



THE END OF MAHDISM

The figure in the foreground is the Khalifa Abdullahi

THE MAHDI OF ALLAH

THE STORY OF THE DERVISH
MOHAMMED AHMED

by

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With an Introduction by

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To avoid the possibility of causing offence to Mohammedan readers, the Publishers desire to state that the claim of the Dervish Mohammed Ahmed to the sublime title of "The Mahdi of Allah" is not recognised by the author of this book, nor by any of those associated with its English presentation.

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G.C.B., G.C.V.O., K.C.M.G., D.S.O.,

and

BARON SIR RUDOLF KARL SLATIN PASHA,
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who have read this work in manuscript and made
many valuable suggestions and corrections.

They themselves played great parts in the stirring
drama of the Sudan, and it is with pride
and gratitude that their names
are associated with
this book.

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INTRODUCTION

IT IS always interesting to know what kind of a book the devil would have written—but the theologians never gave him a chance. It is interesting for Britons to learn the Mahdi's point of view, and Richard A. Bermann has performed this in a remarkable book now translated from the German. It is presumably the first and last word on Mahdism. All who have had a hand in the Sudan must read it with real curiosity and satisfaction. The author of this book has thrown a running commentary of light on a strange and sinister figure which fell like a distant shadow across my generation in the 'eighties. The Mahdi! It is interesting to know that his operations with fire and sword through the Sudan were based on a religious enthusiasm as sincere and philanthropic as that which inspired Saint Dominic or General Booth. When he conquered nearly a fourth of the area of Africa he was at the head of a Salvation Army which literally interpreted General Booth's motto, "Blood and Fire." This book explains an incident which was always a puzzling one in the history of the relations between the Mahdi and General Gordon; how the Mahdi sent him a dervish's outfit with an appeal to renounce the pomps of a wicked civilisation. He would rather have converted than conquered him.

The life of the Mahdi is a romance in miniature and wonderful as that of Mohammed himself. The rebellion of the Sudan was the last great outburst of the blood-red flower of Islam. The Mahdi and his Caliphate might well have endured to to-day and developed as stately a power as that of the Moors in Spain, but it was built entirely on slavery and slaughter and came in contact with maxim guns. The balance between East

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and West depends on the advance of knowledge of arms. When arms were equal, the East as often won, as in the Crusades. Greek and Trojan were equal until the Greek invented the first tank, which is described by Homer as a wooden machine in the shape of a horse.

When the Mahdi's successor met Kitchener, he met a weapon of undreamed power, the machine-gun. It was a fierce but unequal clash between East and West when the Khalifa was crushed at Omdurman. The Mahdi was long dead. He had died in the consciousness of his divine message and power. He had conquered Gordon. Writers do not concentrate on the battle of Omdurman as the climax of Sudan history, but on the moment when the last Christian Hero met the last insurgence of Islam. Literature will not be weary of re-telling the story of General Gordon. He is treasure trove for the romancers of history like Lytton Strachey, and here we have him recalled as the unbending steel foil to the sword of the Mahdi. That very sword survives, and it is fantastic to learn from this book that it was originally the battle sword of a Teutonic Crusader, captured by Arabs, and bearing the mark of Charles the Fifth.

The black banner of the Mahdi swept the Sudan to the booming of the war trombone made of elephant tusk. The rule of the Saints was established. The Puritans of Islam enforced Prohibition. Smoking was punished as a deadly sin. The Mahdi was a mystic and a visionary. He treated those who failed to believe in himself and his regulations as a benevolent but unsparing judge treats the criminal population. The Khalifa was his executioner.

The Mahdi raised himself to dazzling heights by the virtue of poverty and the Holy War. Against him only stood out Gordon, in whom Catholic, Protestant and Moslem saw the makings of the Saint. Never again will one man offer himself to save a city single-handed. Never again will a mystic rank as an English General. Never again will the whole British people be so stricken by the fate of one man.

Thanks to Gordon's diaries, the last phase stands out with astonishing clarity. The thought of this one man scoured the

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desert and passed up the Nile where telegraph wires and other communications had failed. The thought of one man kept Cabinet and Sovereign and people uneasy. The thought of this one man obsessed the Mahdi, who had given orders that he should be captured alive. And the thought of one man defended Khartoum month after month, until while the Mahdi prayed, his General, the Khalifa, passed into the doomed city. No one could afterwards report what had happened save Slatin Pasha, a prisoner, who saw the head of Gordon brought in as a trophy. This grim, silent meeting between Gordon and the Mahdi has exercised the imagination and the indignation of readers and writers.

One day a Gibbon will summarise England's work in Egypt and discover splendid material for a ruthless and unrestricted pen. It is too close for the final word, for the shaping of the scenes of that Drama, for the weaving of the appropriate Chorus, but the dumb-show which in Greek Tragedy was wheeled into the orchestra (as when the body of Agamemnon was displayed in the theatre of Aeschylus), that part of the Egyptian Drama is irrevocably fixed on the stairs outside the Palace of the Governor-General of Khartoum.

After the capture of Khartoum the Mahdi had dreams of world dominion and a conquered Cairo, Mecca, Jerusalem. But he died a few months after Gordon, and was buried as a Prophet under a Dome which was destined to be a target for Kitchener's artillery. And the day came when the Mahdi's head was separated even as Gordon's was. Both believed in Empires which battled for the higher good of mankind. Neither disdained the sword, and both believed in a Fatalism so trenchant that it persuaded and held the thousands under them. In the end Gordon conquered, and the negro was delivered from slavery, which was his chief object. We read now that the cotton factory has taken the place of the slave market. The Mahdi's ends were symbolised by ascetical nudity, Gordon's by the cotton shirt. But while he lasted the Mahdi founded a State which rested, as every State must rest, upon a way of thinking. It is true that it was a mixture of a religious revival

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and the shambles. When he was buried his body was entombed like that of Lenin, and his simple way of thinking continued to be exercised by the Khalifa until the coming of Kitchener.

Wonderful are the ways of England! The son of the Khalifa is an A.D.C. to the Governor-General of the Sudan, while, stranger still, the posthumous son of the Mahdi is Sir Abderahman El Mahdi, knighted for his services to King and Empire, and in a villa on Gordon Avenue in Khartoum he still cherishes the famous old sword taken from a Teutonic Crusader and inherited through the treasury of the Kings of Darfur until it became the sword of the Mahdi, the destroyer and the slayer, the ascetic and the Sufi, the Twelfth Imam that was to come, who came and conquered, and wisely went again before he was conquered himself.

WINSTON S. CHURCHILL

CHARTWELL

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