

A Most Unusual Man

The Literary Club

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It was February 4, 1885 and a typical overcast day in England. But it was not the weather that worried many English people -- including Queen Victoria and the Prime Minister, William Gladstone. The widespread concern was over the safety of Major-General Charles Gordon, a celebrated English hero entrapped with a tiny force in the Sudan, in the city of Khartoum, surrounded by a native army led by a fanatic Muslim warrior who considered himself to be the the second coming of Jesus. Yes, you heard that correctly -- the warrior at the head of the attacking force was both a Muslim and who thought of himself as the second coming of Jesus. Not only the Queen, but much of England was worried for the safety of their celebrated hero—a colorful individual whose exploits had filled the press with accounts of his travels all through the British Empire in the late nineteenth century.

Gordon was a fascinating devote Christian and a fearless warrior who strode into battle at the head of his men armed only with a walking stick and a huge cigar. He literally had no fear of death. In fact, he looked forward to a better life in the Christian Hereafter, if he should be killed in battle. He had gained his fame in China twenty years earlier, at the head of a motley force, mostly of Chinese led by British officers, known as the Ever Victorias Army. That was the episode which earned him the name of "Chinese Gordon" -- partly because he had constantly written back to people in England recounting his exploits. But I am getting ahead of myself. We need to go back and start at the beginning of the story.

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Gordon was born January 28, 1833, the son of an English army officer and a quite religious mother. As a boy, he was unruly, a serious worry to his parents and almost expelled from school several times. The early years forecast a tempestuous personality. He had a winning smile when things went well, but a violent temper when they did not. And he was absolutely sure that his views in every situation were correct -- whether it be a military campaign, or how Parliament should deal with a particular crisis. And he had no reservations about writing to the appropriate commander or government official to inform them of the correct course of action. He was famous for his memos.

More importantly, he was a devout Christian, believing in the literal truth of every word in the Bible. He came to this first through his mother's teaching, but more importantly through constant correspondence throughout his life with his sister Augusta, who was twelve years his senior. Augusta was convinced that this life was one of constant temptation, and that eternal bliss awaited one in the afterlife. Under her tutelage Gordon actually looked forward to the next life, which accounted for his lack of fear of dying. Of course, suicide would be a mortal sin, but he there was no fear of death in battle. Miraculously he survived with hardly a scar during his China campaign.

If you are surprised why we know so much about the man, it is because of his voluminous correspondence with Augusta, English newspapers, and heads of state. He

sought support from his sister to save him from sinning, but he constantly informed his superiors and the world of the correct course of action in every situation. In short, while he worried about the safety of his soul, he was not lacking in self confidence when it came to war or the affairs of state. And he took orders from no one. His superiors tolerated this only because he was uniquely effective in military strategy and in the leadership of men. He could be charming when he wanted to be, but very difficult to work with.

After graduating from a military academy, Gordon was posted to the army and saw his initial combat as a military engineer during the Crimean war. But in 1860 he was sent out to China in the later stages of the wars which the British and French fought against the hapless Chinese. Gordon served first in the action around Beijing, and then was posted to Shanghai. That was where his real military adventures began. But before we examine that action, it is necessary to pause and examine the enemy which Gordon had to face. This was during one of the strangest wars in Chinese history, the Taiping Rebellion, which lasted from 1850 until it was suppressed in 1864. This will be a long diversion from the Gordon saga, but it is too strange a story to pass up. And it provides the background within which the most famous of Gordon's adventures were played out. So bare with me.

China in the mid-nineteenth century was in terrible shape-- especially in the southern provinces, which had been hard hit by drought. It was in this area that a young man named Hung Hsiu-ch'uan had a vision. Hung was born into a peasant family, but he aspired to better things and tried to take the first of three levels of the examinations required to enter into the Chinese bureaucracy. He failed the exam once, and then twice. At this point he happened to meet a street evangelist, an American Baptist minister, who handed him several pamphlets explaining the basics of fundamentalist Christianity. Hung became an ardent convert. He abandoned bodily pleasures, fasted, and dreamed happily of an all-Baptist China, with hundreds of millions not only worshiping God, but worshiping in the only fashion that led to salvation. That conversion set in motion a remarkable chain of events.

Hung tried to pass the exam a third time, and then fell ill. He lay in a coma for forty days, and when he arose he reported having had a vision which changed his life. He said that he had met God the Father and Jesus, and learned that Jesus was God's elder son and that he, Hung, was God's younger son. He had learned that he was the younger son of God. In 1843 he took the civil service exam a fourth time and failed once more.

Shortly thereafter, famine struck his home province and the area erupted into widespread unrest. Hung decided to take action. He founded a secret society called the Society of God Worshipers, organized under his command with six "princes" to assist him in setting up a "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace." In the winter of 1850 he began a revolt aimed at bringing down the Manchu dynasty centered in Beijing. That was a tall

order, but he had some initial success.

The peasant army which Hung raised was surprisingly well disciplined. When the rebel forces took a city, residents need only post on their door a sign with the word "Obedience" on it and they would be unmolested. The initial army of the Ching Dynasty was poorly trained and poorly equipped, and Hung's army pushed it back, conquering most of south and central China, including the city of Nanking in 1853. He tried to capture North China unsuccessfully, so he settled down to enjoy his reign in Nanking.

Hung named himself the "Prince of Heaven", and established the "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace." It was unique. All property was decreed to belong to the state, and each household was allotted an amount of land appropriate to the size of the family. Women were declared equal to men and given a fair share. After a harvest, each family kept what it needed for sustenance, and turned the rest over to the state for distribution to those in need. One decree said that "food and clothing shall be shared; so shall money. No one will have more than his neighbor has, and no one shall suffer from cold or hunger." Thus, four years after the Communist Manifesto in Europe (which no one in China had heard of), and long before Mao Tse-tung's revolution, South China has the equivalent of a communist state.

Every twenty-five households were organized into a "comradeship," which became the basic administrative unit of the state. Each comradeship had a leader who was in charge of both administrative and military affairs, and each household was required to provide one man for combined military and police duty. There was a teacher-priest, who was also the judge and treasurer of the comradeship. All children were required to go to school, where they studied both the Old and the New Testaments, along with decrees from the Prince of Heaven. On Sunday the comrade leader led the people of the comradeship to church where they prayed and sang hymns to the glory of God.

Of special note was the role of women. Contrary to traditional Chinese practice, women were considered equal to men. Many women served as officials in the government, and some acquitted themselves well on the battlefield. Footbinding and prostitution were outlawed. In addition, the transportation and smoking of opium were made punishable by death.

Many of these innovations were an abomination to traditional Chinese values. The common ownership of land was especially appalling to the landed gentry, the elite of nineteenth century China. And the restrictions on the opium trade made the English merchants in Shanghai very nervous. Many of them profited enormously from the opium trade. And while the Taiping adoption of Christianity initially interested Westerners, their discovery of Hung's actual beliefs caused them to consider him a heretic. All of this explained the joint Chinese and Western decision to forcefully put down the Taiping Rebellion.

That was the rebellion in southern China in which Gordon earned fame for his role in it. In the [mal analysis, it was newly invigorated Chinese armies which eventually

destroyed the Taipings. But Gordon and other Englishmen in Shanghai wrote home so extensively about Gordon's involvement that this fine point was lost on many in the home country. And that was how he earned the nickname "Chinese Gordon." So now we return to the original story.

By 1860, the Taiping army had reached to within a few miles of Shanghai, and the worried British merchants hastily recruited a motley force to defend the city, for which they paid. To raise morale it was christened "The Ever Victorious Army," despite the fact that its early exploits hardly deserved that name.

The initial leader was an American named F.T. Ward, who was killed in battle, and his second in command proved incompetent. So General Charles Staveley, commander of the British forces still stationed in China, designated Gordon to take command of the Ever Victorious. Gordon was delighted, but he found himself in an extremely difficult position.

Technically, the Ever Victorious was under the command of Li Hung Chang, the Chinese governor of the province. And there was a parallel Chinese army headed by an ex-Taiping named Ching, who heartily disliked the idea of an Englishman gaining any credit for military successes. Li, Ching and Gordon all had strong wills and violent tempers. On top of that, Staveley decreed that Gordon and the Ever Victorious could not go beyond thirty miles from Shanghai, since it had been created solely to defend that city and paid for by British merchants.

None of this deterred Gordon. He set out to do what had to be done despite orders from Li, harping from Ching, and restrictions from Staveley. He was going to attack the Taipings head-on and drive them back as far as he could.

Technically, Gordon, with a three thousand man army of misfits, was now under the command of a Chinese governor--Li Hung Chang. And he was serving in parallel with an all Chinese army under General Ching, who thought that Gordon should report to him. And he was ordered by the British general in Shanghai not to proceed beyond thirty miles from the city.

But Gordon had a mind of his own. He devised a plan to push the Taiping's back, city by city, until the Heavenly King's capital in Nanking was open to an easy attack. And his tactics were one not thought of previously by anyone else. The Taipings depended on sealing themselves up in a walled city, whose approach was blocked by creeks throughout the area into which with stakes had been driven. Previous assaults had been simply spur-of-the moment daytime charges that had failed. Gordon's plan was to carefully survey the site in advance, build bridges over the creeks and pull up the stakes at night, and then bombard the walls with artillery in the early morning, followed by troops rushing through the breach. It worked--time after time.

But before implementing his plan, Gordon had to get the Ever Victorious Army in shape. He started by having the men outfitted in uniforms of which they could be proud-- smart green jackets and knickerbockers, bright green turbans and shiny black boots. In addition, he created a personal bodyguard of three hundred men outfitted in bright blue with scarlet facings, which inspired the rest to fight like mad to earn the distinction of the Gordon uniform. And he introduced the novel idea of parading his army before him regularly, with careful inspection of discipline and uniforms. He also made sure that the merchants of Shanghai did not fall in arrears with their pay.

He began use of his new army with several highly successful attacks on small Taiping cities within the thirty-mile limit of Shanghai. He then planned an attack on the major Taiping city of Quinsan, outside the thirty mile limit. This campaign turned out to be the one which made banner headlines back in England and earned him the name of "Chinese Gordon."

But first, there were complications to be overcome. After returning from the initial short campaigns, his men decided to celebrate riotously with their women and the loot they had acquired. When Gordon ordered them to prepare to march they refused. They were having too much fun. The day before the march was to begin the officers resigned as a body. Gordon accepted the resignations, demoting them to privates until they changed their minds. The next morning almost the entire Ever Victorious Army absented itself. Only Gordon's bodyguard appeared ready to march. So Gordon arrested all of the regular army's noncommissioned officers and put them in chains. This shook everyone. Gordon announced that he would march away with his bodyguard and halt in the afternoon. Any officer who was not at the halting place with his men would be dismissed from the Ever Victorious. That afternoon he was joined by the entire army, officers included. Thereafter he experienced no insubordination.

The next complication was with Gordon's parallel in command--General Ching, who was both incompetent and jealous of Gordon's early successes. When their two armies arrived at Quisan, Ching wanted to attack forthwith. Gordon refused. As was his usual approach, he wanted to reconnoiter the area first. So he took off with his army and left Ching fuming.

Gordon discovered that there was only one road exiting the city, with a river on one side and a large lake on the other side. Why waste a frontal assault? Quisan was built on a mound overlooking the countryside, and if the Taipings could see that the road was being cut, he reasoned that they would abandon the city and try to escape. He was right.

But the road was guarded by two small forts along the way, and they had to be subdued. This proved to be remarkably easy. He had the advantage of being aboard a small steamer, the *Hyson*, with a canon loaded with grapeshot and a whistle with a particularly penetrating shriek. A flotilla loaded with troops followed behind him. Gordon's attack of the forts with grapeshot and horrifying whistle so frightened the defenders that they gave up almost without a fight. He left his bodyguard to hold the forts, and kept after the fleeing troops, firing grapeshot and blowing his whistle all the

way. He continued almost to the city of Soochow before turning back.

The Taipings in Quisan saw what was happening and decided to abandon their posts and flee before their retreat was cut off. As they fled, they almost overwhelmed the bodyguard defending the forts. But when Gordon's flotilla returned, they blooded the attacking troops, who broke and ran. As they fled down the road, Gordon continued with the grapeshot and whistle, and he was joined by peasants alongside the road who joined in the attack on the fleeing troops. It was a debacle.

Back at Quisan, General Ching moved his troops against the city, only to find it deserted. The victory was overwhelming. That day the Taipings lost five thousand killed and nearly two thousand taken prisoner. Gordon lost two killed and five wounded. Ching lost none at all. When the news reached England, the newspapers were lavish in their praise. This was what an Englishman could accomplish in a far-off land.

Unfortunately, back in Shanghai, General Ching claimed the victory. He said that the Taipings had fled when they saw his troops before the city walls. This infuriated Gordon. There followed a furious verbal row between Gordon, Ching, and Li, who was exasperated with both men. But as much as Li disliked Gordon, he recognized his military capabilities and kept him in command of the Ever Victorious.

The next campaign was against the major Taiping stronghold at Soochow, with two armies, led by Gordon and Ching, and Li following aboard his own steamer. The city was encircled, and after much posturing, the Taiping's cautiously indicated that they might consider a surrender. Into this breach stepped Gordon. He threw caution to the wind and entered the city to negotiate. After all, he had no fear of death. In fact, he confided in his letters to his sister that he looked forward to wonderful life in the Hereafter. He was a most unusual man.

The Taiping army was led by a man named Lar Wang and eight of his brothers. When Gordon met with Wang and negotiated in broken Chinese and with the help of a Chinese interpreter, a surrender was agreed upon. Gordon promised them safe conduct and guaranteed that the city would not be plundered. The Wangs set off in good spirits to Li's boat to complete the surrender. Gordon decided to skip the ceremony and tour the city.

Shortly thereafter he heard cheering and guns firing in the air from the direction of Li's boat. He started toward the boat and met General Ching, slightly inebriated, and obviously in a fine mood. Gordon grew curious, but was persuaded by Ching not to continue toward the boat. Instead, he walked back until he was stopped by Lar Wang's uncle, who spirited him away to his home and hid him. It turned out that Ching's troops were now ransacking the entire city. Gordon was beside himself with anger. But then he learned that, rather than being allowed to surrender, all nine of the Wang brothers had been killed and beheaded. He was furious. This was the ultimate betrayal of an Englishman's word.

He made his way back to his boat and returned to Shanghai, carrying the head of Lar Wang with him. There he brooded for eleven weeks, alone in his tent, with the head of Lar Wang at his feet. He refused to speak to anyone. It was the lowest point in his life. How could anyone do such a deed? He had given his word. He threatened to resign his post. One official after another called to persuade him to remain. China needed him. He was told that even his name struck fear into the enemy. Finally Gordon was persuaded to give up the head of Lar Wang so that it could be buried. Then Li came to try to explain away what had happened. Gradually Gordon came to believe that the Taipings were the worst of a bad lot, and China must be saved from them. He decided to return to battle.

The rest was almost anti-climatic. There were several weeks of furious fighting in which General Ching was killed and Gordon was slightly wounded. But the bulk of the Taiping forces were finally beaten back and several cities close to Nanking were captured. Gordon retired to Shanghai and the rest of the combined army continued on under Li.

Li finally fought his way into the capital of the Heavenly King at Nanking. However, that now debauched monarch was not taken alive. He was found surrounded by the bodies of his many wives, who had all been hanged. As one chronicler reported, the Heavenly King had "swallowed the traditional gold leaf of retiring Emperors and sought his kingdom elsewhere." Thus ended one of the strangest episodes in Chinese history.

But now there was no wars to be fought. Uninvited, Gordon drew up an extensive plan for the permanent defense of Shanghai. He wrote to the newspapers. He advised everyone he met on how China could be fully Christianized. He received commendations from the Chinese government in Peking. Commissioner Li wrote a glowing memorial to the throne, extolling Gordon's virtues. "He has ... consulted with me in everything, and acted in the most harmonious manner with my generals." "Lies, all lies!" Gordon said when he read this. Finally, bored with endless parades and polite conversation, he quietly made his departure and returned to England.

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In England he was received as a hero. The newspapers went wild. He was the returning hero. But Gordon wanted none of this. Spurning all requests, he refused to appear in public. He was now convinced that he had succumbed to the sin of pride in China, and refused to permit anyone to speak of his exploits in his presence. He prayed to God he be absolved of this sin.

After six months he was appointed, as lieutenant-colonel, to build five forts along the Thames at Graveshead to defend the approach to London. He immediately discerned that the locations would be useless, and so advised the War Office. He was sharply reprimanded and decided to build them anyway.

You may question what I am about to say regarding his time at Graveshead, but I assure that it is true. He documented his anguish over his sinful nature and his attempts to cleanse himself in voluminous letters to his sister Augusta, and they were preserved. The

chroniclers of his life gained access to them and wrote at least seventeen books about him.

During his six years at Graveshead, he occupied himself in three ways. Each morning he awoke bright and early and went to complete the useless forts in record time. As you would imagine under a man like Gordon, the forts were well done. In the early afternoon he retired to his quarters to read the Bible, pray and write to his sister Augusta. He considered the body and all things of the flesh utterly evil. Theaters were evil, as were novels, and most musical performances. Only the human soul was capable of communing with Almighty God.

And in his letters he bitterly decried his own terrible sins in China. His outbursts of fury, his envy of those above him, his love of praise. His letters were peppered with texts from Christian readings and quotation from the Bible. He wished that God would deliver him from his earthly frame, but unfortunately he continued to be in excellent health.

He also took to good works. He gave money to the poor--more than he could afford. And he began to scribble Christian messages on scraps of paper and leave them all over the neighborhood for people to find. By the side of paths, in bushes, on seats in parks. When he traveled on trains, he even threw these scraps of paper out the window for people to find.

But his building his forts and his tortured Christian self-debasement were not the only things with which he busied himself at Graveshead. He also had a lifetime love of the company of young boys, and he opened his house to droves of them. They would play games. They would tease him. They would go on long walks with him. And at the end of the day, they would join with him in Scripture reading, prayer and hymns. They had to be instructed in the ways of the Lord. He had done a bit of this all of his life, but it was especially notable at Graveshead.

There is nothing in the record that suggests that this love of boys had a darker side. Nothing at all. He was not given to enjoy adult companionship--either male or female, and it would appear that he relished the uncomplicated playfulness of young boys. A strange man, indeed.

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Several more episodes in Gordon's life are worth noting before we come to the final chapter. The first of these was a six year tour of duty in what was then called Equatorial Africa and Sudan, an area under the nominal control of Egypt. This whole area incorporates the present-day countries of Sudan and Uganda.

In 1874 Equatorial Africa was a wasteland of jungles and swamps, filled with slave traders and guarded by a small malaria-ridden Egyptian garrison. It was theoretically under the control of the Khedive of Egypt, a ruler technically subservient to the Caliph in Constantinople but deeply in debt to England. This was a period of a growing anti-

slavery movement in England, and the Khedive thought that he could win favor by launching an antislavery drive in his southernmost territory. And who better to lead that drive than the celebrated British hero of China--Charles Gordon. The British War Office agreed and plucked Gordon out of his assignment at Graveshead and sent him off to head the expedition.

Gordon was ecstatic over the assignment, freed from the doldrums of Graveshead, and he launched into it with enthusiasm. He hastened to Cairo to meet with the Khedive, assembled a staff to accompany him, and with his usual driving speed raced by train and camel to Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. Technically, he was to serve under the governor-general of Sudan, Ayub Pasha, a fact that did not sit well with Gordon. He found the governor-general to be addicted to wine, women and the acceptance of bribes. But we will come to the import of that later.

Gordon traveled down the White Nile River as fast as his sluggish steamboat would carry him to reach his new headquarters at Gondokora, in what is today Uganda. He found a small, dispirited Egyptian garrison unpaid and immersed in their women. When he challenged their addition to women, he has told, "That is their pay!"

With his usual diligence, Gordon roused his troops and set to work ridding Equatoria of the slave trade. He initially had some modest success, driving out or arresting the Arab slave traders and freeing their captives. But he soon learned that his work was utterly useless. The freed slaves had nothing to do and nowhere to go, and the slave traders simply slipped across the border into Sudan, where they felt safe from the clutches of Ayub Pasha. This infuriated Gordon, but he found that he could do nothing about it. Furthermore, he slowly realized that Equatoria did not have the infrastructure to support the freed slaves or the law enforcement forces to capture and hold the slavers. After three years of growing despair, he finally gave up, resigned his post and returned to England.

But not for long. The Khedive, desperate to stay in the good graces of Britain, begged him to return. After three months, Gordon agreed, but only on one condition: that Ayub Pasha be removed from the governorship of Sudan, and that he, Gordon, be installed as governor-general of both Sudan and Equatoria. The Khedive reluctantly agreed, and Gordon returned--this time to the capital at Khartoum.

He was not happy with the capital, even though it was his. The huge palace that he had inherited was far too pretentious, and the formal wining and dining were totally alien to his nature. He stripped the palace of all but the bare necessities of furniture and did away with all of the formal soirees. And he was appalled at the number of servants who were supposed to attend him, even to assist him in mounting and dismounting his camel. But, most of all he was bored. He wanted action.

Fortunately, action appeared on the scene. The western province of Darfur was in a state of semi-revolt. The slavers there had begun to act as though they were in charge, and the Sudanese garrisons were so cowed that they simply stayed in their compounds

and let the slavers have their way. This was intolerable, and Gordon decided to put an end to it.

He mustered a barely reliable force of three hundred men, mounted his camel and road westward. But this time he adopted new tactics. Racing far ahead of his own troops he would stop before arriving at a particular post, dismount, and don his white marshal's uniform--bedecked in gold--and ride resplendent into the midst an openmouthed garrison. They need have no fear. The mighty governor-general was here. They were so impressed that at once their morale shot up and "they began to terrorize the people who had so recently penned then in their" camps. One by one he revived the mordent garrisons.

And then he turned his attention to the slavers, entering their camps alone. Why did they not kill him? He had an answer. Before he approached a slavers camp, he would pray for them, and he was convinced that "something seems already to have passed between us when I meet (them) ... for the first time. 11 But there appears to have been more to it. The one thing that the slavers respected was cool cheek, and Gordon showed no fear. He would demand obedience, turn his back, light a cigarette, and turn back with a smile to expect compliance. This they respected, and from Gordon's point of view they were fearless rascals of the type he had admired in the Ever Victorious.

On the surface at least he was successful. The slaves were freed, order was restored, and Gordon returned to Khartoum in triumph. How long all that would lasted after he had left was problematic. But at the time it appeared to be a great victory. He wa~wined and dined in Khartoum and celebrated in the newspapers of England. He had achieved another triumph for an intrepid Englishman.

Within a year the slavers had begun to revive themselves, and this time Gordon sent a lieutenant to deal with the problem. The lieutenant was less given to persuasion and more prone to direct action. He simply killed the slavers For all practical purposes, the slavery trade was ended within eighteen months.

Gordon now had little to do, but by this time the Khedive in Cairo had been overthrown and replaced by a new one. The new Khedive, had mistakenly absorbed the view, promoted by Gordon himself, that the Englishman he could do almost anything. He gave Gordon two difficult tasks. He was first asked to meet in Cairo with British financial representatives demanding payment on long overdue interest on Egypt's debt. Gordon met with them and failed miserably. Then he asked Gordon to negotiate a peace treaty with the neighboring kingdom of Abyssinia (the present~day Kenya). Again, he failed miserably. Gordon was great in military action, but he with neither a fmancier nor a diplomat. So he returned to England. And once again, he had failed to acheive is wish of death and to find a better world in the after-life.

Then, much to his surprise, he was offered a position as secretary to the new British Viceroy for India, Lord Ripon, and he accepted. England was aghast. Why should

so celebrated a hero accept such a subordinate post as secretary to the Viceroy? There must be some secret reason. The newspapers speculated that the real plan was to create a British protectorate in Afghanistan to block Russian ambitions there and to put Gordon in charge.

Gordon arrived in India, but did not stay long. He first looked into the record on the former Amir of Afghanistan, then in British custody after having been jailed on accusation that he had planned to assassinate the British Ambassador, and determined that the ex-Amir was innocent. He recommended to Lord Ripon that he invade Afghanistan and restore the Amir to his rightful throne. The British had taken him out, let the British put him back--by force. But Lord Ripon was not inclined to military action and Gordon's proposal was rejected.

The second incident sounds trivial, but to Gordon it was not. He received a directive from Lord Ripon to write a letter to a British Lord saying that the Viceroy had read a letter from the Lord with much interest and would reply to it shortly. Gordon knew that the Viceroy had not read the letter and would not reply. Gordon would write no such letter. The next morning he broke in the Viceroy's breakfast and resigned. He was a man of honor. He had been in India one week.

The British public was now entranced with his letters to his sister Augusta, which were published at this point in slightly edited form. And he was convinced that he alone had the correct answer to many of the Empire's problems and he peppered the newspapers and officialdom with solutions to the situation in Ireland, Afghanistan, Abyssinian, Sudan and South Africa.

Then he obtained a leave of absence, and went to Palestine, to learn all he could about the life of Christ. With his engineering background, he carefully studied all of the sites said to be those in the New Testament, and not surprisingly found them to be incorrectly located. He drew up detailed sketches of the correct locations of the Tabernacle, the Holy Sepulcher, and the walls of Jerusalem, but found that no one in authority was interested.

He finally returned home in January of 1884, looking for something useful to do. While he was worrying over his future, he was visited by a British journalist, W. T. Stead, who had something for him to do. The Sudan was in trouble again, and Stead wanted him to go there and fix it. Actually, Stead was looking for a campaign to launch with his newspaper, and what better campaign than one featuring the celebrated English hero--Chinese Gordon. The campaign caught fire in the press, and Gordon was soon in public demand to go.

At this point we need to stop and consider the situation then existing in Egypt and the Sudan. In the first place, Egypt's financial problems had gotten worse. In 1882 the

British government had brought increasing pressure on Egypt to pay its debts and decrease domestic spending. The reductions in government outlays led to serious rioting in the streets of Alexandria, and foreign residents of Alexandria fled to safety aboard British warships waiting in the harbor. Britain then ordered troops ashore and effectively seized control of the government, creating what was euphemistically called a "protectorate." This meant that while an Egyptian government continued to exist, a British representative--in this case the first Earl of Cromer, Evelyn Baring--was actually in charge.

With Baring constantly in touch with London through telegraph, the effect was to give the British cabinet in London effective control over most events in Egypt (Incidentally, British troops remained in Egypt far into the twentieth century, finally leaving in 1956.)

Meanwhile the situation in the Sudan had also gotten worse. A rebellion was in progress under the leadership of a Muslim Sufi who had assumed the title of "the Mahdi". This takes a bit of explaining. As you undoubtedly know, in addition to the major branches of Islam (the Sunnis and the Shia), there are a number of smaller sects. One of these is the Sufi, a somewhat mystical branch which is normally quite peaceful. It was Sufi missionaries who had converted most of the Arabs in the Sudan to Islam.

Egyptian harsh and somewhat corrupt misrule had created considerable resentment in the Sudan and laid the seeds of rebellion. In 1881, a devout forty-year old Sufi named Muhammad Ahmad decided that he had a vision in which he had been identified as the Mahdi. This also requires some explaining. The title, the Mahdi, is normally associated with the Hidden Imam in Shiism, who is expected to return at the end of time to make things right in the Muslim world. In this case, the Sufi Mahdi believed himself to be the return of Jesus, as a prophet but not divine, in accord with the Islamic view of Jesus. Muhammad Ahmad was convinced that he had been called to make things right not only for Sufis but for all of Islam, leading a military force in much the same way as had the Prophet Muhammad.

Muhammad Ahmad's rebellion had some initial success, including the defeat of a sizable Egyptian force, which included an Englishman, Colonel William Hicks, who had accompanied the force as chief of staff and was killed in the process. This shocked the English public, and led to calls in the press for Gordon to go and redeem British honor. The Cabinet was not enthusiastic, but reluctantly agreed for Gordon to go only to assess the situation in Khartoum. Gordon, of course responded promptly. His instructions, ratified by Baring, were to go to Khartoum, look over the situation, and arrange for the city's evacuation. Unfortunately, an extra sentence authorized him to take whatever executive actions he deemed necessary. Gordon took that sentence and ran with it.

As the Mahdi closed in, Gordon delayed the evacuation too long, hoping to

persuade the Mahdi to make peace. As a result, when it came time it was time to leave, Khartoum was virtually surrounded and the telegraph line to Cairo had been cut. Despite the urging of the public and the Queen, the Cabinet delayed taking action for a long time. Finally, it authorized a very large British force to be mobilized and move south. A small, elite force might have moved faster, but organizing this one and getting it to Egypt took a very long time.

The Mahdi offered Gordon a chance to surrender if he would convert to Islam, and the lives of all those in Khartoum would be spared. Gordon furiously refused. He watched for a relief force through a telescope while standing on the roof of the palace, his headquarters. But none came. Nevertheless, he assured the people of Khartoum that relief would eventually come. They could trust the English. He finally got word by way of a steamer which braved the bullets of the Mahdi's army to bring a message from the advancing British forces. Unfortunately their commander moved with great caution and fought several small battles along the way.

By this time Khartoum had been under siege for almost eight months, food was running out, and Gordon's native forces were gaunt and restless. But Gordon stood firm. He would not surrender and he would not desert his people.

The end came quickly. The Mahdi knew that he had little time before the British arrived. He drove his forces to attack the city and breach its defenses. His troops slaughtered every one they could find. Gordon himself knew what was coming. In typical Gordon fashion, he bravely stood at the top of the steps of his palace and refused to defend himself. The Mahdi's forces charged up the steps and cut him down. When the relief column finally reached the city in January of 1885 it was too late. (We know all this because the Italian consul had remained in the city and miraculously survived.)

Gordon had finally achieved his life-long desire to die in battle and go on to a better world in life after death. You may not agree with him, depending in your own belief as to what happens at the end of life.

When the news reached England, the British public and the Queen were distraught. Whatever errors he had committed, and whatever eccentricities he embodied, Gordon remained a British hero for years to come. The Mahdi died of typhus in 1885. The regime which he had established lived on until 1896, when Lord Kitchener invaded the Sudan and made it into a British colony. The high point of Gordon's career, of course, had been in China, and he will always be remembered as "Chinese Gordon," hero extraordinaire.

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