

FERGIE BEY



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CAPTAIN V. H. FERGUSSON, O.B.E., F.R.G.S.

Born, July 25th, 1891. Murdered by Nuers, December 14th, 1927

THE STORY OF
FERGIE BEY
(AWARAQUAY)

TOLD BY
HIMSELF AND SOME OF HIS FRIENDS

*Not in the camp his victory lies
Or triumph in the market-place,
Who is his Nation's sacrifice,
To turn the judgment from his race.*
RUDYARD KIPLING (*The Reformers*)

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Preface

IN December 1927, papers in England were filled with the news that Captain Fergusson, District Commissioner of Bahr-el-Ghazal, had been murdered by Nuers.

Among his friends in the Sudan he had been nicknamed 'The King of the Nuers.' He had made these savage people his own special care. For years he had studied them, trained them, doctored them—seemed almost to have come within measurable distance of civilising them; and then, suddenly, through the vengeful malice of one man, to whom he had shown favour and kindness far beyond his deserts, the tribe was deprived of the best friend it had ever had.

Early in the following year, articles appeared in magazines about Capt. Fergusson's great and valuable work, and sketches were given of his personality. But papers are of the day, magazines of the month. It was felt by those who knew him best that something more was called for. The true story of an unusually adventurous life was a thing not to be wasted while there lived boys, young and old, who

might joy to read it, seeing that he himself was a boy to the end of his thirty-six years.

He left many letters telling of the work and the fun he had found in life; and he left many friends who were ready to add to these their knowledge of the career and character of one who would never have wished to be called a hero. The result follows. Those who read it may form their own opinions as to what he should be called.

February 1930.

Foreword

*Brave men who work while others sleep,
Who dare whilst others fly,
They build a nation's pillars deep
And lift them to the sky.*

WHEN my friends, Colonel and Mrs. Fergusson, decided to publish extracts from their late son's very full and interesting letter-diary and invited me to write a Foreword, I willingly consented—not only from a ready desire to comply with their wishes, but from a feeling that it was my bounden duty—in so far as I was able—to pay yet another tribute to those splendid officers, officials and others who were helping well and truly to lay the foundations of sound and equitable government in a country which for generations had been a prey to every form of venality and maladministration which it was possible to conceive.

Only a few years ago I had written a short memoir for the late Major Stigand's *Equatoria*, published shortly after the latter's death at the hands of the savage Aliab Dinka tribesmen of the Southern Sudan, and I readily avail myself of this further opportunity of offering my humble tribute to the memory of yet another most gallant and efficient member of the Sudan Services—Vere Henry Fergusson, O.B.E.—District Commissioner, who was

killed on the shores of Lake Jorr by some malcontents of the great Nuer Tribe over whom he had ruled with such marvellous sympathy and such conspicuous success—as the following pages will show.

'Fergie Bey', as he was more familiarly known amongst his friends and comrades in the Sudan, was born in Ireland on the 25th July, 1891—the only son of Colonel W. S. Fergusson, C.M.G. (late King's Dragoon Guards) His Majesty's Body Guard of the Honourable Corps of Gentlemen-at-Arms, and of Mrs. Fergusson. He was educated at Wellington College and after serving in the ranks of both the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry and the 8th Hussars, he obtained his Commission in the 1st Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) in March 1913. Writing in February 1911 to his mother, his company commander says, 'He has made his way in the Battalion in a manner that I have never known in the case of a young soldier. No difference has ever been made either by myself or by any other officer in his case; he has had no favour and he owes his popularity to himself only. I only hope that you will not consider the year that your son has spent in the Army to have been wasted. He does not regret it I am glad to say. I hope it has done him good rather than the contrary. At any rate he has done nothing but good to his former comrades by teaching them that a gentleman can be every inch a gentleman as well in the ranks as when holding a Commission.'

This estimate of his character is borne out very clearly throughout his subsequent career.

From May 1914 to April 1916 he served with the West African Regiment and during that time saw seven months' active service in the Cameroons. To quote from *Sudan Notes and Records*, to the editor of which he sent from time to time very interesting articles on Nuer folklore and tales, 'In these early days he was already noted for the great interest he took in the native and for his talent for organisation, characteristics which he was to develop later and which were to enable him to do so much for the natives of the Southern Sudan. All those who ever served with him will thoroughly endorse the estimate of Fergusson's character as portrayed in a farewell speech by the French Commandant after combined operations: "If we wanted more supplies Fergusson was the one to bring them to us; if reinforcements, Fergusson; if orders or news, Fergusson; if a good friend to amuse us, Fergusson."

'In June 1916, Fergusson arrived in Egypt on being seconded for service with the Egyptian Army. He was posted to the Equatorial Battalion and given command of the Company at Tambura in the Bahr-el-Ghazal Province. During 1918 he was for three months A.D.C. to his father in Palestine and on returning to the Sudan he was immediately sent on Active Service with a column operating against the Turkhana. During these years Fergusson had been attracted by the idea of employment by the Sudan Government as a District Commissioner and he finally transferred to the Civil Administration in July 1919. He was posted to Rumbek and commenced his eight years' continuous service in the

Eastern Bahr-el-Ghazal. It was during the last six years of this period that his life was devoted to bringing the Nuers of the Province under control. In this task, in the face of great personal hardship, personal danger, and many setbacks, he succeeded to such a degree that the District Commissioner of a neighbouring Nuer district described his success as a miracle. During the Aliab Patrol 1919-20 he acted as an Intelligencē Officer and was appointed an Officer of the British Empire Order in recognition of his valuable services. It was almost entirely due to the information he obtained, owing to his knowledge of the natives, that the enemy was finally forced to surrender.

‘ . . . He identified himself so much with the great Nuer tribe that he will always be remembered especially in that connection.

‘As an Administrator of wild tribes Fergusson showed great talent, and his ability to gain their confidence and bend them to his will was most exceptional. The fact that on hearing of his death all other Sections of the Tribe remained loyal and offered assistance when one section rebelled is a crowning testimony to the soundness of his work—undoubtedly too, Fergusson, by his personal fearlessness, kindness and ability to understand their point of view and consequent fairness in his decisions, won the general affection, as well as the respect of the Chiefs and people.

‘Last, but not least, mention must be made of Fergusson’s wonderful medical work. His steamer the *Kerreri* was indeed a floating hospital and the

medical officers serving in his area bore enthusiastic testimony to the value of his work. In Fergusson there passed away an exceptionally fine administrator, a true friend of the native, and one beloved and admired by all who served with him.'

In addition to the O.B.E. and the Sudan Medal and clasp, he received for the Great War, a mention in Despatches, the 1914-15 star and two medals.

Apropos of 'Fergie Bey's' medical work his father wrote me 'there is no doubt that Vere's success in managing the Nuers was largely owing to his extraordinary aptitude for medical and surgical work inherited from both his grandfathers, one of whom was a distinguished Surgeon and the other, though a layman, had extensive medical knowledge.' The 'letter-diary' must be read in order that the magnitude and value of this work may be appreciated, but what could be more striking than the following extracts? 'After breakfast the rush began . . . 106 patients, 65 of whom had injections of one sort or another. . . I'm seriously thinking they will have to give me a doctor of my own soon . . . my total sick returns showed 765 patients . . . not so bad for one month, especially as they all came in 15 days. . . . I got back to the River to find Dr. Crouch waiting for me with the *Lady Baker*. He was just bursting with joy at all the sick . . . and said I must not only have a base Hospital of my own, but also a British doctor and a Hospital Ship. The Director wrote back and said he quite agreed and wanted concrete proposals put up, so at last my work is bearing fruit, thank goodness!'

One could multiply such extracts a hundredfold. Then his hunting adventures with elephants and lions are positively thrilling, showing that not only was he a very fine sportsman but entirely without fear. One can well understand that amongst wild tribesmen who have to gain their livelihood by hunting, fishing and raiding their neighbours, such exploits, coupled with his marvellous kindness and success in the healing of the sick, his love of children and animals and their love of him, and the thousand and one charming traits in his character which come out in the perusal of these most interesting pages—all contributed to make 'Fergie Bey' trusted by those with whom he had to deal—British or European—white or black—they respected and loved 'Awaraqay,' the name by which he was known amongst the natives he ruled, and which had come to him through the gift of a big white bull with a black face; an animal known by the Agar Dinkas (who treated it as a sort of charm) by this strange name. By other tribes he was dubbed 'Marialdite' (the 'big' bull); but it is as 'Awaraqay' that his spirit and his example will live in the great area which he administered with such conspicuous success.

So infectious was his optimism that one of his Nuer subjects, till recently a wild savage, but tamed by 'Fergie Bey', when speaking of a neighbouring but somewhat recalcitrant tribe, remarked, 'Why don't they send their chiefs over to us to be taught how to administer, give them to us for a week, and we'd make them see sense.'

The above brief account of 'Fergie Bey's' short

but very full life and the few quotations I have given will of course be found in full detail in the 'Story,' but I have ventured to epitomise them in this foreword for a set purpose, for I am in entire agreement with a remark made in a letter addressed to Vere's mother by one of her friends who had been privileged to read his letter-diary. 'I hope and trust,' he writes, 'the story of "Fergie Bey" will be given to all our schools, both public and Secondary.'

It has become, therefore, my set purpose to call special attention to this wonderful record of a peculiarly useful life, by endeavouring to take it out of the realm of a mere letter-diary (most valuable as is this aspect of it) and make it a living force—to be studied, examined, and indeed if possible to become an inspiration to old and young alike.

To those who are in the full flow of life, the 'Story' cannot fail to appeal; for the great area of the Sudan, in which 'Fergie Bey' lived and moved and had his being, is still—politically speaking—in the melting pot. Throughout these pages are strewn remarks pregnant with wise import for those who desire to understand the situation in that country and the difficulties which must be surmounted by those charged with its administration or who are responsible for directing its destinies; whilst to the younger generation—to those who are still being educated or who have just begun their careers—whatever may be the walk of life they have selected—the 'Story of Fergie Bey' cannot also fail to be an inspiration: his early training, his life in the ranks, the development and strength of his character,

his will to win, his splendid optimism in face of unheard of difficulties and opposition, his religious convictions—all these characteristics and qualifications will serve as a great example to be followed; yet to one like myself who has had experience of men of all 'sorts and conditions' passing through my hands during the seventeen years I held the post of Sirdar and Governor-General of the Sudan and later on of High Commissioner for Egypt, I can say without hesitation that—outstanding example as 'Fergie Bey' is of the very best type of British Officer and gentleman—the great majority of officers, officials and others who assisted me in my task, were imbued with that self-same spirit of loyal devotion to duty, of uncomplaining cheerfulness in almost intolerable conditions of loneliness and hardship, under trying climatic conditions, and of interminable struggles with wild and savage tribesmen restive under any sort of control. It is to such men, working—so to speak—in the outposts of Empire that I desire to pay this tribute of true appreciation and to endeavour to bring home to our legislators and to those in authority that, in the exercise of their functions, it is of vital importance to attach due weight to the views and opinions of 'the men on the spot.' Throughout these pages, there are passages which show that occasionally 'Fergie Bey' was somewhat restive of control and perhaps at times intolerant of criticism whether in the immediate Headquarters of his District or of the seat of Government in Khartoum; but who can say that his attitude was not justified? How many good men and true—

tried by long years of experience in the government of semi-educated natives or of the savage tribes of Africa or Asia—have not had their views and advice turned down by armchair critics or by those in authority who, perhaps, for political causes or other reasons, have had it in their power to condemn ‘the man on the spot’ as a senseless despot or a wrong-headed enthusiast? Yet time has shown that had their advice been taken endless trouble might have been avoided and success in place of failure achieved. Still every little helps and if the ‘Story of Fergie Bey’ be studied, as I hope it may be, a glorious optimism must result—a feeling of ‘thank God for the lives of such men.’ The great spirit of courage and adventure which has made our Empire is not dead—it is perhaps more alive than ever before—and when the ‘Story of Fergie Bey’ is read, we can rise up with the feeling that with such men amongst the younger generation the destinies of our Country are safe, even though some of the actors either ‘fall by the way’ or ‘are thrown to the wolves’—still their spirits live and their work stands as a monument for all to behold. As Benson and Tatham in their study of General Gordon’s character so truly remark, ‘When a man has worked and striven and done his duty, the good that he has done lives after him and he lives too, not only in another world, but also in this world of ours. His example is left for others; through belief in him, they may believe in the future of mankind. The spirits of the departed are ever with us in our way through the desert of life.’

Before I read the 'Story' I wrote to one of my former Officers, Major Wheatley, of whose views I have always held a high opinion, and who for seven years had been Governor of the 'Bog' (as the Bahr el Ghazal Province has been familiarly dubbed from the early days of our Administration). I knew Fergusson had served directly under him and I asked him to tell me frankly what he thought of him. I cannot do better than give his reply *in extenso*.

'In reviewing the life of Vere Henry Fergusson there appears to be one particularly arresting trait in his character—his will to win. From his childhood upwards as one reads his story one is struck by his unfailing determination to succeed, whether in his own personal career or in accomplishing some task or duty. From those who worked in the closest contact with him I have learned that this characteristic of his was an inspiration and often encouraged them to persevere in what appeared to be an almost hopeless endeavour.

'I cannot help feeling that all those boys and younger men who read this story of his life will share that inspiration so that in the words of one who knew him and his work intimately, "the work will go on and the spirit of Fergie will be ever present guiding and helping."

'He was undoubtedly a born administrator and showed a marvellous talent in dealing with the wild tribesmen, who feared and respected him—not fear born of harsh behaviour but born of a realization of a strong personality and of a deep sympathy with their childlike and untutored minds.

'His services to the Sudan were indeed of a high value and it is a matter of surprise and admiration that he should, in such a comparatively few number of years and at such an early age, have left so marked an impress on his country.

'It is with such material as exemplified by Fergusson that the British Empire has been created and as long as England can produce such offspring—brave, determined, unselfish, self-confident—the Empire will endure.

'To parents—to boys and young men—wrestling with the question of a career—I commend the reading of this life of one who gave his unswerving loyalty to his God, his King and his Country.'

I would urge a wide publicity for this inspiring 'Story'—not only as a valuable educator of our younger generation, but as a reply to some such questions as the following:—'Why are we in the Sudan? Why do we interfere with those savage tribes who have their own methods of rule and who have fought with one another and will continue to quarrel with their neighbours till Doomsday?'

In replying to such questions or to those politically-minded critics who view our Oriental and other overseas possessions and protectorates with undisguised dislike, I would say:—'Does not the civilizing and humanitarian work of a young, unaided British officer in those dark places of the earth appeal to you and—apart from the vitally important political and geographical aspects of our connection with the Sudan—can you not appreciate the self-evident fact that the great struggle carried on by

‘Fergie Bey’ and his co-workers must tend to civilize and uplift those wild and unsophisticated races which Providence, in its inscrutable wisdom, has confided to our care?’

I venture to predict that those who read the ‘Story’ will realise that the true value and significance of the narrative lies not so much in the fact that it is an entertaining book of travel and tale of adventure in a remote and wild corner of the world, but that it is a vivid, vital exposition of the men and methods by which Britain holds her far-flung outposts and binds them all within her orbit of justice and fair dealing at the hands of a comparatively small number of British Officers and officials, and, as in the case of ‘Fergie Bey,’ Stigand and others who sleep where they fell,

“There’s some corner of a foreign field,
That is forever England.”

R. W.

DUNBAR, 28th August, 1930.

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