



TO RESCUE GENERAL GORDON

A Clockwork Imperium

Short Story

J.P. MEDVED

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*When the envelope's cut, and the ground's rushin' up,
And the Captain and First Mate'r bleedin',*

*When the deck shivers and cants, in a tailspinnin' dance,
And the crows'r flyin' close for the feedin',*

*Take yer last look at sky, curse wantin' to fly,
And go to yer gawd like an airman.
Go, go, go to yer gawd,
Go to yer gawd like an airman.*

--Excerpt, *A British Airman*, Rudyard Kipling, 1881

I

It wasn't Henry's idea to steal the airship. James Billingsworth had come to him with the crazy plan in the first place.

He'd flung open the tent flap and flown inside like a dust storm, bringing more than a little of the desert in with him. "Two days!"

"What the devil-?" Henry Emerson had been napping.

"The message from the boats said two days! But at this rate we won't be there for four at the least!" James had always been excitable. His ruddy cheeks, bereft of hair, gave his mouth a wide berth every time he opened it, and his unusually expressive eyebrows bounced up and down at the top of his face like a camel jockey off to the races.

"Now hold on a minute, what in the bloody hell are you on about?" Henry rubbed sleep from his eyes and swung his feet off the cot.

"We'll be too late Henry! And Wolseley is content to sit here for another day and make sure 'everything's all Sir Garnet' before we move. He's heard a conflicting report from a runner that the city has a year, not two days."

"Posh!" Henry's sky blue eyes narrowed in consternation, giving his already hawkish face a shrewd aspect, "It's already been a year, Gordon can't wait forever."

He stood up and splashed some water in his face from the washbasin, then turned suddenly, his brown pilot's mustache flinging water drops, "But James, even without a delay the column couldn't make it there in under *three* days. And the boats can't get all the way back up the river with the water so low. Nothing could make it there in just two days."

Sub-Lieutenant James Billingsworth got a dangerous glint in his eye. A glint that had presaged many a bad decision during the three years Henry had known him. "The *Pegasus* could."

Henry frowned. The army's only airship was still unproven, never before used in combat, "We're forbidden from taking her on anything but supply and scouting missions. Something this dangerous, alone and unsupported? Captain Stewart would never allow it."

Billingsworth's voice had a reckless cast to it, "He doesn't have to." He rushed on, seeing the look on Henry's face, "Now hear me out. We're scheduled to take her up in the morning for a routine out-and-over. Supposing we simply loosed the old girl a little earlier, say, tonight? It's not *technically* disobeying orders, just 'chronologically modifying' them. You can pilot her without Stewart, and I know how to run the boiler. We could be there in twenty hours. Eighteen if the wind's right."

Henry wiped off his damp mustache with the hand towel and looked at his reflection in the small shaving mirror. He had a nice neck. Moreover, he *liked* his neck. During their time together he'd developed quite a fondness for it. But it would be his neck in a noose, right next to James', if this all went to pot. Billingsworth was suggesting a Court Martial-worthy offense.

Seeing Henry wavering, James added, "If we don't at least try, and the column arrives in four days to find out we're two days too late, it'll be more than a national tragedy, it'll be *our* tragedy and a failure of our duty as Englishmen."

Though James was unaware, for Henry it would mean even more than that. He glanced at the bag by his cot. In it, he knew, was a crumpled, torn, and yellowed magazine, its faded title still read, *Adventures for Boys*. A woodcutting of Gordon graced the cover, his face, twenty years younger than the one that stared out of the current newspaper lithographs, was exuberant. The story on the inner pages of the magazine was not at all like the articles that were now appearing to accompany those recent lithographs.

In the last few weeks journalists in England and all across the Empire had related, in dark detail and with the breathless, overwrought phrasing that is the hallmark of the newspaper man, what terrible danger he was in. They'd described the daily struggle to survive with his small army, and they'd told how, any day now, the Mad Mahdi, leading his rebellion of fanatical hordes, would overwhelm the General, and the next lithograph of his visage would show it impaled on a spike outside the gates of embattled Khartoum.

But Henry's treasured copy of the old magazine hinted at no such horror. The dog-eared pages told of triumph and pluck; Gordon's successful subjugation of the Taiping rebels and the consequences of daring to defy mighty Britannia. The military stories had set young Henry Emerson's mind afire. He devoured everything like them he could get his hands on, and enlisted to serve the Queen as soon as he was able.

The well-worn pages contained something else, as well. A simple inscription, written in the clipped letters of a career military man, and signed with the initials "E.E." The ink bore a slight smudge, as if it had been exposed to a single raindrop not long after being penned. The inscription read, "To my son." The magazine had come back aboard a steamer from Bombay. The father had not.

Could Henry really leave his other childhood hero to die at the hands of savages and slave traders? Even if he had to disobey orders and throw away his career for it? Even if he had to hang for it?

He smiled. *Bugger all*. He hadn't come to Africa to sip tea in the safety of a supply depot anyhow. Henry grabbed a pair of goggles off the table and turned to his friend, "We'll need Raheem. How fast can you pack?"

II

The big Sikh tugged his beard, "I do not like heights."

His companions were panting heavily. "Now? You tell us this *now*?" Henry hissed.

Raheem Aranjapour shrugged his broad shoulders, but he did not relax his left hand's grip on the gangplank railing. The two Englishmen tried again to dislodge him, Henry straining to push Raheem's bulky midsection, James puffing as he pulled at one of the Indian man's trunk-like legs.

It was no use. The pair might as well have been trying to roll a boulder up a hill for all the progress they made.

Above them hung the motionless oblong of the airship's silk envelope, inflated to a taught rigidity. In the darkness of the desert night the ship's bulk was a tantalizing presence. Moonlight feathered its outlines and made it shimmer like some lesser celestial body. To Henry its promise had always been mystery, adventure, the open sky. A glimpse of it always sent his heart soaring.

But now he cursed. They were stuck at the most dangerous moment in their plan, when they were most vulnerable to being spotted by a wandering subaltern or curious officer. The airship was still tethered close to the ground, they still had to enter it, loose the tethers to begin ascending--silently--above the British camp, and then, when hopefully out of earshot, stoke the boiler and engage the propellers before they lost sight of the meandering ribbon of the Nile, which was to be their midnight guide to the besieged city of Khartoum.

If any passerby happened upon them now, standing exposed at the top of the gangplank, there would be a lot of explaining to do, especially with the heavily loaded rucksacks and freshly oiled Martini-Henry rifles Emerson had stacked just over the railing of the airship's open gondola.

Henry bit off a few particularly choice descriptions of Raheem's character, his background, and his general hygiene as he struggled with his friend's physical intransigence. Emerson had a wide range of expletives at his command, but even *his* objurgatory powers were being tested by the evening's events. He quickly ticked off options in his head; they couldn't just leave their obstinate friend, a gunner in the ranks of the 2nd Bengal Clockwork Artillery, or they'd have no one to man the Gatling mounted on the little airship's prow. Moreover, three people was the absolute minimum needed to fly the often finicky dirigible.

They could try to knock the big man over the head and drag his unconscious body aboard, but there was just no telling how hard they'd have to hit the bloody bastard, not to mention what his reaction might be when he woke up. Henry couldn't even entice him with promises of gold and glory; Raheem was concerned with three things only: his god, his family, and his stomach. The first two were far away, and the last had recently been filled with some spicy glop from the Indian soldiers' mess. Henry's bowels protested at even the thought of it.

His ruminations were interrupted by James, who exclaimed, *sotto voce*, "Someone's coming!"

Indeed, two figures were approaching the airship through a gap in the tents. Henry could hear snatches of their conversation.

He turned, "Pull harder!"

James whispered hoarsely back, "*Push* harder!"

The two young Britons grunted once more with the exertion of moving the stubborn Sikh. After a good thirty seconds of this effort Henry was exasperated, "Sod it! Let the big oaf get caught. Come on!"

And, so saying, he scrambled up the gangplank, past the still unmoving Indian, and onto the deck of the *Pegasus* where he dropped to crouch in relative safety behind the railing. Billingsworth soon joined him.

Raheem looked back and forth between the oncoming soldiers and his two friends, barely peeking above the gunwale. He seemed to be torn, trying to make up his mind in the fleeting few seconds before his bulk became unmistakably visible in the low light.

Henry tried once more, "They'll see you! Get up here you lumbering idiot!"

The approaching voices were growing louder. Raheem looked like a hapless spectator watching a fast-moving badminton match, his head turning back and forth, back and forth as he tried to make a decision. His feet remained frozen in place.

The two interlopers were now close enough for Henry to see their faces in the reflected torchlight. He dug his fingernails into his palm. One of the men was Commodore Captain Stewart, captain of the *HMS Pegasus* and Henry Emerson's commanding officer.

They were studying the ground now, picking their way through some desert shrubs, but at any moment they would look up, see Raheem's darkened shape on the cusp of entering the *Pegasus*, and the jig would be up. Henry couldn't move, his gaze fixated on Stewart as if just by its intensity he could will the other man to spare the airship a glance. It was no use. The Captain and his companion hopped the last bit of scrub and looked up towards the flying contraption with its trio of would-be delinquents, directly at Henry's hiding place. He froze. The jig was up.

But the two men did not stop in their tracks, did not begin gesturing wildly or even angle their heads quizzically. They didn't give the airship a second glance, but continued their slow pace and amiable chatter.

"I do not lumber."

It was all Henry could do to keep from jumping out of his skin, and he strangled a surprised cry before it could get past his lips.

"I may be an idiot, as you say, but I do not lumber" continued Raheem in a low whisper as he crouched behind Emerson.

Henry let out a long breath he had not known he was holding in, and his tensed muscles relaxed. Raheem was safely aboard, and by some miracle Stewart had not spotted him.

Billingsworth tugged at Emerson's sleeve, directing his attention back to their immediate danger. Captain Stewart and his companion (whom Henry now recognized as a particularly obsequious young ensign) were closing the last few yards to the yet motionless *Albert* Class Steam Zeppelin.

"They mean to board her!" James hissed, and Henry knew he was right. For whatever reason, to perform last minute maintenance, check on the ship's store of coal, or retrieve a forgotten tobacco pipe, both men were headed directly to the gangplank.

"Hide!" was Henry's immediate thought.

"Where?" James gestured to the cramped deck behind them.

There was no place to hide here, certainly not for three grown men. The gondola of the *Pegasus* was flat and open, save for the boiler and helm, and scattered bits of supplies. As soon as the Captain and his orderly topped the gangplank and saw over the railing they'd discover the would-be airship thieves and their store of guns and provisions. It would mean the brig for them and almost certain death for General Gordon.

That could not be allowed to happen. Henry pulled a knife from a sheath at his side and went to work cutting one of the ropes that bound the *Pegasus* to Earth. James saw what his friend had in mind and, after a split second's hesitation, crawled to the far side of the craft to begin unloosening the ropes there. Raheem muttered something under his breath in Punjabi before removing the curved Kirpan from his belt and slicing at another of the tethers.

The craft jostled as the gas balloon above them strained against fewer and fewer restraints. There was a shout and Henry imagined the look of shock on Captain Stewart's sideburn-bedecked face as he saw his command bucking and swaying, seemingly of its own accord.

The last rope snapped off and the three miscreants swung side to side with the freed airship's undercarriage as it began rising slowly into the air. And not a moment too soon, Henry saw. Stewart's pith-helmeted head was so close Emerson could have reached out and given his surprised superior a friendly tap. The gunwale rose higher, however, and obscured the helmet from Henry's view.

He breathed a sigh of relief, his second of the evening. They might make it after all. But then there was a violent jerk, and the gondola see-sawed dangerously. Stewart must have grabbed hold of a trailing rope or tether, his weight toward the rear of the craft added a pronounced tilt to the deck and slowed the ascent of the *Pegasus* perceptibly.

Henry stood. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the dark shape of Billingsworth already moving aft. They needn't have worried. There was a sharp cry and the stern rose immediately as whatever Captain Stewart had grabbed onto gave way and tumbled with him the few feet back to the ground. His curses were proof that he was not, at least, terribly injured by the fall.

Soon there were more shouts in the camp below. The dirigible was ascending at a maddeningly glacial pace it seemed to Henry, and he waited in tense silence for the crack of a rifle or a sergeant's call to "Fire!" But his luck seemed to hold, or the sleeping army was simply too caught off-guard to do anything timely about the impending loss of its only aircraft.

Shortly the sounds of surprise and frenzied activity faded to whispers and the *Pegasus*, aided by warm air currents and its own natural buoyancy, drifted farther and farther away from the firelight and the tents and the closely guarded zeriba below.

James was the first of the co-conspirators to speak, his voice jarring in the silence, "Right then, let's get to it. Time to rescue General Gordon." He stood up and began to shovel coal into the boiler.

Emerson also stood and went about ensuring the ship was ready for their flight. Raheem, for his part, stayed crouched, arms outstretched, fingers splayed against the wood of the deck as if for purchase. His eyes, wide open, shone pearl white in the moonlight. Every errant sway of the deck, creak of the cables above, and pop of the warming boiler caused him to flinch and crouch lower. He would remain more or less in this position for the duration of the flight, his lips alternately muttering Sikh prayers and Punjabi curses.

Feeling about in the dim illumination of the lit coal, Henry took stock of their situation. Their rifles were in good condition, the coal hopper for the little firebox was full, even Raheem's turban had made it onboard intact. In fact, everything seemed to be shipshape until Henry moved to the stern to check on their rucksacks. He groaned. One of them was missing.

It was no faulty tether or weakened rope Captain Stewart had grabbed hold of to prevent their escape, but rather the overhanging strap of one of the rucksacks. The one stacked on top of the others near the railing. And the strap had not broken as the airship rose heavenward, Stewart's weight had pulled the rucksack right over the edge.

The bag the Captain had taken to earth with him was also the only one which contained victuals for their trip; the others held nothing but tools, gear, or ammunition. The reality of it hit Emerson like a rifle butt to the jaw. They were about to embark on a two day round trip journey across the desert with no food, no medicine, and precious little water.

III

It took them, by Henry's watch, nineteen and a half hours to reach Khartoum. When they arrived, the city was burning.

The sky was just beginning to darken, and the clouds were glowing with the dusky oranges and grays peculiar to a desert sunset. It had not been an easy journey. The three renegades pushed their little craft hard, running her boiler at maximum for as long as they dared. At one point, the gears of the starboard propeller had been fouled by sand and dust, requiring a dangerous mid-air repair by James, who'd shimmied out along the propeller strut with a rag and oil can. Raheem had covered his eyes with his hands until James was pulled safely back aboard by Henry.

All three were beginning to feel their hunger acutely. Water from the skins they'd brought had helped to delay the onset of stomach pangs, but it wasn't enough. Henry was beginning to think he'd happily endure a court marshal and the brig for even just a bite of some stale, mealy army hardtack. They were counting on being able to gather provisions upon landing in the besieged city.

The Nile river, which had so far been their faithful guide south into the Sudan, forked now ahead of them. To the left, the Blue Nile, to the right, the White Nile, and on the estuary in between, Khartoum.

The city, save for the palace and some other government and religious buildings, and the now abandoned houses of European expatriates, consisted mainly of mud brick and adobe structures, covered over with thatch or timber. The city walls were stone, and surrounded it on three sides, while the length of the Blue Nile completed the square to the north.

Inside that square the fires raged. The Austrian mission was ablaze, and several other points within the relative safety of the old walls were burning balefully, red-orange light radiating outward among the lengthening shadows of evening. Smoke rose languidly from spots where fires had already burnt out or been quenched by the work of weary defenders. As Henry and the others watched, cannon from outside the city boomed. Most of the shots went wild, splashing into the Blue Nile or falling short to land harmlessly among the barbed wire ringing the city. But some found their marks, flattening homes or bringing down old minarets in a shower of hot metal and splintered stone.

Fires also burned beyond the city walls. The reports said Mohammed Ahmad, "The Mad Mahdi" who believed he was the reincarnated Prophet, had close to fifty thousand men laying siege to Gordon and his little army inside Khartoum. From their bird's eye vantage point the crew of the *HMS Pegasus* could see the thousands of campfires surrounding the city, winking in the deepening dusk, which proved the reports had been correct.

The Mahdi's soldiers were rough savages, one part religious fanatics and one part primitive tribesmen. But they'd broken the British square at Abu Klea, and almost overrun the clockwork artillery outside Tamai. And, of course, everyone in England remembered what had happened to Hicks. The Mahdists may be primitive, but they did not lack for cunning or barbaric intensity, and a spear to the gut could kill a man every bit as much as a rifle bullet.

James Billingsworth, considering it the duty of any good Englishman, was eager to meet them in battle. "Shall I begin our descent, Captain?" He saluted Henry with a grin, his teeth showing white underneath his pair of scuffed brass goggles.

"Aye aye Sub-Lieutenant Billingsworth, bring us down. And Raheem! Prepare the fore'ard armaments! We're likely to be in a bit of a dust up before this is over, I should think." As he spoke Henry carefully spun the helm and angled the airship toward the sprawling structure of the Hakim-dariya, the palace which dominated Khartoum's waterfront. If his guess was correct, they'd find General Charles Gordon there.

While Raheem moved torturously across the deck towards the single Gatling gun, gripping the railing hand-over-hand all the way forward, and James manned the steam pump to fill the ballonets and drive the *Pegasus* lower, Henry looked out across the battle-scarred city. Perhaps spurred on by the arrival of the British air scout, perhaps following a plan set in motion hours ago, the artillery barrage had intensified. Little puffs of white smoke appeared at several locations along the Mahdist lines, and at the outside range of his hearing, over the constant drone of the propellers, Emerson thought he could hear the rattle of musketry.

Suddenly there was a bright flash that drove the dark of early evening away and threw the city below them into an instant, stark contrast. It was followed immediately by the most cacophonous thunderclap Henry had heard outside of a visit to the artillery school at Woolwich.

His eyes were still seeing stars as James shouted, "What on earth was that?"

Slowly, the dazzling afterimages dissipated, and the smoke on the ground cleared enough for Henry to see that a large gash had been opened in the wall. Steam and smoke rose from an immense hole that lay smack dab in the middle of the city's defenses. Rubble and broken bodies surrounded it. Through it men wearing white robes with colored patches, wielding swords and shields and looking from the balloon above like particularly warlike ants, were streaming into Khartoum and already spreading throughout the maze-like streets.

One or two stopped, and he could see sparks of flame as they fired newly acquired rifles skyward. They wouldn't be able to hit the airship at this range, but as soon as James brought the *Pegasus* lower those rifles would become more than just a minor bother. Henry set a course as far away from the breach in the wall as possible.

"A mine." Raheem's deep rumble cut through the propeller noise and the distant din of battle. He was talking over his shoulder, incapable, apparently, of removing his hands from their white-knuckled grip around the Gatling gun's handle. "That was a mine," the Sikh continued, hardly seeming to raise his voice but easy to hear nonetheless, "Your man, this Mahdi, dug under the wall and planted this bomb," a pause, "I do not know if he lumbers, but he is no idiot."

Henry nodded grimly. They didn't have much time before the city was overrun. Already he could see knots of defenders, in their characteristic red Egyptian fezzes, fleeing from the walls and deeper into the illusory safety of the city.

The *Pegasus* was buzzing above the waterfront now. There was a flurry of activity as frightened residents and deserting soldiers loaded onto boats in a last ditch attempt to flee. Some stopped and pointed heavenward. Henry imagined he could see their faces, eyes full of a sudden, desperate hope, daring to think that a British army would be arriving any minute now, hot on the heels of its airborne vanguard to deliver them. He felt a sharp pang in his chest. They had room for General Gordon and his aides aboard the aircraft. No more.

"There!" James was practically jumping up and down as he abandoned his steam pump to point over the railing. Henry squinted before he saw it too. Two flags rising from a courtyard at the corner of the palace, one the red standard of Egypt's Khedive, the other the familiar Union Jack. He adjusted the airship's course.

As soon as the *Pegasus* arrived hovering over the courtyard Henry cut the propellers and threw down an anchor to snag on the underside of a stout wooden horse post. James added more air ballast to the ballonets and brought the airship even lower, until its immense bulk was almost at a level with the crenelated roof and its undercarriage sat evenly with the balcony running the length of the courtyard.

There was hardly anyone left within the palace, and the noise of battle outside the walls was growing louder. One man, not even a soldier, had stopped in the courtyard to gape at the floating apparition settling over his head.

It was this worthy to whom Henry addressed himself, leaning over the side, shouting to be heard, "Where is Gordon?"

There was a look of consternation on the other's face until Emerson repeated, "Gordon! Where is General Gordon?"

"Ah! Gordon, Gordon Pasha!" he pronounced it 'Ho-rdon,' the 'G' becoming a guttural sound in the back of his throat. His face darkened, "He will not come," then a smile, "I will take you to him."

Henry darted a look at James whose ruddy face broke into a wide grin, "Just be back quickly, old boy."

"If I'm not back in five minutes shove off without me," Henry held his friend's gaze to show he was serious.

James just laughed as he handed Emerson a rifle and a handful of cartridges, "And miss all the fun? The bleeding hell we will!" Emerson looked to Raheem for help, but the big artilleryman simply shrugged his shoulders and turned back to aiming his Gatling at the courtyard's entrance.

Henry sighed, took the firearm, slung its strap over his shoulder and, with one last exasperated look at the still grinning James, vaulted across the gap onto the stone balcony. He was met at the top of the stairs by his erstwhile guide; a slight man with dark skin, dressed in white servant's robes and still wearing an ingratiating smile.

"Good day sir, I am Tahir Saaed. I can take you to Gordon Pasha, but I tell you he will not come." His smile contrasted oddly with the sound of explosions and shouting just outside the palace walls.

"Yes, well, we'll see about that," Henry wondered what could prevent the great General from leaving, "Lead on, good fellow!"

With a short bow the Sudanese man turned and led Henry around the balcony and through an archway, across a long covered walkway, and finally to another open courtyard. He stopped in front of a wide wooden door, set deep into the stone wall. Windows sealed with thick, wooden shutter looked out across the fountain and palm trees below.

Henry hesitated and Tahir stood, still smiling, and gestured with his head toward the door. Emerson knocked.

His knock went unanswered and Henry frowned, and knocked again, more vigorously this time. Tahir was still smiling, but Henry could tell now that the smile was not obsequious or ingratiating; it was nervous, and the smaller man was fidgeting with his hands as he stood. Emerson was suddenly worried.

He pushed the door open abruptly, using his shoulder to move the heavy, ponderous wood. It groaned loudly and he slipped in as fast as he could, unslinging his rifle in the process.

"I'll not be leaving with you, Captain."

The room was opulently furnished. The fiery rays of the dying sun shone through glass windows onto elaborately carved native furniture, hand-dyed silk tapestries, and thick, wine colored rugs. A solid oaken desk dominated one side, and next to it a man stood, his back to the door, looking out the window at the rising columns of smoke in the distance. He was of middling height, though solidly built, with short cropped dark and gray hair and sideburns reaching almost to his jawline. Henry had seen enough drawings and lithographs of the man to know he also had a thick, trimmed mustache and penetrating, ice blue eyes. He held himself imperiously, every bit the British officer and gentleman. He was buckling on a pistol belt.

Henry stopped short and lowered his rifle, "I'm sorry?"

"I assume that's why you've come in that flying contraption of yours? I spotted it from the rooftop some time ago. You've come alone. I saw no steamers upriver, no cloud of dust on the horizon. That means there is no British army come to rescue Khartoum, there is only a lone British airship come to rescue me." Major General Charles George Gordon turned slowly from the window and transfixed Henry with his eyes, "And I'm telling you that I shall not be rescued."

Henry hesitated, skewered by his childhood hero's gaze. He took a breath, "Sir, the city will fall. The walls are breached, your men are fleeing, we saw-"

"I know what you saw, Captain, I do not care. I shall remain in Khartoum until either the city is delivered or the Mahdi cuts off my head himself."

"General, I regret to inform you the latter is much more likely than the former; the column is still at least two days away."

"Then so be it, I'm not afraid to go to my god as a martyr for the cause of Christian civilization and the Sudanese people."

"General," Henry pleaded, "the city is already lost, your sacrifice won't save lives or stop the Mahdi. But if we return you safely to the column and to Wolseley, we can convince them to come here faster and perhaps prevent further unpleasantness."

Instead of responding, Gordon walked purposefully around his desk and picked up a large ivory statuette. He held it out to Henry, who re-slung his rifle to take the thing in both hands. It was heavy, and depicted some pagan god, oversized lips and tongue leering up at the airship pilot.

"This was a gift from Iya, a woman here who gave it to me when I first landed a year ago. It is one of her household gods, an *Orisha*. It is meant to protect and watch over me." The General paused while Henry turned the statuette over in his hands. His next words were soft, almost a whisper, "I cannot leave these people to the mercies of a conquering army, Captain. I will share whatever fate they are meant to endure."

Henry slumped his shoulders, defeated, "I understand, General."

"Good. Now I suggest you scarp on back to Sir Garnet and let him know I'm still waiting at the pleasure of Her Majesty's government." Emerson nodded and the General made as if to go.

Henry stood back politely to let the famous man out the door ahead of him. He looked down at the statuette in his hands. As he turned it over he was struck by an unorthodox idea. But he *couldn't*; this was *the* Charles Gordon. He hefted the *Orisha*. *Sod it*. If Henry was the type to simply follow orders he wouldn't be here in the first place.

As soon as Gordon was past him, Emerson cracked him smartly in the back of the head with the ivory statue. The great General fell to the floor like a bag of ballast from an airship, unconscious before he hit the ground.

"Tahir, get in here you horrible scoundrel!" The manservant's face appeared at the door, his smile immediately turning to a look of shock as he rushed into the General's quarters.

"Don't worry, he's fine. He hit his head accidentally."

Tahir stopped short, and narrowed his eyes at the statuette in Henry's hand. The airship pilot looked down, looked back up and, affecting an air of pained innocence, placed the idol carefully on a nearby chest of drawers. Tahir's smile returned, this time with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Henry smiled too, "Grab his legs and help me get him aboard the *Pegasus* you damned rascal."

Tahir obliged and between the two of them they managed to carry the General, swaying side-to-side, out the door. As soon as they got outside, however, Henry heard the unmistakable sound of gunfire coming from the direction of his friends in the courtyard beyond. The erratic cracks of rifles blended in with the more constant roar of a Gatling.

"Hurry!" Henry almost dragged Gordon's limp body out of Tahir's hands in his haste. The two broke into a ragged, awkward jog back the way they had come.

When they finally emerged into the courtyard Henry was panting from exertion and sweating profusely in the dry desert heat. The General was a solidly built, wiry man, and he was not light.

The scene that greeted Emerson and his Sudanese ally was utter chaos. Bodies lay scattered in the courtyard below, James was swinging his rifle like a club at the head of an enemy soldier trying to clamber aboard the dirigible, and Raheem was barely visible, wreathed in a cloud of smoke and steam as he swept the Gatling back and forth across the open entrance to the courtyard, where a seemingly infinite supply of the Mahdi's followers were streaming in.

Henry, lowering his end of the General to the ground, unslung his rifle and carefully squeezed off a shot. The Mahdist in front of James staggered backwards clutching his belly, and tumbled down the stairs behind him. James turned, grinning wildly, his face so smudged with gunpowder and coal soot that his teeth shone like ivory. Henry wondered, not for the first time, if his friend was perhaps a little mad.

Billingsworth was shouting to be heard above the roar of Gatling fire and the hiss of the airship's boiler, "Had to delay the departure old boy, ran into a spot of bother with the local constabulary!" Yes, James was most certainly mad.

Henry sighed, got a grip under Gordon's armpits and, with Tahir, resumed their shuffling jog the remaining distance around the balcony.

"Watch it!"

He dropped his load and turned just in time to see an angry man with wild hair raising a sword. Henry stumbled and fell, tripping to land right on top of General Gordon. He fumbled for his rifle but his fingers felt like lead and the sword was on a downward trajectory now, tracing a path that would end inside Henry's skull.

Suddenly there was a "crack!" and the Mahdist with the wild hair dropped his sword and fell to his knees, a rapidly expanding blossom of red at his chest adding color to otherwise white robes. Another "crack!" and his head jerked back, pulling the body to rest on the stone pavement of the balcony.

Henry looked up to see Tahir, trembling slightly, and holding Gordon Pasha's still smoking pistol; he had pulled it from the unconscious General's belt just in time.

"Good show!" James jumped over and came to help them the last few yards to the waiting gondola. He grabbed the supine form of the General while Henry scrambled to his feet and Tahir, after reverently placing the pistol back in its holster, took hold of Gordon's legs.

James and Tahir man-handled the General into the open gondola of the *Pegasus* while Henry took aim at two Mahdists trying to gain the upper landing of the balcony. The breech-loading Martini-Henry made short work of them before they could reach the top of the stairs, sending their white-robed forms tumbling downwards like rag dolls.

Henry was coolly chambering another cartridge when he heard a cry from behind him. He spun around to see sword waving men spilling out the archway that led back to Gordon's apartment. The Mahdists must have got inside the palace through another entrance. He took a hasty shot at the frontrunner and saw the man stumble and fall face first, his sword flying from lifeless fingers to go skittering across the stone.

"Raheem!" Henry pointed to the new threat and the burly Sikh obliged, swinging his Gatling to bear. The heavy "chuck-chuck-chuck" of its action produced visible results; chunks of masonry exploded from the balcony and shrieking Mahdists twisted and fell, their blood painting the pock-marked stone walls a macabre red.

But enemy soldiers now were pouring into the courtyard below from multiple directions, and the group up top, though slowed by the Gatling fire, was coming determinedly on. It was time to go.

Tahir gave one final push from the balcony, James gave one final pull from the airship, and Charles Gordon was aboard the *Pegasus*.

Henry scrambled after him, "James, take us up!" and, turning back to Tahir on the balcony, beckoned with an outstretched arm, "Come on you sodding imbecile!"

Tahir hesitated, he looked down at the gap between the balcony and the railing of the airship, and the 30 foot drop to the flagstones of the courtyard. When he looked back up his eyes were wide and he was fidgeting with his hands again.

The airship began to rise as James vented the ballonets. Suddenly the pounding of the Gatling stopped and was replaced by a stream of curses in Punjabi. The Mahdists on the balcony surged forward, and those below began to bound up the stairs.

"They'll cut you to pieces, jump!" Henry urged.

The *Pegasus* rose still higher. A spear sailed past Henry's ear so close he flinched. "Why doesn't anyone ever want to get aboard my bloody airship?" he bit off under his breath.

A Mahdist, a fearsome looking fellow with a snarl and blood dripping from his viciously curved sword, was running full tilt, three strides away from the frightened manservant. He held his sword at the level, as if to run Tahir through. The loyal Sudanese turned and took one look at this approaching apparition before leaping like a frightened rabbit for Henry's waiting arms. It was almost too late.

Henry missed with one of his hands but lunged forward and grabbed hold of a wrist with the other. He strained against the sudden weight of Tahir's body, which threatened to pull them both off the airship. Bracing his feet on the railing he scrabbled with his free hand for something else to grab on the Sudanese manservant, now hanging precariously overboard like an overripe peach about to plummet from the tip of an overburdened branch. His grip on Tahir's wrist began to slip. His arm was burning and his fingers felt weak. Finally, by blind chance, his free hand touched on a bit of cloth; Tahir's robe. He seized it immediately and pulled, straining his whole body against gravity. With a grunt he wrenched Tahir bodily up and over, where both collapsed into a heap on the deck.

There was a dull "thunk" and Henry looked up to see a spear quivering on the railing in the space that, just moments before, his head had occupied. He breathed a sigh of relief. The airship was rising faster now, he would need to take his place at the helm. As he stood, however, a flurry of rifle shots below made him duck back down sharply.

"Henry!" James slid a loaded rifle across the deck, "They'll hit the balloon's envelope, help me pot these fellows!" Henry picked up the firearm and edged over to the railing.

But neither Briton, nor Raheem after he finally abandoned the empty Gatling, could do much to slacken the fire of the Mahdi's men below. As soon as one fell, another rushed to fill his place, and, in the confused maze of the palace and city streets, even seeing a target was frustratingly difficult. The hapless crew of the *HMS Pegasus* found they could do little but wait out the fusillade behind the sturdy wood gunwale of the airship until they finally ascended out of range.

When at last Henry was able to safely man the helm, and James could move about freely to inspect the damage, they were high above the city, drifting over the Blue Nile. The sun had fully set now, and only a hazy dusk remained. The city of Khartoum, however, was shining brightly. The intense light of the many fires below combined so that, at this height, the rapes and beheadings, the children about to be sold into slavery, and the keening wails of the bereaved were reduced to the cheerful flickerings of one, great funeral pyre.

Henry, exhausted, turned the ship north, back the way they'd come.

IV

General Gordon came to eight hours into their return journey. The *Pegasus* crashed one hour after that.

The damage to the airship's gas envelope had been grim, as James related to Henry in hurried whispers while the black of night set in and they fled the burning city.

"She won't make it to sunrise Henry, we can only choose whether we come down in the river or the desert."

The rucksacks of tools and ammunition were the first to go, thrown overboard to lighten the load even as the balloon above them slowly deflated, leaking gas through a half dozen bullet-sized holes. The rifles had been next, followed by most of the remaining supply of coal and, despite Raheem's vociferous protestations, the empty hulk of the Gatling, unscrewed and tipped forward to tumble, end over end, to the water below.

They made it to morning, but only just barely.

With the first tendrils of gray dawn came a stir from the prostrate figure on the deck. Lying close to the boiler, where Tahir had moved him for warmth during the bitter desert night, Charles "Chinese" Gordon groaned.

"Where in the blazes am I?" He sat up and rubbed his temples.

Henry adopted a look of concern, "Thank god you're alright sir! That fellow came out of nowhere, if it hadn't been for your stout mister Saaed here you'd have been finished."

Tahir looked up sharply.

Henry went on quickly, before the surprised manservant could contradict him, "Yes sir, one of those savages must have been lying in wait for you outside the door. He got a nasty knock in before Tahir could subdue the fellow. Your man is rather handy with a Webley."

The dark skinned Sudanese, kneeling to offer the last of their water to the General, narrowed his eyes at Henry who, as soon as Gordon looked away to gingerly inspect the back of his head, gave Tahir an exaggerated wink. Gordon's manservant, in sudden understanding, nodded.

"Turn this thing around."

The General, sitting, dirtied, nursing a half dozen bruises and scrapes, still cut a commanding figure. He had the regal air of a Roman patrician; used to being obeyed, and immediately.

Henry felt instantly compelled to turn the helm and take the airship back towards the doomed city, but he resisted. "Sir, I'm sorry, the garrison has fallen."

"My place is in Khartoum, nonetheless." The statement brooked no argument.

Henry argued, "Sir, we'll never reach it. The *Pegasus* is damaged, we're losing air and altitude. Our only hope is that Wolseley has put the column on the move or we're going to crash far from any possible succor."

"Damn Wolseley and *damn* your succor!" The General tried to stand, leaning heavily on the gunwale. "Turn this bloody contraption around. I'll *walk* back to the city if I have to!"

Henry was struck by a discomfoting thought; they were going to die in this desert. If the crash didn't kill them then General Gordon and a lonely trek through the heat without any food certainly would.

Seeming to read his mind, Gordon's expression softened, "Lad, do you know what the most important thing about being a leader is?"

Henry shook his head. James looked up from his post at the steam pump.

"The most important thing about being a leader, is the people you lead. You are a servant. You cannot be a leader without a deep and abiding love for those who follow you. Without that you are a ruler, maybe, or a commander, but not a leader."

He met Henry's eyes, "A leader does not abandon people he loves, and death, however inevitable, is not the worst thing that can befall him."

Henry looked down, unable to answer. No one spoke, their silence accentuated by the creak of the rigging and the soft hiss of gas escaping from the balloon over their heads.

The quiet was shattered by James, who gave a shout.

Past the edge of his pointing finger, on a horizon just barely sketched out in early morning grays and blacks, there was a smudge.

"That's got to be the column Henry!" James was never one to let speculation get in the way of the opportunity for a confident assertion. "Wolseley's come!"

One course correction and forty five minutes later, and the column was clearly in sight. The thousand men of the Camel Corps led, in their dusky blue, bobbing up and down comically on their curious steeds. Next came the infantry, twelve hundred redcoats tramping through the dust, the crimson rays of the newborn sun reflecting off their rifles like a thousand individual points of fire. Finally came the clockwork artillery, a dozen steam engines threw black coal smoke into the air behind twelve trundling guns; light field pieces on wide platforms with thick wheels. The newest models out of the Benson ironworks.

At the very tip of the column was a knot of men on camels; Wolseley and his general staff. Several were gesturing towards the airship and one figure put a spyglass to his eye.

Henry smiled tiredly. He could barely stand. He and James had been awake through the night and the lack of food was causing his legs to tremble. He'd discovered that he could temporarily relieve the gnawing pain in his stomach by swallowing a large globule of saliva, but in the dry desert air his spit had long since run out. He was using his grip on the helm to help him remain upright.

"Sub-Lieutenant Billingsworth, bring us down!" There was a loud tearing noise in the envelope above and the whole airship lurched. Henry struggled to keep his feet, Raheem fell and tumbled towards the prow, General Gordon clung desperately to some rigging. The *Pegasus* began descending landward at a rapid clip.

Henry tried frantically to slow their headlong fall, but nothing on the craft responded to his exertions. He saw they were headed straight for the group of officers and staff surrounding Sir Garnet Wolseley, several of whom, realizing their danger, were turning their mounts around and trying to scatter.

"Brace yourselves lads!" The ship was spinning now. Henry pulled himself behind the wheel and held on for dear life.

Land, sky, land, sky.

Land.

With a terrific crash the *Pegasus* finally came to earth. Henry was wrenched from his position and flung into the dirt. He landed on his shoulder and rolled several times before coming to a rest looking up at the orange tinged clouds.

He cursed. He couldn't move his right arm, and his left ankle throbbed. He remembered the nearby Generals. This was no time to be lying about; there were protocols to be observed.

With every muscle and bone in his body protesting, Henry gained his feet. He limped back to the remains of his command. Raheem and James were already up, leaning on each other for support. Tahir was nowhere to be seen, and neither was General Gordon.

Henry heard a cough behind him. He turned. There, astride a bored looking camel, was the famous General Garnet Wolseley, Peer of the Realm, Baron of Cairo, and Commander of the Gordon Relief Expedition. Behind him was the rest of his staff. Captain Stewart was among them, his arm in a sling and his expression dark. The General was looking down curiously at Henry, his eyes stern above his perfectly trimmed mustache, his pith helmet startlingly white.

Henry gulped. He came to attention and attempted to salute with his right arm but only managed a half-hearted shrug of his aching shoulder. General Wolseley frowned. Then, out of the corner of his eye Henry saw movement in the empty silk of the downed airship's balloon. Two figures emerged flailing from underneath the billowy red, white and blue material. All eyes in the General's staff went to those two figures and it was with some satisfaction that Henry saw them widen in surprise.

A sudden wave of dizziness overcame him and he could feel his vision narrowing. Henry swallowed thickly and gathered just enough energy to continue standing, roughly, at attention. Through dry, cracked lips he broke the shocked silence of the General and his aides, "Lord Wolseley, may I present to you Charles Gordon, Her Majesty's envoy to the Sudan, late of Khartoum."

End.

Afterword

I hope you enjoyed this short story with Henry, James and Raheem. Please be sure to share it with your friends and don't hesitate to drop by the store you bought this and leave a review (these little things help an author immensely!).

If you'd like more of this trio's adventures (and the chance to download a FREE short story) please visit my website

www.jpmedved.com

for news, links and updates about all the stories set in the Clockwork Imperium series (including *The Great Curry Contest*, and *Queen Victoria's Ball*) or visit any online store to purchase them.

Thanks for reading!

-J.P.

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