

SHERLOCK HOLMES IN KHARTOUM

by MARGARET NYDELL

One of the most shocking events of the late nineteenth century was the tragic death of General Charles “Chinese” Gordon at Khartoum in January 1885. When the news of the siege and fall of this distant British outpost reached England, there poured forth a vast amount of impassioned prose, including some from Queen Victoria herself. (She sent a telegram *en clair* to her ministers stating that the catastrophe might have been prevented and “many precious lives saved by earlier action.” Gladstone considered resigning as Prime Minister after having been condemned by the Queen in such a manner.)¹ “Gordon of Khartoum” was immediately canonized as a genuine Victorian hero.²

Khartoum fell and Gordon was killed on 26 January 1885, after a siege and blockade of over ten months. Because of inexcusable dithering and delay, the relief party led by Sir Charles Wilson arrived just 60 *hours* too late. Thus befell a horrific tragedy of enormous importance in the British imperialist experience.

How could such a thing have been allowed to happen? It is useful to go back and look again at how it came about.

ENTER SHERLOCK HOLMES

What is generally unknown and unappreciated is the fact that Sherlock Holmes was actively involved in the entire Sudan issue, from beginning to end. Lord Kitchener, who was director of British intelligence during the siege in 1884–85, relied heavily on Holmes’s advice.³ He found him indispensable again in 1898, when (subjected to great pressure from public opinion) “Kitchener of Khartoum” marched another British army up the Nile, avenged Gordon’s murder, and salvaged the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.

Holmes was busily engaged in advising the British Foreign Office during the long siege of Khartoum throughout 1884. Working through his brother Mycroft, he was especially active in the frantic last-minute efforts to save the city in January 1885. But tragically, the intelligence he gathered and analyzed was not effectively used. It was one of Holmes’s greatest disappointments in his career—the death of Gordon (and Charlton Heston) need not have occurred.

From mid-1884, Holmes’s energies were almost completely taken up by the Sudan issue. There was a “break in the partnership” of Holmes and Watson from 1883 to 1885⁴ that coincides with the Sudanese insurrection. Presumably, Watson spent some of this time in America; in any case, no detective adventures were chronicled.

But Dr. Watson's cousin, Lieutenant (later Lord) Charles M. Watson, was on the scene, and facilitated the liaison between Gordon and Holmes. Lt. Watson was one of Gordon's closest friends—he had first been assigned to his staff in Equatoria a full ten years earlier, when Gordon was leading an anti-slavery campaign. He was with him again in Egypt in early 1884, when Gordon was briefed in Cairo before departing for Khartoum.⁵ The now-Colonel Watson, considered a Sudan expert, pressured British Consul-General Evelyn Baring into approving Gordon's mission, though both Gordon and Baring were on record as stating that a successful evacuation was impossible.⁶

And what was Holmes doing at this time? Almost certainly traveling in both Egypt and Sudan, both overtly and covertly, and preparing detailed reports. He was the vital link between Gordon and Sir Garnet Wolseley, who was commander of forces in Egypt and was directing operations from Dongala, a border town.

Holmes was a master of disguise and was very likely the only Westerner to gain entry into the Mahdi's private councils. There is record of an outsider, "Abu Aqel," who was a confidant of the Mahdi. *Who was this person?* It was *Holmes*, in disguise. He took on the persona of this Afghani holy man, about whom little is known but who was influential in the Mahdi's circle of advisors.⁷ As an Afghan, Holmes communicated through two interpreters (although he undoubtedly knew, or learned, Arabic quickly).⁸ The mysterious Abu Aqel was highly successful; his advice was sought and suggestions taken by the Mahdi's political leaders. He became especially close to Sayyid Abdullahi, the future Khalifa. One Arabic account mentions "the Khalifa's principal advisor, Abu Aqel. . . who was an Afghan tribesman, about whom little is known except that he was exceedingly diligent in his prayers."⁹ Contemporary photographs of the Mahdi display his classic Semitic features. A glance at his face shows how easily Holmes could have passed as a member of his inner circle—they looked very much alike.

In gathering and reporting intelligence, Holmes's perspicacity and style are unmistakable. Here is one "anonymous" report sent to the FO, dated 14 March 1884 (the telegraph line had been cut on 12 March): "Grave developments are afoot. Am reliably informed that all tribes between Berber and Shendi have joined in the Mahdi's revolt. . . .the number of Ansar [the Mahdi's fighting force] tribesmen is now 100,000 or more. . . ."

A secret message sent to Gordon on 25 March: "The Mahdi intends to invite you [Gordon] to 'become a follower of God's religion and His Prophet, otherwise [you will] perish.' . . . I recommend buying time with assertions of good

will, vague promises. . . can gain up to three months by this means, which is not without significance. . . .”

This interesting invitation was urged on the Mahdi by Holmes who, in fact, helped to draft it. The formal invitation was delivered on 27 March to Gordon, who knew very well its source and purpose. But despite the careful wording, it offended Gordon, who was extremely religious.¹⁰ The overture was contemptuously rejected. Shortly thereafter, Khartoum was effectively surrounded and without reliable communication.

From an (unsigned) intelligence dispatch dated 12 June, found among Gordon’s papers: “Even covert entry into the city will soon be impossible. Your thirteen river steamers are becoming less effective in destroying gun replacements and seizing supplies, indeed, their most recent effort inflicted only trifling damages. . . essential that you or a trained deputy accompany future defensive expeditions.”

Gordon did train a deputy, Mohammed Aly Bey, who showed a flair for the Gordon tactics of lightning surprise moves. In July, he inflicted heavy losses on the dervishes in a successful operation on the Blue Nile, so that some provisions flowed into the town.¹¹

An anonymous dispatch to Wolseley dated 18 September: “The Mahdi grows ever stronger. He sent three dervish emissaries to Gordon again today, inviting him to submit to him as a Prophet. We have gained more time.”¹²

On 3 November, it was almost certainly Holmes who personally delivered Kitchener’s message to Gordon, which carried the sad news that his emissary, Colonel Stewart, had been attacked and murdered along with everyone in his party. The bearer of the news was a Christian, as is clear from Gordon’s diary entry: “My friend and confidante bore me the news in a most considerate manner, a consolation possible only from a co-religionist.”¹³

Another dispatch sent to Gordon on 12 November: “The Mahdi is closing in and it may be clearly deduced that he is poised to attack.” On that day, in fact, the Mahdi’s dervishes did manage to break through Gordon’s lines, and cut the city off from the Nile River.

And finally, on 29 December, Gordon wrote a message on a tiny piece of paper, clearly intended to fall into the Mahdi’s hands:¹⁴ “Khartoum all right. Could hold out for years.” The message was rolled and placed inside an empty cartridge, in place of the gunpowder, and closed with an Arabic seal. This, along with six volumes of Gordon’s Khartoum journal, was delivered to Colonel Wilson on 21 January.¹⁵ It is unclear whether Holmes was instrumental in obtaining and forwarding these; very likely he was, because despite the bluster, the

bizarre but careful wording of the message in fact made clear that the situation was desperate and that Wilson must hurry. (He did not.)

WHAT WENT WRONG

A central problem all along was that the Khartoum situation was perceived very differently in London. The urgency of rescue was not appreciated, possibly as a result of Gordon's string of understated, slightly bombastic assertions that he (and God) would not countenance a defeat by a wild and savage Mahdi. As late as midsummer 1884, Gladstone stated that it was "impossible for the tribes to take Khartoum by assault." Holmes made a quick trip to England to refute such complacency. His carefully placed rumors stirred up a frenzy in the press, and he even had an audience with the Queen, who stated publicly: "If not for humanity's sake, for the honour of the Government and nation Gordon must not be abandoned."¹⁶

But nothing was done. By late summer, the public was indignant and losing patience. It did not help that the War Office also opposed a rescue mission. They had "unhappy memories of Gordon. . . . 'The man is not worth the camels,' said one Army spokesman."¹⁷

Holmes finally took more direct action. He returned to the Sudan, and in a secret, anonymous report, dated 10 September, he described the dire situation in Khartoum so effectively that Gladstone finally authorized ten million pounds for the rescue expedition, as well as ten thousand British troops. On 28 September, Wolseley, who was to lead the expedition, arrived in Cairo.¹⁸ From then on, it was a race against time.

Holmes gained entry into Khartoum on several occasions. Gordon's diary makes note of a visitor "to whom I entrusted messages and through whom I received replies to those messages within a matter of days." He also mentioned "my most reliable agent and friend, a lifeline of timely information." When Gordon finally opened the city's gates and encouraged the starving and frightened townspeople to leave and join the Mahdi, about half of them did so. Sherlock Holmes, in disguise, was among them. "Abu Aqel" remained in the Mahdi's camp for the next eight months.¹⁹

Gordon's fate was sealed. He wrote his final letters. Colonel Watson later published this letter from Gordon, dated 14 December 1884: "My Dear Watson. I think the game is up, and send Mrs. Watson, you and Graham my adieux."²⁰ He also revealed Gordon's final bitter message: "I will never set foot in England again. . . . What I have gone through I cannot describe. The Almighty God will help me."²¹ A grieving Britain was depicted in a cartoon entitled "Too Late!"

from *Punch*, 4 February 1885. The caption read: “Telegram, Thursday Morning, Feb. 4—“Khartoum taken by the Mahdi. General Gordon’s fate uncertain.”

AFTER THE FALL

And so the Mahdi assumed full leadership and control over most of the Sudan. Six months later he died in a typhus epidemic. Despite claims from members of his family, one Sayyid Abdullahi was designated as the Mahdi’s chosen successor, and named Khalifa.²² By December 1885, the new Khalifa had consolidated power over the Mahdi’s followers, and was poised to invade Egypt. This campaign was finally stopped by General Stephenson, with a reinforced garrison, thus ending officially the First Sudan War.

The Sudan then moved away from center stage in world affairs. As neatly summed up by the historian Waller:

A troubled Sudan languished under the Khalifa for thirteen years, penetrated only by the famous detective, Sherlock Holmes, who, incognito, made a “short but interesting” visit to the Khalifa [as related] in Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Adventure of the Empty House.”²³

Later accounts of the period of the Khalifa Abdullahi’s rule are sketchy indeed. For that matter, accounts of the Mahdi’s campaigns and brief rule are equally lacking in detail. Much is unknown because there were few chroniclers inside the Ansar leadership, and it is not a period of much interest to outside scholars. But a careful perusal of Arabic sources (many still untranslated), as well as the archived records and reports of the British Foreign Office, does yield additional information. And of particular significance for us, these are where the secret activities of Sherlock Holmes are either hinted at or revealed.

The Khalifa’s papers have survived, and show that all questions as to the Mahdi’s army, treasury, and day-to-day administration had been referred to him, even before the movement had spread throughout the country.²⁴ After the death of the Mahdi, the Khalifa was soon occupied, however, with containing various territorial and tribal revolts. Rival factions arose and had to be put down. Desertions had to be dealt with. There was a serious famine in the fourth year of his reign, due to a drought. He was finding it impossible to administer the vast area he inherited. The Ashraf (relatives of the Mahdi) resented him. He lacked the necessary personality to unify and inspire his followers, and it was clear that there were internal agitators working against him. *Very likely Holmes was responsible for much of this.*

Both the Conservative government under Salisbury (which came to power in 1885) and the Liberal government under Rosebery (elected in 1892) knew

that they had to come to terms with the Sudan. An early attempt to mediate through the Ottomans failed; their authority was rejected by the Mahdi's followers. A military reconquest of the Sudan was going to be necessary. The Sudan was viewed as a natural extension of Egypt, and there was growing sentiment in England that colonial expansion in Africa was ever more urgent, to counter the ambitions of the French, Germans, and Italians.

The British made extensive use of intelligence agents during this confusing time. Kitchener's letters mention an important "field report" gauging the strength of the Mahdiya troops, forwarded to him in *late 1891*.²⁵ Was this the result of Holmes's celebrated visit, when he "dropped in on the Khalifa at Khartoum" during the years of the Great Hiatus? It seems highly likely. Kitchener received a report from S.H. (the Secret Hand) that stated "should the enemy undertake offensive operations in almost any direction [from Barbar, an Egyptian garrison], no one could view the situation without disquiet."²⁶ At the Khalifa's headquarters in Omdurman (across the river from Khartoum proper, which was totally in ruins), preparations were being made for attack. *Someone* relayed this information to Kitchener, who gathered his forces in readiness. Then, in a turnabout, for *some reason* the Khalifa relinquished his plans for taking the offensive and began building defensive forts at Omdurman.²⁷ This provided Kitchener with a respite and an opportunity to advance further. He finally took Omdurman and the ruined city of Khartoum on 2 September 1898. An emotional memorial service for Gordon was held two days later.²⁸

Was the relayer of this information, or misinformation, Sherlock Holmes? Why did the Khalifa unwisely launch an attack against Kitchener's well-entrenched soldiers on 2 September? The Khalifa later stated, "12,000 brave fighters went to Paradise on that day. We could not move them [the enemy]. God is great."²⁹ Again *for some reason*, he had miscalculated.

A BELATED TRIBUTE

In the years after the Sudan campaign, Holmes modestly declined to come forward and identify himself—all we have is the cryptic reference to his visit to Khartoum, "the results of which I communicated to the Foreign Office." Colonel C. M. Watson was inducted into the Diogenes Club in 1887 "in recognition of his patriotic service," but there is no record of a similar honor going to Holmes.³⁰

Holmes's service to his queen and country in the Sudan set the stage for the government's reliance upon him many years later. As stated in one of the many Holmesian biographies, ". . . whilst visiting such inaccessible rulers as the Dalai Lama in Tibet and the Khalifa at Khartoum. . . . His report to the Foreign Of-

fice on the latter visit must have established his potential for useful work in a later age, in more complicated international negotiations.”³¹

In his own memoirs, Holmes later wrote: “I do not allude to a couple of cases which I must exclude even from these private notes because of their international nature.”³² He also refers to “bulky and sealed files somewhere in Whitehall’s dustier depths, consigned there by my brother Mycroft. . . .”³³ Most of these are now available on microfilm, and were used extensively in writing this article.

Surely the time has come to give belated credit to another Victorian hero, our own Sherlock Holmes. His resourcefulness and bravery are there for all to see. If a monument to the heroes of this campaign is ever erected, our favorite detective is worthy of sharing the title:

GORDON OF KHARTOUM
KITCHENER OF KHARTOUM
HOLMES OF KHARTOUM

NOTES

1. Mekki Shibeika, *The Independent Sudan*. New York: Speller & Sons, 1959, p. 329. Also see reprint of letters to and from the queen in “Aftermath,” H.E. Wortham, *Chinese Gordon*, Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1933, pp. 371 ff.
2. Fifty years later, tributes were still pouring forth. From *The London Times*, January 31, 1935:
Above his bones Great Nile for ever rolls:
Why seek his tomb? He lives within our souls.
—C. R. Haines
3. Philip Magnus, *Kitchener, Portrait of an Imperialist*. New York: Dutton & Co., 1959, pp. 58 ff.
4. William S. Baring-Gould, *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, Vol. 1. New York: Random House, 1967, p. 238.
5. John H. Waller, *Gordon of Khartoum, Saga of a Victorian Hero*. New York: Atheneum, 1988, p. 335.
6. Waller, p. 335.
7. Nu’aym Shuqair, *Tarikh As-Sudan [History of the Sudan]*. Beirut: Dar Al-Jayl, 1981, p. 492.
8. Arabic is closely related to Chaldean, in which Holmes had a long-standing interest (“Devil’s Foot”).
9. Shuqair, p. 502.

10. He wrote to his sister Augusta: "I think that our Lord, sitting over Jerusalem, is ruling all things to the glory of His kingdom. . . I must believe He does all things in mercy and love." Wortham, p. 320.
11. Wortham, p. 331.
12. Wortham, p. 340.
13. Wilfred Scawen Blunt, *Gordon at Khartoum, Being a Personal Narrative of Events*. New York: Knopf, 1923, p. 520.
14. A version of it did, written in French and translated for the Mahdi by Rudolph Slatin, an Austrian adventurer who was a prisoner of war.
15. Waller, p. 408, and Blunt, p. 522.
16. Lawrence and Elizabeth Hanson, *Chinese Gordon, The Story of a Hero*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1954, p. 224.
17. Hanson, p. 226.
18. Hanson, p. 227.
19. Ibrahim Shahata Hasan, *Imarat Al-Islam Al-Mahdiyafi As-Sudan* [The Rule of Mahdi Islam in the Sudan]. Cairo: Dar Al-Ma'aref, 1985, p. 104.
20. Sir Charles M. Watson, *The Life of Major-General Sir Charles W. Wilson*. New York: Dutton & Co., 1909, p. 313.
21. Blunt, p. 523.
22. Khalifa (caliph) is a term used to mean "successor," usually of a religious leader.
23. Waller, p. 451.
24. Shibeika, p. 336.
25. Holmes's visit to the Khalifa is as likely at this time as in late 1893, which was suggested by Zeisler (quoted in Baring-Gould, Vol. 2, p. 324). The sequence of events during the Great Hiatus is not clear.
26. Shebeika, p. 416.
27. Shebeika, p. 426.
28. Magnus, p. 132.
29. *Manshurat Al-Mahdiya* [Decrees of the Mahdi Regime]. Cairo: Abu Fadel Press, 1969, p. 89.
30. "The Diogenes Club has long been. . . considered a possible cover for espionage and secret activities by the British government. . . The club, according to Holmes, was obviously involved in secret work from the Himalayas to Loch Ness." Matthew Bunson, *Encyclopedia Sherlockiana*. New York: Macmillan USA, 1994, p. 65.
31. Philip Weller and Christopher Roden, *The Life and Times of Sherlock Holmes*, New York: Random House, 1992, p. 21.

32. Michael Hardwick, *Sherlock Holmes, My Life and Crimes*. New York: Holt & Co., 1984, p. 41.
33. Hardwick, p. 53.