Kitchner

There was neither wind nor sun in the soldier's tent, but it was just as unpleasant as his saddle. It was oppressive like a tomb. Stifled by the pungent air, canvas baked by the morning sun, the young officer rose from his cot, exhausted from the sand fleas that never slept. Sleep was merely a word, slumber a mirage. He surveyed his worldly possessions: a basin, a rickety cot that was too short for him, a shaving mirror hanging on a tent post. The shiny green flies, awaking from the night chill, crowded on the mirror, buzzing. He stood before the mirror seized with hatred for the desert, the heat, the grit, the flies…

When the young officer looked in his mirror he saw a strange face. Not a stranger's face, but a familiar one that appeared aged and neglected. The leather-like skin and tousled hair were not as he remembered. The thin parched lips were hardly noticeable; the rosy jaw-line scar was quite the opposite. But mostly it was his milky blue eyes that had a cloudy blindness about them – the kind he'd seen on old or dying men. His eyes grew bright with tears, without his lips being disfigured, as happens when old men weep.

His shaving was like a man raking dead ashes, trying in vain to retrieve the flame of life in a hearth. What he didn't see, but most certainly felt, was that the walls of his heart had turned to paper; his heartbeat little more than a vibration. The mystery is that the rest of him had become a lump of clay, molded, as if he had been put through a monstrous stamping machine. A horse, a gazelle, even a camel grown old, preserves its grace. What is it that changes a man's face, really changes it, so that it mirrors his thoughts? "How old is this face," he thought, "thirty-five, forty, maybe more?" It was twenty-seven.

The Sudan can shave years off a life in a matter of months. A battlefield can knock a man senseless for decades. One year in the desert had given the young officer's heart fright, not at the thought of growing old, not at the feeling one's youth was used up in this mineral universe, but at the thought that the clay of which he was shaped had dried and hardened, and the faint pounding in him would never awaken the sleeping musician, the poet, the astronomer that possibly inhabited him in the beginning.

He came to the Sudan as a freshly minted lieutenant, for Lord Kitchener's relief expedition. The cast for his mold began to take form shortly before midnight on the 12th of March, 1896 when Lord Kitchener received instructions authorizing an expedition up the Nile, destination Khartoum. The next morning the reserves were called out. On the 15th Lord Kitchener reviewed the Cairo garrison; and at the termination of the parade they were told that the earliest battalions would start for the front that night. Most of the officers feigned laconic smiles, masking the true enthusiasm exhibited by their troops waving high-domed pith helmets. All were eager to get on with it, including the young Lieutenant.

At dawn on the 18th the actual invasion of began. The column started up the Nile, a wide caramel-color river that moved slowly, but with the force of an army. The route lay through a wild and rocky country – desolated by years of war – and the troops

straggled into a long procession. By mid-morning of the next day the column had assembled a sense of order. What a sight it was for the Lieutenant's young eyes. Fields of khaki marched south with the Nile protecting their eastern flank, the Camel Corp shielding the column's western flank, and further west, protecting the Camel Corps, was a regiment of cavalry, the 21st Lancers. In all, more than 20,000 men stretching seven miles snaked into a territory abandoned to the Khalifa – the one-eyed spiritual leader who also led one of the worst military domination which history records, the Dervish Empire. And trailing the rear of this massive army was the Lieutenant.

He was with the Royal Engineers. His weapons were harmless, an arsenal of instruments for making maps not war. His fellow officers were equally harmless, a company of surveyors not soldiers. He was a military man, no doubt, but not a militant man, not really. The problem was he didn't know the difference; but even if he did, he wouldn't admit it. He'd adopted the defenses of a shy and sensitive boy, one who felt his way in an empire dominated by men endowed with a depth of masculine maturity that – as perhaps he realized – he would never attain.

From early childhood he was cut for khaki, his fiber woven with discipline. He followed orders without question, had a natural disposition for routine, and preferred order over chaos almost to a fault. As a child he was fastidious about putting his toys away – blocks stacked, lead soldiers lined in parade formation. He was just like other boys in most things, but differed from them mainly in that he was an observer more than a participant, one who dreamed more than played, which gave rise to a sense of hidden possibilities – a feeling that there was a latent something just out of reach. In short, he grew into an outsider. Often when a summer rain pattered on his bedroom window he'd stand before a wardrobe mirror and admire his lamppost posture, topped by a child's shako – a cylindrical hat of black cardboard peaked with a red plume. Slowly, deliberately, he'd draw his toy sword from its scabbard and bring it to his shoulder; then, with a smart snap, he'd salute his image: "Sir!" In one way, those moments before the mirror reflected his life. Everything here was make-believe. In another way, they reflected his desires – to simply be a good boy – which reflected his father's authoritarian words: "The army makes bad boys good and good boys better."

One might say he had a genetic disposition for military life: his father was a career officer, rising to the rank of Brevet Colonel in the legendary 14th Hussars. Legendary in that the 14th Hussars charged Tennyson's poetic cannons, and he was one of the Six Hundred who made it back, albeit limping. Thrown from his horse when it tumbled over a bowling cannon ball, he shattered an ankle, leaving him with a permanent limp and a broken dream. Many a time the boy would ask his father to tell the story, again. And the old man would recite Tennyson's famous lines, again. By the age of seven, the boy knew them be heart, though admittedly he didn't quite fathom the profundity of all, especially, "Theirs is not to make reply, Theirs is not to reason why, Theirs is but to do and die." He was too young to fashionably ridicule the poem as a glorification of war and a paean to those who blindly, and stupidly, follow orders. He was also too young to sagaciously praise the times when obedient acts of self-sacrifice and courage merit both admiration and profound gratitude. The only things he knew for certain were his father's commandments, which were less impressive than Tennyson's

poetry, but left a more lasting impression. Not the least of them was the one he heard most often: “Never take sweets from strange men. And avoid the saddle.”

The Lieutenant eventually learned to ride, everyone had to back then, but he never felt comfortable in the saddle. And every horse he ever sat upon knew it. Though he sat tall and erect and feigned confidence in a military parade, in the field he was at a loss. More than once he made a quick and rather unorthodox dismount, passed the reins to a livery hand and blithely said, “I believe he’s lost a shoe,” then marched off before anyone noticed the horse had not taken a step.

He shied from guns as much as horses. Both frightened him: they seemed too powerful and unsettlingly loud. The clatter of a Maxim gun rattled his teeth; the thunder of a cannon made him reel, leaving him with a headache. And, quite frankly, he found that guns, like horses, wrinkled his sensitive nose. He could tolerate the report of a light rifle, but the acrid stench of smoking powder was as noxious as horse urine. And though he did find the aroma of gun-oil mildly appealing, and relished the fragrance of saddle soap, clearly, he was not an ideal candidate for either the cavalry or the artillery - or the infantry. By default he became a cadet with the Royal Engineers; obviously not as a sapper – they dealt with explosives – rather, as a cartographer. And Kitchener needed cartographers in Sudan.

Lord Kitchener’s plan for the war was perfect. It turned, however, on one point, the Desert Railway. In a tale of war the reader’s mind is filled with the fighting. The battle – with its vivid scenes – excites imagination and commands attention. The eye is fixed on fighting brigades as they move about smoke; on the swarming figure of the enemy; on the General, serene and determined, mounted in the middle of his Staff. But the long trailing line of communication is unnoticed. The fierce glory that plays on red, triumphant bayonets dazzles the observer; he does not care to look behind where, along thousands of miles, the dusty convoys are crawling to the front in uninterrupted succession. Yes, victory might be the brightly-colored blossom, but transport is the dull stem that made it bloom. And fighting the Dervishes, especially through the Sudan wasteland, was primarily a battle of transport.

Throughout the 1896 Sudan campaign the Nile was the nexus between the Expeditionary Force and its base in Cairo. All supplies were brought to the front as far as a possible by water transport. But the Nile is not always available. Frequent cataracts obstruct its course for many miles. Other long reaches are only navigable when the river is in flood. To join the navigable reaches, and preserve the continuity of communications, a railway was necessary. Two parallel iron streaks, three feet six inches apart, which would grow dim and narrower in a long perspective until, twisted and blurred by the mirage, vanished in the indefinite distance – across the desert.

In any circumstances the challenge of laying a railway in a barren desert is daunting; Lord Kitchener’s task was enormous, complicated by three important conditions: It had to be executed with military precautions. Water was required for keeping both the men and engines alive. And perhaps most important, the first 230 miles had to be completed before the end of winter.

The Lieutenant survived his first eight months in the confines of a tent re-drafting outdated maps. Even in the shade the summer heat was unbearable. Sandstorms rattled

the tent walls like a sails tacking at sea. Sand gritted his pen nub, flies buzzed constantly, and the stench of camp dung hung in the air. Still, there were advantages: Ink dried immediately, which meant his production was prodigious. The translucent light was easy on his eyes: no shadows, just a constant, soothing illumination from the tent walls which gave everything a softness of burnt pottery. And best of all, he was perched on a chair not a saddle, doing what he did best – simple repetitive tasks, alone.

But his solitude ended with the advent of winter and the desert railway. For the next four months the Lieutenant worked with a team of surveyors in the field, plotting the line's course as rail-crews surged forward. When an oasis was discovered, it was the Lieutenant's task to map it with surgical precision. He'd spread the tripod's legs, mount its spirit level and compass, then peer down the telescopic sight to distant landmarks and triangulate the well's location. Then with sextant, chronometer, and navigational tables he'd register its latitude and longitude. Later, by the night fire, he'd transcribe his figures and notes onto a map.

At day's end, and night's beginning, he'd sometimes stretch out upon the sand as on a raft, face to the stars. High overhead all the heavens wheeled slowly, a whole sky open to the Lieutenant's elation. The desert sky at night – like the desert sands at day – can make one feel humble, but what he felt at that moment was immense pride. For the first time since he was born it seemed that his life was his own and that he was responsible for it. He laid still and stared into space. Something half revealed yet wholly unknown had bewitched him. An indefinable bond was forming between the Lieutenant and the desert. The star-studded sky was so different than the veneer of gold on sand, and yet it was the same. The love of the desert, like love of oneself, is born of a face perceived and never really seen.

But as winter faded, the face of the desert, like his own the face, began to change, reflecting the misery of those who inhabited it. He couldn't understand why men attached themselves more stubbornly to barren lands than to any other, defending to death their great store of sand as if it were a treasure of gold dust, dieing for a leafless, stony mountain. And at an oasis – where the least drop would draw from the sand the green sparkle of a blade of grass – water seemed thicker than blood: its sand glistening red from a defender's blade. Or so he'd heard. When the rain fell anywhere, a great exodus animated the Sudan; the tribes riding for days towards grass sprung up two hundred miles away. But now that winter was ending, they'd march for weeks to reach the nearest well the same distance. And when the nomads arrived, they'd have to dig, dig, dig… before there'd bubble a muddy liquid mixed with camel urine. The Lieutenant had witnessed for himself that the Dervish children did not beg for coins. With empty tins in their hands they begged for water.

It's ironic, though understandable, that the Lieutenant was eager to pack-up from the last oasis and cheerfully head back to the blazing desert. His job was done. After four long, very long months, 230 miles of track had been laid before the end of winter – and the supply trains were steaming to the front – just as Kitchener had planned. The Lieutenant was heading to the comfort of the column, at the rear of course; but then, in a week, two at the most, he'd be back in Cairo: fresh food, fresh uniforms, fresh sheets… all like a fresh shave. It was as simple as that. He'd completed his one-year tour. Most assuredly, he'd return to the Cairo garrison, perhaps even England, with a colorful

campaign ribbon on his tunic. Or so he thought as he whistled across the desert – one of the few times he could remember ever being happy on horseback.

Naïveté is not reserved for youth; it is for hindsight, which young folk have little of. Naïveté comes with experience – as an afterthought, a reflection. At the moment it's merely a vision for the future, and a simple one at that. Much like death, naïveté is a state of being –albeit of the mind rather than the body – we see happening to others, never ourselves. Like death, we have no empirical evidence of its existence until it grips us. Then it's too late. And we see the mirage for what it is.

The following morning the Lieutenant was called to the front. The ride forward was anticipated – his orders 'home' – but also filled with anxiety. Not just having to lead his horse over rough ground, he was used to that, but to do it before the eyes of thousands. Though no one was watching, not really; their heavy eyes were either cast down to the immediate broken ground of rocks and scrub or forward to distant dust of the long marching column. The few eyes looking toward him, were, in fact, focused beyond to the horizon, where more skilled horsemen would emerge like phantoms from the desert, with sabers waving, rifles smoking.

His worst moment came near the front, as he approached a squadron of cavalry riding directly towards him: two columns of horses cantering slowly, held in check by their riders. At a distance he recognized the red over white pennons waving from lance tips – the 21st Lancers. As they got closer he also recognized the commanding figure at the head, a major whose reputation for dash and daring was as bold as his mustache. The Lieutenant admired his fawn-colored mustache, ageing with shades of grey, which brought back memories of his father.

The Lieutenant bullied his horse to a trot and immediately took on the appearance of one bouncing down a flight of stairs. He regained his posture just in time to salute the Major. But it was ignored. "Indifference," his father always said, "is the worst form of denial."

His self-consciousness didn't dismount at the General's Staff tent. There was a furry of activity outside, most of it ignored by the Lieutenant who was occupied with dusting his tunic and pulling the helmet strap from his chin before cradling the khaki shell under his arm. Then he stepped into the tent.

A captain was stooped over a map like a medieval alchemist over an alembic while an orderly scurried about, searching for something amongst a pile of crates. The Lieutenant stood still, silent, holding his salute for what seemed the length of a Bible while the Captain mumbled to himself; the Orderly casting an indifferent glance. The back of his fingers felt sweat beading from his brow; the back of his mind imagined sticky hair plastered to his forehead. His anxious eyes darted for a moment, then he gambled: he went for his blue handkerchief and quickly mopped his brow. Then he snapped back the salute and barked: "Sir!"

The Captain looked up impatiently: "Lieutenant, see here." The map was largely blank save a quiver of scattered arrows crayoned in red. "That's what we're looking for," and he tapped at a tiny black dot. The Lieutenant momentarily relaxed and ran a finger down the legend: "Permanent well."

The Captain's heart jumped when he heard the word aloud: "Right, a permanent well – and it's worth more than a gold mine. It's the only oasis between here and Khartoum." The distance was less than a foot on the map, but it covered more than three hundred miles on the ground. Then his hand brushed the map as if dusting the speck away: "But… we don't know where it is."

The Lieutenant's eyes went back to the tiny dot: "I don't understand, Sir."

"We know it's somewhere in that valley – that's all. We had to put the oasis somewhere, so… there it is." The Captain's poised finger over the map was not a diviner's finger; he couldn't locate the treasure, only the pitfall: "But we do know where Wadi el Abid is."

The Lieutenant stared at the strange name scribed across the vastness around the black dot. There was nothing save the name… and blankness of despair: "I see."

His pensive intermission was interrupted by the Captain: "When the well is located, you'll plot it." He snatched the map, rolled it up, slid it into a leather carrying tube and handed it to the Lieutenant.

But the Captain didn't release his grip: "You should know by now, Lieutenant, life in the desert evaporates like a vapor. A man can go nineteen hours without water." The Captain paused long enough for the words to register.

The Lieutenant looked reluctantly into his steel-grey eyes: "I see."

"After nineteen hours, your eyes fill with light..." The Captain released the map, but not his stare: "and the light marks the beginning of the end."

The Lieutenant's orders were simple and straightforward, which should have pleased him. He was a simple man, or so he thought: following orders was simple, making maps was simple: that's what made army life was simple. But his thinking changed when he received his final order, which was also simple. He was reassigned to a cavalry regiment – the 21st Lancers.

Chapter 2

As the sun rose the following morning, the Lieutenant stood before his shaving mirror. From a distance he looked somewhat the same man who a year earlier, in Cairo, had a batman bring him warm shaving water, white linen and morning tea. From the waist down he appeared all soldier. The loops of his braces hung loosely over tight-fitting jodhpurs, tucked into scuffed boots fitted with tarnished spurs. Both leather and brass needed polishing, but then, he was no longer in Cairo. From the waist up he appeared just another man, barely. It was as if his thin naked body was assembled from different men, all small-boned: an alabaster torso saved from the sun, with sandy arms and copper hands attached as afterthoughts. Up close, in the mirror, he was a different man. His face had a

stage appearance: lathered-white jaw, bronze cheeks, sun-burnt nose, a curious pale forehead that had been shaded by his helmet. But his milky blue eyes were far from theatrical; they were vapid. And they weren't fixed on the mirror, but an image in his mind.

He saw a proud column of light cavalry led by an imposing man. The Major would not talk of fear or suffering or of any of life's real problems, but only the force and direction of the enemy, the state of the sky, of his horses. He would chuckle over an officer's pithy phrase and grumble about the heat, just like the rest. But he was his own man when it came to outbursts of temper, snarling at the indecisive officer and lashing the incompetent horseman. The Lieutenant slapped out the worrisome thought by strapping his razor. Then he contemplated what to pack.

He knew he'd be leaving behind his worldly possessions: the basin, the shaving kit, the cot that was too short for him… He wouldn't miss the cot, he would the razor and water. Every morning he awoke to the bugle call and elbowed from the cot for the simplest of pleasures, a shave. Things would be different now. Water was far too precious for wasting on appearances.

Yes, he'd miss the morning shave more than anything… more than the privacy of his tent or the company of his survey team. One finds unexpected comforts in the most uncomfortable places. And there's hardly a more uncomfortable place than the desert. Perhaps that's why shaving was so comforting: it seemed to put things in order. The satisfying clonk of brush-handle against cup; the cleansing aroma of soap; the miraculous creation of froth; the soothing bristle of warm softness to dry cheek… brought him back to the ordinary, the familiar. Then the steady, gentle slap of the razor, a rhythmic heartbeat of steel on leather, recalled a pulse of the way life used to be. Simple. Shaving, the very act itself, was a delicate balance between pleasure and pain. Drawing a straight razor up a throat can be a deadly mistake. But the simple act seemed to cleanse his life as much as his face, each stroke bringing freshness to each dawn.

Recently, the Lieutenant had discovered that there was more to shaving than scraping whiskers. It felt like praying, or at least a vague sensation that he was with someone. But that's often the case when a man is alone in his thoughts, as he was at that very moment, drawing the first strokes of the razor – up his throat. His mind was drifting like a man at sea; memorized by the sound – the gentle hush of razor on skin, like yeasty surf on an empty beach. The razor was riding the crest of his jaw, as smoothly as a rudder slices through water, when…

"Sir!"

The bark startled the Lieutenant. He turned with a wince and saw the Sergeant at the tent flap, saluting. Before the Lieutenant could return the salute, the Sergeant reached in his tunic and handed him a folded piece of paper: "From HQ, Sir, the General's Adjutant."

The Lieutenant took the note, unfolded it and read. Then read it again, then a third time, then he simply stared at it with a vacant expression.

The Sergeant had a different expression, a worried curiosity. He was staring at the Lieutenant's lathered jaw – and the blossoming pink patina.

What the Lieutenant had read, repeatedly, were these quickly penciled words:

Immediately report to 21st Lancers, Wadi el Abid.

Hurry!

Struggling to compose himself yet take action, he folded the note and feigned a sangfroid manner. He tapped the note on his palm, then commanded: "Sergeant, fetch the horses." The Sergeant saluted and left, stirring the Lieutenant to action

. He wiped his face and threw the towel on his cot. He pulled up his braces, then slipped on his tunic. After clasping the collar he noticed his knuckles were a sticky and crimson. He looked down and saw red petals bleeding on khaki. It registered immediately and he turned quickly to the mirror, perhaps too quickly, because he felt a bit woozy. Then again, it might have been his image in the mirror. It was more than a nick.

Chapter 3

He rode alone – not probing the wilderness but piercing it – his haste hobbled by a packhorse heavy with surveying equipment. It took him minutes to collect his gear and suit up. He was so preoccupied to 'Hurry!' that he almost left the tent without knowing where to go. It dawned on him when rolled up the map, like a man locking a door, leaving his house in haste but not knowing why.

He spread the map out again and fingered the wadi – it was merely a name in the middle of despair, nothing more. He plotted the closest well, a good day's ride, south-southwest. Quickly he oriented map with compass, grabbed the survey book from his pocket and scribbled the bearing '193 °'. He fingered the next well: "My God!" The distance was as painful as his cry: the slightest movement of his jaw stung like a wasp. He scribbled the bearing, '260°', and then went to the third well on the edge of the wadi. Flies buzzed him with constant irritation, like circling vultures that wouldn't let up. He took a futile swipe, wincing when he screamed, "Damn!" The last bearing complete, '217 °', he slipped an elastic around the book and stuffed it in a tunic pocket; snapped down the compass cover and looped its lanyard over his head; rolled up the map and slid it into is carrying tube. Then he slipped out of the tent; his 200-mile journey slung under his arm; his blue handkerchief pressed tightly to his jaw.

The Sergeant gave a final tug to the cinch rope and a pat to the canvas, bundles badly tied and swollen with hernias: "That's it, Sir."

The Lieutenant swung into the saddle, or rather, climbed into, for he was weighted like the packhorse: holstered binoculars on one side of his belt, holstered pistol on the other side, two cartridge boxes holstered at the back; a leather map-case slung under one arm, a water-bottle under the other – two more in his saddle bags. And where the bandoliers crossed his chest, the compass hung next to his heart. Pinned to the back of his helmet a dun-colored cloth draped his neck, shielding it from stabbing rays. It looked as if his principle occupation on this earth was braving the elements.

One hand gripped the reins tightly; the other waved the Sergeant for the packhorse's tether. Leather squeaked, bit-chains rattled, the hollow ground thumped from an impatient rear hoof… Then he was off with the feeling of a man canoeing in mid ocean.

For the Lieutenant, riding over the rough ground was bad enough, but trailing a tethered packhorse was crippling. The hand that led it also held the blue handkerchief mottled with dried blood. Whenever he dared, he'd pull hard on the lead rope, and when it slackened, he pressed hard on his jaw.

It was three days of perdition: monotonous plodding on nomadic trails, through brittle scrub, over a rocky terrain... under a merciless sun. We believe that man is free. We take it for granted that a man is able to stride straight out into the world. We never see the cord by which he is tied to the womb of the world. Let man take but one step too many… and the cord snaps. He is a prisoner of the springs and wells.

He made it to the first two wells – but barely! And they were seasonal wells, which were nothing like he imagined. One tends to picture a well as a storybook place to make a wish… a deep-deep hole, walled waist-high by smooth boulders and capped by a gabled roof. And in the shade of that roof the water is wheeled up in a bucket, by a dripping rope, cranked by a golden haired boy… on the edge of an oak forest – or in the heart of one enchanted…. As much as he wished, it didn't come true. They were nothing more than jagged crevices, without shade, without life, and almost without water. Dark cavities with meager puddles: turbid, sordid, tepid, fetid water. Water the horses relished and he wretched.

He awakened early on the third day, filled his water bottles and headed for the expected encampment of the 21st Lancers – that tiny dot in Wadi el Abid. That's when it went from bad to worse. The combination of dysentery, exhaustion and blistering heat had taken its toll on the Lieutenant. By mid-day he'd wandered off course. And worse still, he changed course again, several times. He wasn't lost, he told himself, simply disoriented. But he knew the truth.

It is scarcely within powers of words to describe the savage desolation of Wadi el Abid. It was featureless and nearly impossible to define from the wide horizons. The sun beat continuously upon the surface, and filmy air glittered and shimmered as over a furnace. Once trapped in the open, he knew why it was merely a name on the map.

Finally he halted, swung his water-bottle forward and shook it. It was as empty as the two in his saddlebags. He checked his compass bearing for the umpteenth time: it was different from his last reading. But so was his last feeling, which was no longer vague uncertainty but determined hopelessness. The corner of his parched mouth no longer twitched, as it always did when he became unsettled. He no longer patted his jaw with the handkerchief. The bleeding had stopped; but his jaw ached like a bad tooth. Actually, the pain was good. It was the one thing that kept him from drifting to sleep. He simply stared at the ground with a nagging sense of resignation.

The rattle of bit-chains startled him. He followed his horse's craned neck and saw something – or thought so. He wrestled his binoculars from its case. It was not the mirage that stopped the Lieutenant's heart – he'd seen many rippling lakes on the horizon – it was the phantoms, slender black figures wavering above the water.

A half-mile away, another lieutenant brought down his glass and turned in his saddle: "Finally!" Other Lancers in the patrol stood in their stirrups. They'd found the lost surveyor – long overdue. Their prayers were answered.

When the two lieutenants met it was if each had found the Lord's savior. And in a way they had. After all, Lord Kitchener had ordered the rendezvous.

Kitchener knew el-Amin Oasis lay in the heart of the Dervish homeland. Find it and you find the enemy – looking down your throat. Tentacles of the nomadic army, which numbered in the tens of thousands, were scattered wide and ventured far, but the head stayed near his well. It was his oasis, in spirit as much as possession. Striking the Oasis was as much of a psychological strategy as a military tactic. Kitchener's forces could always follow the Nile south to Khartoum, but that, specifically, was what he did not want to do. A siege on Khartoum, fighting door to door through its narrow alleys, would be a protracted, messy business. His thundering Howitzers might pulverize mud-baked walls, and the clattering Maxim guns could certainly chew up empty streets, but the brunt of the battle would weigh heavily on his hobbled cavalry. Now, with winter gone, the threat of a waterless summer was as unbearable as its murderous heat. He wanted to bring the war to a swift end.

To do so, Kitchener had to meet the Dervishes head on, in the open, where he could swiftly exploit the advantage of his modern army. And striking the Oasis was his bait to lure the scattered tribesmen. It had the psychological advantage of taunting insult more than terrorizing injury. The very thought of Christians defiling the pure waters of el-Amin would tear them away from the peace of their tents, from the embraces of their women, from the happiness of slumber, for suddenly nothing in the world could match the feverish joy of falling unexpectedly at dawn upon the Oasis and there, God willing, killing the infidels.

That's why Kitchener ordered the squadron of 21st Lancers to reconnoiter the Wadi. That and tease prowling eyes on distant dunes. If the Lancers did not find the enemy, the enemy would surely find them. And he'd surely find out. The fastest horses in the regiment were assigned to the squadron's couriers. Once the Oasis was targeted, mapped with surgical precision, Kitchener could advance his army with speed and lay waste in mass. Lord Kitchener was not a religious man, but he prayed his sacrificial lambs would find the Oasis before the sizzling heat found them, before Easter. And it seemed his prayers just might be answered.

Certainly the Lieutenant's prayers were answered. His horses were exhausted and he was drained nearly lifeless. More worrisome, his thoughts were drifting like his compass bearing – in the wrong direction. Second-guessing was second-nature to the young Lieutenant, and he masked it poorly behind his persona. Behind that rigid mien was a flaccid character with enough self-doubt to fill the desert. And the scaffolding of bold appearance was collapsing.

But the Lieutenant was found. Now it was simply a matter of finding the well – buried somewhere in 7,000 square miles of despair. To his simple way of thinking it would take more than prayers; it would take a miracle, like walking on water.

But the Major believed in neither prayers nor miracles. He was of another faith: reason. And it seemed reasonable that Mohammed might have the answer, though it never dawned on him until the eve.

The Major stood tall, erect, by the campfire, his fawn mustache now colorless in the firelight. He was in one of his pensive moods, and his staff knew well to remain hushed. They stood silent in the night chill, palms forward to the fire, like orbiting plants worshipping their sun, eyes fixed on the Major's glowing silhouette: one hand in the small of his back, the other gripping his saber, its tip stabbing the sand.

Finally he looked up with a penetrating stare, "If we can't find the Oasis, the Oasis must find us." And with those pithy words he rattled his saber in the embers, smiling at the brilliant shower of red.

"Gentlemen, I want the fires kept bright."

"But, Sir," asked a startled officer, "won't that just draw attention?"

"Like moths to the flame, gentlemen… but moths don't leave tracks; men do. Follow those tracks, and mark my word, we'll find the oasis of el-Amin!" As a brave or foolish man might stir a hornets' nest for the no apparent reason, he thrust his saber deep in the glowing cinders, its blade glinting sparks.

He noticed his staff, their helmets down – perhaps from the sparkling embers, perhaps from his crackling words – throwing doubtful glances at each other. But he was above challenging their doubt. Instead, he relieved it by commanding their attention to a lighter subject: "And our surveyor, the cartographer, where is he?"

"Sleeping, Sir," a lieutenant said, "He was rather shattered; he could hardly…"

"Yes, yes," brushing the inconsequence aside with his hand, "Well, he'll need his sleep. We all will, gentlemen." He paused, then slid his saber into its scabbard, the hilt clanking hard. "Right-then! Keep those fires fed – and double the sentries! Good night."

The officers saluted and walked away, leaving the Major to his thoughts. He was a man of reason, but also of memory. His eyes went from the glowing fire to the star filled sky. But what he saw was a vision from the past… when he was a junior officer in the Sahara… when each fold in the dunes was rich with hidden mysteries… He recalled the memorable night the tip of his encampment was studded with sentries; when news spread concerning movements of the enemy made all hearts beat faster by the night fires. The officers rolled themselves up in their blankets and stretched out upon the sand, face to the stars. There was a moon bending towards the sands – like this very night – and the officers, lured by her tranquility into oblivion, fell asleep. The fires died and only the stars gleamed. Then the young officers who drowned in their slumber sent forth a feeble wail. And the handsome sleeping lieutenants were massacred – save one.