget the drill of biting open a cartridge, ramming both powder and ball, and thumbing home a percussion cap. Now it was bafflingly simple, with the Snider, to merely press a spring stud to swing open the breech-block, and then push into the breech a cartridge which incorporated its own detonator. 'Easier' Dando confessed, 'than feedin' nuts ter an organ-grinder's monkey.'

'Aysier,' Holloran agreed. 'Faith, theer'll be makin' bloody guns next thet

clayns an' oils thimselves whoil ye're slaypin' on ye bed.'

'That bleedin' Sergeant Creedom,' Dando ruled, 'yer'd think he'd *invented* the soddin' Army.'

Holloran nodded. 'An' he didn't, bedad. Thet wuz the bloody Duke o' Wellington.'

Dando sniffed towards Charlie Crewe, busily applied to black-balling his ammunition boots. 'An' o' course, yer was acquainted wi' the Duke o' Wellington?'

Charlie Crewe paused, considering. 'Only slightly, old fruit. He was my godfather, y'know — at Walmer. That was when he was Warden of the Cinque Ports. He gave me a silver posset cup.'

Dando drew a deep breath. 'I must remember ter keep my bleedin' mouth shut.'

She faced him expectantly. 'For a sovereign,' he reminded her, 'you undress.'

Harriet unlaced her shoes and peeled her stockings to her feet. BurrIDGE watched, cruelly, as she unbuttoned her bodice, pulled it over her hips and stood in a shapeless undergarment. 'Undressed,' he repeated, feeling his mouth dry. He removed his jacket.

With only a small, cracked mirror barely sufficient for the purpose of pinning her hair, she had never seen herself naked. She did not know, therefore, what she revealed to this man's half-closed eyes as she waited against the bed, coldly, her thighs pressed tightly together and her hands uncertain whether to cover her lower belly or her breasts. Nor, despite two scrabbling occasions in the darkness of the ferry steps, had she seen a man expectantly exposed. As BurrIDGE drew up his shirt she wanted to look away, but could not, and deep within her panic yawned. 'Sir,' she offered desperately, 'I ain't sixteen, like I said —' Her covering hands were

inadequate, and she turned from him, but his bulk enveloped her. She twisted, panting, stifled, and it was too late. God and Jesus.

It had been, Burridge conceded later, a clumsy, unsatisfactory business, and afterwards the girl had sobbed quietly. She recovered as he buttoned his coat. ‘May I have the pleasure o’ paying my addresses to you again, sir?’ she asked.

He placed a sovereign on the small, marble-topped wash-stand. ‘I’d never find the place again,’ he shrugged, anxious to push behind him an adventure that had left him depressed and ashamed.

‘The Admiral Hardy, sir,’ Harriet offered. ‘I’ll look for yer. And next time’ — she no longer attempted to cover herself — ‘next time I’ll be better, sir, now I know yer.’

He nodded absently, noting that she had already reached for the sovereign. ‘Perhaps,’ he said. ‘We’ll see.’ He had been hoodwinked by her apparent immaturity, and he was becoming angry that he had restrained himself so naively. She was a hardened little whore, and was probably laughing at him behind those tear-swollen eyes. Damn and blast. There was no fool like a bloody old fool.

Burridge returned directly to London Bridge and thence to his quarters in Chatham. The life of an officer and a gentleman in the metropolis had oddly lost its savour, and he needed time to think.

He did think, and it was even more odd that, as the days passed, he was unable to wrench his gnawing thoughts away from the warm white body of little Harriet Lawrence. It was, he supposed, the price of being a bachelor, of years of lonely nights and no woman to reach for in the darkness. He had never aspired to marriage; he could scarcely afford it even now. He had in fact married the regiment.

Still, damn and blast it, a man needed a woman sometimes, or he became a

cold, unemotional, gold-braided vegetable. There were times, he conceded, when a man had to blaspheme, or get filthy drunk, or rut with a woman — to purge himself by debasement.

And that, he knew, was an excuse, not a reason. He wanted little Harriet Lawrence.

He went back to the Admiral Hardy a week later, alighting from the hansom a street away and ashamed of the swelling in his throat as he glimpsed the shabby tavern. What would he do if she were not at the door? Dare he enquire for her? Should he walk past, whistling at the sky, and return an hour later? Or try the ferry steps? Or find another whore?

But she was there. Agonising relief exploded inside him. She was there, diminutive, childlike, her hair clumsily piled under a cheap straw bonnet and her hands modestly clasped. She had lowered her skirt to conceal her ankles, and wore incongruously long earrings, but she was still only a child. Christ, he flayed himself — for Chris' sake, there were grown women with full bodies that would give as good as they took —

She bobbed a curtsy, and her eyes, this time, were not demure. How many men, he wondered, had fingered this child's body during the past week? How many had she decoyed with her innocence, wheedling extra silver with a well-practised show of timidity?

'Can I please you, sir?' she asked.

He could not have known, but Harriet Lawrence was rejoicing at his reappearance for reasons other than he supposed. Since their first meeting there had been no other men, but she had waited at the Admiral Hardy every day, for Burrridge. Harriet had never known anyone quite like Captain William Burrridge. He had a fine, military figure, he dressed like a gentleman, and his speech was thoughtful and courteous. On that first occasion, when she had undressed for him, she had been almost stifled with fear, but he had

been fatherlike in his behaviour, and Harriet had never known a father. She did not know that their exchange had been clumsy; when it was finished she had lain against the warmth of him, in awe that a gentleman like this could moan with feeling for an insignificant person like her. It had provoked within her a maternal possessiveness. And he smelled clean. Her mother, she'd swear, had never achieved a patron like Captain William Burrridge. Now little Harriet Lawrence was enjoying a warm glow of predatory conquest.

Burrridge, however, was awkwardly uncertain. He spoke to a far chimney. 'Perhaps we could dine?'

She nodded, pretending to speculate, although she knew nothing about dining. 'They do a good slate here, sir' — she had studied it repeatedly during the last few days and knew it by rote — 'stewed eels, sausage an' mash, poached rabbit, pickled herrins, wines by the bottle or glass, good measure. Brandies, ales an' porter.' He also nodded, studying the distant chimney as if it were some architectural miracle.

Self-consciously, he led, lengthening his stride in a shame-faced attempt to survive the taproom without sneering comment but, disastrously, the door of the private room was locked, and both he and Harriet were compelled to wait together under a barrage of musing eyes, while a leisurely bartender fumbled for a key, surveyed the room with raised eyebrows and a sniff, and then admitted them. B'Christ, Burrridge seethed, he was making a bloody fool of himself for a juvenile slut —

* * *

'Ere — wot's all this, then?' Dando peered at the chalked noticeboard outside the guardhouse. ' "Recruits' platoon will parade at oh-eight o'clock ter draw issue o' India Service clothin', cork 'elmets, an' new pattern sea kit bags fer —" ' he peered closer ' "— *Aythiopia?*" '

'Aythiopia, bedad,' Holloran puzzled, unable to read. 'Wheer's bloody

Aythiopia?’

‘Where it bleedin’ sez,’ Dando explained. ‘In India. Where else would yer want soddin’ India Service slops? I ’appen ter know it’s near Bombay.’

‘Ethiopia,’ offered Charlie Crewe, ‘is in Africa, dear boy. North-east Africa, between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Jolly old Prester John country, what? It’s got an Emperor.’

‘An’ yer goin’ ter tell us,’ Dando predicted, ‘that ’ee’s yer uncle by bleedin’ marriage, an’ ’ee sends yer a box o’ bleedin’ dates every soddin’ Easter.’ He snorted. ‘When yer’ve been around a bit, Charlie boy, yer’ll git ter know places, see. Aythiopia’s in India. I know, ’corse in the bazaar there was this big Punjabi bag, wi’ a soddin’ great ring in ’er nose.’ He sighed, ‘ “Stand back, Dando Sahib,” she sez, “an’ take a run at me —” ’

‘Faith, thet wuz Benares,’ Holloran corrected. ‘Did I iver tell ye, me ol’ Charlie, ev the toim Dando wuz prustrayted by the “Black Hole ev Benares”? Shure, she swallowed hem — et wuz loik Jonah an’ the bloody whale, so ut wuz — then blew him out en hundreds ev bubbles, loik ye niver saw. We pretended ut wuz sunstroke, bedad, but he wuzn’t the same bloody man fer a wayk.’

‘I wasn’t bleedin’ ready, see,’ Dando claimed, ‘an’ I’d jest had a touch o’ malaria. Anyway, it was like soddin’ broken glass.’ He wagged a warning finger at Charlie Crewe. ‘Don’t *never* take a big woman ’less yer *fit*, Charlie, or yer can lose *pounds*, see. There’s nothin’ worse than a big woman —’

‘Unless ye want somethin’ ye kin *get hould ev*,’ Holloran suggested. ‘Shure, I loik a woman wid something’ ter get hould ev.’

‘I remember Aythiopia,’ Dando affirmed. ‘That’s where Moss Rose tried ter milk the ’oly cow, an’ then we was chased by the bleedin’ ’Indoos, orl the way ter the cantonments.’

Holloran considered. ‘Thet wuz Merrut, me ol’ darlint, before the Mutiny

— et wuz bloody Christmas, bedad, whin Tom Brownlow filled Bill Sutton's bugle wid curry powder.'

Dando usually confined his reading to bottle labels and brewers' signs, but Charlie Crewe browsed through old copies of *The Times*, discarded by the officers' mess anteroom. 'It appears, old chap, that the dusky panjandrum of Ethiopia has been thumbing his simian nose at Her Majesty's Government. Lord Stanley, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs —'

'Gawd struth,' Dando muttered.

'— Lord Stanley has persuaded the Cabinet towards mounting a punitive expedition from India, under the command of Sir Robert Napier —'

'Bob Napier,' Dando nodded, at last familiar with a name. 'Ee came with us ter Taku. That's when we showed the bleedin' Frogs what soldierin' was orl about.' 'Shure, thet's roight,' Holloran contributed. 'Did I iver tell ye, me ol' Charlie, ev the toim we found the Chinee boat painted wid flowers? B'Jasus, they feed ye wid turrd's an' seaweed, an' then hev ye bloody breeches orf before ye kin say "jig-jig"!'

'An' I'll tell yer another thing,' Dando resumed. 'Bob Napier's an ol' Indian yaller.'

'That's what I'm saying, dear boy. Napier has asked for 12,000 fighting troops, including the 1st Battalion King's Own and the Duke of Wellington's.' He paused, pondering. 'I'm damn sure Bertie Fishlaw's in the Wellingtons — an adjutant, or an aide-de-camp, or something like that. Anyway, he still owes me a pony, dear chaps — five to one in fivers against Moonraker at Newmarket. He never could pick horseflesh, dammit.' He grinned. 'So, old sons, if we meet the Wellingtons, we'll have a jolly old pony to play around with, what?'

'B'Jasus,' Holloran frowned, 'who wants ter play wid a bloody pony? Theer's gun-bullocks, screw-gun mules, commissariat camels, gun-train

elephants, widout mentionin' the bloody dragoons' horrses. Whit wid ye do wid a pony, bedad? Faith, the ol' sergeant wid niver allow ut.' 'A pony,' pronounced Dando wisely, since he always knew better, 'would buy' — he calculated, but his arithmetic was inadequate — 'a bleedin' lot o' beer.'

'At sixpence a quart, dear lad,' Charlie Crewe advised, 'a pony would buy a thousand quarts — or two thousand pints.'

Holloran was incredulous. '*Two thousand?*' He closed his eyes. 'Holy St. Michael I Ut's a brewery on legs, so'tis. Whit wid ye get fer a hunnerd-pound pig?'

The forbidding figure of Sergeant-Major Clarridge emerged from the guardhouse, his eyes fastening on them. 'Private Crewe!' He did not like Crewe, Dando or Holloran, but most of all he did not like Crewe. 'Get yerself into drill order, strapped up, wi' rifle, side-arms an' gaiters, *immediate*. Report back 'ere at the double. Fitzpatrick's gone sick wi' a festered toe, and yer'll be gate sentry relief at midday.' He glowered. 'An' I said *at the double!*'

* * *

'Sentries,' said Field Service Regulations,' should be placed so as to gain a clear view over the ground in their front, whilst concealed from the enemy's view. A sentry will immediately warn his guard commander of the approach of any person or party. When the nearest person is within speaking distance the sentry will call out "Halt", covering him with his rifle. The guard commander will then deal with the person or party according to the instructions received by him. Any person not obeying the sentry, or attempting to make off after being challenged, will be fired upon without hesitation.

The regulations, Charlie Crewe decided, had been intended for somewhere other than a depot in Chatham. He could not have fired upon anyone because

he had no ammunition, while additionally, for the purpose of guard duty, his own bayonet had been substituted by one with a deliberately blunted point. There had occasionally been unfortunate incidents involving enthusiastic recruits who had interpreted their orders too literally. All things considered, mused Charlie Crewe, he would find it difficult to defend the depot against an old lady brandishing an umbrella.

On each side of him stretched a fourteen-foot wall of dirty brick, its top studded with broken glass and facing an exactly similar wall across the road, beyond which, it was rumoured in the canteen, was a school for novitiate nuns, all hot with suppressed desire for a lusty soldier. There were even stories of men being enticed through a small door in the wall, never again to be seen, but precise details were lacking. The road, which served only the depot and a canal wharf utilised by the barges of the Tonbridge Powder Mills, was frequented only rarely by civilian traffic, and there were few distractions for a sentry except occasional speculative prostitutes, or drunks returning from short furlough.

For a quarter hour after the departure of the guard-sergeant Charlie Crewe followed the ritual of stamping twelve paces in one direction and twelve in the other but, lacking an audience, his devotion to his duty seemed rather pointless. At last, a dirty small boy halted, feet from him, to eye him critically. Charlie Crewe suffered the urchin's expressionless gaze for several minutes, then enquired, 'Is it necessary, old scout, to stare at me like a myopic basilisk?' The boy wiped a nose on the back of a filthy hand. 'I'm bleedin' entitled, cocky. I pays fer yer, don't I?' He hawked and spat in the direction of the other's polished toecaps, then scuttled away.

It was 12.30, and the depot would be at dinner — issue beef or mutton, taters and hard peas. Army rations had improved during the preceding decade, to the annoyance of those pundits who swore that the Army was

being ruined by soft treatment. There might even be the luxury of ‘duff’ — or ‘baby’s head’ — an indigestible pudding made from flour and suet, but comfortingly solid, or ‘Chinese Wedding-cake’ — boiled rice laced with currents. Charlie Crewe’s gastric function groaned. He must wait until 2 p.m. for sustenance, which was a hungry ninety minutes away.

He was suddenly aware, however, that a woman stood deliberately before him, plucking at her bonnet-ribbons. The prospect of two inquisitors in the same number of minutes was disconcerting. Charlie Crewe shouldered his rifle smartly, stamped twelve paces to his left, turned about, and repeated twelves paces to his starting point. The woman was still there. He contemplated the sky above her head.

‘This the India Depot?’ she asked. ‘Yer King’s Own, ain’t yer?’ Charlie Crewe nodded woodenly.

‘I can’t go in, see,’ the woman continued, ‘‘corse I’m undesirable — but would yer do an old army woman a favour, matey, an’ pass a message?’

He looked down at her. She was not so old — fortyish — poorly but neatly dressed, with a plain but not unattractive face under hair slightly greying, an ample figure emphasised by a tightly-laced waist and, he sensed, that indefinable something that stamped a street woman of the less blatant kind. Charlie Crewe, however, was nothing if not courteous. He was unable to raise his hat, but — ‘Of course, my dear lady. And what would the gentleman’s name be?’ It was not unknown for prostitutes to form attachments to men in barracks, sometimes without reciprocation, and it was probable that this fading temptress, illiterate, had no other means of maintaining a liaison. She would offer a back-street address, a tavern, or plead a hard-luck story about the rent, perhaps even threaten to plead her predicament before the Colonel.

‘Burridge,’ she said. ‘Captain William Burridge. He’s one o’ yourn, ain’t he?’

Charlie Crewe was surprised. ‘He is, ma’am,’ he nodded. ‘Indeed he is.’ He examined her again, more carefully, with the guilty feeling that he had misinterpreted her profession. No, he was damn sure he’d been right the first time. Mind, she was no painted, flighty dollymop, nor some governess compelled by penury to sell her body, but Charlie Crewe could scent a loose woman with the accuracy of a well-trained beagle. ‘Captain Burrige.’ He nodded again. ‘Yes, ma’am.’ He waited.

She was uncertain. ‘Yer ain’t been in the Army long enough ter rub the shine orf yer hobnails.’ Charlie Crewe assumed an apologetic expression, and she regarded him thoughtfully, then. ‘Tell ’im that Harriet’s in a certain way.’ She met his blank stare and snorted. ‘Gawd almighty, she’s pregnant, see. Harriet Lawrence, tell ’im, o’ Greenwich. She’s *thirteen!*’ She glanced in both directions before resuming confidentially. ‘My ’usband was Corporal George Lawrence, o’ the 60th. Anyway, I told ’er, see, but she wouldn’t listen.’Ee’s an officer an’ a gentleman, she sez.’ She reared her chin. ‘But they’re orl the bloody same, I can tell yer. When George Lawrence went orf in ’fifty-two I swore they’d never go short, see. An’ they ain’t. They bloody ain’t. I got ’er shirts from Levi’s — it’s sweat work, but yer keep yerself clean. A woman’s nothin’ if she ain’t clean. ‘Gawd’ — she spoke through angrily clenched teeth — ’an’ that’s orl the bloody reward yer git!’

Katie Lawrence glared accusingly at Charlie Crewe, and he nodded contritely. ‘It’s a wicked world, ma’am. Perhaps if you had a word with the Chaplain, what?’

‘Chaplain? A bloody lot that’ll do! “Gawd moves in mysterious ways, my good woman, an’ would yer kindly leave by the side door?” ’ Her pointing finger was inches from Charlie Crewe’s nose, ‘Yer ask ’im — Burrige — wot’s ’ee goin’ ter bloody do about it?’

‘I shall, ma’am,’ he assured her, ‘at the first opportunity.’

‘There’s laws, see,’ Katie Lawrence threatened.

It was time for his twelve paces. He shouldered his rifle, turned to his left, and stepped off briskly, but she followed, a yard behind. If there were laws they were beyond the reach of such as she and, if it was a wicked world, it also belonged to men. ‘They’re orl the bloody same.’ she repeated. ‘Are yer *listenin’*?’ Charlie Crewe stamped about, and Katie turned with him ‘‘Ee’s had ‘is bloody pleasure, see —’

They were confronted by Sergeant-Major Clarridge, puce and bristling. ‘Private Crewe! Have yer read the Mutiny Act an’ the Articles o’ War, Part Four, Section Seventeen? *Indecency*! Consortin’, whilst on duty, wi’ a woman of a certain kind!’ He sniffed majestically. ‘Wi’ deference to yer inexperience, Crewe, I kin be lenient, see. He paused, glowering. ‘Seven days pack drill.’ He whirled on Katie Lawrence. And you!’

But Katie was not intimidated. ‘Shut yer bloody mouth,’ she told him, then presented her back and walked away. The Sergeant-Major’s cheeks swelled, bullfrog-like. ‘Sedition!’ he retorted. He turned to Charlie Crewe.

‘*Fourteen* days,’ he amended.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dando and Holloran sat in the shade of the old French 12-pounder that rusted by the wall of the barracks water-tank as, fifty yards away, Charlie Crewe marched and counter marched in full field order, pack, knapsack and greatcoat.

‘Pack drill,’ said Dando, sucking at his pipe disdainfully, is fer bleedin’ children.’

‘Faith, so ut is,’ Holloran agreed. ‘Recruits es tray ted soft an’ aisy these days. Fifty lashes over a bloody gun-whayl, bedad, or chained ter a log wid bread an’ wather —’

‘Still, it’ll ’arden ‘is feet.’ Dando conceded.

No. 4 Punishment, if lacking the brutality of earlier years, however was still demanding. Charlie Crewe was confined to barracks and denied tobacco. He ate his meals under the eye of a sentry, was permitted only a half hour for dinner, stood for two hours at the guardhouse between 6 and 8 p.m., and answered roll-call at the same place every hour between Morning Parade until 6 p.m. Finally, he suffered pack drill on the parade ground for a maximum of three hours per day. Had he acquired a good conduct badge, he would have lost it.

‘Wid ye remember O’Brien, me ol’ Dando?’ Holloran reminisced. Jasus — a starrved divil, so he wuz. He hed two wayks cells fer staylin’ the leg ev porrk from the officers’ cookhouse, then, thray days later, he wuz court-martialled fer staylin’ the bloody prison guards’ rations —’

Charlie Crewe, his period of drill finished, limped towards them. His face was flushed and sweating. ‘By Jove, he breathed, ‘at my death, which may

not be far distant, the words “left-right, left-right” will be found engraved on my heart. And this’ — he contemplated his rifle — ‘is the most diabolical instrument of torture ever invented, dammit!’

‘Faith, me ol’ Charlie,’ Holloran reproved, ‘a rifle’s a sojer’s best friend. Ye shud treat ut loik ye woif, so ye shud, an’ rub ut down wid an oily rag ivery bloody day.’

Dando, drawing Charlie Crewe behind the 12-pounder, produced a bottle of beer. ‘Ere, Charlie — sweeten yer spit. I found it under Sergeant-Major Clarridge’s bed, when I was sweepin’.’ He proffered his pipe. ‘An’ ’ave a spit an a suck.’

Charlie Crewe accepted the beer but declined the pipe. ‘At the moment, old fruit, he apologised, ‘my respiratory faculty is not ready for Old Turk Black Plug. It’s an acquired taste, not given to everyone, what?’ He sat, his back against the grass-clogged gun-wheel, his eyes closed as the beer flooded his mouth. ‘This,’ he announced, ‘is positively nectar.’

‘Bass,’ Holloran corrected, anxiously watching the bottle’s contents diminish. ‘India Pale Ale. Shure, ye’d best not drink too much on a hot stomach, me bhoyo. Et cud give ye colic.’

‘Anyway,’ Dando lectured, ‘it’ll teach yer a bleedin’ lesson, Charlie boy. Don’t never indulge in a bit o’ stink-finger while yer on sentry, see. Not’ — he conceded — unless it’s dark, an’ yer keep stampin’ yer feet orl the time, an’ whistlin’. The thing is’ — he frowned — if she gits ’er shift snagged on the buckle o’ yer expense pouch, yer in trouble, see.’

‘Jasus, ye’re in throuble,’ Holloran confirmed. ‘Niver hev carnal relayshunships wid a bloody expense pouch.’

‘I wasn’t *indulging* in anything, old bean,’ Charlie Crewe breathed. ‘Dammit, she was indulging in me —’

Holy St. Michael, thet’s worrse,’ Holloran shook his head. ‘Thet’s

perverrshun, so'tis.'

'Yer want ter be careful o' that sort o' thing,' Dando warned 'Yer kin go blind.'

'It was all rather odd,' Charlie Crewe started to explain.

'Unnatcheral, bedad,' Holloran emphasised. 'En Calcutta there wuz a woman wid a bloody donkey. Hev ye finished wid the beer, me jewel?'

'She said her daughter was pregnant —'

Dando choked. 'Soddin' arse-'oles! Deny it, Charlie boy! Deny every bleedin' word, see! Jes' keep say in' yer was with me an' Holloran orl the time, an' we didn't leave the barracks canteen orl night. Yer've never seen 'er before in yer bleedin' life, see.'

'Shure, an' whin ye did see her, she wuz wid someone else.'

'She can't prove anythin',' Dando continued. 'Anyway, she's probably tryin' 'er luck wi' 'alf the bleedin' Regiment.' He nodded. 'Jes' keep denyin' it, Charlie, till yer safe on the troopship. First turn o' the screws, orl debts paid, see.'

Charlie Crewe sighed. 'My dear chaps, the lady wanted me to inform Captain Burrige that he had incurred certain paternity obligations, and while she was telling me, the Sergeant-Major exploded from the guardhouse. She said her husband was a Corporal in the 60th Rifles —' He reflected. 'Lawrence. Corporal George Lawrence — and her daughter Harriet had achieved "an interesting condition", what? That, dear boys, was the extent of our exchange. The Sergeant-Major was breathing fire and pack-drill, dammit —'

Both Dando and Holloran were staring at him. Charlie Crewe stared back. 'Anyone would think,' he retorted, 'that I'd revealed the secret plans of the barracks latrines to a beautiful spy from the Russian Embassy. Dammit, chaps, what was I supposed to do — transfix her to the wall with a blunt

bayonet? Or go through the motions of loading and shout “bang-bang”?’

Neither Dando nor Holloran seemed amused. ‘Yer’d never believe it,’ Dando said slowly, his eyes narrowed. ‘Yer’d never bleedin’ believe it, would yer?’

‘Faith,’ Holloran marvelled, ‘ef His Holiness himself told ye on his knays, bedad, ye’d call him a liar, so ye wud.’

‘It must ‘ave been Katie, orlright,’ Dando decided. ‘She ‘ad three brats when we left ‘er on the jetty at bleedin’ Gravesend, wi’ George Lawrence chokin’ on the boatdeck. Was one o’ the brats an’ Arriet?’

Holloran could not recall the names of any of the grimy juvenile, who screeched and swore among the barrack-rooms of Chatham’s Fort Pitt in 1852. ‘Jasus, did they hev names or bloody numbers?’ Charlie Crewe was baffled.

‘George Lawrence must be time-expired,’ Dando calculated, ‘less ‘ee signed on,’ He turned angrily to Charlie Crewe. ‘It ain’t bleedin’ right, see. D’yer see them feet?’ He lifted a boot. ‘Katie Lawrence was soapin’ my socks an’ drainin’ my blisters when you was ridin’ side-saddle on a soddin’ rockin’ ‘orse!’

‘A bloody rockin’ horrse.’ Holloran nodded.

‘Yer’ll ‘ave ter tell Burrige,’ Dando decided. ‘‘Ee can’t Weedin’ go around leavin’ ‘elpless wimmin wi’ bellies full o’ arms an’ legs, then expect ter piddle orf on the troopship, laughin’. It jes’ ain’t soddin’ done.’

‘Dammit, scout,’ Charlie Crewe shrugged, ‘that’s not cricket either. You can’t slap another chappie on the back and tell him his wild oats are bursting into glorious blossom. It’s the sort of thing that could get a fellow black-balled from every club in London, what?’

Dando considered carefully. ‘Yer kin write ‘im a letter,’ he resolved at last, ‘like yer read ter us from the papers, see. “To ‘oo it may concern”, an’ signed

“a well-wisher”. Then ‘ee won’t know who Weedin’ sent it.’

‘Thet’s roight, bedad!’ Holloran was filled with admiration. ‘An’ ef ye give ut to him yeself, ye won’t need a stamp.’

The letter was a collective effort, although Holloran’s contribution was of doubtful value. ‘In rale ink,’ he ruled. ‘Whin ye hev a letter fer arrears ev rrent, shure, ut’s always in rale ink.’ Charlie Crewe had pored over a copy of the Manual of Military Law, surreptitiously borrowed from the Pay Office by Dando.

‘It says nothing about officers’ illegitimate offspring,’ Charlie Crewe announced, ‘only the bastard children of non-commissioned officers and men. Perhaps officers don’t have ‘em, what? Anyway’ — he read from the Manual — ‘it’s sixpence a day maintenance for a sergeant, threepence for corporals and privates, by order of the Secretary of State.’

‘Jasus,’ Holloran murmured, ‘ef I’d known thet before I bloody ‘listed, I’d hev sworn ter the Secretary ev State thet Sarn’t-Major Clarridge wuz me father — the saints presarve hem.’ He knew the price of beer. ‘Thet’s a quart a day fer bein’ a choild ev twilight passion.’

*Captain W. Burridge,
King’s Own Regiment,
H.M. India Depot,
Chatham.*

Dear Sir,

Unaccustomed as we are to putting pen to paper, particularly with regard to a matter of such considerable delicacy, we nevertheless feel it our duty as loyal subjects of Her Gracious Majesty, in order to avoid dissension and riotous behaviour among the civil, leading to disturbances of the Queen’s peace, to draw your honour’s attention to Part IV of the Manual of Military Law, hereinafter known as the Manual of Military Law, all

previous Acts and Statutes being herewith superseded, referring to bastard progeny and maintenance thereof. If a sergeant pays sixpence, a Captain should pay double — (here the phrase ‘being pissy-arsed sods’ was scratched out). At the risk of diversifying, we think Sergeant-Major Clarridge is bastard progeny also, but we have no intention of similarly communicating with the Untouchable Maddrasay Madd Madrassi barracks sweeper who met his mother in a Turkish brothel and died of pox, screaming, before he could be lifted off of her. Therefore and notwithstanding the high incidence of bastard Sergeant-Majors in the glorus glorious Army of Her Most Gracious Maggesty Bass and theretofore quart sod it and your affectionate and loyal. God bless the p Prince of wh Wales Whales. We have a stamp. Stamp stamp.

Formulation had taken several hours over quarts of Bass bitter beer. Dando, who had contributed ‘dissension and riotous behaviour among the civil’ and ‘rot-guttin’ barracks sweeper’, and numerous expletives which Charlie Crewe considered superfluous, nodded approvingly. Holloran, illiterate, insisting on ‘yer honour’ and ‘the Quane’s pace’, basked admiringly in the glow of ‘orl prayvious Acks an’ Statutes, bedad, bein’ herewith super-cayded’. When he crawled to his mattress he was still murmuring, ‘The Quane’s bloody pace and orl prayvious Acks an’ Statutes bein’ herewith supercayded —’

Whether or not the ambiguous composition was adequate for its intended purpose remained undetermined, because Captain Burridge never received it. The day before the letter reached the India Depot, the Captain and the platoon of recruits were aboard the troopship *Serapis*, departing Gravesend for Aden — and the next mail conveyance to Aden might be next week, or next month, or next year.

CHAPTER SIX

Sir Robert Cornelius Napier was one of the better general officers of the largely mediocre 400 on the Army List of the 1860s. Fifty-seven years old at the time of his new appointment, he was tall and heavily-shouldered, with a craggy, kindly face and a lengthy, ragged moustache under blue eyes. If nothing more, he was remarkable for his affable, almost gentle behaviour towards subordinates, and his rare periods of displeasure were marked only by an icy but polite sarcasm that achieved considerably more than any display of shouting and fist-waving.

This bland exterior, however, hid qualities of intelligence and logical application which were not common among contemporaries. He had learned well from a lifetime of soldiering which had begun with seventeen years as an Engineer officer, building roads, bridges and canals with the East India Company's army before participating in the Sutlej campaign of 1845, against the Sikhs. There followed a period of almost constant, if minor, warfare in India, usually unrecognised but often bitterly fought and providing invaluable experience. The Indian Mutiny firmly established his reputation as a fighting soldier as well as an engineer, and the 1860 China Expedition found him Commanding the British 2nd Division under Sir Hope Grant.

Returning to India, Napier became First Military Member and then President of the Indian Council. In 1865 he was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Bombay Army with the rank of Lieutenant-General.

He was thus a soldier of no small operational and administrative experience, and the Ethiopian campaign was the first for which an Engineer officer had been selected for top command. Both Whitehall in London and

the Bombay Presidency would later have cause for regret over their choice. Sir Robert was a thinking general, unlike many of his predecessors who had plunged into complex campaigns with no more preparation than for an Aldershot review, and had often been rescued from disaster only by the sheer guts and adaptability of the common British soldier. Bob Napier was different, and he was coldly and politely awkward. That he quickly made clear.

His attitude was not the result of weakness or nervousness. He could be quietly tough with the rank and file whose value he never underestimated, as he had already shown in India. Demanding the biggest share of British troops, India represented ten or twelve years of near purgatory for the ordinary soldier — of poor pay and atrocious food, vicious discipline, badly planned, stifling and sweat-stinking cantonments, uncaring officers, exploitation by contractors and the contempt of civilians, all exacerbated by the knowledge that nothing would ever improve. Even worse was the high incidence of disease, so high as to be accepted with the shrug of inevitability — cholera, typhoid, dysentery, malaria, syphilis — imposing a mortality level far higher than that of enemy bullets. It was fortunate that the average, slum-reared British soldier had the constitution and mentality of a bison. Even so, the suicide rate was high, with a rifle muzzle held between the teeth and the trigger manipulated by a toe.

There was another way for a desperate man to be quit of India — violence towards a superior. This meant a District Court Martial and a sentence of penal servitude which, however, had to be served in England. The fact that many soldiers preferred years of brutal confinement in a military prison to service in India was demonstrated by the number who committed assaults on officers — usually by the trivial method of throwing a tobacco pipe or a plug of tobacco — and were led away smiling.

Napier did two things. He condemned the warrens of insanitary casemates in Karachi and Poona and built new, airy barracks at Kirkee, then insisted that all soldiers charged with violence towards a superior should receive fifty lashes and serve two years' imprisonment in India. The incidence of violent insubordination fell immediately to a negligible level.

The proposed Ethiopian campaign was a headache — not so much from the purely military as from the logistic viewpoint. Britain was not the most popular nation in the world; there were many countries which would chuckle to see her humbled, and the whole world was watching and waiting for the outcome of this new embarrassment. For all Britain's naval and military might, the difficulties imposed by nature were shuddering — a harbourless coastline and hundreds of miles of unmapped, untamed interior, lacking roads, bridges, telegraphs, railways or any civilised means of communication, badly watered and reputedly disease-infested. All these problems had to be solved before meeting the unknown quantity of the Emperor Theodore's forces. Already, insurance companies had announced increased premiums for anybody rash enough to accompany the expedition. Sir Robert Napier, in the language of a later generation, was on a hiding to nothing.

Bob Napier, however, had never taken a hiding from anyone. At Mahabaleshwar his green-shaded desk lamp gleamed into the early hours, with the punkahs silent, and only a tired khitmatgar bringing him periodical coffee as he calculated, considered, and calculated again, occasionally putting down his pen to walk to the window where, beyond, a star-scattered sky was flushing to dawn pink; but he saw only the spectre of another Crimea, where the British had landed, scandalously underequipped and utterly ignorant of what lay beyond high-water mark. And he had himself experienced the Indian Mutiny, which an obese and stultified administration had watched approaching for years without stirring from its armchairs. Well, the gutter-

scum of the British Army had saved Whitehall from humiliation on those occasions, but only just. This time Napier would make damn sure that those gutter-scum were sent into a fight with every chance that money could buy. And this time Whitehall would pay in hard cash, not soldiers' lives.

Government House eyebrows were raised in disbelief when the Commander-in-Chief's recommendations were received. First, said Napier, he would require full authority, both military and political, during the Army's presence in Ethiopia. He knew too well the frequent incompatibility of soldiers and diplomats, and had no intention of tailoring his strategy for the benefit of frock-coated civil servants with an eye on the annual Honours List. If a political officer was imposed upon the expedition he would be politely listened to, but that was all.

His troops would be drawn entirely from the Bombay Presidency. He would have no mixed bag of battalions from Madras and Bengal, despite those commands' desire to be involved, and the infantry he chose would be climate-hardened — three regiments of European infantry, seven of sepoy (one to be a regiment of Punjab pioneers), four regiments of Indian cavalry and a squadron of European cavalry. To support these would be two batteries of mountain guns adapted for carriage by mules, a battery of rifled, breech-loading Armstrong six-pounders, and a rocket brigade. His British troops, at least, should all be armed with Snider-Enfield breech-loading rifles, of which 4,000 were to be despatched from Britain immediately.

In addition, Napier went on, there would be a coolie corps of 3,000, so that he could use his troops for what they were intended for — fighting — and not digging roads and ditches. The instructions for troops' equipment were precise. Every man would have a solar helmet, spare boots and socks, flannel shirts, a cholera belt, gloves, and a waterproof sheet in addition to his blanket. Napier had carefully studied the provisional medical report of the American

Union Army following the recently concluded Civil War, which revealed that 93,443 men had been killed on the battlefield or died of wounds, but almost twice that total — 186,216 — died from disease, and this was a figure that did not include 24,184 dead from unknown causes. It was not that Bob Napier had any desire to show the Americans, or anyone, how to treat soldiers. The British had nothing to boast about in their treatment of soldiers, but Napier was not too proud to learn a lesson. This time there would be an efficient and well-equipped medical corps, and three hospital ships staffed by surgeons and trained orderlies, clean-scrubbed in accordance with Miss Nightingale's instructions. Each ship would be stored with the latest medicaments — chloroform, quinine, 250 dozen of port, and ice-making machines.

* * *

'Ice?' Dando snorted. 'Don't it make yer *spit*? There's the Sar'nt-Major tellin' yer ter boil yer water, so it's too 'ot ter Weedin' drink, and there's them sods makin' *ice*! Wouldn't yer think *someone* could make up their Weedin' minds?' This modern army, in Dando's view, was going to the dogs. There was a time, he recalled, when men marched their feet bloody, drank from slimed puddles that the mules refused, and fought a battle on a handful of choke-dog biscuit and sour salt beef. And that, he was never tired of telling Charlie Crewe, was real Weedin' soldiering.

* * *

Bob Napier was far from finished. He demanded condensers for converting salt water to fresh, and Norton pumps to convey the fresh water to storage tanks. He wanted steam locomotives, trucks, with twenty miles of track to be laid across the coastal plain, telegraph equipment for several hundred miles, electrical lamps, and piers, lighthouses and warehouses. Then he required hundreds of Maltese and bullock carts, 3,000 horses, 16,000 mules and

ponies, 8,000 camels, 5,000 bullocks, and 50 elephants — a list that sent veterinary officers scouring the markets of Spain, Italy, Syria and Egypt.

With a force that involved Christians, Hindoos, Muslims, and whatever the coolies might be, catering was not the least of problems, and commissariat stores must include rice and ghee in addition to compressed vegetables, pickles, flour, sugar, 50,000 tons of salt beef and the same of salt pork, powdered milk, potatoes, tobacco, jam, and 30,000 gallons of Jamaica rum.

To transport all these men, animals and materials from Bombay and elsewhere to a suitable point of discharge on the Red Sea would necessitate nearly 300 ships, both steam and sail, many of which must be chartered in England at a total monthly cost of £449,000. The Royal Navy would be required to survey potential landing areas, lay buoys and moorings, and supervise the arrival and disembarkation of vessels.

Finally there was the question of ready money — most necessary when dealing with a primitive people who understandably had no faith in commissary notes, paper receipts, banknotes, or even coin, unless the coin was a Maria Theresa dollar from Austria and plainly stamped 1780. It was one of the enigmas of history that this particular coin should be accepted as trustworthy, to the exclusion of all others, throughout the whole of the Middle East, northern and north-central Africa. The Vienna mint had for ninety years enjoyed a profitable monopoly in stamping out millions of silver dollars dated 1780, incorporating the busty profile of a long-dead Empress on one side and the Austrian imperial arms on the other. Vienna would be delighted to meet Napier's demand for a further half million new coins.

By October 1867, the results of a coastal survey had indicated that the Anglo-Indian force should land at the Berber village of Zoulla, in Annersley Bay on the Red Sea, a stretch of sandy beach thirty miles south of Massowah. The fact that Annersley Bay was nominally Egyptian territory would not

normally have caused any concern to the British, who were accustomed to ignoring such trivialities, but in this case the Egyptians had no desire to impede a threat to their old enemy, Theodore.

It was generally suggested, and Napier agreed, that the Ethiopians would do little to contest the British advance across the coastal plain. There might be skirmishes among the narrow passes of the mountains beyond, 8,000 feet high, but Theodore, it was felt, would concentrate his forces at Magdala, where the British would be 400 miles from their landing point, their lines of communication similarly stretched, and the effects of sickness and weariness having reached a maximum. If Theodore could inflict a defeat on Napier, or even stubbornly resist him, the consequences could be as devastating as Elphinstone's retreat from Kabul. Reports seeping out of Ethiopia revealed that Theodore was not as ill-equipped as the world liked to think. He would enjoy an overwhelming numerical advantage, and his warriors were armed with double-barrelled percussion guns against the smooth-bore muzzle-loaders of Napier's sepoys. Further, the Emperor, whose German workers had established powder factories and gun foundries, had far superior artillery power, with 56, 24 and 18 pounders — British, French and Turkish — and including one colossal mortar weighing more than seventy tons and requiring 500 men to haul it.

Things could go very wrong with the proposed Ethiopian campaign — and all this for a handful of hostages, many of them non-British, who might be massacred within hours of Napier's landing at Zoulla.

* * *

'Did yer ever see such a soddin' silly 'at?' Dando asked, trying his solar helmet for the first time. 'Do they think we 'ave 'eads shaped like bleedin' fig puddin's?' He sniffed. First it was ice, now hats like pudding bowls. 'It'll be bleedin' gamps an' spats next. There was a time when a sojer *looked* like a

soddin' sojer, not a bleedin' fairground pimp.' He took off his helmet to stare at it disgustedly. 'An' wot's them 'oles for?' 'Ow can yer fill a bleedin' 'at with water if it's got '*oles*'?

CHAPTER SEVEN

‘If there was some fountins an’ statchers,’ Dando opined, ‘it’d be like the bleedin’ Exhibishun in ’Yde Park — if it weren’t so soddin’ ’ot. I don’t know why people want ter live in places that’s so soddin’ ’ot.’

‘Shure, an’ ye’re roight, me ol’ darlint,’ Holloran agreed, as he usually did. ‘Ef I lived en a place loik this, bedad, I wudn’t live heer. I’d embrocate somewheer else, so I wud. Faith, thim Aythiopians es burrrnt *black* wid the hate.’

‘It’s a question of evolution — Darwin and all that,’ Charlie Crewe said, wiping his streaming neck with a handful of barrel pull-through. ‘My grandfather — he was the eleventh Earl, y’know — thought the Eskimos began at Ipswich, and anywhere south of Sittingbourne was tiger-shoot country, what?’

The coastal plain — the fringe of the great Rift Valley that plunged southward into Africa to Mozambique — was flanked by mountains, fourteen miles distant. The survey report had described it as abundantly grassed and well watered, but the survey had been undertaken at the close of the wet season; now the terrain was arid and dusty, furrowed by dried stream-beds choked with stones and scattered with tired furze and juniper shrubs. Several thousand mules, camels and cattle, disembarked from transports and turned loose on the plain for want of attendants, had found no water or fodder, and hundreds had died daily, their carcasses putrefying in the hot sun. Many had been stolen by natives and, it was rumoured, were being sold back to the Army with brand-marks changed.

Above the glistening white of the beach were the immaculate lines of tents

over which a Union Jack lazily floated, prefabricated wooden buildings, and the water tanks only now being supplied by a massive American condenser, in turn situated on an artificial island linked to shore by a tram-railed pier of nine hundred feet.

Napier had brought 13,000 fighting troops to Ethiopia, of which 4,000 were British and 9,000 Indian, but this force was already supplemented by 19,000 non-combatants — coolies, muleteers, wagoners, camel-drivers and elephant mahouts. The chancellories of Europe had added their quota, and there were military observers from thirteen countries, including France, Prussia, Austria, Italy, Holland and Spain. The press was represented by G. A. Henty of the *London Standard*, Dr. Austen of *The Times*, Whiteside of the *Morning Post*, Lieutenant Shepherd of *The Times of India*, and the garrulous Henry Morton Stanley of the *New York Herald*. There were interpreters, chaplains, and missionaries, while the British Museum had sent a geographer, an archaeologist and a zoologist.

The sun-bleached sands of Annersley Bay had scarcely been trodden since the Israelites had fled from Egyptian bondage. Now the bay teemed with thousands of humans, white, brown and black. Piles of commissariat and ordnance stores, fodder and timber mounted hourly as the crowded ships off shore vomited their cargoes. Elephants were being hoisted into lighters, camels snarled and spat, and the steam pumps and locomotives panted and rattled. Files of laden coolies shambled everywhere, shouted at by overseers, and local natives prowled, eager to pilfer. There was a pervading, insinuating stench from the putrescent carcasses that littered the surrounding plain for miles, attracting millions of flies that invaded the tent-lines. Although the condensers were producing fresh water at the rate of 160 tons a day, this was barely sufficient for the needs of the thousands of men and animals already ashore. There were guards on the water-tanks, with scuffles and fighting

among the labourers when they drew their evening ration, needing rifle butts and kicks to quieten.

Gradually, however, problems were being overcome and order was asserting itself. Rations, if somewhat repetitive, were ample, consisting of a pound of biscuit daily, one and a half pounds of meat, with rice, sugar, tea, salt, compressed vegetables, and a grog issue. Some items were in short supply — bread, butter and mustard — and fresh milk (*haleeb*) cost the equivalent of two shillings a pint, which was beyond the pockets of even the officers. There was no beer, but a native fermentation, known variously as *tej* and *arrachi*, made a potent substitute. Yet while supply difficulties at Zoulla were relatively trivial, the affair of the coolies and the Shoho had not been predictable.

By European standards the local Shoho tribespeople were not attractive. They were black-skinned Somalis, dirty and unsophisticated. The women lacked the natural physical grace that compensated for the primitive qualities of other Africans, and even though they were often naked to the waist offered little temptation to the white troops, who were normally far from discerning in the matter of sexual indulgence. The coolies, the dregs of Marashtra, Mysore and Gujurat, receiving seven rupees a month for portage and railway building, were not similarly repelled. The Shoho women were naively and openly promiscuous, but for 3,000 coolies there were not enough of them. They resorted with equal appetite to the hordes of small girls and boys who thronged the camp lines.

Within weeks, hundreds of the coolies' communal tents harboured an additional tenant. The Shohos, oddly, seemed to view the Indians' bizarre sexual habits with amused detachment, only mildly surprised that the strange brown men should apply themselves so enthusiastically to such meaningless activities. The British took a different view.

‘No rifles,’ Captain Burridge ordered, ‘just lathis. I want every one of the coolies’ tents searched, and all Shohos driven out of the lines — and make sure the devils don’t double back when you’ve passed. If you catch any of the Indians *in the act*, use your stick, *hard*, on both of ’em. If you see buggery, you can use your boot as well —’

‘Boggery?’ Holloran enquired. ‘How kin ye tell bloddy boggery whin ye see ut? Whit’s *boggery*?’

‘Easy,’ Dando explained. ‘If both their toes is turned down, it’s buggery, see. If their toes is facin’, it’s jest a *carnal exchange*, which is legal.’ He paused, pondering. ‘No. Make sure the party underneath ain’t a woman that’s offerin’ ’er parts backwards. That ain’t buggery, it’s jest bleedin’ different, unless she’s offerin’ the wrong part.’ It was becoming confusing. ‘No —’ ang on. If the party underneath is male, see, it’s bleedin’ buggery, unless ’ee’s facin’ upwards, when it don’t make soddin’ sense. If, on the other ’and —’ The other hand was threatening to become too complex, and Dando compromised. ‘If yer see a coolie an’ a blackie stuck together, use yer bleedin’ lathi, see —’

The stench of the coolies’ tent-lines was nauseating, with the stink of the plain mingling with that of human and animal excreta, urine, sweat-fouled bodies, cooking, and rotting refuse. Every inch of the dust underfoot was stained by red betel juice, continually and randomly spat by the Indians, with the tent interiors stifling, gloomy caverns jumbled with dirty bedding, artefacts and tawdry rubbish. The crowded Indians slept, sprawled, gossiped, disputed and, inevitably, spat everywhere.

There were Shohos in plenty — women with cropped hair in shapeless kanzus, girls and small boys, naked or almost so, each resigned to the sequential, perverted whims of perhaps twenty coolies, which left them seldom unmolested, but seemingly content with the reward of food and an

occasional small coin.

Captain Burridge's platoon swept through the coolies' camp with flailing lathis and undisguised gusto. Indians scattered, wailing, with their puzzled Shoho hangers-on cowering among the debris in the tents. A score of coolies, caught *flagrante delicto* in convulsive partnership with native children, writhed and scrabbled as the soldiers' sticks slashed at them, and black-skinned women crawled among the tent-ropes, shrieking, trailing their ragged, nightshirt kanzus.

When the noisy affair was finished, Captain Burridge dismissed his men. 'Subjects of the Queen,' he told them, 'have to learn that there are standards of decency that have to be maintained. The rules that Englishmen respect are the rules of the Empire, and I expect you men to set an example. Women should be treated with courtesy, and not taken advantage of because they are ignorant primitives. As for the unspeakable depravity of violating natives of tender years, this must be stamped out with severity. Offenders of any rank will be tried by field-general court-martial under Section 49 of the Army Act and sentenced to penal servitude.'

'Did ye heer thet?' Holloran snorted. 'Who wid want ter indulge en unspaykable depravity wid thim black Hottentots? It'd be loik kissin' an' squayzin' a Thing from the Pit, so it wud.' He paused. 'Shure, ye cud only do ut in the darrk.'

'Would yer soddin' *believe* it?' Dando retorted. 'An' after we sent 'im that letter an' orl. Yer wudn't think'ee'ad the brass ter look us in the face, wud yer?'

'It's odd, to say the least,' Charlie Crewe agreed. 'Damn odd, old scout. It's hypocrisy. I've half a mind to write to *The Times* about the morals of army officers.' 'Signed "a well-wisher",' Dando suggested.

Holloran agreed. 'Wid orl prayvious Acks an' Statutes bein' herewith

supercayded, bedad, an' rale ink. Thim wimmin is loik bloody *orang-outangies*, an' they can't even *spayk*! Jasus, a man cud get stuck half-way, an' they'd not tell ye till ut was too late.' He searched in his bed-roll for a consoling bottle of *tej*. 'Did I iver tell ye, me ol' Charlie, ev the girrls ev Donlevy's linen mill, who pushed apprentices' members into a bottle, then tickled thim till they cudn't get ut out?'

'Aving a bit o' Black 'Am,' Dando ruled, 'is orlright, if yer like that sort o' thing. That's wot yer join the soddin' Army for.' Aving it orf with a black ain't the same as a twelve-year white girl that's an orphan.'

'Jasus, thet's roight,' Holloran nodded gravely. 'It's a bloody dishgrace, so'tis, thet honest sojers kin only hev hay then black orang-outangies, whin theer's *hunnerds* ev whoit girrls thet's orphans. Did I ivcr tell ye, Charlie bhoyo, ev the little Goorkha piece at the Hindun? Faith, she wuz a little darlint, wrigglin' an' squeakin', an' diggin' her nails. An' I got fifty lashes fer ut.'

'An expensive *affair de coeur*,' Charlie Crewe suggested. 'Bedad, no — she wuz a Goorkha. Theer's nothin' loik a Goorkha woman fer bloody ayting yer aloive.'

Forty-four elephants, many of them seasick, transported with their mahouts from Calcutta in two ships specially modified to accommodate them, created frantic excitement among the Somalis, who had never before seen such animals. The elephants picked their way delicately up the beach, now polluted with oil, cinders, cement and coal-dust, littered with broken bales of fodder, iron rails, fishplates and fishbolts, sleepers, latrine buckets, tent canvas, corrugated iron — the effluent of civilisation. In both European and Indian lines men were beginning to sicken from a mildly feverish, apathetic malaise — indefinable, but the Army had seen these red lights before, in

Balaclava and Scutari, Madras, Hong Kong and Taku. It spelled disaster, and the men must be moved to higher ground. The mountains, fourteen miles distant, and on the route to Magdala, were certainly higher. It was time to march from the increasing filth of Zoulla.

* * *

Both a railway and a road — with the uninspiring name of QMG Road — were being pushed across the plain towards Komayli, at the entrance of a ravine that thrust into the mountain range. Only six miles of track, however, had so far been laid, the builders being plagued with difficulties which included the supply of five different types of rail requiring four different methods of fixing. Equipment had been stored in the wrong ships, there was a shortage of experienced plate-layers, and the intense heat limited labour to only 6½ hours a day. Finally, the engines and rolling stock brought from India were antiquated and cranky, repeatedly breaking down.

Detachments of the Belooch Regiment, with sappers and miners, had already reached Komayli and had even pushed outposts through the ravine to Senafe. Information had been received that the Emperor Theodore was falling back on his fortress of Magdala with heavy ordnance. Mess tacticians suggested that Napier should race to deal with the Ethiopians before they could reach their fortifications, but Magdala was 340 punishing miles from Senafe, before which was the tortuous, rock-strewn defile of the Komayli ravine, which pessimists claimed could not be negotiated by guns and wagons. And then there was the question of Kassai, Prince of Tigre.

The success of Napier's advance would depend greatly upon the co-operation of the provincial chieftains, and the first 150 miles of country were controlled by a yet unseen Kassai, known to be in revolt against Theodore but apparently more concerned with fighting his neighbour, Wagshum Gobaze, Prince of Lastra. Napier's proclamation to the Ethiopian tribes had given

assurance that the British had no other design than the release of the captives in Magdala and, as soon as this was achieved, the expeditionary force would withdraw. Kassai, for this reason, was reluctant to show himself friendly. What would he earn except Theodore's vicious vengeance when the white men had gone? He would prefer to sit on the fence and allow his rival, Wagshum Gobaze, to be mauled by the Emperor first. Then he would see.

Meanwhile the reluctant Prince, with 10,000 warriors, waited at Adowa, on the right of Napier's line of route, while ahead, on the mountains, were the Danakil tribes, the men of which achieved warrior status and marriage only by the taking of a human life. In such an unpredictable situation, the maintenance of a secure line of communications almost four hundred miles long would be almost impossible.

Whitehall, in the meantime, was becoming anxious over the mounting expense of the expedition and also the possibility of the Egyptians sending an army into Ethiopia to exploit any successes of the British. 'What is desired here,' wrote the Duke of Cambridge from his London armchair, 'is that a flying column, or a succession of flying columns, should be pushed forward and operate to the front, so as to make a dash if possible and finish the business before the rains set in.' The Duke, cousin of the Queen and Commander-in-Chief of the Army, had an undistinguished field record and was completely ignorant of Ethiopia.

Napier adamantly refused to be hustled but, he knew, a start must be made. The seven-mile column of troops, with mules, guns, elephants and servants raised a throat-choking pall of dust as it lurched across the plain towards Komayli and the mountains. In India a European battalion was accompanied by 1,200 baggage mules and 600 camp followers. Napier's orders allowed only 187 mules and 100 followers, with officers restricted to 7a pounds of baggage, including bedding, and sleeping 12 to a tent. Other ranks, who were

permitted 25 pounds, would have one tent between 20.

Most of the infantry were now clad in khaki cotton, the Naval rocket detachment, armed with cutlasses and Snider carbines, in wide-necked flannel shirts. The temperature was ferocious and, on that first day, fifty men of the King's Own collapsed with heat exhaustion, to be carried by dhoolie or mule. The men employed as muleteers — Egyptians, Turkish, Sudanese — were insubordinate and surly, complaining that a string of five mules was too much for one man to manage. When this number was reduced to three, they claimed that one should be used as a mount. They were careless of their animals, many of which became cruelly galled by their pack-saddles and had to be rested. Finally, a river that the survey party had described as providing 'abundant water' was found to be a clogged, 18-inch trickle, half an inch deep. Napier's march to Magdala was beginning to assume a pattern long familiar to the British Army.

There was unexpected respite, however, at Komayli. The gruelling, five-hour march that climbed through thorn-scattered wilderness halted at the yawning mouth of a vast chasm that cleft the mountain wall — a massive, natural amphitheatre with precipitous grey heights festooned with brushwood and kolquall trees. Looking back, the tired column could see, far distant, the white tents of Zoulla, the snowy, glistening sand of the shore and the blue sea scattered with ships. To their left could just be distinguished the huddled, flat roofs of Massowah among groves of green trees. But to the sweat-soaked soldiers there were things more important than a fine view of the Red Sea coastline.

There was coolness in the shadow of the mountain, the air was sweet, and there was fresh water in plenty. The sepoy pioneers had sunk wells from which chain pumps belched more copious supplies than men or animals had seen for months. Native goats and sheep thronged the lower rocks, nibbling at

creepers and moss, and speculative tribespeople — Shoho, Berber and Danakil — had erected lines of straw-matted market booths, offering an amazing variety of wares.

Among nets of onions, white dates, figs and nuts were bales of Latakian leaf tobacco from Istamboul, cognacs, claret, bottles of soda water, London pipes and Paris soaps, pickles, gherkins, jars of black olives, pocket mirrors, amber and wood carvings, jellies and confectionery, Persian hubble-bubbles, clothing and exotic feathers and leatherware, hair and shawl pins, pumpkins, chillies, honey and garlic, goatskin bags, eggs, jars of milk, neck strings and iron crosses. There were also, inevitably, women — many of them still the coastal Shoho, but now including the more graceful Ethiopian Tigréans. Both adult men and women wore a similar, single garment — a shapeless cotton robe, apparently seldom washed. Strolling warriors, lean men with greased, plaited hair, all carried a circular shield, a spear and a sickle-bladed sword. Many additionally shouldered guns, varying from antique matchlocks to impressive double-barrelled percussion weapons of British or Belgian manufacture.

CHAPTER EIGHT

He was Theodorus, Emperor of Abyssinia, the Descendant of Menelik; Son of Solomon, King of Kings, Lord of Earth, Conqueror of Ethiopia, Regenerator of Africa, and Saviour of Jerusalem. Thirteen years before, the Abuna of the Coptic Church, in Gondar, had placed on his head the 15th century gold mitre of King Adam Legud, and named him, Theodore, *Negus Negusti*, and he had raised the imperial standard of Ethiopia — a lion rampant of the Tribe of Judah.

That his claim was false he never considered, nor were there any about him who whispered it, for fear of instant death. He had forgotten his humble boyhood in Kouara, when his name had been Liz Kassa, and he had crushed millet with a pestle and mortar made from a hollowed tree trunk.

Now he was surrounded by riches and splendour — gold, silver, copper, silk tents of rose, purple, lilac and white, carpets from Persia, Uschak, Broussa and Lyons, fur robes, capes of lion and leopard, scimitars and talwars of Damascus and India, wines from Champagne, Burgundy, Greece and Jerusalem. There were letters and gifts from European sovereigns, Amharic Bibles and magnificent parchments. As he dined from Sèvres china, there was music from harps, pandean pipes, flutes, guitars and cymbals, and graceful girls danced. A kneeling servant broke bread, pushing it between his lips as another offered honey-brewed *tej*. A massive, gorgeously-hued umbrella swayed over his head.

He had a wife, the diminutive, 26-years-old Empress Etegie Torenachie, daughter of Prince Ubie of Samen and Tigre, but Theodore was bored by her meek demeanour, and she, with their six-year son, Ala Mayu (meaning ‘I

have seen the World') had been locked in Magdala for several years. In his camp at Debra Tabor he made sport with the captured daughters of enemy chieftains, or concubines, in particular his favourite, the voluptuous Gallas woman, Ita Mangu.

Theodore was surrounded by political enemies, but unrest among the provincial princes was endemic — the natural order of things — and a shrewd Emperor could play off one against the other indefinitely, using his own force only when any became too dominant. Now, in early 1868, he watched with amusement as his two most powerful adversaries, Prince Kassai of Tigre and Prince Wagslium Gobaze of Lastra warred with each other. Others who had declared insurrection were Prince Menelik of Shoa and the Moslem Gallas Queen Walkeit and Queen Regent Musteval. United, his rebellious provinces could cause him serious embarrassment. Jealously squabbling, they posed few problems for Theodore's experienced general, Fitaurari Gabi, whose trump card was an artillery train impressive by even European standards, including the monster, seventy-ton mortar, named 'Theodorus'.

Loyalty among his own followers was encouraged by a lavish use of the 'courbash' — a whip of hippopotamus hide — and execution, while influential families could be held in check by imprisoning their principals. Many lesser chiefs of Semier, Id, Godjam and Meja had been incarcerated in Magdala for fourteen or fifteen years.

There were 600 prisoners in Magdala, including the Coptic Patriarch who, thus detained, could not crown anyone else Emperor. The European captives — British, German, French, a number with Ethiopian wives, children and servants — had also been escorted from Debra Tabor to Magdala. With the exception of the British diplomatic staff, Cameron, Rassam, Blanc and Prideaux, for whom the discourtesy of the Foreign Office had earned leg-

chains, the Europeans were not harshly treated. They were permitted to retain their servants, were housed in native huts simply but adequately furnished, and were well fed. True, only the German artisans, employed on arms manufacture, were allowed to leave the prison compound; but even had any Europeans managed to escape, scaled Magdala's massive gate, and descended the precipitous track to the plain, a thousand feet below, there still remained 400 miles of unmapped wilderness which women and children, certainly, would never negotiate. The few men capable of doing so had long decided that the reprisals likely to be suffered by those remaining at Magdala did not justify an escape attempt. Walls and guards were unnecessary.

Theodore did not understand the unreasonable, offensive attitude of the British. Did they not claim to be Christians? Had he not acceded to their request to stamp out slavery, and to pay his soldiers instead of allowing them to exist by plunder? And was not he, Theodore, engaged in war against the enemies of Christendom? When he had driven the Turks from the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem perhaps they would acknowledge him for what he was — the world's greatest man.

But for the moment the Holy Sepulchre must wait. His policy of divide and rule was beginning to disintegrate and the rebels were becoming bolder, despite the hostages he held. His camps were being attacked, stragglers killed, and many of the peasantry were burning their crops and villages to deny them to the royalist forces. The Moslem tribes had declared a Jihad, a holy war, against him, and the kingdom was aflame.

Theodore was not easily intimidated, and his reactions were those of a maddened dog. His campaign of indiscriminate slaughter depopulated entire provinces and devastated the harvests. Multilations, torture and floggings were commonplace. He stormed and plundered Gondar, the old capital, where some rebels had taken refuge, burned its buildings and churches, and

ordered hundreds, including Christian priests, to be thrown to the flames. To his baffled fury, resistance was not crushed, and his own army was threatened with starvation as a result of the country's scorched earth defiance. Then he heard of Napier's landing at Zoulla.

He might have been warned of it earlier from a letter written by Lord Stanley, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, which demanded the immediate release of the European captives on pain of military action. Oddly, the letter was addressed to the care of Hormuzd Rassam, the detained Assistant Political Resident, and Rassam, fearing that its threatening tone might provoke the unpredictable Emperor to some frenzied reprisal against the prisoners, had destroyed it.

Now, with his own military situation becoming daily more serious, Theodore received an ominous communication from Napier.

From Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Napier, Commander-in-Chief, Bombay Army.

To Theodorus, King of Abyssinia —

I am commanded by Her Majesty the Queen of England to demand that the prisoners whom your Majesty has wrongfully detained in captivity shall be immediately released and sent in safety to the British Camp.

Should your Majesty fail to comply with this command, I am further commanded to enter your Majesty's country at the head of an army to enforce it, and nothing will arrest my progress until this object shall have been accomplished.

My Sovereign has no desire to deprive you of any part of your dominions, not to subvert your authority, although it is obvious that such would in all probability be the result of hostilities.

Your Majesty might avert this danger by the immediate surrender of the prisoners. But should they not be delivered safely into my hands, should

they suffer a continuance of ill-treatment, or should any injury befall them, your Majesty will be held personally responsible, and no hope of further condonation need be entertained.

R. Napier, Lieut.-General,

Commander-in-Chief, Bombay Army.

Theodore's behaviour was typically polymorphic. Immediately, to disguise any apprehension he might have felt in the presence of menials, he expressed delight. 'I long for the day,' he claimed, 'when I shall see a disciplined European army!' To further hedge his bets he sent a message to the British diplomats in Magdala: 'The reason I have ill-treated you was because I *wanted* the people of your country to come to me. Whether they beat me, or I beat them, I shall always be your friend. How are you? Fear not, I am coming to your assistance. Keep up your head; I shall soon be with you.' Aware of the Emperor's capricious mentality, the prisoners were not comforted.

Towards his own troops, the Emperor's conduct was incomprehensible. The march to Magdala with the heavy guns — including the seventy-ton monster — was painfully slow, and it seemed certain that he would not reinforce the existing garrison by more than about 8,000 men, but Theodore did not spare the lashing courbash, nor did he display much confidence in their ability to defeat the British, whose troops, he jeered, were much better. True, Magdala was impregnable, and no foreign army had ever penetrated the Ethiopian interior before. The noise of the great gun 'Theodoras' was alone sufficient to strike terror into an enemy. 'Are you ready to fight?' he shouted, 'and enrich yourselves with the treasures that the white slaves carry on their elephants? Or will you disgrace yourselves by running away?'

A grizzled old chief roared a reply. The Emperor was invincible, and the Ethiopian warriors would cut the British to pieces. Theodore whirled on him contemptuously. 'You stupid old fool! Have you ever seen English soldiers in

battle?’ Nobody dared to ask the Emperor the same question. ‘Before you know where you are, your bellies will be riddled with bullets!’

Perplexed, the sweating, hungry warriors returned to their task of hauling the ropes of the thirty-four field-guns, howitzers and mortars which, Theodore had determined, would be served in battle by the German artisans who had cast many of them, and filled his magazines with powder and shot. The Germans, most of them armourers, but including a few scripture-readers, had fraternised much more readily and obsequiously than the other Europeans, and had received favours in return. In consequence they were now regarded with contempt by the British, French, and others, of the captive community. Soon, however, they were going to pay for their years of favour-seeking by becoming the Emperor’s artillerymen against the British, but they did not know it yet.

Theodore was savouring the moment when he would tell them. Was it not just that they should prove the weapons he had paid them to forge? It was a decision of genius — but, after all, was he not descended from Solomon?

But his tent was waiting, thickly spread with soft carpets and cushions, with the charcoal brazier sprinkled with sweet herbs, and Ita Mangu, with her dark, brooding eyes, whom he had taken from the Gallas. She had watched as her father and brothers died under the spears of his warriors, and had then crawled to him on her belly to kiss his feet. He had kept her. Her fawning adoration, he knew, was counterfeit, and she waited patiently for his moment of carelessness. They both knew.

No weapons or sharp utensils were permitted in the Emperor’s tent; it was searched by his guards twice daily, and the woman’s nails were trimmed to the flesh. They both knew, but it amused him. Tomorrow, or the next day, or next week, he could have her clubbed or speared, or flung from the Magdala heights. There were many more women.

But few as beautiful as Ita Mangu. She fell to her knees as he entered, in her hands an ewer of lemon water and a silver basin. Theodore seated himself, then raised a dusty foot, and she approached him on her knees, her face expressionless as he watched, musing, with half-closed eyes. The water chuckled from the ewer, and then she opened her kanzu, baring herself, to dry his feet with her breasts, her hands cupped under them. He kicked, and she sprawled backwards, outflung on the carpet. The Emperor laughed, and she gazed back at him silently.

Perhaps Napier would not come. Perhaps his threat was a bluff. Many had come to Ethiopia — Franks, Saracens, Egyptians, Arabs — but none had conquered. Even if Napier did reach the plain below Magdala, Theodore reasoned, it was inconceivable that he might carry the fortress by storm, against the mightiest artillery defence in Africa. And for several years the Emperor had been accumulating powder and shot. He would out-gun Napier overwhelmingly. Napier, with 400 miles separating him from his ships, would have reached the extremity of his logistic capability, and faced with the impregnable colossus of Magdala, he would parley. He would have no choice. Theodore would offer fair words and gifts, and the longer he delayed the more embarrassed Napier would be, with his soldiers hungry, thirsty, and growing mutinous, the province already stripped of harvests — manioc, corn, pumpkins, sheep and cattle. The Magdala store-pits were crammed with food.

Theodore chuckled. Was he not the descendant of Solomon?

Outside his tent, on the dark plain, the campfires spat sparks at the sky. A foraging party had dragged in a steer. With its legs tied, and eyes bulging, the animal threshed in the dust, defeated and expecting death. The warriors' knives slashed, gouging steaks from the living animal, and, as the beast screamed at the stars, they pushed handfuls of bleeding flesh into their mouths, drooling crimson and laughing.

* * *

‘When they come at yer,’ Dando instructed Charlie Crewe, ‘yer’ve got ter ’old yer fire till they’re nearer’n fifty yards, see. Always aim fer the gut — jes’ below the belt-buckle, if they’re bleedin’ wearin’ one. If yer’ve got a baynit fixed, then yer aim lower, ’corse yer rifle ’ll kick up more. Watch fer the crafty bastards running’ wide, thinkin’ yer ain’t noticed. They can cut in on yer flank an’ give yer trouble. If yer ’ave ter baynit a man, yer don’t need twenty inches, see. Yer might git it *in*, but it’s a sod gittin’ *out*. There’s some that’ll tell yer that two inches is enough. Meself, I sez six — hard in, then up. That gits ’is vitals. Nine times out o’ ten ’ee’ll jack-knife towards yer, so put yer boot in ’ard, ter stand ’im back — otherwise yer can’t withdraw *clean*, an’ yer can break yer soddin’ baynit easy.’ He paused. ‘If Holloran an’ me’s on each side of yer, yer’ll be orlright — and remember yer’ve got a rear-rank man, who’s supposed ter take care of them that kills yer, then step in ter take yer place, see. It’s orl organised.’ He sniffed. ‘An’ if yer *are* snuffed out, we auction yer effects an’ send the proceeds ter yer next o’ kin.’ He paused yet again. ‘An’ if yer’ve got good mates, we see yer buried deep, wi’ stones on top — otherwise the dogs dig yer up.’

‘Thet’s roight,’ Holloran nodded. ‘Bedad, ye don’t want bloody dogs diggin’ ye up.’

CHAPTER NINE

He had been old enough to be her father and, damnation, she was only a teenage prostitute to whom Burridge had probably been merely one of a score of patrons. He knew he was a bloody fool, a middle-aged, deprived bachelor behaving like a callow boot-boy over his first fumbling affair with a grubby kitchen-maid. It was a heaven-sent mercy that the Ethiopian campaign had rescued him when it did, or God only knew into what depths of sordid involvement he would have plunged himself. He was an officer and by inference a gentleman, but he had the uneducated appetites of a common soldier — no better than any of the enlisted riff-raff who called him ‘sir’ to his face, and sneered and winked behind his back.

The Colonel had been right about the social tastes of men promoted from the ranks. Burridge shuddered to think of his embarrassment if he had met brother officers while in the company of Harriet — their icy politeness and meticulous salutes disguising the contempt behind their eyes, the spiteful gossip of the regimental ladies, and the inevitable interview with the Depot Adjutant-Major which would have stripped him of his last rags of self-respect.

He needed desperately to erase the memory of Harriet Lawrence, but he could not. In Woolwich he consoled himself with the thought that prolonged abstinence was bad for a man, physically and mentally; he needed Harriet, or another. Blast it, were the other officers so superior because they resorted to cigar-shop girls, governesses, or unemployed actresses at Madame Rachel’s?

Still, it was thankfully fortuitous that his relationship with Harriet had been terminated abruptly. He had failed to even honour his last promised meeting

with her — although not by choice. He and his platoon of recruits had been subjected to a ‘pier-head jump’ that allowed them no time to settle personal affairs. For once in his life, Burridge was grateful that Whitehall considered that soldiers never had personal matters to settle.

Now, at least, he had enough to occupy him. The Duke of Wellington’s Regiment, with wings of the 10th Native Infantry and Sind Horse, a mountain battery and sappers, had already plunged into the Komayli Pass. The King’s Own were to follow. Within three miles of Komayli the route narrowed to a climbing, twisting defile with granite walls 800 feet high, the track never more than twenty feet wide, often shrinking to fifteen. Days ahead, the Bombay Sappers and Punjab Pioneers had laboured incredibly with explosives, pick and shovel to clear the defile of its more serious obstacles so that the first convoy of seventy-five bullock wagons could pass.

The wheeled transport was important, for while two animals could haul 750 pounds in a wagon, they could only share 380 pounds in pack-saddles, of which much was their own fodder. Additionally, the muleteers were becoming more troublesome, stealing from their packs and often deliberately causing their animals to founder in order to drop from the column. Their persistent misbehaviour eventually proved their undoing. They were paid off, returned on foot to the coast, while each string of mules was given to an Indian sepoy with a British soldier in company.

‘Them bleeders,’ Dando pointed at the elephants, ‘ain’t soddin’ ’ooman.’ He had never liked elephants or their monkey-like, goad-pricking mahouts. The massive grey beasts of the Bombay Service were the first to carry guns on their backs instead of hauling them. Their tusks were trimmed short to five feet, with the ends copper-bound to prevent splitting, and they were docile enough, but sharing the narrow defile with the slouching mammoths was uncomfortable. They moved slowly, disliking the walled and gloomy confine

of the track and the rubble-strewn ground that hurt their feet. This was not like India with its timber-yards, grassy forage reserves and elephant lines.

There were three men, Burridge was beginning to realise, who seemed to maintain a strange, detached interest in him. One was a recruit named Crewe, the others — Dando and Holloran — pretended to be recruits but, he would take oath, had worn out more pairs of army boots than they cared to admit. They were, re-enlisted men for certain, and that perturbed him.

Burridge would discover their gaze on him and, when he did, they would look away clumsily. Occasionally, at a distance, he might see the three of them in conversation and shooting brief glances in his direction. Crewe he did not care about, but Dando and Holloran were old soldiers.

He had long been aware of them at the India Depot in Chatham, but had he shared earlier service with them? It was possible, but he had a good memory for both faces and names, and there was nothing familiar about Dando or Holloran. Looking at an officer wasn't a crime, even silent contempt, but it was disconcerting.

No, they'd never served in the King's Own before, but they might have served in the Crimea, at Inkerman — at the Mikriakoff Gully.

There had been eighteen men of the 88th Connaught Rangers on that day, and one sergeant of the King's Own. The eighteen had died, bayoneted, and only the sergeant had reeled back to Townshend's Battery to receive, in due course, the Sultan of Turkey's Order of the Medjedieh.

It had been thirteen years before, but it might have been only thirteen days. Long before dawn on that awful 5 November, Sergeant Burridge with four soldiers had pushed the handcart off the dark, mist-clogged Woronzoff Road, at the windmill, on to the track that led to the 2nd Division's camplines. They were cold, with their worn greatcoats and boots sodden, shakoes glistening with wetness. It was an uncomfortable mission, but not dangerous, and there

would be a rewarding conclusion. They were to collect a rum issue for their own battalion from the stores of the 88th Regiment, the Connaught Rangers.

They were anxious to return to the King's Own bivouacs in time for the forenoon picquets to be given a warming tot of Jamaica spirit before taking post on the drenched Fedioukine Hills. A man needed something more in his belly than a few ounces of tepid stirabout porridge to maintain him through six hours of a bone-chilling Crimean November.

The distant gunfire began before they had sighted the 88th's lines, but the swirling fog denied any clue to its direction. Still, they knew the track well; they were nearer their destination than anywhere else and, besides, there was the rum. They pressed on, blindly, breaking into a trot when they reached the timber-laid approach to the camp.

The ramshackle hovel that served as a guardhouse for the 88th was deserted but, beyond, hundreds of men were jostling in the fog, with sergeants shouting, and there was no time for a rum issue from the commissariat stores. The Russians were attacking in mass from Sebastopol, invisible in the fog until they had stumbled into the first British picquets. The Coldstream Guards were already in action on Shell Hill, and Russian heavy artillery had opened fire from barely a mile distant.

There was nothing to do but throw the handcart aside, unsling their arms, and join the desperate scramble to support the thinly spread Guards falling back slowly before the massive enemy advance. All was confusion, with Coldstreamers and Grenadiers mixing with Highlanders, Loyals, Riflemen, and even French Zouaves. Sergeants were commanding companies, Colonels shouted on platoons, and officers fought with bayonets like common soldiers. In the blinding fog, the enemy seemed everywhere in overwhelming strength, the grey-clad conscripts of Mother Russia in their flat, pie-shaped hats howling, urged on by officers with Cossack whips. Fortified by *raki*, they had

thrown off their knapsacks and greatcoats and came forward doggedly, paradoxically less familiar with the terrain than the occupying British and equally uncertain of the strength of the forces opposing them. In old-fashioned, close-packed columns, they were ludicrously exposed to the cool, raking volleys of the British infantry, and a dozen cheering redcoats, charging out of the fog with bayonets levelled, could send an enemy company stumbling back in disorder.

Sergeant Burridge had lost contact with his own four men within seconds, but the Connaughts were deploying into ragged line, cursing, and he joined them as they rolled forward into the gloomy haze. The stony ground under their slithering feet was descending steeply. He did not know it, but they were spilling over the lip of the great Mikriakoff Gully. He did know that, shockingly, they were abruptly faced by a massive wall of approaching Russian infantry — the Ekatherineburg Regiment, the Borodino Regiment, the Tomsk Regiment — thousands of white faces with mouths agape, screeching, thousands of musket-muzzles aimed and flaring at point-blank range, with powder smoke acrid in the throat and men falling, sobbing and vomiting.

A score of blood-hungry Irishmen, with Burridge, raced forward. Behind them, somewhere, a bugle was sounding Retreat, but it was too late. They reached a broken stone wall, paused behind it to fire once, then scrambled over it, clawing at their pouches.

They were alone in the fog now — eighteen men and Burridge — surrounded by half the Russian army, their line of retreat cut off and with all sense of direction gone. They tore off their shakoes and knapsacks and waited in a small huddled group, firing, loading, and firing again, until the great, grey sea of enemy infantry flooded over them, shooting, stabbing and clubbing them into the wet ground.

Except for Burrridge. As the Irishmen fought for brutal seconds against the final horde of Russian infantrymen, he dropped to his knees, then sprawled as if struck by a ball. The iron-shod feet of savagely panting men trod over him, unheeding, gashing his cheek to the bone so that his eyes were filled with blood, and breaking his left wrist. Several ribs, he knew, were splintered, and he almost shouted with agony as a jerking, heavy body fell over him. There was a suffocating, rancid stench in his nostrils, of onions, leather and foul humanity. It was a Russian, and Burrridge tensed as the man writhed, shrieking, with an Irish bayonet in him. Then the Irishman fell also.

There were jolts, shouts and musket shots, and then noise receded to a distance. Burrridge could hear the continuous rumble of artillery, the controlled chatter of musketry, the cheers of men he thought were British. It was raining, but the blood had caked over his face, and he lay still, waiting his time. He was playing the coward, and he knew it. There would be another day. Only feet away someone was crying softly about the Mother of God, but soon the crying ceased.

It was impossible to measure the passage of time. He was, at least, alive. Above and beyond the corpses that covered him, thousands of men were locked in murderous battle, scything each other down in death while he, Burrridge, lay here safely. True, he had a few broken bones, he was becoming increasingly wet and cold, and he was hungry — bloody hungry — but he breathed, and he survived.

* * *

Twenty-two hours later he scrabbled his way free of the tangle of arms and legs that buried him. He was wet and cramped with cold, his left arm was useless below the elbow, and he could scarcely suck breath without flaring pain in his ribcage, but he stood upright slowly, slowly.

He was alive, fouled with blood not his own, crippled, with his belly a

hungry, empty pit — but he was alive. The sun was a sickly yellow thing over the eastward Tehernaya river.

About him, as far as he could see, the drenched ravines and hillsides were thickly scattered with contorted bodies, warped humps of grey or sodden scarlet, weapons, occasional horses with legs broken and helpless, and the patient wounded waiting for searching pioneers, who might come today, or tomorrow.

Burridge walked slowly, racked, up the slope of the gorge, and then towards the Sandbag Battery, where the men of the Guards lay in drilled ranks, disciplined still in death, and the ravens floated to earth like black familiars. He could see movement, of men with horse-drawn limbers, who stared at him across the desolation and shouted. Burridge heard their distant voices and turned away, stumbling over indescribable, yielding things, seething with self-disgust and anxious not to be questioned.

He may have stumbled a nauseating mile before, suddenly, the four men of the King's Own — the scrubby four who had hauled the handcart before yesterday's dawn — flung themselves on him, lifting him, blaspheming and whooping, roughly tender and filling his puking mouth with filched spirits. Christ, they'd seen him, hadn't they? Burridge had gone forward with eighteen Connaught Rangers, straight at the centre of Soimonoff's reserves, then vanishing from sight in the fog. The halted 88th had heard a rapid tattoo of shots, a crescendo of Russian shouts, and finally silence. The reckless nineteen, they guessed, had been overrun. No-one had expected to see them again.

Burridge received his Order of the Medjidieh — one of 13 awarded to the Regiment by the end of the war and 615 to the British Army. The French were equally lavish with crosses of the Legion of Honour and the Sardinians with the Order of St. Maurice and St. Lazarus. The Regiment, which had not

suffered a single casualty at Inker-man, was proud of Sergeant Burridge.

That had been thirteen years before, and he'd never forgotten, never worn the silver and enamel medallion with its gaudy ribbon. Had there survived an Inkerman soldier who had seen him throw down his rifle and crawl from the fighting like a whipped mongrel? It was possible. In that swirling fog it had been difficult to tell friend from enemy. The eighteen Irishmen had been found afterwards, their bodies perforated with bayonet wounds, but nobody had enquired how Burridge, although suffering a broken wrist and cracked ribs, had survived without a mark from shot or steel. Somebody could have seen, or merely calculated. Dando or Holloran? Or both?

Burridge found himself eyeing the three soldiers as surreptitiously as they were glancing at him. They shared some dirty secret, blast them — and there was nothing in his record about which to feel guilt except that day in 1854, and to which, indirectly, he owed his rank.

Nothing, that was, except for Harriet Lawrence, and nobody knew about her.

* * *

'Ee keeps looking at us queer,' Dando said, studying the sky. 'If yer arst me, 'ee's taken all this time ter guess who wrote the bleedin' letter, an' now 'ee's guessed.'

'He ought to be damn grateful, don' cher know,' Charlie Crewe nodded. 'It's not everyone that has our diplomacy. When Freddie Bellinger-Soames married his mother's chambermaid, Dolly, in Paris, he had to resign from Brooks's and the Athenaeum, and from the Berkshire Volunteer Light Horse. Mind you, chaps, Dolly was a little peach, what?'

'Ef he's bloody grateful,' Holloran calculated, 'he moight make us orderlies en the Officers' Mess, servin' the beer an' orl.'

Dando considered. 'Or let us drive a bullock tonga instead o' bleedin'

marchin’.’

‘We might get promoted,’ Charlie Crewe offered.

‘Might,’ Dando snorted. ‘Bleedin’ *might!*’

* * *

It was the forward base of Senafe at last, on the high plateau 8,000 feet above sea level and the first village of any importance they had seen in Ethiopia. Beyond was undulating tableland broken by jagged masses of rock, scanty vegetation, acacia and juniper trees. To the southward were the mountains of Adowa, and the road twisted relentlessly on, southward, to Adigrat, it was said, then Adabiji, Antalo, Marawa, Dildi.

It was soddin’ murder. It just weren’t bleedin’ right. Ever)’ time they reached the top of a mountain there was another stinking mountain on the other side. They’d all been thinking that Senate represented the end of their labours, that Theodore and his nigger minstrels were waiting just beyond. At Senate there were tents and stores, the usual lines of commissariat animals, and native fat-tailed sheep, but little else except the prospect of further days of sweat, dust and blistered feet followed by nights of shuddering cold. Already, only sixty miles from the coast, the problem of supplies was becoming worrying. Meat was available, and wood for cooking-fires could be laboriously collected from the mountain sides, but vegetables were scarce, and the grass and barley expensively purchased locally were barely sufficient for the transport animals. A diet primarily of meat threatened dysentery and scurvy, and the straggling supplies of vegetables, tea, sugar and spirits always seemed to be a day behind the march.

Not all the troops had been issued with khaki. The 3rd Dragoon Guards still rode in scarlet tunics with yellow facings, the Beloochees in green kurtas and red pantaloons, while all artillerymen were in blue shell jackets, booted overalls and forage caps. There were mutterings in the ranks of the 33rd

Duke of Wellington's, confined to 25 pounds of baggage, at the sight of the camp equipage of some of the noncombatants. One American was attended by five servants to manage his large wall tent, horses, trunks of clothing and provisions, camp kettles and folding furniture, brandies and sporting guns. While the ranks' rations had been reduced to beef and biscuit, there were camp tables served with mulligatawny soup, roast duck and roast kid, curried chops, cracknel biscuits, cheese and Mocha coffee. At night the men crawled thankfully into their crowded tents to avoid the penetrating cold, and on the dark, Ethiopian plateau the hyenas yelled.

News from Magdala was fragmentary, seldom in chronological sequence, and suspect. Every day, Theodore's column was creeping a few miles nearer to the fortress — a writhing column of heavy guns hauled by thousands of people, men, women and children, with the whips lashing under the hot sun. Dusty herds of cattle and sheep followed, and with each nightfall a town of twenty thousand goatskin tents spread across the rock-strewn plain. Daily, the savage skirmishing parties of tribesmen hunted for game, or stripped villages of every grain of food, killing and burning. The night-fires flared, and sprawling, white-robed warriors drank *tej* and feasted on raw beef, or dragged protesting women from their cringing menfolk to an hour of brutality on a cowhide. Daily, Theodore sent encouraging messages and gifts to his captives in Magdala — a fresh-killed antelope, a pair of lion cubs, a dozen partridges, some silk shirts. They should be of good cheer. Theodore assured them, for he was coming to them. The Ethiopians were a wicked people, and he, Theodore, was an ignorant Ethiopian.

Even as the European captives gazed apprehensively at their daily gifts they could hear the blood-chilling screams of Theodore's native prisoners as they died slowly, in agony.

For the Europeans, also, information on Napier's advance was infrequent

and vague. They had known for many months that the tribes were in revolt, and it had seemed of little importance which of the several factions — Coptic Christians, Gallas and Somali Moslems, or tattooed pagans — achieved victory. Too often in the past years they had seen Theodore's warriors putting out the eyes of prisoners or, in their screeching hundreds, flaunting the testicles of victims on their spear-points. In the circular, thatch-roofed Coptic churches the walls were crudely painted with pictures of Christ, the disciples and saints, oddly all white-skinned, while only the Devil was black. But perhaps it was not so odd.

Theodore, they knew, for all his talk of the blessed Saviour and the Holy Sepulchre, was barbaric, mad, and wildly unpredictable. His gifts and soft words could, in a single moment, be replaced by inhuman ferocity. The British expedition was a doubtful blessing. If it ever reached within gunshot distance of Magdala every European man, woman and infant could be a mutilated corpse in minutes.

CHAPTER TEN

Something would have to be done about the mysterious and non-committal Kassai, Prince of Tigre, reputed to be hovering on the flank of the proposed route to Magdala with ten thousand tribesmen, and Napier needed to know, urgently, how this potentially dangerous force intended to behave in the face of what was, after all, a foreign invasion. Ethiopian politics seemed to be a labyrinth of inconsistencies; a promise today was reversed tomorrow, and Napier's line of communication with the coast was going to be thinly stretched and nakedly exposed — an umbilical cord which, if severed, could explode into nonsense all the naive armchair plans of Whitehall. Senafe, the advanced base, was the last sizeable stores depot. Thereafter the village halting points, at one day march intervals, would each be protected by only a handful of sepoy, armed with smooth-bore muskets, under a subadar, and no possible defence against thousands of Ethiopians.

The long, dusty column lurched on, through the shabby villages of Adigrat, Adabaji, Anatolo — circular adobe houses, single floored and with thatched roofs, grouped around a large open quadrangle which served as a market-place and communal centre, where the natives laid out their assorted wares, eager for the Maria Theresa dollars. Since they could give no change, every item irrespective of value was priced at one dollar, whether a hundredweight sack of barley or a bundle of kindling wood. Dirty priests, emerging from cow-shed churches, sold milk and eggs.

Commissariat rations were becoming still more meagre. Grain and fodder purchased locally was of indifferent quality, and many of the baggage animals were in poor condition from inadequate food, exposure and hard

work. The troops, too, were feeling the effects of rough marching and insufficient rest, not compensated by army beef, hardtack and sugarless tea. True, they had encountered none of the horrific dangers promised by the London pundits. There were no tsetse flies or poisonous spiders, no deadly pink-headed flies or toxic honey. Wild life fled at the approach of the massive, noisy and dust-clouded column — not only the lions and cheetahs but also most of the game which might have supplemented at least the officers' mess-tables.

It was February 1868. In London Lord Derby was disabled by gout and Benjamin Disraeli was about to become Prime Minister. The lower orders were exchanging lewd jokes about the Queen's relationship with a certain John Brown, at Balmoral, while the Irish Fenians in Manchester and London were active with bombs and guns and, when captured, were being hanged. Eighteen-year-old Horatio Kitchener had just been accepted as a cadet by Woolwich Academy, and Marx's *Das Kapital*, published the year before, had earned only £67.

In Berlin, Bismarck had decided that Louis-Napoleon's Second Empire must be humbled, and Krupps of Essen were producing 50-ton steel guns which fired a shell weighing 1,000 pounds. The United States, vociferous opponents of colonisation, having absorbed Arizona and New Mexico, had now purchased Alaska from Russia for £1,450,000.

At Adabaji, on the rocky Ethiopian plain, Sir Robert Napier received intelligence that Prince Kassai was advancing towards the British line of route with his full following of horse and foot.

* * *

The British advance force stood to arms on the Haramat plain, twelve miles to the north-west of the village of Adabaji, at first light of dawn. They were in home field service dress — the King's Own in scarlet, the 3rd Bombay

Light Cavalry in light blue and silver, artillerymen in blue, and a detachment of the 10th Native Infantry in scarlet with white turbans. In position were twelve 7-pounders, the new steel 3-inch rifled muzzle-loaders, weighing 150 pounds. Across their front ran a narrow stream beyond which, westward, the ground rose for a half mile to a long line of jagged, sandstone cliffs. Behind the British the sun was rising.

They heard the noise of the Ethiopians' approach before it was sighted — a slow, ominous throb of drums beyond the shadowed hills, and the picquets that had advanced across the river withdrew. Then there was vague movement on the far skyline, and over it trickled a slow-moving tide of horsemen, white-robed, led by two yellow and red pendants and with kettle-drums rolling. Behind the horsemen as they spread raggedly across the hill face surged a jostling, spear-bristling horde of warriors on foot, again white-gowned, but indistinct still at that distance and in the dawn's obscuring haze.

It was the first sizeable concentration of Ethiopian fighting men yet encountered by the British, and it was mildly uncomfortable to watch four thousand armed warriors, of uncertain intention, approach to within a hundred yards of the opposite water's edge. There, however, they halted, closely crowded — lean, fierce-visaged men in picturesque togas smeared with dried blood and filth, bare-headed, but carrying rifles, pistols, swords, spears and circular shields. The ranks of British troops waited in silence, uneasy. They had been given no orders to load, and the Ethiopian drums rolled like thunder.

* * *

'If they git any nearer,' Dando complained, 'they'll be drawin' our bleedin' rations. Ain't the General goin' ter do nuthin'?''

'He's showing the blacks we're not very impressed, old lad,' Charlie Crewe said. 'Strategy.'

‘Stratchery?’ Holloran enquired. ‘Whit’s stratchery, b’Jasus?’

‘It’s like not lettin’ the soddin’ enemy know ye’re out o’ ammunition,’ Dando explained, ‘but keep on bleedin’ firin’.’

‘Shure, an’ I remember Slattery,’ Holloran reminisced. ‘He wuz midnight guard on the wather-tank en Calcutta, an’ saw the Surgeon-Lieutenant in his bloody night-shirt. He thort et wuz a ghost, an’ opened fire.’

‘You don’t say?’ Charlie Crewe frowned. ‘And he killed the Surgeon?’

‘Faith, no,’ Holloran shook his head. ‘He het the wather-tank, which wuz worrse, an’ we wuz rationed ter two pints a day fer a bloody wayk, so we wuz.’

Dando lifted a dirty hand to shade his eyes, then spat.

‘There’s some silly sod over there on a donkey, wi’ a bleedin’ great umbrella.’

* * *

A gap had opened in the centre of the Ethiopian mass. It was not a donkey but a white mule, harnessed in red leather, that emerged to halt at the river’s bank. It was ridden by a man who sat tall and with dignity, clad in the inevitable white robe which was, however, richly embroidered with crimson. He was olive-skinned — paler than most Ethiopians — with thickly greased, black hair drawn back in a plait and tied on the neck with a ribbon. A mounted escort followed, and at the mule’s side a trotting retainer held aloft, with difficulty, a large red umbrella which swayed dangerously. This, for certain, could be none other than Kassai, Prince of Tigre.

Sir Robert Napier was not to be outplayed in the matter of theatricals. There was a commotion to the rear of the British lines, and an Indian elephant trod sedately forward with trunk curling. Cushioned astride it was the General. The mahout shouted, stabbing with his goad, and the big animal knelt at the water’s edge. Nonchalantly, Napier slid to the ground, his hand raised in

greeting.

‘I seen this bit before,’ Dando recalled, ‘in *The Beast o’ Bhutan* or *The Devil-Priest’s Revenge* at the Penny Gaff in Deptford. The General, ’oo’s reely a Chinese strangler in disguise, gits shot wi’ a bleedin’ poison dart an’ dies in agony, foamin’ at the mouth.’

‘Faith, an’ thet’s roight!’ Holloran enthused. ‘An’ the curtain caught fire whin Captin Travers blew up the rebels’ magazine, bedad!’ He nodded. ‘Charlie, me darlint, ye shud hev seen ut! Theer wuz blood orl over the floor, b’Jasus, an’ a hand wid a knife thet came out ev the wall, an’ a bloody snake en the port decanter. Then theer wuz the corpse they *thort* wuz dead, an’ the voice thet scraymed en the bloody noight —’

‘*Macbeth*’ said Charlie Crewe. ‘It’s similar.’

‘Simla?’ Dando spat. ‘Godalmighty — that was a bastard place, Simla. There was only bottled Allsopp’s that the medicals ’ad put bleedin’ quinine in, an’ three rupees fer a short-time in the Sudder. I never did like soddin’ Simla.

Napier, now, had mounted a horse, considered to be less alarming to the Ethiopians than the elephant, and Kassai kicked his mule into the stream, scarcely more then fetlock deep, while his entourage jostled to follow. Moments later the two leaders were shaking hands, their respective interpreters talking and gesticulating. Napier waved an inviting hand in the direction of his own tent, and Kassai, his dark eyes keenly observant of all that was happening, nodded.

It was unfortunate that the smartly-drilled British guard of honour, only yards away, chose the moment to fire a thunderous musketry salute at the sky. Kassai’s mule shied and the Prince flinched. Across the river, thousands of Ethiopians — many of whom had sunk to their haunches — rose to their feet, fumbling for their own weapons and surging backwards like a white,

retreating sea-tide. 'Remember wot I said, Charlie.' Dando was plucking at the buckle of his expense pouch. 'Aim fer the gut an' watch fer the bastards runnin' wide on the flank.' But Captain Speedy, Napier's interpreter, had his hand on the Prince's bridle, talking urgently, and the precarious moment had passed.

In Napier's tent, with the flaps thrown wide, the General and the Prince sat on adjacent chairs with their attendant officers tightly clustered in the hot, confined space. The Ethiopians, including Kassai's interpreter, spear and shield carrier, fusil bearer, and five lesser chiefs, sat cross-legged on the coir matting. The British staff stood, sweating in their scarlet as the two principals exchanged lengthy greetings and enquiries regarding each other's health and drank port from a bottle appropriated from hospital stores. Cautiously the Prince waited until Napier had tasted the wine before doing so himself. 'It is good,' Kassai approved, then repeated; 'How are you? You are well? I do not know why the Feringhee Negus has come; if I knew, it would please me. I would hear what you have in your heart.' He went on to enquire if the British would supply him with arms and ammunition, a request which Napier parried by expressing his own happiness with the fact that the Ethiopians were Christians.

This was so, Kassai said. He did not like strangers in his country, but if strangers had to come, it was preferred that they were Christians. How was the Feringhee Negus? Was he well? The sweat-soaked British aides groaned silently.

It was time for gifts. Napier presented the Prince with a double-barrelled Purdey rifle, some Bohemian glassware, and an extremely fine horse from his own string. Kassai did not know — nor Napier until later — that following the presentation the handsome animal was adroitly substituted by one of lesser quality by an annoyed officer.

An hour of verbal fencing followed, the result of which was an agreement that Kassai would concede the British an unhindered passage to Magdala and provide provisions and fodder at reasonable prices, to be paid in Maria Theresa dollars. In return Kassai asked for military assistance in a campaign against his rival, Wagshum Gobaze, Prince of Lastra, but this, Napier insisted, could not be given — the great Queen, Victoria, had expressly forbidden it — but he, Napier, would swear that neither would he assist any other Prince or Ras, and with this assurance Kassai seemed doubtfully content.

The discussion ended with promises of mutual goodwill as lengthy and wearisome as the preliminary greetings, and the relieved, stifled officers hurried for the open.

‘The bleedin’ jaw’s finished,’ Dando said. ‘Now we ’ave ter perform like soddin’ fairground comics.’

The regimental fifes and drums were braying a military medley, and across the stream the Ethiopian kettle-drums and cymbals exploded into a discordant reply. The British infantry marched and counter-marched in columns of companies, deployed in skirmishing order, double-marched and formed square. The blue-and-silver Bombay Light Cavalry walked, trotted, wheeled and charged. Kassai and his party watched, obviously impressed but with their expressions revealing little enthusiasm until the artillery guns jingled into view. Only then were there murmurs of approval, smiles and nodding heads. The Prince stroked the barrel of a 7-pounder, peered into its muzzle, and lifted a shell appreciatively in his hands. The Feringhees, he conceded, must be good Christians, or the Lord God would not have granted them the learning with which to build such wondrous weapons of war. The Feringhee soldiers might be a match for Ethiopian warriors on an open plain, but never in the mountains. The guns, however, were different. He was finally

convinced that Heaven's blessing was upon Napier.

It was Kassai's turn to entertain. The British officers splashed across the stream in the wake of the Prince's company. The dense sea of gowned warriors engulfed them, but they were well behaved despite their savage appearance, almost all armed with percussion rifles or muskets, most of them also with shields, spears, or the crooked-bladed sword which, it was rumoured, could not be parried by a man with a bayonet. There were, Kassai claimed, six thousand more like these at Adowa, his capital — and it was a damn good thing, the British officers mused as the Ethiopian drums thundered deafeningly, that they were on Napier's side and not Theodore's.

The Prince's tent was circular and red-dyed, so that the afternoon sun, penetrating, turned white faces and hands blood-coloured. Once again the sweat burst from every pore, but there were distractions. Black-skinned girls, bare-breasted, offered bowls of curry and flat, round cakes of brown bread, sour-tasting. To British embarrassment the girls insisted on repeatedly kneading handfuls of bread into putty-like balls which they thrust into the mouths of the guests. There were huge bullock-horns of *tej*, on drinking which the guest bowed towards the Prince, and no sooner emptied his vessel but to have it again filled to the brim. Six men with crude wind instruments played unceasing, wailing music, painful to a European ear, and a warrior danced, whirling and jumping, while the Ethiopian hosts sang in sepulchral chorus.

Then, with approaching dusk and its welcome coolness came Kassai's gifts for Napier. The General was presented with a silver armlet, the badge of a great warrior, and a lionskin cape was placed around his shoulders. In his hands were put a spear and a shield, and outside the tent awaited a grey mule with Ethiopian saddlery and housings.

Caparisoned and mounted, followed by an inebriate and chuckling staff,

Napier rode back across the river, grateful that darkness hid his ridiculous appearance from all but the gaping midnight picquet.

But for Bob Napier it had been worthwhile. The British gutter-scum and the Bombay sepoy who thinly guarded the slender line of communication with the coast were safe. It had been sworn to him by Dajatchmatch Kassai, Ras of Tigre, in the year 1860 from Christ in the time of John the Evangelist, in the month of Hadar.

The lionskin and the grey mule were worth it.

* * *

Still, while the security of the British column's rear was a welcome achievement, there remained the worrying question of supplies. Napier *had* to reach Magdala before the rains, and to do so meant that his fighting force was moving too quickly for adequate stores to follow from Zoulla. 'If we can surround Theodore at Magdala,' Napier wrote, 'all will be well. If he carries off his prisoners to his own country, more remote than Magdala, we shall have to remain there. We have reduced all baggage to the very lowest... the only people who have luxuries are the Special Correspondents. But all are in good health and spirits, equal to anything but starvation. We could starve between two points if there were relief at the end, but when the end is attained, and we are then to find no resources, and to find our way back again, opens a possibility on which I must not venture...'

The American correspondent, Stanley, was already calculating that 'a force of 10,000 men including followers requires for 30 days 4,000 mules at the rate of 150 lbs per mule. For baggage, ammunition and tents rather more than 4,000.' The trickle of commissariat stores that managed to overtake them, supplemented by the weekly three thousand madrigals of wheat and barley promised by Prince Kassai — about sixty thousand pounds weight — would not nearly meet this requirement, particularly as, in a few more days, mule-

loads were to be reduced from 150 to 100 lbs in order to move the column even more quickly in its race against the approaching wet season. Beyond Lake Ashangi no baggage would be allowed other than what officers carried on their own horses and the men on their backs.

‘An’ if this is wot they call a table-land,’ Dando observed, ‘then the bleedin’ table’s upside-down, an’ we’re marchin’ up an’ down the soddin’ legs.’

The daily marches were becoming almost intolerable. The miles-long column of men and laden animals, often able to move only in single file, threw up a choking pall of white dust from the loose limestone underfoot. Mules slithered and fell, spilling their loads. The elephants, on minimum rations of 35 lbs of bread and 40 lbs of straw or grass daily, moved slowly. A climb of 1,500 feet told seriously on these lowland animals, and they snorted and trumpeted with mistrust of the gaping ravines sometimes only inches from their feet. Temperatures averaged 98 degrees by day, falling 40 degrees when night fell.

Then the track plummeted 3,000 feet to the reed-choked shore of Lake Ashangi, and Magdala lay only a hundred miles ahead.

Napier issued his toughest orders of the campaign so far. From this point the column would be force-marched. Only men, horses, elephants and mules would proceed, with only three *dhoolies*, for wounded, per hundred men. There would be no further rum issued; it was too bulky a commodity. Rations were reduced by one half, would be sufficient for only 15 days at this level, and would no longer include sugar, coffee, tea, potatoes or onions. Within the next few days all tents would be abandoned. The General had received intelligence that the Emperor Theodore had reached his fortress with his army and gun-train, including the incredible 70-ton mortar, and had spent his first night butchering several hundred of his Ethiopian prisoners, flinging many

chained in pairs from the Magdala precipice. There was no news of the European captives, but Theodore, it was understood, had 10,000 well-armed warriors within the citadel, their savage defiance encouraged by the Emperor's alternating promises of rich Feringhee booty for the bold and bloody retribution for the faint-hearted. Napier decided on a final dash to Magdala, and an attack immediately on arrival.

* * *

It was becoming a tropical nightmare. The increased speed of the march threw the following supply facilities still further in arrears. The mules and horses were suffering badly. Overworked and underfed, each had to be helped by a dozen infantrymen hauling on ropes. The men, now reduced to a daily ration of 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ lbs of unspecified meat, 1 ounce of preserved vegetables, and 12 ounces of biscuit which, in practice, seldom exceeded 8, were themselves reaching morale-breaking point. In the fifteen-miles march between the cluttering huts of Marawah and Dildi, the exhausted King's Own were engulfed by a freak hailstorm which churned the loose, rubbly limestone to white glue, bringing men to their knees, with hundreds of terrified mules flinging off their packs as the soldiers clung to them desperately. They scrabbled forward, blaspheming in the pitch darkness, to reach their allotted halting-place at 11 p.m., eleven thousand feet above sea level, with no tents, the ground a quagmire, the temperature below freezing point, and no rations except for the officers.,

Now leading the weary column, the 33rd Regiment, Duke of Wellington's, was becoming surly and insubordinate. There was bleedin' limits. It was all right for soddin' officers, who never tugged a kicking, teeth-bared mule for festerin' miles, had first claim on rations, always seemed to flout orders to produce a tent and groundsheet, and always had a drop of the stuff to warm their guts. It just weren't bleedin' right, see. There were obscenities flung,

with famished, soaked men falling out from the baggage guard without orders, telling their sergeants to get festered, and sitting on the ground and refusing to march.

Napier ordered the entire battalion to be withdrawn from the column and mustered before him.

‘Your regiment was once commanded by our country’s greatest soldier,’ he told them. It survived the Siege of Valencia, the Battle of Dettingen, the capture of Cherbourg and the American War of Independence. At Waterloo the 33rd took their bayonets to the French Imperial Guard and put that invincible corps to flight, while only thirteen years ago your comrades fought with distinction at the Alma, Inkerman and Sevastopol. Today, before even meeting the enemy, or firing a shot, you have become a disgrace to the Army and to the proud name of your regiment. Such conduct cannot deserve the honour of leading this column. You will be reduced to the rear, to march in the dust of better men. The King’s Own Regiment will replace you.’

‘That’s what yer git,’ said Dando, as they swung past the halted 33rd. ‘That’s what yer git fer doin’ ye bleedin’ duty. Yer git put in the front so’s yer the first ter git bleedin’ shot at.’ He sniffed. ‘It was the same in China, when we ’ad ter git over the wall o’ Tang Ku before the soddin’ Frenchies did. That’s when me an’ Holloran won our medals.’

‘Medals?’ asked Charlie Crewe. ‘By Jove — you got medals?’

‘Won ’em, I said,’ Dando corrected. ‘We didn’t bleedin’ *git* sod all.’

The long, sprawling column tramped determinedly on, dust-caked and parched, eyes dazed from the blinding sun of day, genitals and armpits chafed and burning from sweat-rash, lips cracking, feet scalded in steel-shod boots, until night, when the thin contractors’ blankets were frost-stiff in the bitter cold, and men half sleeping shouted to Christ that they’d seen Persia, and the Crimea, and Delhi Ridge, which were bleedin’ Paradise compared with this

rot-guttin', soddin' Ethiopia. The elephants were surly, becoming increasingly temperamental under their loads of breech-loading Armstrongs. The mules, carrying the 3-inch screw-guns, were almost uncontrollable. They were collapsing in scores. In one day's march of sixteen miles, 165 animals of the Transport Train were reported dead. The teams of sailors hauling the rocket-caissons, with their wide-brimmed straw hats and grey-smeared, teak faces over imperial beards, slung carbines and cutlasses looked more like ragged Corsican *banditti* than ratings of Her Majesty's Navy.

Within two more days rations were further reduced to 1 lb of meat, 10 ounces of flour, 4 ounces of rice, and a half ounce of native rock salt. Cavalry horses were down to 8 lbs of grass and 4 lbs of barley grain, mules to 4 lbs of grass and 3 lbs of grain. Sir Robert Napier was taking a calculated risk, and it was a real risk. It was incredible that, in these days of screw ships and steam locomotives, the most carefully planned expedition ever mounted by the Army, once out of sight of a depot or railhead, was still dependent upon an infantryman's tramping feet and the hooves of horses and mules.

At isolated small villages, surrounded by wattle fencing and patches of corn, still green, wrinkled elders emerged to bow at the passing soldiers, mouthing '*Didwal achoó*, and girls and youths gathered, dogs barked at the droop-headed mules and naked children scuttled in the wake of the elephants, shouting. It was occasionally possible for an officer to buy a few pounds of grain to share among his troopers' horses, but they were now entering the area recently pillaged by Theodore's retreating army, and there was little of anything available. Increasingly, they saw the charred ruins of huts and native churches, burned crops and putrefying animal carcasses picked at by crows, the litter of broken chattels. The vedettes were hourly reporting the presence of distant groups of mounted warriors, riding parallel with the column, but whether friendly or enemy it was impossible to tell. The shivering night

picquets, British and sepoy, were nervous, ready to fire at the noise of birds or small animals. There were hyenas, it was said, that could take off a man's face or an arm, with one snap of steel-trap jaws, and the Ethiopians, like the Pathans, could move in utter silence with their sickle-bent swords. 'An innocent sintry, bedad,' said Holloran, 'wouldn't know he wuz dead till he wuz, an' thin ut's too bloody late shoutin' "Halt, who's thet?" '

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Including children, there were now fifty-six Europeans enclosed by the zariba of the Magdala compound. Several of the German artisans — Zander, Saalmüller, Bender and Mayer, and the Swiss, Waldmeier — had taken Ethiopian wives and fathered a number of children, and were thus regarded with righteous disapproval by the British. Most of the Germans had come to Ethiopia as scripture-readers, and it seemed incomprehensible that they should now not only deprave themselves by taking black-skinned women but also be willing to make guns and munitions to be used against a British army bringing salvation. The British community closed ranks, joined uncertainly by three Frenchmen, an Italian and a Pole. The native servants sided with their employers, and bickered accordingly.

By Ethiopian standards the captives were reasonably housed in *rekubas* — mud-walled huts with straw-thatched roofs. Each had an *angareb*, a low bed consisting of a crude wooden frame laced with strips of leather, and other chattels were those that had survived from the days before captivity, artefacts carefully maintained. Clothing and shoes were impossible to replace, and clumsy modifications of native garments were adopted. Most people now boiled their own soap. There were few medicines other than native simples such as tamarind, senna and sesame oil, and some had cultivated their own lemon and pomegranate trees.

Food varied in quality and amount. There were periods when supplies were plentiful — beef, mutton, scraggy chicken, flour and milk — others when there was little more than donkey meat, sour durra bread, boiled potatoes, dried apricots or *fayo* — a kind of radish — but at no time did the captives

suffer seriously in this respect, and the visions of wretched starvation provoked by London newspapers were mischievously false. Of greater inconvenience to the Europeans was the general poverty and crudity of their existence, the lack of privacy, an almost complete ignorance of events outside Magdala and, most of all, a wearying uncertainty of the future, of tomorrow, next week, or next year.

Charles Cameron, the British Consul, was still humiliated by fetters, his ankles in large iron rings joined by a length of chain. He was attended by his sole remaining servant, an Italian named Pietro. Two others of his household, the Frenchmen Makerer and Bardel, had been appropriated by the Emperor Theodore, although Bardel was now ill and weak with fever. Frau Flad, wife of a German missionary, was also ill, as was an Irish boy, McElvey.

There was money circulating, and extras and favours could be purchased. The most valued currency was the ubiquitous Maria Theresa dollar, but there were also Medjidie — Turkish or Egyptian dollars — and locally minted ones. Rates of exchange fluctuated but, typically, a Maria Theresa dollar might be worth eight locally minted ones and a Medjidie five, although all prices were quoted in terms of local currency. A native horse cost between 60 and 80 dollars, a cow 100 to 160, a woman servant 80 to 100, a concubine 180 to 300, or a small girl of ten years 110 to 150.

Ostensibly, slavery had been forbidden by Theodore several years earlier, but was still widespread, and Ethiopian morality was, by Victorian British standards, extremely low. The British in Ethiopia, however, followed the pattern of the British in India. To marry a native woman was unthinkable, but to have a brown-skinned girl or two around the house, to release the mem-Sahib from an unwelcome chore, was something not talked about but accepted as a small compensation for the white man's burden. The European bachelors of Magdala — Hall, the Pole, Parkins and Kenzlin — could have

their hour of carnality with a writhing *suraya* without being rejected by the better people of the Magdala compound. The Ethiopian women, usually accompanied by dealers who were probably their husbands, entered and left the compound at will. At a raised hand they would prance a few steps, lower their kanzus to show that breasts were firm and high, and then with deft fingers indicate a precise awareness of a prospective client's lewdest thoughts. The European ladies, pruning their lemon trees, looked away. Their wistful husbands did not.

A few, perhaps, were in no great hurry to be rescued. Their parent societies in Leipzig and Frankfurt would be crediting their bank accounts and publishing ecstatic reports of their missionaries' devotion to their faith in the face of torture and starvation in darkest Africa. It was going to be difficult to explain why gospel-teaching had long been abandoned for the manufacture of bullets and powder, why there were no converts to the Lutheran Church, and why the small German community in Ethiopia had been increased by six black wives and seventeen coffee-coloured infants.

There were more immediate reasons for apprehension towards the arrival of the British. Theodore's savage thousands had already poured up the narrow road from the lower plain, dragging their heavy guns, and their tattered tents now covered the wide Salamge plateau which was the only approach to Magdala proper. From their compound just inside the Kobet Bar Gate the captives could see the vast, sprawling camp teeming with warriors, the trickling smoke from hundreds of cooking fires, long lines of tethered horses, mules, pens of cattle and sheep. They could hear the rolling war drums far into the night, and the distant, meaningless shouts. Sometimes, too, they heard the baying of the ombeyas, the massive horns of elephant tusk, and knew that Theodore rode among his warriors, exhorting. Whether or not the British reached the Salamge seemed a matter of indifference. The captives

would be separated from their rescuers by ten thousand Ethiopians, only a handful of whom could slaughter the Europeans in a few minutes. Every dawn anxious eyes scanned the northward for a distant dust-cloud which would mean that the crisis was almost upon them, that this day was the last of their captivity, one way or the other.

Despite the close proximity of Theodore's barn-like residence, the Emperor had conceded no audience since his march from Debra Tabor. Ignoring Consul Cameron, however, he continued to send almost daily messages to Hormuzd Rassam, the detained Assistant Political Resident from Aden, pleading his friendship. But Rassam and several others permitted to leave the compound had seen the torsos and hacked-off legs and arms of hostages held in the native prison, seen men and women flogged to crimson ribbons by the courbash, while the stench of rotting corpses on the jagged escarpment below Magdala was strong in the throat when the sun grew hot.

The German botanist Essler and the geographer Schimper had acceded to Theodore's demands that they supervise the gangs of native diggers and the subsequent boiling process which provided potassium salt necessary for the manufacture of black powder. It was, they excused themselves, only poor quality powder, unpredictable in the barrel of a gun, but the British were unimpressed. In the workshops others moulded bullets and filled cartridges, of which daily mule-loads were taken to the tribesmen camped on the plateau. Maurice Bourgaud, a highly skilled armourer, and the only Frenchman to defect, had been responsible for the casting of four 24-pounder howitzers, three 12-pounders, and eleven smooth-bore iron guns of smaller calibre. This was no mean achievement in view of the primitive facilities available to him, but the guns had not yet been fired with a full charge, and his compatriot, Marcel Makerer, an old soldier who had fought under Bazaine at Solferino — and now compelled to serve the Emperor Theodore's table —

loudly and obscenely voiced his prayer that the weapons and their treacherous architect would blow themselves to a thousand pieces.

Makerer brought back snatches of information from the Emperor's household. Much was irrelevant, but some told of the Feringhee Negus and his army of white and brown soldiers who strangely marched in step, who had tame elephants and long guns that threw balls of fire for ten miles — but, of course, the Feringhee's would never reach the high plateau of Salange now that the Emperor's giant mortar, 'Theodorus', was in position on the Salasse Peak, commanding the road from the plain.

There was also ominous news regarding the Gallas tribes of the territories surrounding Magdala — the tribes that had suffered most at the hands of Theodore's rapacious warriors. Now they were slowly moving closer to Magdala, like speculating, hungry wolves that approach a wounded bear — wary still of the Emperor's savagery, but waiting for the aftermath of the promised battle, when there might be opportunities to settle old scores, to return fire for fire, butchery for butchery. And in the Emperor's bed-chamber, too, Ita Mangu had heard the talk, and smiled behind her dark, impassive eyes. The time had almost come. Wait a little, wait a little.

* * *

The sun blazed from a white-gold sky.

'I don't bleedin' understand,' Dando croaked, 'if we keep climbin' 'igher, why it don't git soddin' 'otter. It oughter git 'otter, not bleedin' colder.' Behind the exhausted troops a serpentine track had climbed 3,000 feet to the Wadela heights, 11,000 feet above sea level.

'It's the thinner atmosphere, old scout,' Charlie Crewe explained. 'Less air, y'know.'

'Wot's *air* got ter do wiv it?' Dando snorted. 'Is that wot they teach yer at soddin' Oxford? It ain't *air* wot does it, it's the bleedin' sun. Yer ain't been

in India in the 'ot season, Charlie, or yer'd know orl about it.'

'Shure, the hate wuz bloody murrder en India, so ut wuz,' Holloran agreed. 'Ut wuz so hot, bedad, ef ye shot a pheasant, ut wuz cooked before ut het the bloody ground.'

'If yer tried ter spit,' Dando went on, 'orl yer got was bleedin' steam.'

'Jasus, thet's roight,' Holloran nodded. 'An' pissin' wuz worrse.'

Colonel William Cameron lowered himself from a blown horse. The arid, furze-stippled plateau was scattered with outflung men of the King's Own, blue-lipped, chilled and panting after tugging equally weary, gun-laden mules for a dozen punishing miles. At another time, men would have climbed to their feet at the Colonel's approach, but now none did. They'd had a gutful, sod it. And sod Ethiopia. There was limits. What were men expected to do on a mouthful of stringy beef, dried cabbage, choke-dog biscuit — and no rum? For a march like this, a man needed *vittles*. The 33rd Regiment had said so, and perhaps the King's Own ought to say the same. Sod it.

Cameron knew that his men were being pushed hard and were becoming increasingly disgruntled because, ignorant of the wider issues, they could see no justification. Soldiers would accept incredible privation, march their feet bloody and fight hopeless odds if they were aware of the necessity, or simply if there was no alternative. Napier's soldiers, however, were becoming disillusioned. They had seen the massive piles of stores at Zoulla — meat and flour, tinned milk, tea and preserves, and they had seen the railway and hundreds of carts. All right, they had outstripped the commissariat. That wasn't unusual; men could always march faster and further than draught animals. But why all the soddin' hurry? Whether Magdala was reached next week or the week after seemed irrelevant. They would fight Ethiopians — or, for that matter, Chinese, Burmese, or rot-guttin' Mongolians — but they didn't have to starve, and work like bleedin' black-gang convicts, did they?

Theodore's few dozen white captives — and half of them were soddin' foreigners — had waited six years. They could wait another bleedin' week, couldn't they?

Cameron knew their thinking; he did not entirely disagree. He was stupidly proud of his regiment, and to see his incorrigible, blaspheming, but intensely loyal gutter-scum battered into insubordination just because Whitehall was counting pennies again, or perhaps because Napier wanted a peerage, choked him with anger. As he had ridden past the colonel of the 33rd he had kept his eyes rigidly ahead, unable to even glance at a man crushed, whose regiment would carry the mark of the leper for the rest of its history.

And now, on the Wadela heights, the woodenness of his own men's faces told him that discipline was dangerously near collapse. Dismounted nearby was a group of headquarters officers, including Count Seckendorff of His Prussian Majesty's Guards and the American journalist, Stanley. The latter had already smugly reported: 'The 33rd Regiment is one of the finest bodies of men in the British Army, and it was a great blow to its reputation to be thus summarily disgraced.' There were probably similar comments being enjoyed in Berlin, Paris and Vienna.

Cameron did not often shout — it was something better done by sergeant-majors — but he did now, and Goddam the absurdity of it.

'My lads!' He pointed at the crippling slope behind them, for several miles clogged with climbing men and animals. 'Thrashing Theodore will be nothing after climbing that damn hill! Who'll give me three cheers? Hip hip —'

The response could hardly be described as a cheer. It was a moan, wrung from hundreds of aching lungs — but it was a response, and here and there were shame-faced grins. 'A bloody *hill*, did he call ut?' Holloran enquired. 'Faith, ef me hearrt wuz es tinder es me fate, I'd be bloody good ter the poor,

so I wud.’ Dando eyed the mule he had been fighting to control for miles. ‘An’ I’d give a week’s bleedin’ pay ter know ’ow Noah got *two* o’ these bastards inter the ark.’

‘My great-uncle, Cathcart,’ Charlie Crewe said, ‘who was Ambassador to the Swedish court, had a horse given to him by King Christian which refused to gallop until it heard the *pas de charge* beaten on a drum.’ He paused. ‘Of course, he’d been Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte.’

‘O’ course,’ Dando nodded. ‘I remember.’

‘Uncle Cathcart was one of the Lansdowne-Crewes of Chobham. The horse was called Gerard.’

Holloran’s eyes were narrowed in speculation, and Dando sniffed. ‘Gam, Irish — yew bleedin’ arsk ’im.’ Holloran did. ‘Whit’s the bloody good ev a horrse thet only gallops whin ye bate a drum?’

Charlie Crewe shrugged. ‘That’s what Uncle Cathcart always asked, old bean.’

* * *

It was clear that the column was being watched by Theodore’s scouts; shadowing parties of horsemen could be seen daily, but none approached sufficiently to be taken by the cavalry vedettes. The few natives brought in for interrogation gave information which was obviously second or third hand, conflicting, highly coloured and unreliable. This, too, was nominally the territory of Wagshum Gobaze, Prince of Lastra, enemy of Kassai. The night picquets were doubled, and officers were forbidden to shoot game in case the noise of shots provoked an alarm.

On 2 April a picquet comprising a naik and four troopers of the 3rd Bombay Light Cavalry sighted an approaching body of 200 Ethiopian horsemen. Unaware that they came on a friendly mission from Wagshum Gobaze, the Indian NCO, in accordance with the drill manual, shouted a

challenge. The Ethiopians shouted a greeting in return, brandishing their spears, and came cantering on, whereupon the troopers fired a volley which tore three of the Ethiopians from their saddles, then fixed their bayonets and charged. The astounded Ethiopians halted, wheeled, and fled.

The squad of dismounted cavalymen, congratulating themselves, returned to their post, reloading, but the noise of their firing had roused the bivouacs to their rear, and bugles were shrilling. The King's Own and the Belooch Battalion were buckling belts and pouches as they scrambled to take open order on the camp perimeter. The 3rd Light Cavalry jingled past the excited picquet, as the naik shouted, to scour the surrounding hills in pursuit of the enemy, while a battery of 7-pounders was loaded with ready-use canister.

The Ethiopians were found angrily and vociferously manning the zariba of a small village, convinced that they had been treacherously decoyed by the Feringhees. It required an hour of shouted diplomacy by an interpreter, and three hundred Maria Theresa dollars, blood-money for the casualties, to persuade the indignant warriors that all had been a mistake. The Ethiopian casualties — one dead and two wounded — were apparently of no account to their countrymen after the money had been handed over to the band's leader. They were, he shrugged, only common peasants, and could rot. The British hospital tent received them.

* * *

The consequences might have been more serious. A commissariat report indicated that the leading 1st Brigade, with 5,000 animals, was now reduced to only 4,000 lbs of grain, while the following 2nd Brigade had nothing. With the rains daily imminent and the purchase of supplies from local sources so vitally important, to have made an enemy of Wagshum Gobaze must have meant ruin. Napier's margin of safety had worn dangerously thin; there must be no more misunderstandings by picquets, and all posts would be

continually visited by officers.

On the extreme edge of the Wadela plain was the Bet Hor, sometime campsite of Theodore's army, now deserted. The bones of cattle and sheep, picked white by scavengers, covered the ground, with scattered scraps of native blankets, a few broken quern stones, wooden kneading troughs, the cold ashes of cooking fires, a human arm in the last stages of corruption, and a skull with a splintered gash across its crown. The southerly picquet, Dando, Holloran and Charlie Crewe, stood easy, leaning on their rifles.

'Yer c'd make twenty barrels o' glue from orl them bleedin' bones,' Dando decided.

'To what advantage, dear lad?' enquired Charlie Crewe.

'Theer's the auld picquet commander,' Holloran warned. 'Et's bloody Captin Burr ridge himself.'

Burr ridge frowned as the three riffles rose to shoulders. 'Who's the senior soldier?'

Dando's right hand tapped his butt in salute. 'I reckon that's me, sir.'

Burr ridge nodded. 'What's the duty of an outpost, Dando?'

Dando's reply was immediate. 'Ter prervide protection against surprise, an' in case o' attack, ter gain time fer the commander o' the force ter put 'ee's plan of action inter execution.'

Burr ridge nodded again, then, 'Holloran — what happens to an outpost at night?'

'By noight,' Holloran recited, 'the outposht shud be doubled en the posht incraysed accordingly.'

The Captain studied them both sombrely. 'It seems to me,' he observed, 'that for men who were recruits only a few months ago, you know the drill manual pretty damn well.' He paused, his hands behind his back. 'I'd say this isn't your first shilling's-worth. I'd say you're re-enlisted.'

‘There ain’t nothin’ wrong wi’ re-enlistin’, sir,’ Dando offered, ‘so long as yer ain’t a deserter — an’ we ain’t. We done our time proper.’

‘Thet’s roight, Captin sorr,’ Holloran agreed. ‘An’ I cud show yez me discharge paper, ef I still hed ut.’ He shrugged. ‘I sold ut ter a desarter from the Connaughts fer a quart ev porter an’ changin’ our boots. His boots wuz better than moin, bedad. Moin wuz failin’ ter bloody payees, an’ he wuz joinin’ the railway diggin’s wheer they *gives* ye boots against ye first wayk’s pay. An’ a shovel. Ye kin hev boots *an’* a shovel whin ye startt —’

‘The Connaughts?’ Burrridge asked.

Charlie Crewe, excluded from the exchange, was mildly offended. ‘Ask me a question, dear chap. Ask me anything you like. For instance, I can quote you “Moonraker’s” line right back to the Byerley Turk.’

‘Shit in it,’ Dando said.

‘Thet’s roight,’ Holloran affirmed. ‘Shit in ut.’

‘Obscenity,’ Charlie Crewe suggested, ‘is the hallmark of one incapable of adequate expression.’

‘Belt up your bloody clack!’ Captain Burrridge roared. His gentlemanly veneer was shredded. He was a sergeant again. ‘The Connaughts, was it? You think you bloody know, don’t you?’ He glared at them. ‘And where were *you* when it damn happened, eh? Where were *you*, eh?’ Charlie Crewe remembered. ‘In the barracks canteen, sir — all night — with Dando and Holloran —’

‘B’Jasus, thet’s roight an’ orl.’ Holloran also remembered. ‘An’ he didn’t move a bloody step, sorr, after we told him wheer he wuz.’

Burrridge’s eyes narrowed. ‘Are you blasted half-brained, or just insolent?’ He pointed a threatening finger. ‘Whatever story you’ve got, nobody’ll believe it. There were eighteen others with me, and none of them survived — and it was too damn foggy to see anything from the Woronzoff Road.

Nobody saw *anything* until the next morning.’ He leaned forward, flush-faced. ‘And what do you suppose you’re going to gain, eh? Is it money you’re after — or seeing me cashiered?’

The three soldiers were silent. Then Dando cleared his throat. ‘I ain’t sure we expect ter git sod-all, sir — but a gentleman’s supposed ter pay fer ’is pleasure, ’specially when —’

‘Pleasure? You think it was a bloody *pleasure*, lying in a damn gully all night with a broken arm and five ribs gone?’ Burridge snorted. ‘All right — if there’s just one whisper, just one dirty canteen joke, I’ll know where it came from, and I’ll have the three of you tied to a gun-wheel and cursing the day you ever saw me or the Woronzoff Road, or the Connaughts, or the King’s Own. You’ll bloody see what it’s like in leg-chains, and breaking down stones for two years.’ He whirled and strode away.

For several seconds nobody spoke, until Dando finally lifted his helmet to scratch his head. ‘Christ! did yer ever ’ear anythin’ bleedin’ like it?’

Charlie Crewe grimaced. ‘The man’s a peasant, dear boy. Positively uncouth. Probably went to a cheap school, y’know. Playing fields are the thing — teaches a chap how to play the game and all that, what?’

‘That Woronzoff Road he wuz spaykin’ ev,’ speculated Holloran. ‘Is thet wheer the India Depot wuz?’

‘Greenwich, probably,’ Dando decided. ‘Ain’t that where Katie Lawrence was? There’s always soddin’ fog in Greenwich.’

Another period of silence followed, as they calculated. Then Dando said, ‘Ow old was Katie’s daughter? Bleedin’ *thirteen*? Christ — an’ there was *eighteen* other sods besides Burridge wot didn’t survive, an’ Burridge got a broken arm an’ five ribs gorn?’ He screwed up his eyes. ‘Soddin’ arse —’oles 1 I thort the Black ’Ole o’ Benares was a bleedin’ female man-eatin’ bear — but *this* one, b’Christ — he counted on his fingers —’all night in a

gully in soddin' Greenwich, in the fog, eighteen o' the Connaughts wot didn't survive, an' Burridge wot did —' It was a fascinating vision.

'The mind boggles, old scout,' Charlie Crewe nodded. 'The Russians don't need guns only Katie Lawrence's daughter. What'll she be like when she ripens, by Jove!'

Holloran shuddered. 'Jasus, ut's a tumble thing, so'tis. Just think ev ut!' They did, for several painful moments.

'It takes orl kinds,' Dando pronounced gravely.

'Orl kinds,' Holloran agreed. 'Faith, ut takes orl kinds.'

'Charlie!' Dando lifted a sad face. 'Yer oughter write a bleedin' book, see. There's things wot people *jes' don't know*!

'Hunnerds ev things,' Holloran divulged. 'Dando an' me cud tell ye hunnerds ev things thet's niver been heard ev. Fer instance —' He leaned forward and winked. 'D'ye know whit they tells ye about Chinee wimmin, me jewel? Shure, ut's orl a bloody lie. Whin ye see ut, ut's the same es two pays, so'tis.' Charlie Crewe did not seem enlightened, but Holloran went on. 'An' in India theer's holy men thet hangs on mate-hooks, slapes on nails, an' ye kin stand on theer chest fer an anna. Mind ye, me bhoyo, the magic didn't worrk whin we hanged thim wid rope, but ye don't hev ter say thet.' He paused. 'Bedad, ef I cud wroit, I'd wroit ut meself.'

'There was a woman in Bhiwani,' contributed Dando, 'wot got carried orf by a tiger, but she came back next day wi'out a bleedin' scratch. Nine months later she 'ad a brat — wi' black an' yaller stripes.'

'An' her husband,' Holloran said pointedly, 'didn't hev stripes et all.'

'Then there was Rifleman Snell, o' C Company, wot 'ad a tatto of a ship on 'is chest. 'Ee was magazine sentry in Meerut, in the ot season, an' when they relieved 'im, 'ee'd soddin' melted, an' there was only the soddin' tattoo left on the ground.'

‘Thet’s roight,’ Holloran nodded. ‘An’ the fatigues party cudn’t scrub ut off. Ye can’t scrub off a bloody tattoo.’

‘They ‘ad ter dig an ‘ole, an’ plant a bleedin’ pomegranate tree,’ Dando plunged on. ‘An’ every time the guard commander came round, the tree stood ter soddin’ attention.’

Charlie Crewe sucked his teeth thoughtfully. ‘My uncle, Sir James Bannerman-Crewe, who was Lord-Lieutenant of Dorest, had a French valet with six toes on each foot.’

Dando choked. ‘Bugger orf, Charlie! If yer goin’ ter write a book, yer’ve got ter ‘ave *jacks*. Real bleedin’ *jacks*, see? Yer can’t *invent* sod-all. When yer’ve been around a bit, yer’ll *see* things.’ He paused benevolently. ‘Yes jes’ stick wi’ me and Holloran, Charlie boy, an’ yer’ll be President o’ the Royal bleedin’ Society.’

CHAPTER TWELVE

But there was no time now for debating Captain Burridge's odd behaviour. Only twelve miles away and sharply visible in the clear, mountain air was the Gibraltar-like mass of Magdala.

It was obvious, now, that the walled township was secure from any armed approach until several formidable obstacles had first been overcome. Immediately before Magdala — the highest point in view — was the wide plateau of Salange, on which was established the main Ethiopian army of foot and cavalry. The Salange plateau was also commanded by the higher Salasse Peak, rising in terraces, with perpendicular scarps of basalt, to 9,100 feet. The peak was skirted by a narrow, crudely constructed road that diffused into a lower saddle which, in turn, was dominated by yet another flat-topped eminence, Fala. It was on this bastion that Theodore had placed the 'Emperor's Battery' of heavy guns, to be commanded

by himself. The narrow road plunged crazily to the Aroge ravine far below, where ran the Bashilo river.

The Magdala complex represented a nasty military problem. The only approach was by the narrow road, at places so steep that horses must be dismounted and tugged. To employ anything like an extended formation, infantry must sling their rifles, needing both hands to claw an ascent, and hauling up guns would be a nightmare.

Napier's last reconnaissance on Monday 6 April had eliminated all speculation. There was no room for tactical innovation, no advantage in British discipline, drill or experience. The road was the only practicable approach and the Fala bastion was unavoidably the first key to Theodore's

position. Behind Fala there waited the Salange plateau and 10,000 Ethiopians.

The General's task was similar to that of Wolfe at Quebec, 109 years earlier, except that now the forces opposed were three times larger. But because Wolfe had added Canada to the Empire he justified a colourful chapter in every British history book; Napier, with no territories to contribute, would be fortunate to achieve an indifferent two lines of print.

Problems, in fact, were presenting themselves with increasing rapidity. Six companies of the 45th Foot — the 'Nottingham Hosiers' — until now deliberately held two marches in rear of the van, had overtaken. It was not just commissariat stores that had dwindled to almost nothing; it was now water. The Emperor Theodore might be an ignorant black savage, but he was nobody's fool. He had drawn the Feringhees over hundreds of miles of torturous terrain which had stretched their supply line to breaking point and decimated their baggage train. Now they found themselves in a scorched-earth situation, confronted by a defensive position which might defy them for days, even weeks, to reduce with their sole source of water the narrow Bashilo river which they would not reach until they began the assault. The men would have to go forward with a handful of dry biscuit in their haversacks and fill their water bottles from the river as they crossed it.

And the assault could be no later than tomorrow's dawn. It would be led by the King's Own, followed by the Belooch Regiment, the 27th Punjab Pioneers, two companies of the 10th Native Infantry and a company of the Royal Engineers. The remaining brigade would follow as soon as the first, hopefully, reached the summit and drove the enemy from it. The 45th would be in reserve. Despatches from the coast told that the 24th Cameronian Regiment had disembarked at Zoulla, but it might as well remain there, or return home, for all the contribution it would make to the campaign.

It was a long night, with many of the men sleepless despite their weariness. Magdala was peppered with camp fires, clustering thickly on the now invisible strong-points of the Salasse and Fala peaks and delineating clearly the route of the road. Officers with night glasses could see white-clad figures in the distant fire-glow, but did not know that Theodore himself, on Fala, was simultaneously scanning the British lines below.

‘The Fourteenth Earl o’ Dovercourt,’ Dando told Charlie Crewe, ‘’ad better keep ’ee’s bleedin’ ’ead down termorrer, or there won’t be no soddin’ Fifteenth. It’s generals wot git the medals, shoutin’, “Forward, me brave boys!” from a bleedin’ mile be’ind, not the sojers. But remember, Charlie — whatever ’appens, *don’t run*. If things git bad, jes’ take open order like yer told, fix baynits an’ *stand*. A runnin’ man’s ’elpless, see, ’specially with soddin’ lancers or dragoons follerin’. On the other ’and, ’orses don’t like a line o’ baynits, an’ cavalrymen firin’ from the saddle can’t ’it the side of a barn if they was bleedin’ inside it. Mind you’ — he sniffed — ‘termorrer won’t be nuthin’ like Ghazi-ud-din-Nagar, or the soddin’ Kashmir Gate, but fer a beginner yer might be a bit nervous, see.’

‘Shure, don’t ye be sweatin’, Charlie darlint,’ Holloran nodded. ‘Jes’ ye tuck yeself behind Dando an’ me, an’ ef ye see an Aythiopian, ye holler loik a banshee. Jasus, theer’s niver an Aythiopian born thet cud stand on his fate foightin’ Dando en Holloran. Ef ye’d been in Hong Kong when we bate the intire China Fleet, or Benares, whin the Fusilier spit en Dando’s beer —’

‘Dammit, chaps,’ Charlie Crewe protested, ‘there are times when a fellow wants to indulge in a little cut and thrust for himself, what.’

‘Bless the choild,’ Holloran chuckled gently. ‘Loik a bantam-cock wid hes spurs up. Whit ’ll he be loik whin he’s grown?’

* * *

Amused and seemingly unconcerned, Theodore had watched the approach of

the British with a telescope from the high ground of Fala — first the distant dust, the occasional flash of metal in the sun, and then the long, snake-like column of men, animals and guns that crawled slowly nearer across the surface of a plateau shimmering in the heat. He could see the advance picquets clambering down to the far bank of the Bashilo and, beyond and above them, the increasing anthill of the British camp. ‘There are hundreds of boxes filled with silver dollars,’ he told his attendants, observing arriving ammunition mules being relieved of their loads. ‘I will share them among my warriors who show most prowess in battle.’ He was good-humoured, laughing at the British whom, he said, were only donkeys to be slaughtered, but at noon he ordered that all the weapons in the Magdala armoury should be distributed, and powder and shot brought to Fala, where he had posted a battery of four heavy and four light guns. Grouped unhappily around them were the German artisans, marched from their compound by Theodore’s guards. They would serve the guns against the British, the Emperor told them. If they killed many, they would be rewarded. If they did not, he would be very angry.

When darkness fell he went to his tent on Salamge and began drinking *tej*. His jovial mood was evaporating, and he was becoming morose. It was the period of uncertainty, his watching guards knew, when he was capable of anything. He could butcher twenty prisoners or regale them with expensive gifts, take a woman to his bed, afterwards watch her flogged to death, then order the corpse to be given a Christian burial. He was capable of anything; it was the hour of madness.

Tonight, however, he would be extravagantly generous. He ordered the gates of Magdala’s native prison to be opened and the prisoners driven down to Salamge where he would choose a number to be released. ‘Am I not Theodore, King of Kings, Lord of Earth?’

It was an hour before the leading group of prisoners was herded before the tent of a now drunken Emperor — three hundred and eighty shuffling, apprehensive wretches, many of whom had not been outside the prison compound for eight or nine years. Their eyes gleamed whitely in the fire-glow as they huddled in disorder, jostling backwards to avoid Theodore's amused gaze. It was the hour of madness, when lives meant nothing, and nothing had meaning.

Theodore was capricious. He liberated Ras Engelda, Chief of Agaomed, Shum Salorom of Tigre, and randomly selected almost a hundred others before tiring of his sport and returning to his tent to drink again. The freed prisoners, incredulous, stumbled into the night, uncertain of purpose or direction. Theodore laughed, and his warriors laughed also, for he must be humoured when the madness was in him. 'See,' Theodore pointed, 'they are like stupid sheep that have not the wit to run from a hunting leopard!' He drank from a cup, and the liquor flooded stickily over his chin. Where was Ita Mangu, of the royal Gallas, who should be kneeling at his feet with a scented napkin? It would be amusing to give her the severed head of one of her kinsmen, or the gouged eyes of her mother on a silver plate, or a jug of blood. He could laugh at her and kick her to the floor, watching the defeated, sullen hatred in her eyes and asking her why the Muslim gods did not strike him dead. Was he not Theodore, King of Kings, Lord of Earth?

He had forgotten the remaining native prisoners — almost three hundred — who still stood or crouched miserably beyond his tent-ropes, most of them with hands tethered and watched by contemptuous guards. They had seen a third of their number released and sent scuttling into the surrounding gloom, but they still waited on the Emperor's pleasure. Their prayers of many years had seemed about to be answered. It was incredible, but it was happening; they were being freed. But the Emperor had suddenly turned and disappeared,

with the glorious dream left uncompleted. It was unjust.

There were many too cowed by years of brutality to complain, but there were a few who were not — or else, raised to a level of exquisite hope, then seeing that hope about to be dashed, no longer cared. It was unjust. They were hungry and parched, for the guards had been too excited about a Feringhee army approaching Magdala, and the prisoners had not had food in their mouths since yesterday. It was all very confusing, but why should some be freed and not others? It was unjust. Men and women sank to their haunches, white-eyed and humming loudly. It was unjust. It was unjust.

Theodore burst from his tent, grasping a two-handed sword. ‘The sheep are bleating?’ he slavered. He struck with maddened fury, splitting the skull of a kneeling woman like a crimson-vomiting pumpkin. Unable to retrieve his blade, he screeched, then tore a pistol from his robe and emptied its cylinder in the direction of the terrified prisoners before him. His aim was wild, but two more women sprawled, clawing at a stampede of trampling, flinching legs. Theodore flung down his empty pistol. ‘Kill the sheep,’ he spat. ‘Kill them all.’

* * *

At 3.30 in the morning of 10 April, Good Friday, the leading assault companies of the King’s Own, loaded with rolled greatcoats, waterproof sheets and blankets, clambered down to the ravine floor and the near bank of the Bashilo river, eager to fill their water bottles — their last opportunity before action. The following Beloochees and Punjab Pioneers carried sandbags, scaling ladders and explosive for the demolition of enemy gates and stockades, while a party of bandsmen and Punjab muleteers brought stretchers for the carriage of wounded.

To the troops’ disgust, the river was so thickly muddy as to be undrinkable even for men already severely parched. They waded to the further bank,

cursing. Without water, their haversack rations of hard, dry biscuit would also be uneatable.

‘D’yer remember wot the bleedin’ recruitin’ posters sez?’ Dando asked. ‘“Capital barracks ter sleep in, provisions found wi’ as much meat an’ drink as yer wish, a rum ration when overseas, pay accumulatin’, an’ a fine prospect o’ seein’ the Empire I” ’ He seethed. ‘It’s bleedin’ *diabolical*! I bet even the Aythiopians’ got soddin’ *water*! It ain’t much ter arsk, is it? I mean — soddin’ *water*? Why didn’t they bring bleedin’ *barrels*?’

‘Thet’s roight, bedad,’ Holloran agreed. ‘An’ ef they brort barrels, faith, they cud hev filled thim wid beer instead ev bloody wather.’

Dawn broke, overcast with low, leaden clouds that threatened rain, the air heavily sultry. Seven muddied, sweating companies of the King’s Own, across the river, turned to begin their laborious ascent, led by an ensign with the Queen’s colour. Two companies employed as baggage-guard and another escorting the artillery climbed by the narrow road. The mountainside, which seldom sloped less than one foot in two, stretched for nearly a mile above them, tom by shallow gullies and scattered with patches of tired shrub. It might have been a death trap if disputed. A determined, well-supplied battery of 24-pounders on the crest would enjoy a full twelve hours during which to blast the simplest of targets, against which the climbing British could have done nothing.

And when, at 4.15 p.m., the leading men and officers scrambled the last few yards to reach the high plateau, they fell on their faces, utterly exhausted and unable to speak. Nothing, this time, it seemed, would provoke them to advance another pace. Dozens had fallen out from the climb, crippled by fatigue, heat, and lack of water, and lay on the mountain. The Fala bastion, ominously silent, was less than a mile and a half distant.

‘Do they expect us ter bleedin’ climb *that*?’ Dando croaked.

‘That’s nothing, old scout,’ Charlie Crewe panted. ‘Magdala — when we get to it — is a damn sight higher.’

‘Fer Chris’ sake!’ Dando pleaded.

‘Ef we git any bloody higher,’ Holloran suggested, ‘we’ll be hearin’ holy music.’

There was a sudden, distant grumble, a mushroom of smoke over the summit of Fala, eastward, and two hundred yards ahead of the prostrate troops a massive shot struck the ground, hurling dust and clods skyward. ‘Soddin’ ’ell,’ Dando snorted. ‘Them bastards is usin’ real bullets.’

The effect on the weary soldiers was dramatic. Both officers and men scrambled to their feet, flinging off their solar helmets and the greatcoats, blankets and waterproof sheets that had encumbered them for hours. ‘Deploy half companies from the right!’ Colonel Cameron roared.

The glasses of a dozen officers were turned towards Fala, wreathed in smoke as Theodore’s heavy guns vomited again.

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A mile to the north-west, the two smaller supporting columns of the assault force had just breasted the long slope and were emerging onto the lower level of the plateau. These were the cumbersome baggage train escorted by one company of the King’s Own and, now separated, the six-gun battery of the Mounted Train Artillery, the Naval Rocket Brigade, and two companies. All had expected to find their exhausted arrival screened from an enemy action — but it was not. The great expanse ahead of them was empty, except for the threatening mass of Fala, and they were alone and exposed. Somebody had miscalculated, that was certain. The spear point of the British advance had suddenly become a long column of baggage mules and a thinly guarded artillery train. There wasn’t another European or sepoy in sight. And the Emperor Theodore, on Fala, had already perceived it.

There was the hoarse shout of a sergeant. ‘There’s enemy on top of the ’ill, sir —’ordes of’em!’ The long summit was thickly crowded, from end to end, with Ethiopians in undisciplined thousands, the congealing multitude of white-clad warriors interspersed by mounted chieftains in glorious crimson. It needed merely a glance to calculate five or six thousand, and perhaps there were more yet unseen. It was a shuddering vision. The bristling, chanting sea of the enemy flooded down the slope of Fala. Beyond, the 70-ton mortar, ‘Theodorus’, was being ladled with powder under the Emperor’s narrowed eyes. Lieutenant George Sweeny, of the King’s Own, who had earlier cursed his rotten luck at being detailed officer-in-charge of two hundred mules, spat a cheroot to the ground. How the hell did anyone make two hundred mules take open order against six thousand blood-hungry Ethiopians?

* * *

The screeches of the native prisoners flung to their deaths from Magdala’s precipice, followed by the shots of guards sniping at those who still moved, had ceased, and Theodore had slept drunkenly for three hours, undisturbed. Rising, he dressed carefully in loose, white silk jodhpurs and a red robe embroidered with gold, then fell to his knees to pray to God the Father, pleading forgiveness for his sins.

Hormuzd Rassam, with hair and beard now white, but one of the few of the European community for whom Theodore seemed to entertain a genuine affection, had come from the Magdala compound, seeking an interview. There was still time, he insisted, for the Emperor to talk with the British, to avoid the bloodshed of a battle. The Feringhees demanded only the release of the European captives, nothing else — and of what value were the captives to Theodore? Only an hour before, a native had come through the Ethiopian lines with a final ultimatum from Napier: ‘By the command of the Queen of England I am approaching Magdala with my army in order to recover from

your hands Envoy Rassam, Dr. Blanc, Lieutenant Prideaux, and the other Europeans now detained by your Majesty. I ask your Majesty to free them to my army as soon as it is sufficiently near to permit their coming in safety.’ The messenger, inexplicably, had taken five days to deliver the letter, and Napier would by now have abandoned any hope of it achieving its object. But there was still time, Rassam suggested. It was barely dawn, and the Feringhees were still twelve hours away.

Theodore jeered. ‘By the command of the Queen of England? You think that I, Theodore, King of Kings, could talk with a man who serves a woman?’ He shook his head. ‘No, Sultan Rassam — and neither will you communicate further with the Feringhees, or my friendship with you will cease, and the blood of you all will be upon your head!’

Defeated, Rassam walked back to the prison compound. Dawn was flushing the eastward sky, heavy with cloud, and all was very quiet. He could see no guards in the vicinity of the compound — they had probably all gone down to Salamge — but their absence made little difference. There could be no freedom for the Europeans unless the Emperor so decreed.

Fitaurari Gabi, the Emperor’s commanding general, had sent word at first light that the Feringhee army was on the move, crossing the Bashilo river below and beginning to climb the long road towards Fala. There was no need for great haste to prepare to fight them; no army, with animals, guns and baggage could climb from the valley in less than twelve or fourteen hours. Gabi was confident. During many years of campaigning he remained undefeated, and the men under his command, on Salamge, were the loyal hard core of the Emperor’s forces; all lesser men had long deserted the royal cause. He knew, too, that defensively Magdala was almost unique. However numerous the enemy, the narrow road was a filter which would permit them to reach the summit only on a very narrow front. They would need further

hours to accumulate and deploy in strength, but Gabi did not intend to give them those hours.

Theodore, with the great ivory ombeyas roaring, rode his richly caparisoned white mule through the Salange camp towards Fala, from where he intended to supervise the firing of his main battery. With him was his first minister, Ras Engedda, and his senior chiefs Dajatch Deris and Dajatch Wahe. On Fala, also, were the German artisans Moritz, Mayer, Waldmeier and Saalmüller, who were to load and lay the guns. They claimed that they were not artillerymen and knew nothing of warfare, while Moritz added that, even at this moment, his wife in the Magdala compound was labouring in childbirth. The Emperor waved aside their pleas. They had taken money and privileges in exchange for making the guns and powder, he said, and now they could prove that they had not cheated him.

From Fala the steep fall to the valley of the Bashilo was obscured, but the Emperor received frequent intelligence on the Feringhees' progress. The English, he told his staff, were only a race of traders. They might manufacture excellent guns, which they needed because they lacked personal courage, and could only fight from a great distance. They would be no match for his Ethiopian warriors in hand-to-hand combat. They would be slaughtered.

It was late afternoon when it was reported that the first of the Feringhee infantry had reached the high plateau, not yet in any great numbers and apparently exhausted. The Emperor ordered his guns to open fire. Then, almost simultaneously, he could see for himself, almost two miles to the westward, a long file of laden mules — perhaps two hundred — spilling slowly onto the plateau from the direction of the road. The long, snaking train seemed only thinly escorted by a few score khaki-clad infantrymen and oblivious to the proximity of Fitaurari Gabi's picked fighting men on the

slopes of Fala — six thousand foot warriors and five hundred mounted chiefs. The mules, Theodore knew, carried the Feringhees' silver bullion, and they had blundered blindly into a situation which, in a few more moments, would be impossible for them to retrieve.

It was an opportunity not to be lost. The capture of the convoy and the massacre of its escort would shatter British morale and enhance that of his own army. Theodore's staff thronged around him excitedly, urging him to command them to attack. The Emperor nodded. 'Go, my children.' He pointed. 'Capture the treasure for yourselves, and kill all the Feringhees for me!' It would be proper, he added, for him personally to strike the first blow at the head of his army, but then he allowed himself to be dissuaded. True, he must not endanger his royal personage, and only he could supervise the firing of the guns.

The savage thousands on the Fala slopes were chanting their war songs. They were the chosen, the invincibles, the immortals. Fitaurari Gabi, crimson-cloaked, raised his spear high, the drums thundered, and the massive, human flood deluged towards the unsuspecting baggage train.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Theodore had been right in assessing a blunder on the part of the British. More accurately, the hazardous position of the baggage train was largely the result of poor communication. The officer commanding a reconnaissance party had sent back a note to Napier indicating that the head of the road was undefended, which was true, and had been secured, which it had not. In any case, it had not been possible to predetermine exactly where the head of the road was; nobody had been there before. The head of the road — where it achieved the lower plateau — was not its end. It continued across a sweeping saddle to skirt Fala and eventually diffuse into Salamge. Lieutenant Sweeny, escorting the mules, had been mildly surprised that he had not yet sighted any British picquets, but doubtless they were covering the route ahead. His mild surprise turned to incredulity when he saw six thousand Ethiopians storming towards him.

But Theodore, in his ignorance of European standards (he was always convinced that Rassam was a senior minister of Queen Victoria), had also miscalculated. Although he was aware that British infantry had also mounted the plateau only a mile to his south-west, and he was firing three of his guns in their direction, he was ignorant of the speed of their build-up, that the King's Own had already deployed six companies and, equally important, that the 23rd Punjab Pioneers, hastily forming on the flank of the King's Own, would be just in time to stand in the path of the charging Ethiopians. The Belooch Regiment was scrambling to follow, while the patchwork line was completed by several companies of Madras Sappers, like the Pioneers armed with muzzle-loading Enfields.

There were handfuls of others, but of all the jaded troops struggling to fend off this first and massive blow of the Emperor Theodore, only the King's Own could be accounted a regiment of the line, and carried breech-loading Sniders. The sepoys, although drilled in musketry, were intended primarily for construction and support duties. Their weapons were inferior to those of the Ethiopians, for Indian troops had not been trusted with breech-loaders, or artillery, since the Indian Mutiny of 1857.

Napier had not intended it this way; it was likely to be a near-run thing. It could be a disaster.

The General shouted at an aide. 'Away, you sir! Bring up the King's Own at the double!' He turned to a second. 'And you, sir — order the Naval Brigade here immediately!' Several officers ducked their heads to their saddles as a 68-pound chain-shot from Fala hissed over Napier's group and plunged to earth, scattering debris. A mule battery came to an untidy halt, and Colonel Penn, the senior artillery officer, had his sabre drawn.

'Down with those bloody guns! Take the mules to the rear — and keep ye wits bright, or by God I'll spur ye to it! Range nine hundred yards!'

The tidal wave of the enemy rolled nearer, until the sweating British could hear deep-voiced war chants and the shouts of chiefs. Horses caracoled and warriors skipped and vaulted, tossing their lances and black shields, many throwing off their flowing symas and bezans — some even their loincloths, so that they ran naked. Nothing more now could bolster the British line before the Ethiopian thousands swarmed over it, and the first shock must be met by six companies of Bombay and Madras sappers armed with muzzle-loaders. Could they stand?

The sepoys could, but only just, with the timely and enthusiastic support of a hitherto eccentric detail — the eighty-three sailors of the Naval Brigade's Rocket Battery.

The Royal Horse Artillery had regarded the rocket with disdainful disapproval for many years and, although an approved weapon, it had been deliberately neglected by the Army. The rocket, in the opinion of artillerymen who revered their guns, was inaccurate, unpredictable and very unprofessional equipment. This assessment was true only insofar as the Army's neglect had made it so. Artillerymen and Engineers were the only real military professionals; the others were merely time-serving gallivants. Gunnery was a scientific art. Rockets were not; they were fireworks.

The Naval contingent, drawn from the warships *Octavia*, *Dryad* and *Satellite*, was led by Lieutenant-Commander Fellowes and hauled four carriage-mounted rocket tubes. These fired 3-pounder Boxer rockets offering a choice of shell, solid shot or incendiary missiles, with a range of up to 3,000 yards depending upon the length of stick employed and the elevation of the tube — the nomination of which was largely arbitrary.

The carriage, from which the tube had to be unloaded and raised on a tripod, had no trail like a gun carriage but was fitted with a long box for carrying sticks, two boxes for rockets, and a final pair of small boxes for implements and slow match. The rocket propellant was standard black powder that had been made into pellets and hydraulically pressed into the steel rocket case, which also had a vent for ignition.

The carriages came careening madly over the craggy road with wheels bouncing, slewed, and then clattered to a dusty halt between the Pioneers and Beloochees. Dozens of raffish sailors spilled everywhere in apparently frenzied confusion, but in seconds the carriages were secured, tripods unloaded and raised, and crews kneeling and ready with rockets prepared and slow matches smoking. Commander Fellowes shouted orders, repeated by his boatswains.

‘Prepare for action front. Elevation twenty. Ammunition shell. Load.

Ready. FIRE!’

The battery was immediately engulfed in black smoke from which four serpents of flame screamed in the direction of the advancing enemy. With such a widely spread target it would have been difficult to miss with the most erratic of weapons, but the spitting, incandescent missiles ploughed full into the crowded Ethiopians just as the leading warriors were in the act of launching their spears at the waiting line of sepoys.

The effect on the enemy was neither spectacular nor lasting. The jostling hordes hesitated for a few seconds, milling around the places where the rockets had fallen, but seeming more puzzled than intimidated. It was impossible to see how many casualties had been suffered. Angry chiefs on shaggy ponies shouted, exhorting, and when the sailors’ second salvo of rockets — loaded almost as soon as the first had struck home — burst among them, the warriors merely crouched momentarily. Then they came on. True, they no longer leapt and ran blindly, but they trotted with determination, chanting. The advance, too, was splintering into three huge segments, each apparently intent upon the British position most clearly seen — the baggage train, the Punjab Pioneers, or the Madras Sappers. The yawning gaps between these hastily deployed units, each an open invitation to an outflanking movement, were being ignored. The Ethiopians had no time for tactics; they had come to fight.

‘The Fourth to the front, if you please,’ Napier ordered, ‘in skirmishing order and at the double quick!’ The Naval Brigade had usefully slowed the enemy’s pell-mell assault, which, by its very momentum, would almost certainly have flooded over three-quarters of the British force having yet reached the plateau. Now the Ethiopians must be hit hard and quickly, and Napier had only the King’s Own at his disposal.

‘This is ’ow it orl starts, Charlie,’ Dando advised. ‘Like I said — jes’ keep

out o' bleedin' trouble, aim fer the gut, six inches o' baynit an' yer boot in 'ard. If yer do as yer told an' *don't* try ter be a soddin' 'eero, we *might* not 'ave to bury yer after, see.'

'Jasus, thet's roight,' Holloran nodded. 'An' ef we *do* bury ye, don't worry, me jewel. Ef theer's enough corpses, we hev a parade an' a bloody band. Hev ye a morrsel ev chewin' terbaccy, me ol' Dando?' He pushed a cartridge into the breech of his Snider with the ball of a huge thumb. 'An' the auld chaplin wroights ye name en a holy book.'

Three hundred men of the King's Own, in two ranks uncomfortably short, gave a ragged cheer as their Colonel pointed ahead. On the flank was the slim figure of Ensign Edward Woodgate, with the Queen's colour, escorted by two sergeants, and to the front an expanse of tableland scattered with scrub oak and rubble that fell away gently to a shallow wadi before climbing again to the level of the higher plateau, across which the Ethiopians approached. This meant that, within seconds, the tramping infantrymen were in dead ground and could no longer see the teeming enemy that was closing upon them. It was oddly disconcerting to only hear the rapidly nearing surge of chanting war-cries mingled with the crump-crump of artillery, to smell smoke, and even feel the ground shudder underfoot, yet be ignorant, albeit briefly, of the scene only yards ahead. It was, as Dando would say later, like 'walkin' a railway cuttin', and 'earin' the whistle of a bleedin' express engine coming round the nex' soddin' bend'.

Then, as the leading line reached the brow of the punishing slope, they could all see. The entire landscape was black with advancing, stamping warriors, the leaders scarcely one hundred and fifty yards distant. Among the forest of jolting shields and tangling lances there were banners on poles. Men flayed drums, prancing and whirling, and hundreds of chiefs on trotting horses, in flowing crimson and gold, struck at the sky with their swords. A

massive sea of noise, of drums and shrilling trumpets, songs and chanting, burst over the dry-throated King's Own.

'Jasus,' Holloran breathed, 'did ye iver see so many black haythens, orl et one toim? Wheer did they orl bloody *come* from, bedad?'

'It ain't where they come from that's bleedin' important,' Dando spat. 'It's where they're soddin' *goin'*.'

Above the skirling tumult, Colonel Cameron's quiet voice was amazingly clear. 'Halt, and commence firing by half-companies.'

'Halt. Load and present. Ready. FIRE!'

The volley rolled along the line in a rattling tattoo that wasp-stung eardrums and shrouded all vision in lead-coloured smoke. Instantly, three hundred Snider butts came down to hips and three hundred right hands snapped open breeches, turned over weapons to shake free expended cartridges, then groped in unbuckled pouches for a fresh round.

'Reload. Present. Ready. FIRE!'

It was ludicrously simple. A man did not have to sight — he merely had to keep his aim low. The breech-loaders tore down the Ethiopians in swathes, tumbling them into the dust in a scrambling welter of men and kicking horses. Shocked and confused, the leading warriors halted, crouching and humming, pressing backwards at the hordes that followed, that eventually overspilled the leaders, unknowing, and in turn were scythed down like helpless cattle. Colonel Penn's seven-pounders had also, at last, found their range, and were strewing fuzed segment-shell over the entire Ethiopian front as fast as the sweat-soaked gun crews could load and fire.

The warriors, however, were far from cowed, merely uncomprehending. With many of their leading chiefs killed by the first few British volleys, they had lost cohesion. The densely crowded horde was fragmenting into groups obstinately loading and firing their rotten, home-made cartridges at the line of

troops on the brink of the wadi. Every minute a handful of men would rise and storm forward, shouting, but the Snider bullets would tear into them, and the group would break apart and disappear. Seconds later a fresh group would be running and crouching, holding up their shields through which the bullets sheared like paper, hewing them to the ground, where they crawled, or lay unmoving, crumpled mounds of blood-drenched linen.

‘Dammit, they’re sitting birds,’ Charlie Crewe complained. His rifle was hot against his cheek. ‘It’s only poachers, Americans and Whig M.P.s who shoot at sitting birds, and catch salmon with nets, and all that. The poor bounders ought to be given a sporting chance, y’know.’

‘Yer mean we oughter walk over an’ throw bleedin’ stones at ’em?’ Dando enquired. ‘Or chase ’em wiv sticks?’ He sniffed. ‘They ain’t got no idea o’ proper fightin’, see. Not like the Paythans. If they was soddin’ Paythans they wouldn’t be satin’ on their arses bein’ shot at, Charlie. Fer a start, yer wouldn’t bleedin’ see ’em. Yer wouldn’t see *sod-all* till yer guts was spillin’ over yer knees, see.’

‘Thet’s roight,’ Holloran affirmed. ‘Ef ye give thim haythens a chanst, Charlie me darlint, they’ll be carvin’ ye up ter serve wid curry — an’ the black colleens go fer ye’ privates, scraychin’, wid knives!’ He fired, then gave a satisfied grunt.

The Ethiopian battle-horde, where it faced the three hundred breech-loaders of the King’s Own and the vicious segment-shell of the seven-pounders, had been stopped in its tracks. One co-ordinated, determined charge could have overwhelmed the exposed line of British infantrymen in seconds, but leadership had disappeared. It was incredible that two thousand warriors could be defied by three hundred, but the three hundred, in a drilled line wreathed in smoke, fired, loaded, and fired again. The men were confident, derisory, waging pints of ale against their marksmanship, and when a lone

chieftain on a white horse, richly robed and festooned with gilt lace, spurred desperately and hopelessly towards the British position with lance levelled, both man and animal were met with a blizzard of rifle-fire that flung them headlong, tangling. The soldiers cheered. ‘Wid ye be thinkin’ thet wuz Himself the bloody Emperee?’ Holloran suggested. ‘Faith, ef he had a candle en his mouth he’d look loik a bloody Christmas tray, so he wud.’ He took aim, squinting, and fired. ‘Did I iver tell ye, Charlie me jewel, ev the toim Dando spewed in the bloody lilac outside the officers’ mess et Chatham? “Wot? Wot? Who’s thet?” sez the duty officer —’

‘Piss orf,’ said Dando.

Here on the southerly flank of the British line, it was no longer a battle but the beginning of a massacre. The Ethiopians, frustrated, were drifting away to take cover behind rocks and scanty wild olive trees, but the Snider bullets and the segment shells sought them out with devastating accuracy. The soldiers stood among the thousands of scattered, empty cartridge cases spilled from their hot guns, and the regimental boys were looking at their sergeants, hoping to be allowed the loan of a rifle for a few shots at the distant crawling blacks. Then a bugle teetered.

‘Cease fire!’

‘Fix bayonets!’

Three hundred bayonets rippled like silver com in a long-drawn metallic whisper — the most frightening of all sounds to a beaten enemy, the *coup de grace* of the battlefield.

‘General advance!’

The double line of khaki-clad infantrymen lurched forward, with spent brass cartridges splintering beneath iron-shod feet.

* * *

Northward, where the road climbed to the lower plateau, the situation was

more serious. The baggage-master, Lieutenant Sweeny, had managed to halt the mules in a small ravine, reasonably secure from enemy gunfire, and deploy his single company in open order to meet the Ethiopian advance. Save for a few scattered olives and wild tamarind there was no cover and no time to raise a breastwork. Thank God, to his right — but still painfully distant — he could see trotting sepoy, half obscured by their own dust, and guessed them to be the Punjab Pioneers. Even further he could see field guns. Christ, he needed field guns, but the battery, he calculated, would likely be too busy fighting for its own survival to give much attention to Sweeny's mules.

‘Load. Range four hundred —’

The thinly-spread men of the baggage detachment were firing as fast as they could claw cartridges from their pouches. They needed no orders. There were only seconds remaining in which to exploit their superior weapons, only seconds before the swarming enemy came within spear-stabbing reach. It was bleedin’ *marvellous*, weren’t it? Where was all the other sods that had marched all the way ter bleedin’ Magdala? There was the Duke o’ Wellington’s, the Bengal Cavalry, Sind Horse, the Belooch Regiment, the Punjabis, the 45th Regiment, Artillery, and even bleedin’ sailors — but when the fightin’ started yer could only see one company o’ the King’s Own and a bunch o’ soddin’ mules. It was bleedin’ *marvellous*! It made yer wonder what all these soddin’ colonels and generals *did* for their bleedin’ money!

The 23rd Regiment of Punjab Pioneers was composed of Dogras, Sikhs, Punjab Mussulmans and Pathans, mostly of farming stock, in equally-numbered half companies distinguished by differing styles of puggaree. The mixed-bag composition was the result of the Indian Mutiny of ten years before, it being considered most unlikely that men of four different cultures would achieve any clandestine alliance against authority. The men, commanded by British officers, were of indifferent quality, slow-witted, and

most of the Pathans, recruited from the Yusufzais, Orukzais and Afridis, had become soldiers only to gain military experience to be used against the British on the North-West Frontier in due course.

None had previously served outside India. Almost all had enlisted only to escape famine and finally earn a pittance of a pension. Although now in Ethiopia, they were unaware of that country's existence, and their interest in the campaign was negligible except that it provided daily rations and somebody to programme their every move.

They had always recognised that they were the poor relations of their British counterparts. Promotional prospects were limited; an Indian officer was always subordinate to a white officer and even to a white NCO. When rations had to be reduced, it was usually the Indian troops who suffered first. On the last few stages of the march to Magdala the British were still receiving meat, flour, sugar, tea and salt — albeit in small amounts — when the Indians had been reduced to flour and ghee. Both Muslim and Hindu regulations did not permit pork or beef to be included in their rations — these meats being forbidden by their religions — but they were compelled to tolerate the issue of unlabelled tinned beef described as 'Red Mutton' or 'Kashmir Goat' by an uncaring white commissariat, or go hungry. Regulations also compelled them to wear boots, when almost all had walked barefoot since infancy, to fight with weapons obsolete by most military standards, and to be generally subject to continuous, cheese-paring economies imposed by an Indian Council which boasted of the finest army east of Suez, but intended to maintain it as cheaply as possible.

Now having been transported across the sea — an experience the Hindus dreaded — they were required to fight Ethiopians, of whom they had never heard and with whom they had no quarrel. Would the sepoys ever be returned to Ferozepore and Amritsar? Or would they remain just another forgotten

garrison in some arid outpost of the Buna Ranees' Empire? There would be questions asked later why the British had used Muslim and Hindu troops against Christians, but now there was no time for debate. The Colonel Sahib was shouting.

The sepoys fired, once, at the distant, crawling horde of Ethiopians. There was no time for laborious reloading, for breaking paper cartridges, ramming powder and then ball. The Musketry Manual demanded that a trained soldier should load and fire three times in one minute, but there were no minutes to spare; the enemy were already surging around the half-hundred men of the baggage guard flung around their hidden mules. Before their own powder smoke had cleared, the sepoys fixed bayonets.

This, at least, was a good weapon — the 1853 socket bayonet which the British troops also carried on their Sniders, and would later transfer to the Martini-Henry until 1876. Its blade was seventeen inches of hollow-ground steel weighing 11 ounces, and it was probably the best in Europe. Whether it was a match for the Ethiopians' seven-foot spears or their curiously crook-bladed swords — shotels — was a question yet to be answered.

But it was answered quickly. The Bombay sepoys, in a tramping, close-ordered phalanx, sheared into the surprised, wider-spaced warriors like an angry buffalo through thorn-scrub, thrusting and clubbing. Although numerically superior by several dozen to one, and not lacking in savage courage, the Ethiopians were totally uncoordinated, individual fighters, baffled by an enemy who fought shoulder to shoulder behind a hedge of bayonets with every soldier supported by another on each side. Single, leaping tribesmen, or small groups of three or four, flung themselves against the sepoy line, stabbing, as frustrated chiefs slashed at their unwilling ponies, but the line of Indian soldiers, in green murtas, hunched over their bayonets, rolled immutably forward. Screeching Ethiopians were down, flailing in the

dust and trampled. There were sepoys, too, reeling and blood-drenched, but the Sahibs were leading, with swords and percussion pistols drawn, shouting at their children — and who could flinch when the Captain Sahib named him? — ‘Aprug! Get a move on! *Ek dum!* Emotin! You prod like a woman! *Maro! Maro!*’

* * *

On Fala the Emperor’s battery was still hurling shot at the British on the plateau, but achieving little. The Germans had spoken the truth when they claimed to have no knowledge of gunnery. Most of their shot, too heavily charged, were going far beyond the British position and crashing harmlessly among the rocks and shrubs on the mountain side. The artisans were also deliberately laying the guns inaccurately, hoping the discrepancy to be unobserved by the Ethiopians clustered around them, but Theodore angrily flung them away from the breeches. They would load the guns, he ordered, but he — the Emperor — would personally aim them. Was he not of the line of Solomon, knowing all things on earth? Furthermore, the colossal mortar, ‘Theodorus’, would now be fired, and the Feringhees would hear the mighty voice of the King of Kings.

‘Theodorus’ had been loaded since dawn with several hundredweight of black powder and a huge, crudely spherical ball that had been winched into the muzzle. It had taken four hours.

Waldmeier lit the slow-fuse and ran. The Emperor struck a pose, glaring at his entourage, and the fuse spluttered, died, then spluttered again. On the plateau below, the Emperor knew, his warrior thousands were butchering the English — as they had already butchered the tribes of Shoa, Salowa, Id and Haramat. Who was this brazen female, Victoria? And warriors who served a woman could themselves only be women.

There was a thunderous, ear-rending explosion followed by a brief,

screeching hiss. Instantly everyone within thirty yards of the great mortar was enveloped in choking, sulphurous smoke. The sky rained tiny, stinging cinders, and the air was suddenly hot, like that from the open door of a furnace. Men sprawled, while others reeled with arms protecting faces.

For moments the mortar was hidden from sight, but as the smoke thinned it could be seen that the giant, iron, bell-shaped barrel was split from mouth to vent, the trunnions torn from the massive timber cradle, which lay in splinters. The mortar's black throat, still clogged by its enormous shot, continued to trickle smoke, and eight or ten incautious bystanders lay dead on the surrounding, scorched earth.

For the chiefs and ministers on Fala, however — and the makeshift German gun-crews — there was something more frightening than a burst mortar. It was the resultant, berserk rage of the Emperor Theodore. But this time Theodore had no time to order a hundred immediate deaths. He had barely realised that his treasured toy, 'Theodorus', had destroyed itself when the sailors of the Naval Brigade's distant rocket battery turned their swash-buckling attention towards Fala. In quick succession, three fiery, shrieking missiles, more noisy than dangerous, burst among the crowded and already unnerved Ethiopian staff, and a small shell splinter struck the Emperor's right calf, imposing a modest flesh wound which was, however, sufficient to bloody his silk jodhpurs. Another splinter killed a horse only feet away. 'What terrible weapons are these?' he shouted. 'How can we fight them?' But his belligerence was draining, and he sat alone, his shield on his knees hiding his face. None dared to approach.

But somebody had to. Ras Ourary, tall and thin, his black face wetly shining with sweat, stood before Theodore. His right arm, cradled in his left, was a crimson horror, with the bone visible through shredded flesh. His head was lowered in shame. 'Lord, we have fought the Feringhees and their brown

men, and we have failed. How can we destroy an enemy that we cannot reach?’ He lowered himself to his knees. ‘Many of our princes are dead, Lord, by the many bullets and the long knives, and the death hornets that sing like harps —’

‘Fitaaurari Gabi?’ Theodore gritted. ‘Where is my general, Fitaaurari Gabi?’

‘He is dead, Lord,’ the other confessed. ‘Alone, he rode at the English, like a mighty flame, with a battle hymn on his lips, but the white soldiers killed him, and laughed to see him broken. When our warriors saw this, they hid behind rocks and trees. Then the Feringhees gave a great shout, and blew trumpets, and marched forward. Now, everywhere, your army is falling back on Magdala.’

The Emperor raised himself. ‘Falling back? They’re *running away*? It was a contingency that Theodore had never considered. That his warriors might fail simply by being killed was always a possibility, but they had never run from the most savage encounter; the penalties for cowardice were shuddering. In his blind anger, the Emperor could order the slaughter of hundreds, with their women and infants. Theodore’s warriors never ran away.

Still, in almost twenty years of constant warfare the Emperor had never conceded defeat. Nor had a foreign army ever achieved victory over a Lion of Judah in the whole history of the world since God’s creation, for Jesus Christ, the Son, had been an Ethiopian. It was impossible that he, Theodore, should be the first of his line to be so humiliated, but if it had to be, then his enemies’ victory would be a bitter one.

‘If the English reach the Kobet Bar Gate,’ he swore, ‘we shall throw them the bloody corpses of their people in Magdala.’

* * *

‘Jes’ look at them bastards run,’ Dando chuckled. ‘Mind, yer can’t expect much from a bleedin’ crowd o’ nigger minstrels, wot don’t know the

difference between a baynit an' a soddin' banjo. As I said, if they was Paythans —'

'Jasus, thet's roight,' Holloran agreed. 'Ef they wuz bloddy Paythans, they wudn't hev banjos.' He frowned. 'Faith, whit *wud* they hev?'

'A sort o' fiddle,' said Dando, 'that makes a soddin' awful noise like ten cats wi' gripe.'

'It was Alexander who introduced stringed instruments to India,' Charlie Crewe offered, 'from Greece, y'know.'

'Yer ain't sayin'?' Dando hawked and spat. 'Then 'ee oughter be shot down like a soddin' dog, that's wot. Yer ain't never 'eard Indian music, Charlie boy. It twists up yer gut like bleedin' ship-vinegar.'

'Thet's roight, so'tis,' Holloran nodded. 'An' theer's no worrds. Whit's the good ev music ef theer's no bloddy worrds?'

The Ethiopians, however, had been misjudged by both the advancing British and their own Emperor. They were not running, and they were not beaten yet. Frustrated and angry, they retired across the plateau towards Magdala in untidy droves. There was still a chatter of shots as men halted to fire back at the following infantry, who in turn trod over slumped, black bodies, bayoneting the wounded. Many of the dead were richly robed chiefs, and by the day's end a score of British troops would claim responsibility for having shot the Emperor Theodore.

But the sun was setting over Magdala, and Napier ordered a halt and withdrawal. Despite the day's success, his dispositions were still patchwork, and ammunition was dangerously low. He needed a breathing space, to bring up fresh troops and reform his line. More important, Theodore still had one ace up his sleeve — the European prisoners — and Napier wanted a final opportunity to negotiate their unharmed release, which was, after all, the sole reason for the campaign. It would be ludicrous to have come this far just to

bury sixty mutilated corpses.

The troops, at least, were not sorry to be halted and disengaged. They were weary almost to collapse, sweating and filthy, hungry and desperately parched, while most had only one or two cartridges remaining in their pouches. The King's Own had fired 10,203 rounds, had suffered only four casualties, and the 23rd Punjabis, in their bayonet charge, only thirteen.

'It ain't *that*,' as Dando explained. 'Yer gotter expect it. If yer can't stand the sight o' blood, yer shouldn't bleedin' join. But we ain't soddin' camels, see, with 'umps full o' bleedin' water. An' we need *vittles*. Anyway, it's time some o' them Wellington buggers 'ad a go. They ain't come jes' ter git their bleedin' knees brown.'

There was a surprise yet for the British. The Ethiopians, seeing their enemies suddenly halt, turn about, and then retire towards their earlier positions, also halted. Was it possible that the Feringhees' courage had failed, and they were retreating? The warriors stood watching, uncertain. A few of the bolder men retraced a few steps, prancing and stabbing at the air with their spears, shouting insults at the withdrawing British. In seconds, magically, the sparks of defiance flared and spread like a tropical grass-fire. Drums were thundering again, a few banners rose, and thousands of chanting tribesmen began to surge, yet again, in the wake of the tramping British.

'Gawdalmighty!' Dando was incredulous. 'Ain't they satisfied? Do they want it in bleedin' writin'?'

'In rale ink, b'Jasus,' Holloran nodded, groping in his expense pouch for one of his few remaining cartridges.

'They've got backbone, dammit,' Charlie Crewe protested. 'I remember an old dog fox with three legs — when I rode with the Beckford — who dragged us fourteen miles and drowned three hounds before going to earth, and *then* took the snout off a terrier. The Earl of Clareborne's horse broke both

forelegs and the Earl broke his neck. Mrs. Erle-Farrington-Drax, who was following in a brake, had a premature infant.'

'I ain't bleedin' surprised,' Dando considered. 'I suppose yer joined the Army fer soddin' safety.'

Behind them, the following tide of Ethiopians was getting uncomfortably close. The seven companies of the King's Own, still extended, were stumbling into the wadi again, and here they turned for the last time, loaded, and waited. They had one volley left, possibly two. The Ethiopians exploded over the lip of the wadi like black spray.

'FIRE!'

They reloaded and waited again, but the lip of the wadi, against the dusking sky, was empty.

'In rale ink,' Holloran affirmed, smugly. 'Bedad, theer's nothin' loik rale ink.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Incredibly, it had begun to rain. There were still no tents, and fires were few, damply smoking and uncomfortable. Nor had rations arrived, and the men had nothing except the few biscuits carried in their haversacks since dawn. At midnight, however, water-carts reached the plateau.

Although with thirst relieved, there was little for the men to do but huddle on the ground, wrapped in their greatcoats, wet and cold, and with rifles to hand. Picquets were strongly posted, the sentries shrugged into their collars. Throughout the night, from the darkened Salamge plain that separated them from Magdala to the northward, they could hear movement and see an occasional flicker of light as the Ethiopians sought their wounded. Chillingly, there were also the bickering snarls of prowling hyenas.

When daylight came, all was contrast. The rain had gone, replaced by bright, hot sunshine, and birds sang — clock-birds, swallows and high-flying larks. More important to the grimy, unshaven soldiers, there were rations, still the monotonous beef, preserved vegetables, biscuit, tea and sugar, but today there were no complaints. The fires were coaxed into life and the kettles with their incongruous mixtures were soon steaming as the men waited hungrily with their mess-tins. With full bellies, gloriously supplemented by a tot of rum, they were laughing and swearing, ready for anything the coming day might threaten.

The Surgeon-Major reported to General Napier the extent of the previous day's casualties. In total, only one officer and thirty-one men had been wounded, of whom two would subsequently die. It was an unbelievably modest butcher's bill.

Lieutenant Sweeny — yesterday's baggage-master — now taking a detachment into Salamge to estimate enemy losses, and accompanied by the American correspondent, Stanley, returned with a more sobering story. Ignoring those who had crawled, or been carried, back to Magdala, there remained 700 dead and 1,200 wounded on the plateau. Many of the wounded had been additionally mauled by scavenging animals during the night, and among those conveyed to the British hospital tents was the warrior prince Dajatch Deris, with a smashed knee. The corpse of Ras Ourary, who had returned to the fighting after his brief exchange with Theodore on Fala, had also been identified.

The dead lay thickest on the left flank, where the baggage guard and Punjab Pioneers had been engaged in hand-to-hand fighting. It was apparent that the bayonet had completed what bullets and segment-shell had left half done, and men and horses were heaped in tens and twenties. On the other flank, where fighting had been at longer range, the surviving wounded were more numerous, some still attempting to crawl towards Magdala, or achieve the shade of a bush or rock. Of the dead, 560 would be buried by detail parties during the day, but within a week the hyenas, jackals and vultures would have removed most of the battle's horrors, leaving a field of whitened bones.

Napier was in no hurry' to resume the action. Every passing hour, with the progressive reinforcement of the 33rd Duke of Wellington's, the 45th Nottinghams, the 10th Native Infantry, and the breech-loading Armstrong batteries, improved his situation. The prevailing shortage of water ruled out the employment of large bodies of horse, but detachments of both British and Indian cavalry were ordered to the westward of Magdala, on the plain below, to seal off any conceivable escape route on that side.

The net had closed around the Emperor Theodore but, inside, the Emperor had his own net, and it contained fifty-six European captives.

* * *

Theodore had spent the night on the slopes of the Salasse Peak, brooding over the day's reverses, of which, however, he still had only a confused knowledge. His first interpretation was one of utter disaster involving the massacre of half his army. He shouted for his favourite generals — Fitaurari Gabi, Ras Ourary, Dajatch Deris and Dajatch Wahe — but, his attendants told him, they had all died on Salamge.

Querulously, he drank *tej*. 'I once thought my warriors to be brave men. Now I find they were only timid women, to be slain and scattered by the English advance-guard.' Outside his tent was all the tangled chaos of a defeated and despondent army, with exhausted and wounded men in their hundreds seeking a place by the fires and a mouthful of meat or bread, or merely a dark corner in which to crouch from the rain. Among the men walked women in sodden kanzus, rocking their heads in their hands and wailing for the loss of husbands and sons. Theodore stamped hysterically, baring his teeth. 'Stop those squealing women 1 Are there none who will fight instead of whining like whipped dogs?'

'How can we fight the Feringhees, Lord,' a chieftain pleaded, 'when they come towards us like a great snake, and do not stop to reload their guns? It is a magic we cannot keep at bay.'

The Emperor nodded. 'And are not the Feringhee captives the cause of all this ruin? So be it.' He raised reddened eyes. 'Take warriors into Magdala, and kill them all.'

'Wait, Lord!' It was grey-haired Ras Engedda the oldest counsellor. 'Not yet, Lord. Preserve them. They are coin with which to bargain. While you have them alive, the English dare not attack, but if you kill them, the English will slay every man, woman and child, and raze Magdala to the ground.' He paused. 'Why not send two of the captives to the English General, to see if he

will discuss a treaty? All that is lost is time, and time is more important to the English than to us.'

Theodore calculated, his gaze on Engedda for a long minute. Then he smiled. 'It is good advice. While we have the captives we can still make conditions. Send Sultan Rassam to me, at once, and we will prepare a letter for the English general.' All was not lost, then. There was still much that could be saved — indeed, even turned to his own advantage if he negotiated shrewdly. Perhaps, in the end, it would be the English who made concessions, and he, the Emperor, would be seen as the victor. After all, was he not Theodorus, descended from Solomon, King of Kings?

He felt immensely relieved, almost jubilant. He would go to his inner tent, where Ita Mangu awaited his pleasure. But he would whip her first.

* * *

She had seen the small case, shagreen-covered with silver fittings, many times. The interior was lined with velvet, and a number of recesses housed a pair of double-barrelled percussion pistols with engraved walnut stocks, a mould, capper, flask, cleaning rod and other accessories. There was also a silver plate, with an inscription: 'Presented by Victoria, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, to Theodorus, Emperor of Abyssinia, as a Slight Token of her Gratitude for his Kindness to her servant, Plowden, 1861.' But Ita Mangu could not read the strange words which, although well intended, were an affront. Only disdainful foreigners referred to Ethiopia as Abyssinia, which was from an Arabic word meaning a mixed people.

The pistols had never been loaded; no potentially harmful weapons were permitted in the Emperor's quarters. Ita Mangu knew little about guns, but she had watched, reasoned, and now she understood. Secretly, over a period of several weeks, she had gleaned a small quantity of powder and shot. Then, while Theodore was absent on Fala, and the tents deserted of guards, she

began to methodically load the pistols.

Each pistol had twin barrels and required two percussion caps. Ita Mangu loaded both barrels of one, but had only sufficient powder to load a single barrel of the other, but she was satisfied. She replaced the guns in their case, carefully brushed away a few scattered powder-grains, then retired to the inner tent. The time had almost come.

* * *

Lieutenant John Prideaux, sometime of the 70th Foot and the Bombay Staff Corps, had put on his old scarlet shell-jacket, white summer trousers and ridged tropical helmet, all of which had been old-fashioned in Poona even three years ago, but in Ethiopia, he had then considered, the scarlet would be more impressive than the drab khaki coming into vogue. Accompanying Mr. Rassam to the Emperor's court at Damot had seemed rather a lark in 1865; older officers could tell yams in the mess about the Mutiny and the Afghan border, but none had been into Ethiopia. He wished, b'God, that neither had he.

Now, he had waited impatiently for daybreak, choking with suppressed excitement and unable to contemplate food. With him was the elderly missionary, Flad, and one of Theodore's own staff, Dejatch Alami, who would ensure that they passed through the Ethiopian camp without molestation. It was a beautiful dawn, with the sky blue, the sun bright and warm — the most beautiful dawn, Prideaux decided, that he had ever experienced.

The three men skirted Salamge and the lower terraces of the Salasse Peak, emerging onto the Fala saddle where, for the first time, they could see the scattered human debris of yesterday's battle. The corpses were beginning to swell in the sun's increasing heat, attracting flies. Prideaux, unconsciously, was hurrying, and the older Flad was breathing hard.

Ahead, in the distance, they could see rows of tents and a flag drooping from a pole, horse-lines and wagons — and, Goddam, were those *elephants*? There were hundreds of men strolling, standing, grouped about cooking-fires, apparently at leisure, and Prideaux could hear faint, boisterous shouts, unintelligible, then the notes of a bugle. Christ, he could almost smell black shag and yellow soap!

They were surrounded. Khaki tunics, khaki men, khaki faces, all exactly the same. How did one distinguish an officer? But it didn't matter, blast it. It had been three years — *three bloody years*!

'Hullo!' somebody said cheerfully. It was a young khaki man with a sword-belt. 'Who are you chaps? Portuguese militia?'

'Lieutenant Prideaux, Bombay Staff Corps.' His voice was shaking. 'Attached to Mr. Rassam, Assistant Political Agent from Aden. I have a communication for General Napier from the Emperor.'

'Prideaux — ? We've heard about you,' the young man nodded. 'Damn bad luck, your business.' He indicated the flag on the pole. 'You'd best come along so see my chief first. Do you play bridge, old man? We haven't had a fourth for weeks.' He glanced at Prideaux' shabby scarlet. 'And we'd better get you something civilised to wear. You look like that chappie who sings "Who'll Fight for the Queen?" at the Alhambra.'

* * *

Ita Mangu lay among the crumpled cushions of the Emperor's inner tent, exhausted and bleeding after a savage whipping followed by a brutal sexual exchange that had left her drained, limp, and in a state of shock. Her lips were swollen and broken, her breasts clawed, and her pelvis ached from an hour of physical insult that she thought would never end. There had been moments when she had been on the brink of begging for respite, to promise him slavish compliance in all things, to debase herself, but she had not; she

had not given him that victory. She had lain, as she always did, frigidly impassive, with expressionless eyes on the tent roof as he churned and panted over her until, sated, he flung her aside. Ita Mangu was a Gallas princess, and proud, but this time he had almost broken her. She was not sure that she could endure the next trial, when it came. Knowing herself now alone, she moaned softly, wanting to vomit.

Theodore, with his counsellors in the outer tent, was beginning to regret sending a message to Napier. The message, conveyed by Lieutenant Prideaux, had been verbal because the Emperor would not consent to writing to the servant of a woman. He had conceded that, until yesterday, he had considered himself the greatest man in the world, but events had shown that there were others as strong. He suggested, therefore, a reconciliation as between equals. That was all.

Now, with the new day, it seemed that his military situation was not nearly as bad as he had thought. He had not lost half of his army; he had perhaps lost two thousand men. Every hour saw more of his scattered warriors returning to their camp on Salange, perhaps because they had nowhere else to go, but they were noisy with bravado and threats to recompense for their defeat of yesterday. When the Feringhees had fought a battle, they shouted, they went to sleep. Yesterday was unfortunate. Today would be different. Today the English would be slaughtered.

* * *

In the early afternoon Lieutenant Prideaux, Flad and Dejatch Alami returned from the British lines. Their respective sentiments differed. Prideaux had been stunned by Napier's suggestion that they should return to Theodore, after their years of captivity, but he had choked back his disappointment, and complied. Flad, on the other hand, was relieved, for his sick wife remained in Magdala. Alami was depressed. He had seen the Armstrong batteries and the

elephants, and the disciplined movements of the British and Indian troops. He was convinced that the Emperor could not prevail. 'There is no escape for us,' he admitted. 'We must surrender or be killed. We cannot run away; we would be pursued, and we are surrounded by our enemies, the Haimanoo people and the Gallas. All is finished.'

They had lunched with Sir Robert, and the General had made it plain that, at this late stage, anything short of complete submission and the safe surrender of all the captives was unacceptable. His written reply to Theodore was translated into Arabic, then from Arabic into Amharic.

Your Majesty has fought like a brave man, and has been overcome by the superior power of the British Army. It is my desire that no more blood shall be shed. If, therefore, your Majesty will submit to the Queen of England, and bring all the Europeans now in your Majesty's hands, and deliver them safely this day in the British camp, I guarantee honourable treatment for yourself and all the members of your Majesty's family.

On Salamge, Theodore paced his tent furiously. He was insulted by the fact that the servant of a woman should address him at all, far less in such peremptory terms. 'What does he mean by *honourable treatment*? Will he agree to assist me in fighting the rebellion in my country, to which he has given encouragement? And has he taken into account my numerous family? I have as many wives and children as hairs on my head. They would involve immense expense in England if they are all to be provided for.'

Prideaux could have replied that the British had no intention of waging war on Theodore's behalf, and certainly none of conveying the Emperor and his uncounted relatives to England as guests of the Queen, but he held his peace. Theodore was in a belligerent mood.

The Emperor summoned a secretary. He would dictate a note to the English, he said, which would be written on the back of Napier's own

communication, and be unsealed. Following prolonged references to the justice of his cause in the sight of God, and implying that the defeat of his warriors was attributable to his absence from their ranks, he answered Napier's demands: 'Since the day of my birth no man has dared to lay hands on me. Whenever my soldiers wavered in battle, it was I who arose and rallied them. Last night the darkness hindered me from doing so. May God do unto you as He has done to me! I had hoped, after subduing all my enemies in Ethiopia, to lead my army against Jerusalem, and expel from it the Turks. A warrior who has dandled strong men in his arms like infants will never suffer himself to be dandled in the arms of another.'

Armed with this unpromising reply, Prideaux and Flad set out once more across Salamge towards the British position — Prideaux hoping that it was for the last time, Flad less happily. Within an hour of meeting Napier, however, Prideaux' hopes were again dashed. The General returned to him the much-thumbed letter, instructing him to inform the Emperor that no further terms would be granted, that there would be unrelenting pursuit and punishment of all who might be involved in the ill-treatment of the European captives. The British had reached Magdala, and there was no corner of Ethiopia, however remote, that could hide anyone from English vengeance.

Wearily, Prideaux and Flad tramped past the picquets into Salamge, towards the distant Ethiopian tents.

* * *

'They're goin' backwards an' forwards like a bung in a soddin' barrel,' Dando commented. 'I don't see there's anything ter bleedin' argue about. We kin go through them niggers as easy as a fart through an' old sock.'

'Aysier,' Holloran affirmed.

'The General's bluffing, old scouts,' Charlie Crewe decided. 'Old King Cocoa's holding the master trump, y'know — the European captives — and

he can make Napier go on bidding until he goes bust. In short, dear boys, he has Napier by the jolly old privates.'

Holloran considered. 'Faith, an' don't generals hev anythin' better than *proivates*?'

* * *

Meanwhile, on his knees, the Emperor had pleaded his predicament to his Holy Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Believing that all power had been given to him, he prayed, he had established his people in this heathen place, in defiance of the Musselman. Had he not fed and protected many Christians? He had intended, if God so decreed, to conquer the whole world in His name, and he would die if that purpose was not fulfilled. Would God give him the power, and forsake not His people? Yards away, Ita Mangu watched and listened in silence.

When he returned to the outer tent, he found his advisers locked in furious debate. Several had been drinking *tej*, and were noisily demanding that the European captives be killed immediately, their heads stuck on spears, and the Ethiopian army committed to a life-or-death struggle with the English. Grizzled old Ras Engedda, and Dejatch Alami, who had seen the English guns and soldiers, counselled compromise. The captives were of no value to Ethiopia, they urged, except as coin for bargaining. That being so, they should be offered now, while there was still time to purchase a treaty. In a few hours, with the Ethiopian army destroyed and Magdala a charred ruin, there would be nothing to bargain for.

Theodore was baffled by uncertainty, incensed by the thought of humiliating surrender but with his petulance dampened by Alami's repeated assertions regarding British military superiority. None of the other chiefs had similar first-hand knowledge of the Feringhee's strength.

He agreed at last. 'It is a great charity that I do in the name of the Father.

The Europeans shall be released and sent safely to the British.'

Receiving the news, the captives in the Magdala compound were ready for departure in an incredibly short time; they knew too well the capricious moods of the Emperor. Most had prepared their bundles several days earlier, and now they wished to be free of their confinement before Theodore could revoke his order. Afoot, or astride asses, the appearance of many of them was ludicrous, clad in native, toga-like kanzus, sandals and clumsily-woven straw hats. There were 187 servants and 323 animals accompanying the Europeans, among whom was the wife of the artisan Moritz, heavily pregnant. Frau Flad and the Frenchman Bardel, both sick, were to follow by litter.

The scarecrow column streamed through the Kobet Bar Gate of the Magdala fortress, with the native servants slashing at the animals' rumps to urge them faster. There was a moment of throat-choking suspense as the Emperor himself, fully robed and attended by guards, appeared at the roadside, but he only nodded silently in recognition of familiar faces as they hurried past, occasionally lifting a hand. He caught sight of Consul Charles Cameron, the man he had imprisoned, in shackles, since 1863. Cameron, prematurely aged and stooped, was wrapped in a dingy grey blanket as he clung to the saddle of a borrowed donkey.

'Ah, goodbye, Cameron,' Theodore smiled. 'We part friends, do we not? You will forgive me for what I did to you? We shall never meet again.'

Cameron, recalling the wasted years during which he had been chained, whipped, subjected to continual insult, and apparently abandoned by his own Government, had many things he might have said to the Emperor. He had rehearsed them often enough in the fetid darkness of his hut, lice-infested and stinking of sweat. One day, he had prayed, the positions of Theodore and himself might be reversed. One day, he had repeatedly assured himself, he would see the Union Jack flying over Magdala and the arrogant Emperor

broken. The anticipation had lightened his misery — and now that long-awaited moment had come.

But the captives were not free yet. Not yet. One careless word, one disdainful gesture, could transform Theodore into a maddened animal. He could shout an order, and every man, woman and child of the departing column would be a blood-drenched corpse. The Emperor still smiled.

Cameron inclined his head respectfully. ‘Goodbye, your Majesty.’

The massive gate of Kobet Bar crashed behind them. They were almost free. Salange was ahead, they knew, and beyond the plain were the tents of the British Army. The native servants slashed again, shrilly exhorting, and every rock-strewn yard was one yard nearer safety. Frau Moritz was in labour, swaying, her teeth drawing blood from her lips as her ass stumbled. The afternoon sun was hot, and children were sobbing.

As the eager, leading captives reached the brow of a ridge they could see, at last, the far-off lines of white tents, the smoke of field kitchens, and even a trotting troop of Indian lancers behind a coloured guidon. Less than a half mile ahead, however, were two men tramping determinedly towards Magdala, but at that distance unrecognisable. They halted, stared, and then came running forward, shouting and waving their arms. They were Prideaux and Flad, carrying Napier’s final ultimatum to the Emperor.

There was no further need. The far troop of lancers had wheeled and was approaching at a dust-scudding gallop, while beyond, in seconds, the tent-lines were an ant-heap of sudden activity, of hundreds of men running, blaspheming, cheering. Tethered mules tugged at their head-ropes, and an elephant trumpeted, trunk to the sky. Among the released captives the children’s weeping ceased, and the women burst into tears.

For an hour there was noisy confusion, of back-slapping and hand-shaking, of soldiers lifting children to brawny shoulders, and Napier, hatless and

broadly smiling, strolling among the throng. The smile under his ragged moustache hid the intense relief he experienced. Theodore, inexplicably, had discarded the one advantage that could have frustrated the General. Now the whip had changed hands — and now, Napier resolved, he was not going to tamely withdraw from Ethiopia. He was going to give Theodore a stinging lesson.

With the exception of Consul Cameron and two or three others, the captives were in surprisingly good health. The British had been convinced that they were to rescue people who were naked and starved, sore-covered and tortured. That was what the newspapers had claimed, and Napier's march from Zoulla had consequently been a race against time. They had expected, too, that they would need to accommodate about fifty captives, but now, with the native servants who insisted on remaining, there were 243.

Before nightfall there were 244. Frau Moritz gave birth to a son in the hospital tent and, incredibly, he was to be christened Theodore.

And there were four of the returned captives, Napier ordered, who were not to be allowed immediate sanctuary. They were Mayer, Waldmeier, Saalmüller and Moritz, who had yesterday served the Ethiopian guns on Fala. They were mercenaries of the Emperor and had collaborated more readily than any of their fellows. Napier's instructions did not include relief for the enemy's hirelings. They would return to Magdala until Theodore volunteered their discharge from his service.

* * *

In Theodore's outer tent the chiefs and ministers talked in low voices, shooting occasional glances at the silent, pensive Emperor. With the captives gone, Theodore's humour had begun to deteriorate rapidly. It was clear to him that the whole world was in arms against him — the Egyptians from the Red Sea and the Sudan, the Muslim insurgents in Ethiopia, and now the

British — but it was the abasement he had suffered at the hands of the last that disgusted him most. Worse, he had demonstrated weakness before his own followers, and perhaps even at this moment they whispered against him. It required a strong and savage hand to control the warrior chiefs of the army. Self-pity was replaced by resentment and then by a choking anger. He would prove beyond doubt that he was the chosen of God, King of Kings. He would prove, by the intervention of God the Father himself, that he, Theodore, was created to lead the world against Islam, as had been Jesus, the Son.

He knew, but his chiefs did not, that the pistols in the case at his elbow were unloaded. He lifted the lid, took up the nearer gun, and rose to his feet. The murmur of conversation ceased immediately.

‘The Lord God will stretch forth His hand,’ Theodore announced, ‘to keep me from death, and so show that I am the chosen one of Heaven.’ He cocked one of the hammers, placed the muzzle of the pistol in his mouth and, before anyone could move, pulled the trigger.

There was a hollow click. Ras Engedda and Dejatch Alami flung themselves forward, and Engedda tore at the pistol. The Emperor, intent upon repeating the demonstration, wrenched himself away, fumbling for the second trigger. A thunderous detonation deafened everyone, and a bullet grazed Theodore’s ear before shearing through the roof of the tent.

Everyone stood still, speechless. Theodore stared at the smoking gun in his hand, struggling to control his amazement as blood dripped from his cheek. Then several of the chiefs dropped to their knees, lowering their faces to the ground. It was Ras Engedda who spoke, humbly. ‘Majesty, the Lord God has spoken to us, and we are ashamed that we doubted. Truly, God will give us strength and victory when His chosen son leads us against the English. God has spoken.’

In the inner tent, Ita Mangu had risen from her cushions, listening. She had

heard the shot, and her folded hands clawed at her arms. Then she heard Engedda's voice, and the vomit reached for her throat. She had failed, and Theodore would calculate and guess. He would come to her with his whip, and blood in his eyes, and this time she could not endure. She wept, terrified.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

On the morning of Easter Sunday, 750 men of the 33rd Wellington's, and 400 of the 45th Regiment, flanked by the Belooch Regiment, had moved up into line in readiness for the expected assault on Magdala.

Dando was indignant. 'Don't it make yer bleedin' *spit!* We've 'ad all the sweat, an' jest when we're goin' in fer some bleedin' loot, them other sods put their snouts in 1' He scrubbed at the lock of his Snider with a scrap of oily rag. 'We got bugger-all at Delhi, an' the Summer Paliss was picked clean by the bleedin' Frogs before we got there. It ain't soddin' justice. There oughter be arrangements.'

There had been church services for respective persuasions, with Holloran electing to join that of the Church of England because it was the only one with a band. The chaplain gave thanks for the safe delivery of the hostages, with confusing references to the Israelites' flight from Egyptian bondage. Now, suitably purged of sin, the soldiers were constructing scaling ladders from dhoolie poles and pick-axe handles, and preparing powder bags, grenades and crow-bars. Ample ammunition had been issued, the elephants had taken the Armstrong batteries to positions commanding Fala, and two days' ration of grain had come by mules from the Bashilo river.

Frustratingly, the men were still on reduced victualling, with sugar, tea, coffee, rice and tobacco in particularly short supply — a situation not relieved by the presence of the 244 rescued captives. Five hundred bullocks were being employed in bringing water from a suitable stretch of the Bashilo, seven miles away.

Shortly before noon, the Emperor's secretary, Alaka Ingada, accompanied

by one of the German artisans, approached the British picquets bearing a letter. They were escorted to Napier's tent, where the communication was laboriously translated from Amharic into Arabic and then into English. The message was as bewildering as its author.

I am writing to you, without being able to address you by name, because our intercourse has arisen so unexpectedly.

I am grieved at having sent you my writing of yesterday, and at having quarrelled with you, my friend. When I saw your manner of fighting, and the discipline of your troops, and when my people failed to execute my orders, then I was consumed with sorrow to think that, although I killed and punished my soldiers, yet they would not return to the battle. Whilst the fire of jealousy burned within me, Satan came to me, and tempted me to kill myself with my own pistol. I cocked my pistol and, putting it into my mouth, pulled the trigger. Though I pulled and pulled, yet it would not go off. But when my people rushed upon me, and laid hold of the pistol, it was discharged, just as they had drawn it from my mouth. God has thus signified to me that I should not die but live.

Today is Easter. Be pleased to let me send a few cows to you. You require from me all the Europeans. Well, be it so. But, now that we are friends, you must not leave me without artisans, as I am a lover of the mechanical arts.

Any attempt to rationalise the letter seemed pointless; the Emperor's mode of reasoning was completely baffling. Was Theodore surrendering? But there was no time for debate. The picquets had hurriedly reported that, from the direction of Magdala, a thousand cattle and five hundred sheep were being driven towards the British lines.

This time Hormuzd Rassam, the freed Political Resident, had advice for Napier. The gift of cattle, he said, was a deliberate ruse. Acceptance, in Ethiopian eyes, would be tantamount to a British declaration that hostilities

had ceased and full reparation made. Thus, any further military action by Napier would be considered treachery even by those Ethiopian tribes friendly to the British. The enigmatic Emperor had not lost his cunning.

Napier ordered the approaching herd, and its drovers, to be halted and driven back, if necessary with bayonets.

* * *

‘In a few more minutes,’ Dando lamented, ‘there’d ‘ave been ’ot beef an’ taters in the pot — if we ‘ad some bleedin’ taters.’ He regarded the unappetising fragments of unidentifiable salt meat in his mess-tin without enthusiasm. ‘I wudn’t be soddin’ surprised if some o’ them cows sneaked past the picquets an’ *jest* ‘*appened* ter find their way ter the officers’ bleedin’ field kitchen. I ’ope it gives ’em soddin’ worms.’ He sniffed. ‘An think o’ all the tripe yer’d git from a thousand bleedin’ cows.’

* * *

The four Germans who had returned to Magdala took with them the body of Fitaurari Gabi, the Ethiopian commander who had ridden alone and hopelessly against the British line. Gabi had been popular with his warriors, and hundreds thronged behind the four men as they carried the blanket-wrapped corpse to the door of Theodore’s tent. The Emperor regarded the dead face of his favourite general silently, and when one of the Germans enquired if the few Europeans remaining in the camp might be released from their responsibilities, he seemed not to hear. Then he waved a hand resignedly. ‘I give all of them permission to leave Magdala.’ He paused, thrusting out a lip. ‘*Everyone* who wishes to leave may do so.’

But he had sent the cattle. He knew of the British supply difficulties, and they would accept — of that he was certain. As a result, there would be no more fighting. There would be talks, and further exchanges of gifts, much drinking and singing, and the British would be his friends. Then the rebel

tribes would see that the Emperor had powerful allies, and would tremble, and their princes would come to Magdala to put their faces in the dirt at his feet. He would send emissaries to his sister Victoria, asking for breech-loading guns and fire-rockets, and perhaps officers to train his warriors in the manner of European warfare. Then he would lead his army to Jerusalem, and the world would know of him, Theodore, King of Kings.

When they brought him news that the British had turned back the cattle he was incredulous. What did these arrogant British expect of him? The refusal of his gift left him with only two alternatives — the surrender of his royal person, which was unthinkable, or war to extinction — and Theodore's confidence in his warriors was shaken, despite their blood-lusting assurances. They had howled such threats before, and had then been scattered like women by the Feringhees. And now, too, his best generals were dead — Fitaurari Gabi, Dajatch Deris, Ras Ourary and Dajatch Wahe.

But there was a third possibility, if he dared. Was it not right that the royal line of Solomon and Menelik should be preserved? If he died, who then would challenge Islam and win back the Holy Sepulchre? Magdala would be forgotten when the standard of the lion of Judah was flying over the Holy City of Jerusalem.

Beyond the northerly gate of Magdala — the Kafir Bar — was the Sangalat, an empty, flattened spur of rock useless for any purpose except the burial of dead, but from it a little-known and dangerously precipitous track descended to the lower valley. The British would not know of it. Theodore, with his wife and son, perhaps the Abuna (the Coptic Patriarch) and a bodyguard of picked warriors, could be fifty miles away before his enemies realised he had gone. And Ethiopia was vast.

Reports indicated that the British were preparing for an assault. Their infantry and guns had already been advanced, and bodies of cavalry were

reconnoitring the Fala saddle and the far side of Salamge. Theodore ordered his own artillery to be withdrawn to cover the immediate approaches to Magdala, and then sent for his wife and son, the Empress Etegie Torenachie and the six-year-old Ala Mayu.

The British attack, he calculated, would begin at dawn tomorrow, but it would take several hours to negotiate the narrow, twisting paths across Salamge before reaching the scarp on which Magdala stood behind a loop-holed wall. His flight must be carefully timed — not too soon so that his warriors threw down their weapons and refused to fight, but early enough to be safe from pursuit. He would leave at the first flush of dawn, when all attention would be on the impending British attack.

He kicked Ita Mangu from his inner tent to accommodate his wife for the first time for months. Had he associated the Gallas woman with the loaded pistol he would have had her dismembered and her still breathing torso hung from a spike, but he had not wished to investigate too closely the matter of the pistol. Whatever the explanation, it had reassured the commanders who must fight tomorrow, and their disillusionment could be damaging. If it had been the hand of God, then he was secure from all danger. If it had not, then it was better not to question it until he was far away.

At the wall, and on the outer terraces, thousands of warriors were reinforcing the defences, raising barricades of thorny stakes and filling the arched gateway with massive boulders, so that entrance, even if the gate were destroyed, would be impossible. The Lord God had spoken to the Emperor, the chiefs shouted, and many had witnessed. Theodore, *Negus Negusti*, was the Chosen One, and tomorrow the Feringhees would be devoured as the sea had devoured the hosts of Pharaoh.

Before dusk, the Emperor instructed two of his most trusted officers to have a force of picked warriors mustered before first light on the morrow, fully

armed and provisioned for marching. He did not tell them why, but they did not doubt that he was to lead them out to slaughter the British, and the Lord God would be with them.

Theodore, in his tent, had momentarily forgotten the Lord God. He was drinking *tej* and dreaming new dreams as his wife and son watched him in nervous silence. Did not the Bible tell of men who had gone into the wilderness, to return with great power? Had not Mary, and the Son, fled from the wrath of Herod? And was not all now being repeated?

* * *

Ita Mangu had crouched in the outer tent throughout the night. She might have fled, for there had been much confusion, and she knew there were Gallas people on the plain below Magdala, but the darkness that would hide her escape would equally make a descent of the mountain impossible. Besides, beyond Salamge there were the Feringhees, and she knew nothing of the Feringhees. From the inner tent there came the gleam of a lantern, and she could hear the restless noises of the Emperor as he slept. Tomorrow, she had learned, there was to be another battle.

When dawn came it was dark and chill, with only a shred of dirty yellow to the eastward, and Theodore was shrugged into his cloak as he emerged from the tent. A few cooking fires still gleamed dully among the goat-skin shelters that sagged damply, and Salamge was thickly clogged with huddled shapes, numbly cold but only half awake. Here and there a man would rouse himself, thrust fuel into a fire, and sparks would spit skyward. A few dogs prowled the black shadows, an infant wailed once and then fell silent, and the tethered horses and mules stood with drooped heads.

But the silence was deceptive. In long, unmoving lines, stretching both sides of the Kobet Bar Gate, stood warriors, densely formed, in the darkness a ragged, blurred and grey-white congestion stippled with the grass of raised

spears. There were a few silk and brocaded robes, the glitter of silver ornaments, the dull gleam of greased and plaited hair over indistinct black faces. As Theodore halted, an officer came forward to lay his spear at the Emperor's feet. 'All is ready, Lord. Lead, and we follow.'

The Emperor was startled at the size of the contingent. He had thought in terms of a few hundred men, but here there were two thousand. This was, however, no time to object. The eastward sky, over Magdala, was paling rapidly, and the members of his household were mounting — his wife and son, his gun-bearer Waldo Gabir, several body-servants, and the aged Coptic Patriarch. Theodore rose in his saddle. 'Warriors who love me,' he cried, 'gird yourselves. Leave all behind, take nothing but your weapons. The time has come to seek another home!'

Only the nearer warriors heard all his words, and few seem to have taken in the meaning of the last sentence. There were puzzled glances as the royal party led the long procession into Magdala, but none desired to openly question the Emperor's strategy. They filtered between the timbered palace and the deserted, gloomy European compound, past the treasury, the Coptic church, and almost a half mile of closely built houses whose conical straw roofs were jagged black teeth against a sky exploding into golden sunshine. They passed through the eastward, Kafir Bar Gate, onto the plateau of Sangalat. Ahead were hundreds of miles of rock and desert terminated only by the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which none of them had ever seen.

But ahead, also, there was the distant, crawling movement of horsemen, a tiny swirl of dust. It was impossible that the British had climbed to Sangalat, but there were others, worse, who might — the warriors of Wagshum Gobaze, of the Gallas Muslim Queen Musteval, or Walkeit, Queen of the Assubo, all of whom demanded a price in blood for years of savage oppression. If these wolves of the Shoa and Wollo mountains stood in the

Emperor's path he could expect nothing but unrelenting attrition and, if he were taken, a slow and hideous death.

Theodore and his two thousand were between two fires. 'Where is my advance guard — the men of Amhara?' he asked. He would need the spears of his finest warriors, his élite, to fight a way to the lower plain. Once there, if in danger of being overwhelmed, he could make for Merza, the camp of Musteval, Queen of the Wollo Gallas, to eat of her salt. As a Muslim, despite her hatred of him, she would not refuse him sanctuary.

Dajatch Alami, the faithful, shook his head. 'The advance guard is at the rear, Lord, which they claim is the front, for our enemies are on Salamge. They will die with you in Magdala, but they will not run from the Feringhees again.'

Theodore clenched his lips in anger, swaying. For a few seconds he seemed likely to strike Alami, but he controlled his temper quickly, then shaded his eyes to stare eastward. The distant horsemen were clearly visible now. There were faint shouts, a musket shot hardly audible, but Alami was speaking again. 'Bad news has come from Salamge, Lord. The Feringhees have begun their advance across the Fala saddle. Our people can see them, and they march for Magdala.' He hesitated. 'Your chiefs say they will fight the Feringhees, or surrender to them, but they will not follow you into the wilderness, leaving their families to the enemy. If you persist, or order them to be speared' — he paused again — 'they will have you chained.'

The Emperor was silent for several moments, but finally he nodded. 'There is nothing, then, to be said. So be it.' He turned his horse away from Sangalat.

* * *

But Magdala's population, too, already knew that the Feringhees were coming. Thousands were choking the Kobet Bar, men, women, children,

bleating sheep and jostling cattle, streaming over the scarps into Salamge and all anxious to free themselves of the town before the guns and fire-balls began. With them went warriors and chiefs, incensed by the news that the Emperor had fled at dawn. If the Emperor had abandoned Magdala, why should they remain to die? The garrisons of the fortress hills of Fala and Salasse, in the path of the British advance, had already thrown down their spears and were flocking to surrender to the white soldiers, to kneel and put their faces to the dust. Here and there old people sat on the ground, defeated and resigned. A few loyal officers shouted, and scattered groups of uncertain spearmen clustered the walls and the thorn zaribas, but the Emperor, the Chosen One, had fled — so it was rumoured — taking with him his favourites and the Abuna, his queen and son. Yesterday the chiefs had shouted that the Lord God had spoken to the *Negus Negusti*, that a thousand warrior saints would fight on the side of the Ethiopians, and the Feringhees would be destroyed by their thunderbolts. If this were true, why wasn't the Emperor here? Already they could see the distant glitter of bayonets and lances, the carpet of rising dust that rolled behind line after line of tramping infantry, immaculately precise. Ethiopians did not fight like this; they clutched their spears and ran, stabbing and shouting, meeting other warriors who also stabbed and shouted, and in the end one side, usually the more numerous, was left victorious. What they saw now was an unhurried, co-ordinated monster, pulsating with colour, the khaki of the British line regiments, green of Belooches, blue of artillerymen, scarlet of Royal Engineers, the plodding mules of the mountain batteries and the sky blue and silver of Indian cavalry.

The band of the 45th Nottingham's was playing *Cheer, Boys, Cheer*, while that of the King's Own had chosen *Garry Owen*. Ahead, the 33rd Wellington's were marching to *Yankee Doodle*. The 33rd, consisting almost

entirely of Irishmen, had not recovered from Napier's criticism of their behaviour and their relegation to the rear of the column. They were anxious to show themselves as good as anyone, and were hurrying on towards Magdala, thrusting through the crowds of refugees pouring in the opposite direction. Besides, there'd be loot in Magdala, and the first over the walls would have the pick of it before the provosts arrived. On the contorting, narrow goat-tracks the gun-laden mules were having a hard time in keeping pace. The elephants, carrying the breech-loading Armstrongs and 8-inch mortars, refused to be hurried, some reluctant to be driven at all. They had been severely tested for several weeks, their feet were lacerated by rocks, and it was unlikely that many were capable of the 400-miles march back to the coast. They would have to be shot.

'Elephants,' said Dando, who did not like them, 'ain't no good to anyone that ain't carrying bleedin' great guns or soddin' great trees. If yer ain't, wot's the good o' elephants?'

But the cliffs of Magdala were in sight. The 33rd were preparing to deploy, fixing bayonets, and a detachment of Royal Engineers, with Madras Sappers, were forming into storming parties with powder-bags, ladders and crow-bars. The ragamuffin sailors, hauling their rocket carriages, had crashed to a halt and were unloading, watched from a distance by infuriated artillerymen who had not yet been able to bring their guns into position. Why didn't sailors stick to bleedin' ships, and not fart about where they didn't belong?

* * *

Now back in Magdala, Theodore flung himself savagely into the business of organising a defence against the British, whom every minute brought nearer. He lashed his white pony among the warriors, reviling those that had abandoned their posts, seemingly careless that he had earlier done the same. In the open, on Salamge, were several artillery pieces, deserted, and the

Emperor mustered two hundred horsemen and a hundred spearmen to retrieve them. The guns were his best, of British and French manufacture, and there was still a chance that under Theodore's divine guidance the attacking British could be mauled.

Before they could reach the guns, however, they could see, beyond, a cantering detachment of the 3rd Bombay Light Cavalry with white officers, also intent on reaching the battery. Theodore spurred forward, shouting, and his mounted warriors followed. The enemy cavalry, considerably outnumbered, drew rein.

Theodore, in gold and scarlet, and mounted on a richly caparisoned white pony, was a conspicuous figure. He rode to within three hundred yards of the halted Feringhee cavalymen, taunting. Is there one among you who will fight with the King of Kings? Come! Are you all women, that you hesitate to attack a few warriors?' The British officers were more concerned with the possibility of cutting off Theodore's withdrawal than with indulging in a medieval trial by combat, but the Ethiopians had secured two guns and were dragging them back towards Magdala.

It was a slow and laborious task, covered by the Ethiopian horsemen, who milled around, firing occasional shots, and with the cavalry detachment too small in number to attack. Gunfire from Magdala, also, was becoming annoying, and the British guns in action had not yet found their range. It seemed almost certain that the Ethiopians would succeed in reaching the Kobet Bar when the first few companies of British infantry opened fire with their Sniders from more than twelve hundred yards away. At that distance any accuracy achieved was entirely fortuitous, but warriors fell. The exposed Ethiopians, struggling with the guns, flung down their tug-ropes and ran for the cover of the gate. The horsemen followed.

From that moment the outcome of the battle for Magdala was beyond all

further doubt. At 3 in the afternoon the British batteries opened fire in earnest, keeping their fire to the Kobet Bar Gate and adjacent defences. Theodore and his remaining warriors crouched behind cover as shells and rockets shattered houses close to the wall. On Salamge, the waiting infantrymen of the British right flank were aware of an insidious stench, and a few moments' search established the cause. Just below them, on a ledge of the precipice, were the stripped and putrefying corpses of hundreds of natives, piled upon each other in heaps, many chained or roped, where they had fallen after being speared or sabred by Theodore's men. Any sympathy that remained among the troops for the Emperor's predicament immediately faded.

At 4 p.m., Theodore and his warriors heard the distant notes of a bugle, and seconds later the Feringhee cannonade ceased. The Emperor sprang to his feet, shouting a war cry and waving his men to the Kobet Bar. They had now been reduced to a mere three hundred, all others having progressively retreated into Magdala and beyond reach of the shells. As Theodore's few reached the stone-clogged gate, old Ras Engedda was killed by a flying splinter, and the Emperor, reminded of his own eye-catching appearance, removed his gold-brocaded cloak and gave it to a servant.

Seen from the wall, the British advance was fear-inspiring. Led by skirmishers, waves of khaki-clad infantry were climbing the steep slope, stumbling and scrambling. The first defensive barricades of thorn and timber were overrun, the scattered defenders driven back by a rapid fusillade of rifle-fire. The Emperor rallied his own followers.

'Warriors of Ethiopia! Theodore, whose trust is in Christ, speaks to you! Your countrymen, who once loved me, have turned their backs on the enemy, but I shall never surrender alive! In the name of God in His Trinity and His Unity, those of you who fear to die I release from your allegiance.'

The swarming British had reached the Kobet Bar, and here, for a few brief minutes, they were checked. The Engineers with their explosive charges had not kept pace, and crow-bars had to be used to prise open the heavy gates. There was a last, desperate volley from the double-barrelled rifles of the wall's defenders, and nine soldiers were torn down. Then, as the gate splintered, it could be seen that the arched opening, fifteen feet deep, was crammed with heavy stones and impassable.

It was a baffling moment — but only a moment. Elsewhere, blaspheming men of the 33rd Wellington's had scaled the wall with ladders and clawing hands. Outflanked, the gate's defenders fell in scores, with the survivors either throwing down their weapons or scattering among the huts and houses of the higher slope. The excited subaltern carrying the Regimental Colour of the 33rd, unable to immediately mount the wall, was lifted bodily by madly cheering Irishmen and passed over their heads to the front.

* * *

Theodore was alone. He stumbled up a narrow, ledged path between two houses to the Magdala plateau. Behind him there was a rattle of gun-shots, Feringhee cheers, and several louder explosions as charges were detonated. He trod over cluttered debris and abandoned weapons. There were, he realised bitterly, still thousands of warriors, skulking in Magdala, or beyond on Sangalat. Was it possible that he could still exhort them to fight? The Feringhees had taken the walls, but if he could inspire a stubborn, house-to-house resistance, with the British paying in lives for every yard gained, they might still count the cost and ask to parley. All was not lost. He might still communicate with Napier, and send gifts — He entered the walled and deserted courtyard of the barn-like palace, passed through its open doors. It was dark and cool within, and the distant noises of fighting were muted and unreal. He looked about him for *tej*, but could see none — and the servants,

he guessed, would have fled like all the others, who once called him Lord. But a few feet from him, in the gloom, there was a sudden movement, and he started, groping for his dagger. Then he sneered. It was Ita Mangu.

‘So, it is the whore of the Gallas Muslims who stays with her master? It is true that the more a bitch is whipped, the more she will fawn. Or do you think to mock at the downfall of your Lord?’ The silent woman’s eyes were on him, grave and demure. Stung by her composure, he raised a hand to strike, but she sank to her knees.

‘I am not yet defeated,’ he retorted. ‘My warriors are cowards, but when I have spoken to them, revealing that I am the Chosen of God and the Lion of Judah, whom none can conquer, they will rise again and follow me, and the Feringhees will be scattered. The Lord God has shown this once, and will again.’

Ita Mangu did not speak. She reached for a shagreen-covered box by her elbow, raised its lid, and took up a double-barrelled pistol. She offered it to him, butt foremost.

Theodore stared, then laughed. The distant shouts were getting nearer, and time was running short. ‘You have the cunning of all infidel spawn.’ His eyes were reddening. ‘When I return, victorious, I will have you baptised, before feeding you a broth boiled from your own breasts.’ He kicked, but she flung herself prone, then lay watching as he reeled to the door with the pistol in his hand.

He blinked in the sunlight. There was not much time. There were Feringhee soldiers climbing the paths from the Kobet Bar, but in the other direction he could see people running among the houses, and some, he perceived, had spears and guns. He started towards them.

‘Listen and heed you! I am Theodore, King of Kings, Son of Solomon, Lord of Earth and the Chosen of God!’ Nobody seemed anxious to listen, but

he shouted on. 'Warriors of the Lion of Judah, hear me! There is nothing to fear, for the Lord God has already spoken, and will stretch forth His hand to protect His Chosen Son!' It was apparent that Theodore was convincing none of his fugitive subjects, and already several British infantrymen, more interested in loot than bloodshed, were regarding him curiously. He made a final effort. 'The Lord God will speak again, and the doubters shall see the truth, that the King of Kings is held safe from all hurt.'

He placed the muzzle of the pistol in his mouth.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The battalion tent was chokingly hot. The Adjutant-Major sat at a camp-table, reading from a despatch and sweating, dabbing gently with a handkerchief at a throat flushed by an itching rash. Before him, Captain Burridge stood stiffly, his helmet awkwardly beneath his left elbow and also sweating. Eight feet away the Colonel presented his back to them both, rigidly motionless.

‘Application has been made by a Miss Harriet Lawrence’ — the Adjutant sniffed — ‘to the Justices of the Greenwich Division of London for a summons against Captain William Burridge, King’s Own Regiment, covering an affiliation order for the maintenance of one male child, born out of wedlock, up to the age of thirteen.

‘Under sub-section 2 of the Army Act a copy of this order has been forwarded to the Secretary of State, and in consequence has been served upon your commanding officer.’ Eight feet away the Colonel choked, and the Adjutant drew breath.

‘However, no such process under any Act, or at common law, is valid against a soldier of the regular forces if served after such soldier is under orders for service beyond the seas, but on your return you will be arraigned before the relevant petty sessional division and proceedings instituted.’ He looked up. ‘Presumably you *are* the Captain Burridge named?’

Burridge nodded. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Ye-es.’ The Adjutant considered. ‘On regaining Zoulla, this battalion will embark in the steamship *England* for Suez, then entrain for Alexandria to board the troopship *Serapis*, calling at Portsmouth and discharging at Dover.’ He placed down the paper, his eyes lowered. ‘I understand that, at the time of

your’ — his lip curled — ‘association with this female, she was *twelve years old?*’

Burridge swallowed, then shrugged. ‘I didn’t know —’

‘Burridge, it is not for me to suggest your course of action, but simply to say that the officers of this Regiment are unable to further accept your presence in the mess, and you are requested to confine yourself to your personal quarters when not on duty. The Colonel will accept your resignation twelve hours before reaching Portsmouth, where you may disembark in mufti, and make your own arrangements regarding this — this business. You owe it to the officers to involve the Regiment’s name as little as possible, and you may care to remark to the Court that you were, after all, raised from the ranks.’

Burridge stared at the tent wall beyond the Adjutant’s head. ‘Yes, sir.’

The other continued to dab his throat. ‘It will be ten or twelve weeks before we reach Portsmouth, Burridge — and more if we’re quarantined. That can be a long time for a man in your position.’ Burridge was silent.

‘Of course’ — the Adjutant examined the nib of his pen — ‘you may feel that you are capable of some conciliatory gesture —’

Burridge frowned slightly. ‘I don’t see —’

‘You don’t? Dammit, man, it’s going to be a bloody unpleasant affair, don’cher understand? An officer of the Royals in the dock, and all the sordid details of a Greenwich brothel, including a twelve-year-old whore, with the working-class newspapers and their gutter-bred reporters.’ He tugged at his moustache angrily. ‘Goddam, Burridge, do you realise’ — it was a horrifying thought — ‘do you realise that *the Colonel of your Regiment may be required to give evidence?*’

It was, indeed, a horrifying thought. The Colonel coughed, and the Adjutant resumed more soberly. ‘On the other hand, Burridge, if you were not

available, you couldn't be charged, and if you weren't charged — we'd send the girl twenty pounds from mess funds. She'll be happy enough, and nothing will reach the papers. Now do you see?'

Burridge did see, very clearly. He considered for a few moments, then, 'Five hundred.'

The Colonel whirled. '*Five hundred?* Good God! What the hell would the little slut do with *five hundred pounds*? That's six years' pay for a blasted subaltern officer! What are you trying to do, Burridge — feather your own damn nest?'

'Five hundred pounds to Miss Harriet Lawrence,' Burridge repeated firmly, 'and I'll not be available for arraignment.'

A long silence was disturbed only by the humming of flies. Then the Colonel gave a curt nod and, without glancing at either, strode from the tent.

* * *

Neither Dando nor Holloran had ever received a letter in their entire lives, but a sergeant of Engineers was oddly respectful when he brought Charlie Crewe a much-thumbed envelope. 'Engineers,' Holloran said, morbidly studying a large toe protruding from a hole in his sock, 'thinks they hev electrical lamps shoining out eve theer arrse—'oles.'

'Chaps' — Charlie Crewe began warily — 'there's something nasty turned up.'

Dando and Holloran gazed at him blandly. 'Wot yer got?' Dando enquired. 'Scabies?' He sniffed. 'Don't give it a thought, Charlie. It could 'appen ter a bishop. Yer'll jest 'ave ter shave orf, that's orl, an' use carbolic.'

'Thet's roight,' Holloran nodded. 'Scabies es aisy. Faith, I'd hev scabies fer a bloody wayk's pay, any toim.'

Charlie Crewe shook his head. 'No. The family solicitor has telegraphed from London, through Suez, and it's come with despatches from Zoulla. The

old man died ten weeks ago, at Dovercourt.'

Both Dando and Holloran removed their helmets. 'It comes ter us orl,' Dando offered sympathetically, 'but life mus' go on.' He glanced at Holloran. 'Irish, wot 'appened ter that bottle o' *tej* we was savin' fer my birthday?' He turned back to Charlie Crewe. 'My ol' man died on the same day the Prince o' Wales was born — typhoid. 'Ow did your'n go?'

Charlie Crewe chuckled. 'The telegraph doesn't say, dear boy, but he probably choked on a walnut after his fourth bottle of port. That, chaps, isn't the worst. I'm now the Fourteenth Earl of Dovercourt and Orwell.'

Dando wiped his nose on the back of his hand. 'Christ,' he said, 'do we 'ave ter bleedin' call yer 'Ighness?'

'An' bow an' walk backwards,' Holloran added. He extracted the wooden bung from the bottle of *tej* with his teeth. 'This es a good drop ev the stuff, bedad. Do ye hev ter weer a bloody crown, me ol' Charlie?'

'A coronet, I think,' Charlie Crewe nodded, 'on state occasions — but I'll have to hire one. The Eighth Earl sold most of the family plate when he went bankrupt in 1719.'

'The lousy bastard,' Dando decided. 'Yer can't bleedin' trust anyone.'

Charlie Crewe was grinning. 'How would you fellows like a village each? You can choose from Ramsey, Thorpe-le-Soken, and Beaumont-cum-Moze.'

'Which one hes a brewery?' Holloran asked.

'No brewery, dear boy, but there are six churches, four corn-mills and a saw-mill, a rope-loft at Parkeston that hasn't made ropes since Benbow's day, and a brick-working that's run out of clay. The Harrington-Crewes have everything except money.'

'Wot yer want is a bleedin' heiress,' Dando suggested. 'One o' them Americans.'

'Three bloody heeresses,' agreed Holloran. 'I cud do wid one meself.' He

offered Charlie Crewe the bottle. ‘Give yer liver a shock wid a drop ev the auld fire-wather, me jewel — and ut’s jest the stuff fer ye scabies.’

* * *

Four hundred yards away, in the officers’ lines, Captain William Burrige entered his tent, took his Adams pistol from its holster, placed it to his temple, and fired a .45 calibre bullet into his brain. He would not be available for arraignment.

POSTSCRIPT

One of the most astonishing things about the Abyssinian campaign of 1867-8 was that 13,000 troops and numerous supporters marched 400 miles through an unmapped, roadless and mountainous wilderness, defeated a stubborn, if outclassed, enemy, rescued 250 people from captivity, and returned with only 29 casualties, of whom 12 were Indian.

Twenty-eight years later, in 1896, an Italian army invaded Abyssinia, and in a single action at Adowa suffered 6,000 killed and 1,700 wounded.

The original estimate of the cost of the British expedition, to the end of 1867, suggested a sum of £2,000,000, with a forecast of a further £600,000 a month if operations continued into 1868. In consequence, Parliament raised Income Tax by 1d in the pound (to a total of 5d) in November 1867. When all items of expenditure had been met, however, it was found that the expedition had cost nearly £9,000,000.

Magdala was thoroughly looted by the British and then burned to the ground. The body of the Emperor Theodore was buried with ceremony by his Coptic priests, and the Gallas woman, Ita Mangu, returned to her own people in Arusi. Etegie Torenachie insisted that her son, Ala Mayu, should be taken to England, and that she should accompany him. The Queen, however, had been ailing for months, and before Napier's column could regain the coast, despite the surgeon's efforts, she collapsed and died. Her son reached England, and in due course went to Rugby School, but he, too, died at the age of nineteen, to be interred in St. George's Chapel, Windsor.

Captain William Burridge was also buried, at Makale, being carried to his grave by dhoolie-bearers instead of soldiers. No men were permitted to be

present except a few senior sergeants, but the chaplain attended despite being ordered not to.

Sir Robert Napier became Lord Napier of Magdala, and Hormuzd Rassam received £5,000.

Charlie Crewe, now a peer of the realm, was an embarrassment to the Army, and had no difficulty in purchasing his discharge for ten pounds. He married the daughter of a wealthy Birmingham manufacturer of patent pumps and water-closets, took his seat in the House of Lords, wore his Abyssinian medal as if it were the Order of the Garter, and outlived both Queen Victoria and her son, King Edward VII.

And Dando and Holloran? They got drunk in Dover and were arrested for being drunk and disorderly in Aldershot, gave aid to the civil power in Dublin and got drunk in Sackville Street after a fight with the 8th Hussars. In Chester, after complaining of the ale in the Pied Bull and breaking fourteen windows, they were taken to the guardhouse by the provost patrol, and in Liverpool had a fight with the 2nd Fusiliers. Then there was trouble in Zululand, and Dando and Holloran have temporarily passed from our ken, though more research by the author may yet reveal their further adventures. Perhaps they returned, perhaps they did not, but whatever happened we can be certain they gave good value for their fourpence per day — and they shared their last bleedin' bottle.

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