

Omdurman, Fashoda, and the French Connection

I. GORDON'S GHOST: SUDAN, 1896-89

Ten years after Gordon's death, the face of Africa had changed ... at least on the atlases of the world.

When he met his death in Khartoum, the Mahdi ruled a country without borders in a part of Africa without countries.

By 1895, most of it had been parcelled out. To the west, the French had claimed great swaths of real estate. Up the Nile, in the realms once belonging to the Sultan of Zanzibar, German and British authorities had drawn boundaries.

The Mahdi had talked of liberating the whole Muslim world, into one empire.

Now he lay in a shrine, in a tomb across the river from Khartoum, at Omdurman, and in his stead reigned the Khalifa, his heir.

The dome could be seen three days' ride away.¹

And Omdurman grew, spreading for six miles along the Nile River, mud houses and flat-roofed homes, filthy, squalid, with narrow

¹ Alan Moorhead, *The Blue Nile*, 280.

streets, and 150,000 people.

As for Gordon's Khartoum, the Khalifa decreed that it
suffer the fate of its hero.

The people were ordered to leave.

Slaves went through ransacking the homes, and
then levelling them.

It became a ghost city, with desert sand sifting
through the streets and bushes growing
out of shattered walls.²

His kingdom was no greater than the Mahdi's, and the enemies
surrounding him ever so much abler to protect themselves.

Sudan seemed hardly worth taking from him.

Since Gordon's day it had suffered famine

and plague

and drought.

and cholera

Compared to those, the Khalifa didn't look so bad.

He was a true believer in Islam, a defender of the faith.

² Alan Moorhead, *The Blue Nile*, 283.

He was brave, and not softened by luxury or greed.

Go to his palace, and you would find that its
fanciest luxury was a brass bed.

And, in his bathtub, there were two
faucets of brass.

(Except when you turned them, nothing
came out. They weren't connected
to pipes – the Khalifa didn't even
have indoor plumbing).³

You might find him generous, tolerant, even charming if he
was in the mood.

Or cruel, vengeful, and brutal.

People coming to see him had to crawl to him on all fours
and keep their eyes on the ground.⁴

Slavery had sprung back to life under the Mahdi.

Now it thrived. Omdurman became a prime slave market.

And it lacked that token of the highest form of civilization – the one thing
Egypt had given the Sudan....

³ Phillip Ziegler, *Omdurman*, 64.

⁴ Alan Moorhead, *The Blue Nile*, 284-87.

High taxes.⁵

It was a miserable, brutal government – about par for the course in the Arab world.

And on simple grounds of strategic interest, there was no reason why Europeans couldn't have let it go on forever.

In fact, for quite some time, it made more sense to England to leave the Mahdists in charge.

As long as there was a big, strong tyrant with no end of dervishes, nobody was going to plant any OTHER flag at the head of the Nile...

no French tricolor

no German eagle.

Strong as he was, the Mahdi couldn't threaten England's hold on Egypt. They could.

⁵ Peter M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881-1898: A Study of its Origins, Development and Overthrow* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 186.

But by 1895, it was clear that the Mahdist state was a mirage.

A breath from a foreign power might just blow it away, like
sand off a dune in a simoon.⁶

Still, who would want the Sudan?

In itself, the Sudan had precisely nothing...

no oil
no gold or silver
no coal
no good farmland

All it had was the ghost of General Gordon.

And that was enough. The reconquest of the Sudan was, for England,
a matter of pride, and of payback.

It would take time...

– Egypt would need an army fit to meet the dervishes in
the open field.

British officers would have to train them

– England would need a breather, when it had no other
worlds to conquer.

⁶ Patricia Wright, *Conflict on the Niles: The Fashoda Incident of 1898* (London: Heinemann, 1972), 46.

The moment didn't actually come till 1896.

The man in charge of the expedition to redeem the Sudan was Sir Horatio Herbert Kitchener.

a cold, uncharismatic man

the kind you just can't find stories about

as efficient and impersonal as a machine

hard as nails, demanding, secretive.... and very, very talented.

He could speak Arabic.

He loved to work, and loved to take charge of all the decisions – loved to save money – loved to handle everything himself.

Anything he set his mind to – it would be done.
Anything he wanted – he'd get it.

He looked every inch a general, big and broad-shouldered with a whopping big mustache.

He was even given the title of Sirdar, Commander in Chief for the Egyptian army.

In fact, he had had his training as an engineer.

That was good. It meant that, where he could get his hands on trains and boats and steamers, he was sublimely happy.

And he would use all of them to make his the most efficient, best-supplied army in the world.

There were weaknesses in the man – weaknesses that became very clear later.

He wasn't a quick thinker.

He couldn't improvise, or handle surprises.

That emotional intuition that generals of genius have, he didn't have.

At a crucial moment, not given enough time, he'd freeze, not sure what to do, afraid to change.

... like a man who goes out to shovel his walk, only to find that it's 50 degrees and the snow's going to melt in an hour anyhow, going ahead and shoveling it, because...

well, see, he had this shovel in his hand, and it'd be a shame to waste it.⁷

⁷ My analogy. But the analysis of Kitchener is in Patricia Wright, *Conflict on the Nile: The Fashoda Incident of 1898* (London: Heinemann, 1972), 70-71.

We won't see the weaknesses in the Sudan. The campaign didn't have many surprises. It took a man who understood transport and organization.

But it may tell us why this heroic figure would not do well in other situations.

Kitchener left nothing to chance. Redeeming the Sudan would take time and planning.

Gunboats must be built, specially for use on the Nile.

To carry the army and keep it well supplied, a railroad must be laid southward into the desert.

Every single expert warned Kitchener that it couldn't be done.

Kitchener listened – and then went ahead and did it.

Omdurman,⁸ September 2, 1898

Omdurman was no Xanadu. Mud walls and the white dome of the Mahdi's tomb overlooking it all. The Nile ran along one side, and just above the

⁸ That's its official War Office name. Kitchener wanted to call it the Battle of Khartoum. The Sudanese call it the battle of Karari, after the range of hills where the battle actually took place. John Pollock, *Kitchener: Architect of Victory, Artisan of Peace*, 138.

city, the Blue and White Niles came together⁹

That was where Khartoum stood – General Gordon’s Khartoum.

But the British weren’t complaining about the scenery. It was epic:

The Khalifa’s army rushing on them...

Or, rather, two great armies –

the Green Flag
& the Black Flag

banners by the hundreds in the air

the sun glinting on “a sparkling cloud” of spear-points.¹⁰

50,000 spearmen, swordsmen, riflemen

a front line four miles wide

There were two to every Egyptian and British trooper poised to meet them.

⁹ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White man’s Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912* (New York: Random House, 1991), 539.

¹⁰ Winston Churchill’s words. Winston Churchill, *The River War*, 2:87.

It was picturesque. It was also a massacre.

Mud walls can stand against wind and sun ...

... but not against the twelve-pounder.

And a few five-pounders from the howitzers turned the Madhi's tomb into clouds of red dust.¹¹

Six thousand of the Khalifa's men rushed the British lines.

They put their faith in Allah and chanted, "There is but one God and Muhammad is his Prophet," as they charged.

But already, well over a mile from the British lines, bullets from Lee-Metfords were knocking them out of the ranks.¹²

The soldiers fired till their rifles burned their hands and had to be traded for cooler ones.

And still the attackers came.

And still the shooting went on.

Whole front ranks of the Sudanese melted away.

First into battle – and first through the gates of Paradise – were the Emirs, rallying their men.

Some charged forward, dressed in chain-mail

¹¹ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa*, 1991), 540.

¹² Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa*, 543-44.

and waving swords captured from
Christian soldiers in the Crusades,
600 years back.

Maxim guns joined the roar, and Martini-Henry's, filling the air
black with smoke.

Not a man, not a spear, reached the enemy.

The dervishes didn't make it within 800 yards of the
British.

And against the Egyptian and Sudanese troops, they
made a charge that turned into a run.

The smoke and dust were so thick that the
defenders couldn't see what they
were shooting at.

But they kept firing, volley on volley.

And as the smoke cleared, they discovered that just three
warriors were left alive, one holding the
standard, all still rushing forward...

all to certain death.

All over the field, they died by the thousands, fled wounded by the
thousands, as the Sirdar called,

“Cease fire! Please! Cease fire. What a dreadful waste of

ammunition!”

Before the morning was out, the British were on the run – straight for Omdurman to flush the enemy out.

By the time it got there, there was nobody TO flush out.

The hosts of the Black Flag and the Green Flag lay dead or dying or wounded, all over the fields –

30,000 and more.¹³

The British were in real danger just twice....

– once when Kitchener re-enacted the charge of the light brigade, sending his cavalry against the enemy, sabres drawn –

and leaving their carbines at home.

Well, anyway, *some* of the *horses* made it back.¹⁴

– and when Kitchener told his men to shoot anybody around the town who was carrying a weapon, and, to be on the safe side, shoot the wounded, too.

¹³ The fairest guess is that some ten thousand of the Khalifa’s troops died fighting. There may have been as many as twenty thousand wounded, and maybe a quarter of them died within the next three days, by the best guess. Plus there were five thousand prisoners. Philip Ziegler, *Omdurman*, 216.

¹⁴ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa*, 545. Four hundred horses went in, and in just two minutes, 119 were killed or wounded ... as were 65 men and five officers. Winston Churchill wasn’t one of them, though he found it quite exciting, as one of the survivors.

The British were glad to do it – but a lot of their bullets
bounced off the walls and d–n near killed them.

With just a little more attention to aim, a shell from one
British gunboat could have ended Kitchener’s own
career then and there.

The Khalifa escaped,¹⁵ but the Mahdi didn’t.

No doubt wanting to show that there was punishment after death,
Kitchener ordered every trace of the tomb wiped from the
face of the earth.

... and put the arson-squad under the command of
Gordon’s nephew.

(It has been reconstructed since).

The Mahdi’s bones were flung into the Nile, or most of them.

Kitchener saw to it that the Mahdi’s skull was saved.

... makes a terrific ink-stand!

... or how about drinking from it?

¹⁵ For the moment. He would be tracked down and killed in battle.

With some small sense of the proprieties, he decided to give it to the Royal College of Surgeons instead as one of their curiosities.

After all, they had Napoleon's intestines.

– this would set those off perfectly!¹⁶

(That is, till the Queen objected. The skull was given a decent burial after that).¹⁷

II. Fashoda

Now for Fashoda.

The story of Fashoda had been brewing for ten years.

England had looked to connect the Nile River with South Africa.

¹⁶ Except that they didn't have Napoleon's guts. How Kitchener could have imagined such a thing, there's no knowing. Ziegler, *Omdurman*, 221.

¹⁷ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa*, 546. It went into a Moslem cemetery at Wadi Halfa, and is still there.

Rhodes's idea of a Cape to Cairo railroad.

And as Kitchener prepared for his battle in the Sudan, the railroad he built was the same gauge track for South Africa's lines.

From the south, the railroad stretched up past the great, green, greasy Limpopo River.

Feeder lines carried it from Mombasa to Lake Victoria.

From Egypt, the line pushed into the Sudan.

As Britain spread its domain north-south down and up the Nile, the French had been expanding east-west, from the Sahara towards the Indian Ocean.

They had forts on the upper Niger River, and were struggling for a larger share of the trade and influence among the warring nations upriver from Sir George Goldie's Niger Company.

On the Red Sea, they controlled Djibouti, in Somaliland.

On the Congo River, the French flag flew at Brazzaville.

Linking the coasts, what they needed were two things – a working alliance with the King of Ethiopia

A foothold on the upper end of the Nile River.

It would take nerve; and for the first time in a few years, the French had a Foreign Minister with nerve, Gabriel Hanotaux.

The question was, WHERE should the French make their foothold on the Nile?

Where would it give them the most influence over the Nile valley?

Khartoum, where the White Nile met the Blue, was already taken.

But 300 miles south the Sobat River flowed into the Nile.

It was a swampy bit of land, and there was a fort, where the Mahdists had stored prisoners, and a little village, called Fashoda.

But put a dam there, and you could dry up the Nile all the way into Egypt.

France would have the whip-hand in the Sudan.

At the very least, England would have to deal with France seriously, as an equal, in empire matters.

And... who knows? Maybe the power to turn the faucets on and off would give France the right to take back its sway in Egypt itself.

That assumed you COULD build a dam there.

Some fool expert – a hydrologist – had convinced the French government that you could.¹⁸

As Kitchener built his railroad and moved south towards Omdurman, the French sent an expedition from Brazzaville east through the jungles.

At its head was a French marine, Captain Jean-Baptiste Marchand.¹⁹

12 Frenchmen and 150 Senegalese soldiers marched under his command for Fashoda.

¹⁸ The fool was a very renowned fool, Victor Prompt, and not necessarily a fool. It could – conceivably have been done. See Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 38. Here's a few points that make it seem a little less implausible.

Until the 1880s, the experts thought that most of the Nile's water came from the Blue Nile – that's the one that comes from Ethiopia and flows into the Nile at Khartoum. It produces over 450 million cubic meters of water a day at its highest flood, and the White Nile, which rises in the tropics of central Africa – around Fashoda – only 70 million at that point. No argument, right? And no real need to worry about the flow from central Africa of the White Nile.

Ah, but what experts had seen by the 1890s was that the rivers aren't in flood most of the time. And if you want day to day averages, all through the year, the White Nile is the giver – 37 million cubic meters a day on average, to the 7.5 million from the Blue Nile.

Egypt needed irrigation all year round. And especially as the British built up the waterworks of the Nile. That means that by the 1890s, for the first time, it was what happened on the White Nile that mattered most to the British and to Egypt.

Well, then... could you dam it, dammit? Not the **Blue** Nile. Everyone agreed on that. It would be terrifically expensive, what with that enormous flood. But the **White** Nile was in that big spongy swamp to slowly release waters. There, a dam WAS feasible, at comparatively less cost, north of the confluence of the White Nile and the Sobat. (Which is where Fashoda was). Wright, *Conflict on the Nile*, 45-46.

¹⁹ Born in 1863, the oldest child of five, son of a carpenter and cabinet-maker near Lyons, and with long experience on the Upper Senegal and Niger River. Wright, *Conflict on the Nile*, 122-25.

It was a grueling journey.

24 months of walking, 3,500 miles of distance.

They battled swamps, crocodiles, scorpions, fleas, fever and
skeeters.

Two months before Kitchener stood in the palaces of Khartoum,
a French flag was flying in the swamps at the mouth of
the Sobat.

The Upper Nile was claimed for France, and with it,
a big share of the Sudan.²⁰

Being French, they set out a flower-garden

grew radishes, papayas and lettuce

cucumbers and aubergines and tomatoes

(a good Frenchman insists on a good salad)

One of them even exercised by biking – he had brought

²⁰ Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War*, 251-52. The fort wasn't a French one, and it was. The Egyptians had had a fort at Fashoda, which the French knew had been abandoned. By the time the French got there, though, it mostly had to be rebuilt. A stone or two stood on top of another, and there were occasionally arches, ditches, cellars to be seen. But that was about it, and a lot of the form had become native cropland and a place for huts. The French had to set to work building it again – and started in the appropriate French manner, by toasting things with champagne, though all they had was chipped mugs to put it into.

It wasn't desolate surroundings, really. You could see gazelles and giraffe all around there, and villages with round, conical-roofed huts on stilts, with papyrus thatching all about. And the French expedition's main worry was that by the time they got there, the English would have reclaimed the Sudan and already have an occupying force at hand. Patricia Wright, *Conflict on the Nile: The Fashoda Incident of 1898* (London: Heinemann, 1972), 160-63.

his bicycle with him across Africa.

(The natives called it an “iron donkey”²¹)

and waited for the enemy ...

They didn't know which one;
probably the Mahdi's men –

maybe the English ...

²¹ Patricia Wright, *Conflict on the Nile: The Fashoda Incident of 1898* (London: Heinemann, 1972), 169.

but certainly somebody.²²

Under secret orders from the Prime Minister himself,
Kitchener headed south with five gunboats and
some 2500 Sudanese soldiers, armed with Maxims
and field-guns, to push the French out.²³

Marchand was ready to welcome him ... to French soil.

And to back up his right by referring to treaties he had
signed, putting local kingdoms under French
protection, and mentioning the French army on its
way to reinforce him.

Of course, there WERE no treaties.

²² Patricia Wright, *Conflict on the Nile: The Fashoda Incident of 1898* (London: Heinemann, 1972), 164-69.

²³ This wasn't a bullying expedition, in spite of the numbers. For one thing, Kitchener didn't know how many people Marchand had, and reports made it out that the forces he was to confront were going to be quite a lot larger. So he had to take along a big contingent, to have any credibility.

For another, the British position was that all this area where Marchand was claiming ground belonged to Egypt, and that nobody else had the right to take it. France agreed that it HAD belonged to Egypt. But that was before the Mahdi, they insisted. The Egyptian government had abandoned it. That meant that it was now up for grabs. This was not a position that the British were likely to agree to, but it also explains why Kitchener chose to claim the fort not in the name of England, but in the name of Egypt. England was not claiming it; indeed, England did not claim the Sudan, either. John Pollock, *Kitchener: Architect of Victory, Artisan of Peace*, 144-47.

And there WERE no reinforcements on the way, but
Kitchener wasn't expected to know that.

Of all the places in the world for a major war to break out, this one seemed
the least appealing.

– a bleak, muddy, fever-ridden swamp, stretching endlessly
on.

– a village and a dilapidated fort of no economic significance.

(A “glob of mud”, the French had called it)

– a million toads, trilling and creaking through the night²⁴

– a handful of Frenchmen, exhausted, insect-bitten, pale and unwell
from tropical illnesses.

And it was a fight that neither commander was ready to plunge into.

Kitchener admired Marchand's pluck.

Marchand admired Kitchener's victories.

He knew well what would have happened, if the Dervishes had
carried the day at Omdurman.

They would have come south, and wiped him and his
fort right off the map.²⁵

²⁴ Patricia Wright, *Conflict on the Nile: The Fashoda Incident of 1898* (London: Heinemann, 1972), 171.

All the same Marchand was not going to be kicked out without a fight.

And a fight might very well set one empire against another.

Kitchener never won points for his subtlety or charm.

Maybe he should have. He handled the crisis with real smoothness.

For one thing, he liked and admired the French.

He'd lived in Brittany.

²⁵ Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought*, 252.

He'd served in the French army.²⁶

For another thing, he knew something about pride.

He would insist on his rights, but he would send word back to Europe, and let the Foreign Office decide what it wanted done.

In the meantime, Britain would build its own fort, 500 yards south of Marchand's, blocking the one line of retreat Marchand could count on.

And instead of claiming this land in the name of Britain – a very unfriendly act, and one sure to raise French hackles – Kitchener would claim it for the Khedive of Egypt,

hoist the Egyptian flag –

and, if he had to back down, it wouldn't be England that lost face; it would be the Egyptians.

Kitchener even came to deliver his ultimatum, dressed in an

²⁶ In the last days of the Franco-Prussian war. He had been a military cadet and got a spot in the Army of the Loire in January 1871. When the terrible fighting around Le Mans took place, he was there, though he fell sick and had to be sent home. Patricia Wright, *Conflict on the Nile: The Fashoda Incident of 1898* (London: Heinemann, 1972), 178.

Egyptian uniform.

And when the flag was raised, had his British officers
give their three cheers in Arabic.²⁷

His meeting with Marchand started with a few gracious warnings
and ended with the two men sharing drinks.

It was the best of French champagne.

Kitchener gave them a gift of the latest newspapers.

Marchand gave the British a gift of vegetables, grown on French
colonial soil.

But there was a flash of steel beneath the velvet glove.

“You have achieved something remarkable, very remarkable,”
Kitchener told Marchand. “But you know the French
Government will not back you up.”²⁸

²⁷ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 40.

²⁸ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 44. And, lest they miss the point, Kitchener added, “France has other things to think about at the moment: the Dreyfus Affair.” The garrison had known nothing about it, but the British told them the terrible details, including the fall of the French Cabinet.

The French thought that, all things considered, they had won out. Under the arrangement, at the same time that the Egyptian flag went up, the French would keep their flag flying. The final issue would be left to diplomats at home. “We were half satisfied,” one of the French garrison would write, “... and realized that Marchand had won a diplomatic victory over the victor of Omdurman, for all his overwhelming strength. It is with our consent that he was able to land on the mudbank to the right of our post. How anyway could we stop him without force? We have carried out our task, which was to occupy a convenient point on the Nile – preferably Fashoda – before the English. More than that we are not empowered to do. We have given our diplomats a good position to do their part, it is now up to them.” Patricia Wright, *Conflict on the Nile*, 179-81.

He was perfectly right, though it took the French a while to find it out.

They counted on Russia to support them; hadn't they an alliance with the Czar?

Russia quickly declared that it wasn't going to get involved in any tiff in Africa, and certainly not this one.

The Foreign Minister now was not the aggressive Hanotaux. It was Theophile Delcasse, and he could read the figures:

“We've got only arguments. They've got troops.”²⁹

Lord Salisbury would have liked to have done a deal –

strike the French colors here, and strike the British colors somewhere else.

His Cabinet wouldn't hear of it.

The most the Prime Minister could get was time, to let the French back down without looking like whipped schoolboys.³⁰

England's contempt for France was one reason why France had sent Marchand to show the flag, and here it was again.

Then our Cap'n he up and he says, says he

²⁹ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 45; Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War* (New York: Ballantine, 1991), 254-55.

³⁰ Morrison Beall Giffen, *Fashoda: The Incident and Its Settings*, 79.

“That chap we need not fear, –
 We can take her if we like,
 She is sartin for to strike,
 For she’s only a darned Mounseer,
 D’ye see?
 She’s only a darned Mounseer!

But to fight a French, fal-lal!
 It’s like hittin’ of a gal –
 It’s a lubberly thing for to do.
 For we, with all our faults,
 Why, we’re sturdy British salt,
 While she’s only a Parley-voovoo,
 D’ye see?
 While she’s only a Parley-voovoo!”

– Gilbert & Sullivan, “*Ruddigore*”

Sabres rattled and tempers flashed, but it was all like summer lightning, that does no more than break the stillness of a sultry evening.

France had no intention of fighting two wars at the same time.

And right now, it was battling ferociously against the one enemy it knew the best:

itself.

For this was the year of the Dreyfus case

Crowds were roaring in the streets.

There were duels and assassination attempts, threats and posturings.

Why fight like an idiot in a hot, miserable climate halfway round the

world – when you can do it all so much more conveniently
halfway round the block?³¹

³¹ I'm being very unfair to realpolitik, so here's the hard realities behind the French decision. Always, their foreign policy had two goals in mind: *revanche* – a restoration of the old French influence on the Continent – and colonies. They were separate, but they were tangled together.

Because any adventure in Africa or Asia made France less able to cope with the bullies on its own block, like Germany. If they got into a mess or a war with England, they would be powerless in Europe for the time being. So the question is, can you afford a war? And that hinges on two other questions: what will our old enemy Germany do? And what will our partner in alliance Russia do?

If Russia was willing to step in, it could make plenty of trouble for England in India and maybe even in Turkey. Then France could stand up to the British demands. And if Russia's navy was combined with France's, it would be ... irksome, at the very least, for England at sea – enough to make the British Empire think twice about playing the bully.

If Germany could be made friendly – or if it would only keep cooling towards England (remember the Kaiser, after the Jameson Raid?) – then France wouldn't have to keep looking over its shoulder; and England might, worrying just what Germany would do.

But the conditions didn't apply. By the summer of 1898, German relations with Britain were very much better, thank you, and deals made in China looked like the renewal of what had been a beautiful friendship. As for Germany's relationship with France, it was as cool as ever, and maybe more so. The Dreyfus case made that even worse, because ... well, who was Dreyfus supposedly selling those military secrets to?

As for Russia? Fuggidabattit. Russia turned into the shrinking-est of violets. A European war, yes – a war for sweltering swampland? France, you on your own! It was friendlier to Germany than it had been for quite a while, and utterly neutral to France. The Anglo-Russian treaty, apparently, applied only when it served Russian needs, but not when it didn't. And Fashoda didn't matter at all to the Czars. So there was no back-up.

What about that Navy? First of all, Russia made clear that it wasn't about to lend it to French adventures. Second of all, the British had seen Russia's fleet in naval exercises that summer and were gob-smacked: we been afraid of them? Paper boats could do better! Little Lord Fauntleroy's Nursery for Seashore Sand-bathers could command better! And third, and most important, the Russians couldn't have steamed to the rescue of Fashoda if they wanted to. By the time the crisis erupted, it was winter in the Baltic. The harbors were locked shut with ice. The warships couldn't get out.

France therefore had no ally, and its enemy had no enemies. It was stuck. For the complexity of the problem, and France's reasoning, see Morrison B. Giffen, *Fashoda: The Incident and Its Diplomatic Setting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), 166-68, 180-84.

For that matter, if you wanted to back Marchand up, how would you get to him?

There was only one way: carry your army up the Nile

— the British-controlled Nile.

Marchand couldn't get hold of supplies without British say-so; and a British army could take his fort any time it pleased.³²

All the French government needed was an excuse, and they quickly found one: Marchand HAD to leave. He was running out of food – he couldn't possibly hold on.

The one person who didn't believe this was Marchand.

³² Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War*, 254.

He had lots of food.³³

His soldiers were in fine fettle.

He was spoiling for a fight.

– delirious from the heat, no doubt.

The French brought him home and lionized him.

They made him a commander of the Legion of Honor.

He was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel.³⁴

As for Fashoda, it had served its purpose.

When the French flag came down, so did the fort.

And so did the English fort.

Within a few years, there was no Fashoda on the map.

³³ But the French government may have believed it. Their only source for information about Marchand came from the British, and the British quite deliberately suppressed all information about Marchand's supplies, and made his condition more desperate-seeming than it was. See Patricia Wright, *Conflict on the Nile: The Fashoda Incident of 1898* (London: Heinemann, 1972), 185-93.

³⁴ And sent to China for the Boxer Rebellion. As soon as the French could push him into retirement, they did, though he returned to the fray in the Great War, and became a general of his division. He died in 1934. Patricia Wright, *Conflict on the Nile: The Fashoda Incident of 1898* (London: Heinemann, 1972), 216.

To make the French feel better, the telegraph station there was renamed Kodok.³⁵

III. INTENT ON ENTENTE

French feelings took years to soothe.

- they were so angry they almost forgot about Alsace Lorraine.
- in the Boer War, their papers blistered the British, worse even than the German ones had³⁶

For the time, too, Joe Chamberlain kept his visions of an English alliance with Germany.

Negotiations went on for years.

One man stuck by his lonely course: Delcasse.

Fashoda taught him something important:

Having Russia as your ally is almost as good as being alone.

What good is having back-up from somebody who backs out?

³⁵ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 46-47.

³⁶ Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War*, 342.

Against Germany, you need to go for a much heavier hitter.³⁷

At all cost, France needed Britain as an ally, and if that meant giving way on colonial issues, the price was small enough to pay.

In the end, France's restraint paid off handsomely.

The German negotiations ended, with neither side more friendly.

Britain had made alliance with Japan.

But it needed a friend in Europe.

And this, in itself, may be the crucial point: *Omdurman was an illusion.*

It was the illusion of power.

Mowing down a medieval army is easy – as easy in real life as it was in Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.

But cheap victories don't mean a thing in geopolitics.

What did the Sudan have to offer?

As a scrawny Confederate said, when a Union soldier took him prisoner:

“A h-l of a git you got.”

³⁷ Patricia Wright, *Conflict on the Nile: The Fashoda Incident of 1898* (London: Heinemann, 1972), 210.

The Sudan was worthless except as a way of showing off, and showing people up.

Fashoda's value was so little that it was practically abandoned as soon as taken.

The real story, as Joe Chamberlain saw, was that "splendid isolation" wasn't so splendid.

The Empire could be taken away, if the balance of power shifted against England.

There came a scary moment in 1900, in the midst of the Boer war, when everybody looked ready to pile on.

Russian troops were building up on the border of Afghanistan.

In Algeria and Morocco, French forces were pushing into the disputed borders. They might just grab Morocco – and then, bing!

gone's the command of the straits of Gibraltar – and the sea route to India.

Spain is keen to make up for the shellacking America gave it in Cuba and the Philippines, and is making warlike noises against Gibraltar.

And there were rumors that the French were about to launch an invasion.

As W. T. Stead, a leading newspaper man put it, “The Empire, stripped of its armor, has its hands tied behind its back and its bare throat exposed to the keen knife of its bitterest enemies.”³⁸

False alarm. But how many false alarms do you need, before you put in a sprinkler-system?

England would need friends at all costs.

It would have to align with one of the two great European blocs or the other.

Germany, if possible.

Russia, if possible.

³⁸ Kennedy, *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914*, 242.

... but at any rate, with somebody.³⁹

By 1902, the negotiations were under way.

The sticking places were the colonies.

- France would give up any claim to Egypt, and let England have a free hand there
- England would back up France's claims in Morocco, which was a welter of quarreling bandit gangs, and right next to Algeria...

a perfect north African possession to round off their empire, linking north and west Africa.⁴⁰

³⁹ Much of the story of that transformation, and the shift to antagonism to Germany can be found in Avner Cohen, "Joseph Chamberlain, Lord Lansdowne and British Foreign Policy, 1901-1903: From Collaboration to Confrontation," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 43 (1997): 122-34; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* (London: Ashfield Press, 1980): 230-31.

⁴⁰ Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War*, 344-46.

From the French point of view, it was a pretty good deal.

– their claim on Egypt was no more than words.

– but Morocco; they had wanted that for quite a while.

And the one power standing in the way, protecting its independence, was Britain.

It supplied 44% of Morocco's imports
France supplied only half as much; Germany a fourth
as much.

The commander of the Sultan's army was Kaid MacLean,
a little white-bearded Scotsman, who wore a
turban and burnoose, but played the bagpipes
in his garden.

The Sultan had all the English tastes...
English grooms
English butlers
English electricians and plumbers
English commission agents

He developed a passion for the latest English goods ...
cigarette lighters
lawn mowers
house boats

And from Queen Victoria came his favorite gift in all the world:
a Maxim gun!⁴¹

⁴¹ Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War*, 353.

What's more, England had a good reason to make Morocco a colony – the Straits of Gibraltar, vital to the British navy's control of the Mediterranean.

So by taking hands off Morocco, England really was giving up something of value.

The 1904 Anglo-French agreement wasn't an alliance.

It was just a deal, to let each country get out of the other's way.

Nowhere did it promise to protect France against any other nation.⁴²

No, it would take a genius, or a blustering idiot to have made it more.

Germany had the latter, who thought he was the former.

Alarmed that German interests in Morocco might be at risk, the Kaiser made an issue of French ambitions there.

He did more: he threatened war.

His aim was to make France back down.

It worked, and then again, it didn't.

France did back down.

⁴² Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War*, 346-48.

Morocco would stay independent, after all.

But in the conference of Great Powers to decide it, France and Britain found themselves working together.⁴³

⁴³ Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War*, 358-67. One thing needs cautioning: this wasn't necessarily the plan of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Lansdowne. He certainly helped put through the Anglo-French accords of 1904, but he probably wasn't thinking in terms of an alliance, and wasn't all that interested in tying Britain's hands by connecting the Empire to one great bloc or the other. What Lansdowne wanted were treaties as a set of little fire-extinguishers – to put out the possible blaze that France might make, in rivalry with England in Africa, and that Russia might make with England, in Asia. If he could do those and still make a small-scope deal with Germany ... well, that was fine.

It was Joe Chamberlain, with his imperial vision, who saw more clearly. He had hoped for so much from German negotiations. But when they broke down, he didn't try starting them up again. He at once started courting

France. To his mind, it was time to choose up sides. Germany wasn't going to play ball – that was clear. Anglo-German friendship, plainly, was an illusion. German industry was beating the pants off British trade in the world's markets. Germany and England both needed raw materials and markets. If they couldn't agree on an "open door," they'd have to be rivals. There was nothing in between: alliance or open enmity. See Avner Cohen, "Joseph Chamberlain, Lord Lansdowne and British Foreign Policy, 1901-1903," pp. 127-32.

An alliance that had nothing to do with European power-politics had become in all but name, an alliance of France and Britain against Germany.

Sir Edward Grey

It was a Liberal foreign minister who sealed the pact that a Conservative government had made.

Sir Edward Grey was no Londoner.

He detested the Foreign Office, where for eleven years he would be Foreign Secretary.

For him, the sun of the New forest and the trout streams of Hampshire were what made life worth while.

He couldn't wait for his weekends.

Power was something he hardly cared for.

His soul moved to different tempos...

or maybe a tune by Handel, his favorite composer.

Get along with people? Grey was happiest when he was alone.

And his wife helped him that way, by not having any kids.

Their main pleasure was going off bird-watching.

And you couldn't call him a man of the world –

Not while he was in office, anyhow: he left Britain
just once.

He could hardly speak French ... a few phrases, that was all.

French literature didn't interest him a bit.

He never visited the Biarritz or Marienbad or the Riviera.

As for German, he didn't know a word of it.

All this was a problem, because the French ambassador, in his 23 years in
London, never learned English.

That made talking to Grey pretty difficult.

But they did talk, and had a lot to talk about.
Starting in 1906, the two countries opened military talks, to discuss how
to help each other fight in a war.

It was so secret that nobody else knew – not even the rest of the
Cabinet – for six years; and the talks went on that long, too.

At the same time, Grey worked out a deal with Russia, which DID have an
open military alliance with France.

The Anglo-Russian Entente of 1907 wasn't a treaty of alliance.
It didn't have military clauses.

It never mentioned war or aggression or defense.

What it did was smooth out the quarrels over empire, in the Middle East and in Central Asia.

– it agreed to leave Tibet and Afghanistan outside either one's empire. they would stay as buffer states.

China would be given sovereignty over Tibet.

Russia agreed that it wouldn't try to control Afghanistan.

Britain agreed to let the Russians share in the trade of Afghanistan.

As for Persia, it was divided into shares of influence...

a Russian

a British

a no man's land in the middle.

What had happened in each case – in France's case and in Russia's – was

that the Great Game had given way to the Greater Game:

the European picture had been sketched out, over the imperial one.

So now Germany found itself hemmed in.

For a generation, its policy had been to isolate France.

And to keep Russia and England at loggerheads – the better to protect itself from attacks west and east at the same time.

But now, that policy was in ruins.

France had allies on either side of Germany.

Russia was no longer England's enemy, or even its rival.