

## A SOLDIER AND SANCTITY

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O the assertion that "Chivalry is dead," Kenelm Digby in his *Maxims of Christian Chivalry* replies: "what is accidental and not necessarily connected with the inmost soul of Chivalry may indeed have its destined period. The plumed troop and the bright banner and all the quality, pride, pomp and circumstance, of feudal manners may pass with the age which required these, but what essentially belongs to this great cause must endure to the end. Although all other things are uncertain, perishable, and liable to change, this is grafted upon deep and indestructible roots which no time can weaken and no force can remove."

Again, if the demise of Chivalry occurred with the passing of the great orders of knights, to what shall we attribute the spirit that animated a Padraic Pearse, a Joyce Kilmer? and the thousands who gave their lives for the advancement of human science and knowledge? Not all were desirous of fame, glory, wealth, or power. There was something generous, something heroic about all which commands attention and respect. It is this generosity, this heroism that constitutes Chivalry, for Chivalry is but "a name for that general spirit which disposes men to heroic and generous acts and keeps them conversant with all that is beautiful and sublime in the intellectual and moral world." Heroism alone will not constitute the truly chivalrous man; that is why knighthood declined. For knights were no longer generous, no longer moral, and they became but a band of mercenaries whose skill at arms was at the command of him who could pay the highest price.

There is no more severe trial of a man's heroism than death; no surer sign of his generosity than charity; no greater test of moral virtue than purity of life; no more positive indication of intellectual integrity than adherence to truth.

These and more were the possession of Charles George Gordon or, as he is more generally known, "Chinese" Gordon. Neglected by the country he served, he bore hardships and death unflinchingly; for the poor and derelict his purse was ever ready; even in his own day

he was known as the "purest man in the British Army"; against oppression and injustice his voice was one of the few to be heard.

Charles Gordon was born at Woolwich, England on the 28th of January, 1833. His parents were members of the Church of England and though many of his ancestors had died in defence of the Catholic faith. Little is known of his boyhood beyond his attendance at school in Taunton. It was but natural that the son of a family renowned for its soldiers should have been intended for the military profession. Accordingly, in 1848 he entered Woolwich Military Academy and at the end of four years was sent to Chatham for further studies in the arts of war.

His first military service was during the Crimean War at Balaclava, whither he had been sent as an engineer. Here his position was a minor one, and upon the completion of the war he spent the next four years in study and travel.

China, the land of his destiny, was the next scene of his military operations. He had been sent here in 1861 as Captain of Engineers. With the defeat of the Imperial Chinese troops, little was left for him to do beyond the ordinary round of army life. However, in 1860 the Taiping Rebellion had begun in the southern province of China and, because of the danger to the foreign residents, the English and French made common cause with the Imperial troops against the invaders.

One army in particular had resisted the rebels with great success. It had been organized and led by an American civilian, Ward, who possessed extraordinary skill and ability as a military leader. In the two years of his command, the force had fought some seventy engagements without suffering defeat. For this it had received the grandiloquent, and characteristically Chinese, title, "Ever Victor-Army." Unfortunately Ward was killed in 1862, and in his place another American, Burgevine, was named. Because of his temper and lack of control he was dismissed, and an Englishman, Holland, was appointed. It was during his commandery that the army suffered its first series of defeats. Out of these arose a spirit of mutiny and dissension, and a new choice had to be made. Gordon, now a Major, was selected in March, 1863.

Upon his assumption of the command he had promised that he would clear the rebels from their position in eighteen months, a task which the Imperial armies had been unable to do in fourteen years. It would be tedious to explain how this was accomplished. What is more enlightening is an incident which is characteristic of the man. The rebels in a certain city had agreed to surrender on the condition

that their lives would be spared and to this Gordon had pledged his word. Upon the capitulation a frightful butchery took place. Later, for his part in the capture of the place, Gordon received a medal and ten thousand taels from the Chinese Emperor. When the formal presentation was made, Gordon took the rescript of the Emperor and wrote upon it his "regret that owing to the circumstances which occurred since the capture of Soo-chow, he was unable to receive any mark of his Majesty the Emperor's recognition." This frankness the Chinese recognized to be but the expression of the man's integrity, and, despite other declarations of a similar character, he was presented with citizenship in the Chinese Empire, an honor few of his race ever received.

To Gordon's direction was entrusted the construction of forts on the Thames River at Gravesend. Here he encountered the abject poverty so prevalent in the England of his day. Characteristically, his efforts to better these conditions did not consist in a mere protest at their cause, rather they involved his personal goods and salary. Never a wealthy man—the medal he had received from the Chinese Emperor had made its way to a charity fund in Coventry—by dint of sacrifice and labor he succeeded in alleviating much of the misery of the place. The recipients of his generosity were not mere clients or cases, and in spite of the cares and worries attendant upon his position, he yet found time to keep in close touch with all. Of this concern one who knew him intimately writes: "in his sitting room Gordon had a big chart of the world, with pins stuck in it, marking the probable positions of the different ships in which his 'kings' (as he called them) were sailing. He thus followed them in his thoughts, and was able to point out their whereabouts to their friends when they came to inquire about them."

It was at this time too, that he began to record his spiritual thoughts and meditations to his sister. That one should have a deep spiritual life and should speak of it, of itself should cause no surprise, for there have been and there are men and women who have done so. What does cause wonderment is that in this case it is a soldier and at a time when rationalistic and atheistic thought was the commonplace of England. More, the reserve for which Englishmen are famed would seem to prohibit the expression of such sentiments as "My God has been so faithful! and kind! all through my troubles, that I can recommend Him to you" or "Oh! if we were content to have God's will instead of our own, we should be happy."

Much of the theology of his letters and reflections, it is true, is erroneous; yet he arrives at many profound truths. Perhaps it was

because, as his biographer, Butler, puts it: "Absolutely without a parallel in our modern life, Gordon stands out the foremost man of action of our time and nation, whose ruling principle was faith and good works. No gloomy faith, no exalted sense of self-confidence, no mocking of the belief of others, no separation of his sense of God from the everyday work to which his hand has to be put; no leaving of religion at the church-door as a garb to be put on going in and taken off coming out; but a faith which was a living, moving, genial reality with him, present always and everywhere, shining out in every act of his life, growing and strengthening as the years roll on, filling the desert with thought and lighting the gloom of tropical forest, until at last it enables him to sit quietly and alone, watching with light heart and pleasant jest the great cloud drawing nearer in which his life is to go down."

The sharp division in our own day between religion and the duties and offices of life is the cause of much of the unrest, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness of men. When Christian principles are divorced from business, pleasure, or government, a social upheaval is imminent. Gordon's recognition of this fact and his efforts to make Christianity live in his own life and actions (whether they concerned Emperors or beggars),—these alone would make him conspicuous in any age.

Consequently we should be surprised not at the errors of his theology, but rather at the fact that the circumstances of his age, race, and position in life permitted any theology at all, much less its practice.

At the invitation of an Egyptian Minister in 1872 he became Governor-General of the "Province of the Equator" and of this place he writes: "no one can conceive the utter misery of these lands, heat and mosquitoes day and night the year round," but, delightfully, in another letter, "I prefer it infinitely to going out to dinner in England." His work here was to open up the Nile River to the Equatorial Lakes, subdue the hostile natives, and break up the slave trade. In 1876 he was given the Governor-Generalship of the entire Soudan, and after three years of the most feverish activity, the hopelessness of the task is forced upon him. Of the slave trade he says: "I declare I see no human way to stop it. When you have got the ink that has soaked into blotting paper out of it, then slavery will cease in these lands." With dishonest government officials he waged continuous war, and to crown his troubles, those for whom he had worked hardest betrayed him. His messages were distorted and he

was made to appear disobedient, inconsistent, and insubordinate. His return to England was anything but that of a hero.

In an age of the most violent antipathy towards Ireland and her Catholicism, his views are refreshing. "I must say from all accounts, and my own observation, that the state of our fellow-countrymen in the parts I have named (the south and west of Ireland, then devastated by famine) is worse than that of any people in the world, let alone Europe. I believe that these people are made as we are; that they are patient beyond belief; loyal, but at the same time broken-spirited and desperate, living on the verge of starvation in places in which we would keep our cattle. The Bulgarians, Anatolians, Chinese, and Indians are better off than many of them are. The priests alone have any sympathy with their sufferings, and naturally alone have a hold over them. In these days, in common justice, if we endow a Protestant University, why should we not endow a Catholic university in a Catholic country? Is it not as difficult to get a Five Pound note from a Protestant as from a Catholic or a Jew? . . . Our comic prints do an infinity of harm by their caricatures. Firstly, the caricatures are not true, for the crime in Ireland is not greater than that in England; and, secondly, they exasperate the people on both sides of the Channel, and they do no good. It is ill to laugh and scoff at a question which affects our existence."

Throughout his life Gordon had ardently hoped to visit the Holy Land. Duty had interfered but in 1833 he was able to gratify this desire. From the year spent here came his "Reflections in Palestine," a series of meditations on Scriptural texts and studies upon the topographical features of the locality. In the latter are found his attempts to place the various happenings in the life of Our Saviour. The former contains such subjects as "Baptism," "Holy Communion," "The Passion of Christ," and "Prayer." Here, too, fault may be found with his theological conclusions, but there can be no gainsaying the spirit that motivated a work which bares the constant struggle of a man to practice the Christian life.

In 1833 the natives of the Soudan had revolted and the British government determined to withdraw its garrisons, civil employees, and those under Egyptian rule who wished to come. But one man was fitted to superintend the withdrawal, but political intrigue delayed the choice until 1884 when Gordon was appointed. His own account of the appointment reads like a scene from an English war play. The difficulties of the task were explained to him and he was asked "'will you go and try?' and my answer was, 'only too delighted.'"

He proceeded at once to Khartoum and in eight weeks had succeeded in moving 2500 men, women, and children to a place of safety. All may have gone well, but in March of the same year the British forces defeated the natives in two battles. Immediately, powerful tribes, hitherto friendly, revolted against the government. Gordon was surrounded in Khartoum and a siege was begun. For ten weary months he was to hold out against the Arabs in spite of famine, treason, and neglect.

Together with his journal, the few letters that reached England during this time reveal the matchless spirit of the man. "May our Lord not visit us as a nation for our sins, but may His wrath fall on me, hid in Christ. This is my frequent prayer, and may He spare these people, and bring them to peace." To his sister he wrote: "this may be the last letter you will receive from me, for we are on our last legs, owing to the delay of the expedition. However, God rules all, and, as He will rule to His glory and our welfare, His will be done."

The expedition sent to relieve him arrived too late. From the natives it was learned that Gordon had died two days before. Of his end the Dublin Review of 1885 says: "Not even in death were they to look upon the face of him they hoped to save—not even on his unconscious clay might a comrade's hand be laid in reverent pity at the end. By the treachery of one he trusted, in the streets which had so often rung with acclamations of his bounty, on the threshold of the dwelling where he had spent so much of his life's energy in the service of the people who slew him, Gordon died in the discharge of his trust. Yet in the manner of his death, as told by those who professed to have witnessed it, there was a certain appropriateness to his strangely dual character and career. For he fell as a soldier leading soldiers on—but to save and succour rather than to slay; with arms in his hands, but no blood on them; in fight, yet unsoiled at the last with the immediate heat and fury of the fray; surrounded by enemies, yet in his heart at peace with all men."

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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