

TEN YEARS IN CAPTIVITY

DEATH OF THE MISSIONARY WHO WAS CAPTURED BY THE MAHDI

The death of Father Joseph Ohrwalder, removes a picturesque figure from current history (says the *London Universe*). Father Ohrwalder had passed through a series of events which no man hitherto or afterwards had experienced and lived. He was captured by the first Mahdi in 1882. This 'potentate' was an impostor, Sheik Mahmoud Ahmed, of Dongola, who gave himself out as a prophet, or Mahdi, foretold by the prophets of Islam. He succeeded in capturing the Province of Darfur, of which El Obeid was the capital. A series of fights and massacres occurred, and the Egyptian troops in the Soudan having proved themselves unequal to the task of coping with the enemy, the Egyptian Government sent out Hicks Pasha with a force of 11,000 men to overthrow the rebel. Unfortunately Hicks Pasha, neglecting the advice which had been given him by those who knew the barren and waterless region of Kordofan, left the banks of the Nile when his force had been successful and plunged into the arid desert. Decoyed into a defile, his army was attacked by an overwhelming multitude; they formed squares and fought with desperation until nearly every man was killed. That was the battle of El Obeid, fought on November 3-5, 1883.

The events leading up to his capture and that of his brother and sister missionaries were told by Father Ohrwalder upon his escape from the clutches of the Mahdi. The story was translated into English and edited by General Sir Francis Wingate, Sirdar of the Egyptian Army and Governor-General of the Soudan, and the work appeared in London in 1892 under the title of *Ten Years' Captivity in the Mahdi's Camp*. To this work we are indebted for the story which follows.

Father Ohrwalder left Cairo on December 28 of the year 1880 'as full of bright hopes for a happy future as any young man could wish to be.' The party consisted of Bishop Comboni, two missionaries, and some Sisters. After 28 days the party reached Khartum, where the members of the mission, headed by Father Alois Bonomi, gave them a hearty welcome, and from Khartum Father Ohrwalder went to El Obeid, in Darfur, the centre of the original successes of the first Mahdi.

The mission was at Jebel Delen when the place was attacked by the Baggara, of the Nuba plain. These tribesmen had made several incursions upon the people in the neighborhood of Delan. The Baggara were several times repelled, but Father Ohrwalder and his associates lived for five months in perpetual anxiety as to their future, whilst they were effectually cut off from the rest of the world and their work was stopped. They dared not expose themselves on the plains, and confined themselves to the hills, where they hunted the koodoo. Then it was decided to attempt a flight to Fashoda. Aided by the Nubas, they quitted the mission at midnight, but the soldiers were unready to accompany the party, although their leader had promised their aid, and when the missionaries returned to their house it was found that the Nubas had carried off everything. In company with Father Bonomi, Father Ohrwalder went in desperation to Mek Omar, a former slave-dealer. He brought them coffee, and having received them in a friendly manner spoke thus:

'I know that you will not turn Mohammedans; you must therefore understand that your property and slaves are no longer your own; at the same time I will give you a letter to the Mahdi regarding your situation.'

They had no alternative but to accept these conditions; they were disarmed, returned to the mission, and spent the night alone on their knees. This was on September 14, 1882, and on the following morning they rang the Ave-bell for the last time. At noon Mek Omar arrived with his followers chanting the Mahomedan creed. He entered the church, and the

missionaries had the agony of witnessing its destruction. In three days they left their beloved Nuba hills after endless trouble in procuring from Mek Omar four animals on which the Sisters might ride. The two priests and two lay Brothers took it in turns to walk and ride. They were in charge of Mek Omar's son, Naser, who, when they got near El Obeid, put them in a hut, where they were told to remain whilst he saw the Mahdi. In the village they were received with bitter and disgraceful taunts, and would inevitably have been killed but for their escort. After a day in the hut they were ordered to the Mahdi's camp.

The appearance before the Mahdi was not altogether dignified, so far as Father Ohrwalder was concerned, at any rate. As they approached El Obeid they were ordered to rest beneath a large *Andansonia* tree. Scarcely were they settled than they were suddenly attacked by Naser and his party, 'who seized our watches and other valuables, and then stripped off our clothes; they even attempted to remove the veils and outer garments of the Sisters, but to this we forcibly objected, and, seizing sticks, tried to drive them off. At length these wretched thieves, ashamed of their unequal conquest, drew off, and Naser ordered our clothes to be returned; but my suit, in which I had stitched thirty dollars, was not given back to me, and I was reduced to appearing before the Mahdi in a shirt and drawers.'

The Mahdi placed before the missionaries the advantage of embracing the religion of Islam. Several emissaries were sent, but they got no satisfaction. The Christians now prepared themselves for death. Shortly they were ordered to follow an armed party, and after half an hour's walking, suffering bitterly from fatigue, they were taken to a central position and ordered to bend their necks to receive the death-blow. 'Without the smallest hesitation we did it.' But their hour had not come, for the Mahdi summoned them. He was riding a white camel, and as they approached he returned and said, 'May God lead you into the way of truth.' The troops were dismissed, but the crowd threatened the crush the captives to death. The Mahdi protected them, and when the people had passed asked them separately whether they would become Moslems or would prefer death. Each answered resolutely, 'Death!' A council was held, and although the majority were for killing the Christians a certain Hajji Khaled pointed out that according to Moslem law it was not lawful to kill priests who had not offered armed resistance, and who were, moreover, captives. So they were taken to a camp, where they lived in the open for fifteen days before they could build a hut for themselves. They had become covered with horrible vermin, which seemed to increase every day. They had no clothes to change, scarcely enough water to drink. Washing was out of the question. Three of their number died—two Sisters and a lay Brother, whilst the others lay helplessly side by side with their dead Brothers and Sisters.

'It was a terrible exertion to us to sew the corpses in mats and drag them to the door of the hut. At length some slaves—much against their will and on the promise of good pay—removed the already decaying bodies, and buried them in shallow pits, which they covered up with sand. . . . It was a terrible grief to us not to accompany our poor companions in adversity to the grave, but we were all too ill to move, so they went to their last resting-place without prayer or chant and even to this day I cannot tell if the slaves really buried them or merely dragged the bodies beyond the huts, and left them lying there on the ground. The condition of us miserable wretches who were still alive is beyond description; we envied our companions who were now beyond the reach of human suffering.'

The Mahdi promised that they would be allowed to return to their own country on the surrender of El Obeid. When this did happen the missionaries at El Obeid were taken to the Mahdi and were, before a solemn assembly, asked in vain to become Moslems.

The Mahdi told his prisoners that he would protect them until the coming of Sayidna Isa (Jesus Christ), when they would either have to turn Moslems or die.

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