HISTORY SHAPERS

THE STORY OF GENERAL GORDON

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by

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Charlie Gordon

Sixty years ago, at Woolwich, the town on the Thames where the gunners of our army are trained, there lived a mischievous, curly-haired, blue-eyed boy, whose name was Charlie Gordon.

The Gordons were a Scotch family, and Charlie came of a race of soldiers. His great-grandfather had fought for King George, and was taken prisoner at the battle of Prestonpans, when many other Gordons were fighting for Prince Charlie. His grandfather had served bravely in different regiments and in many lands. His father was yet another gallant soldier, who thought that there was no life so good as the soldier's life, and nothing so fine as to serve in the British army. Of him it is said that he was "kind-hearted, generous, cheerful, full of humour, always just, living by the code of honour," and "greatly beloved." His wife belonged to a family of great merchant adventurers and explorers, the Enderbys, whose ships had done many daring things on far seas.

Charlie Gordon's mother was one of the people who never lose their tempers, who always make the best of everything, and who are always thinking of how to help others and never of themselves.

So little Charlie came of brave and good people, and when he was a very little boy he must have heard much of his soldier uncles and cousins and his soldier brother, and must even have seen the swinging kilts and heard the pipes of the gallant regiment that is known as the Gordon Highlanders.

Charles George Gordon was born at Woolwich on the 28th January 1833, but while he was still a little child his father, General Gordon, went to hold a command in Corfu, an island off the coast of Turkey, at the mouth of the Adriatic Sea. The Duke of Cambridge long afterwards spoke of the bright little boy who used to be in the room next his in that house in Corfu, but we know little of Charles Gordon until he was ten years old. His father was then given an important post at Woolwich, and he and his family returned to England.

Then began merry days for little Charlie.

In long after years he wrote to one of his nieces about the great building at Woolwich where firearms for the British army are made and stored: "You never, any of you, made a proper use of the Arsenal workmen, as we did. They used to neglect their work for our orders, and turned out some splendid squirts—articles that would wet you through in a minute. As for the cross-bows they made, they were grand with screws."

There were five boys and six girls in the Gordon family. Charlie was the fourth son, and two of his elder brothers were soldiers while he was still quite a little lad. It was in

his holidays that the Arsenal was his playground, for on the return from Corfu he was sent to school at Taunton, where you may still see his initials, "C.G.G.", carved deep on the desk he used.

At school he did not seem to be specially clever. He was not fond of lessons, but he drew very well, and made first-rate maps. He was always brimful of high spirits and mischief, and ready for any sort of sport, and the people of Woolwich must have sighed when Charlie came home for his holidays.

One time when he came he found that his father's house was overrun with mice. This was too good a chance to miss. He and one of his brothers caught all the mice they could, carried them to the house of the commandant of the garrison, which was opposite to theirs, gently opened the door, and let the mice loose in their new home.

Once, with the screw-firing cross-bows that the workmen at the Arsenal had made for them, the wild Gordon boys broke twenty-seven panes of glass in one of the large warehouses of the Arsenal. A captain who was in the room narrowly escaped being shot, one of the screws passing close to his head and fixing itself into the wall as if it had been placed there by a screwdriver.

Freddy, the youngest of the five boys, had an anxious, if merry, time when his big brothers came back from school. With them he would ring the doorbells of houses till the angry servants of Woolwich seemed for ever to be opening doors to invisible ringers. Often, too, little Freddy would

be pushed into a house, the bell rung by his mischievous brothers, and the door held, so that Freddy alone had to face the surprised people inside.

But the wildest of their tricks was one that they played on the cadets at Woolwich—the big boys who were being trained to be officers of artillery. "The Pussies" was the name they went by, and it was on the most grown up of the Pussies that they directed their mischief. The senior class of cadets was then stationed in the Royal Arsenal, in front of which were earthworks on which they learned how to defend and fortify places in time of war. All the ins and outs of these earthworks were known to Charlie Gordon and his brothers. One dark night, when a colonel was lecturing to the cadets, a crash as of a fearful explosion was heard. The cadets, thinking that every pane of glass in the lecture hall was broken, rushed out like bees from a hive. They soon saw that the terrific noise had been made by round shot being thrown at the windows, and well they knew that Charlie Gordon was sure to be at the bottom of the trick. But the night was dark, and Charlie knew every passage of the earthworks better than any big cadet there. Although there were many big boys as hounds and only two little boys as hares, the Gordons easily escaped from the angry cadets. For some time afterwards they carefully kept away from the Arsenal, for they knew that if the "Pussies" should catch them they need expect no mercy.

From Taunton Charlie went for one year to be coached

for the army at a school at Shooters Hill. From there, when he was not quite sixteen, he passed into the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich.

As a cadet, Charlie Gordon was no more of a bookworm than he had been as a schoolboy. There was no piece of mischief, no wild prank, that that boy with the curly fair hair and merry blue eyes did not have a share in. But if he fairly shared the fun, Charlie would sometimes take more than his fair share of blame or punishment. He was never afraid to own up, and he was always ready to bear his friends' punishment as well as his own for scrapes they had got into together. Of course he got into scrapes. There was never a boy that was full of wild spirits who did not. But Charlie Gordon never got into a scrape for any thoughtless mischief and naughtiness. He never did anything mean, never anything that was not straight, and true, and honourable.

He had been at the Academy for some time, and had earned many good-conduct badges, when complaint was made of the noise and roughness with which the cadets rushed down the narrow staircase from their dining-room. One of the senior cadets, a corporal, was stationed at the head of this staircase, his arms outstretched, to prevent the usual wild rush past. The sight of this severe little officer was too great a temptation for Charlie Gordon. Down went his head, forward he rushed, and the corporal was butted not only downstairs, but right through the glass door beyond. The corporal's body escaped unhurt,

but his feelings did not, and Charlie was placed under arrest, and very nearly expelled from the College.

When his term at Woolwich was nearly over, a great deal of bullying was found to be going on, and the new boys were questioned about it by the officers in charge. One new boy said that Charlie Gordon had hit him on the head with a clothes-brush—"not a severe blow," he had to own. But Charlie's bear-fighting had this time a hard punishment, for he was put back six months for his commission.

Until then he had meant to be an officer of Artillery—a "gunner," as they are called. Now he knew that he would always be six months behind his gunner friends, and so decided to work instead for the Engineers, and get his commission as a "sapper."

At college, as well as at school, his map-drawing was very good, and his mother was very proud of what he did. One day he found her showing some visitors a map he had made. His hatred of being praised for what he thought he did not deserve, and his hot temper, sprang out together, and he tore up the map and threw it in the grate.

But almost at once he was sorry for his rudeness and unkindness, and afterwards he carefully pasted the torn pieces of the map together for his mother.

"How my mother loved me!" he wrote of her long years afterwards.

His hot temper was sometimes shown to his officers. He would bear more than his share of blame when he

felt that he deserved it, but when he felt that blame was undeserved, his temper would flash out in a sudden storm.

One of his superiors at Woolwich once said, scolding him,—"You will never make an officer."

Charlie's honour was touched. His temper blazed out, and he tore off his epaulettes and threw them at the officer's feet.

He always hated his examinations, yet he never failed to pass them.

When he was fifty years old, he wrote to his sister,—"I had a fearful dream last night: I was back at the Academy, and had to pass an examination! I was wide awake enough to know I had forgotten all I had ever learnt, and it was truly some time ere I could collect myself and realise I was a general, so completely had I become a cadet again. What misery those examinations were!"

When he was nineteen, Charlie Gordon became Sub-Lieutenant Charles Gordon of the Royal Engineers.

From Woolwich he went to Chatham, the headquarters of the Royal Engineers, to have some special training as an Engineer officer.

There he found his cleverness at map-drawing a great help in his work, and for nearly two years he worked hard at all that an officer of Engineers must know, and soon he was looked on as a very promising young officer.

In February 1854, he gained the rank of full lieutenant, and was sent to Pembroke Dock to help with the new fortifications and batteries that were being made there.

Whatever Charlie Gordon did, he did with all his might, and he was now as keen on making plans and building fortifications, as he had once been in planning and playing mischievous tricks.

When he returned to Pembroke thirty years later, an old ferryman there remembered him.

"Are you the gent who used to walk across the stream right through the water?" he asked.

And all through his life no stream was too strong for Gordon to face.

Gordon had not been long at Pembroke when a great war broke out between Russia on one side, and England, France, and Turkey on the other. It was fought in a part of Russia called the Crimea, and is known as the Crimean War.

The two elder Gordons, Henry and Enderby, were out there with their batteries, and, like every other keen young soldier, Charlie Gordon was wild to go.

After a few months at Pembroke, orders came for him to go to Corfu. He suspected his father of having managed to get him sent there to be out of harm's way.

"It is a great shame of you," he wrote. But very shortly afterwards came fresh orders, telling him to go to the Crimea without delay.

A general whom he had told how much he longed to go where the fighting was, had had the orders changed.

On the 4th December 1854 his orders came to Pembroke. Two days later he reported himself at the War

Office in London, and on the evening of the same day he was at Portsmouth, ready to sail. At first it was intended that he should go out in a collier, but that arrangement was altered. Back he came to London, and went from there to France.

At Marseilles he got a ship to Constantinople, and just as fearlessly and as happily as he had ever gone on one of his mischievous expeditions as a little boy, Charlie Gordon went off to face hardships, and dangers, and death in the Crimea, and to learn his first lessons in war.

Gordon's First Battles

The Crimean War had been going on for several months when, on New Year's Day 1855, Gordon reached Balaclava.

The months had been dreary ones for the English soldiers, for, through bad management in England, they had had to face a bitter Russian winter, and go through much hard fighting, without proper food, without warm clothing, and with no proper shelter.

Night after night, and day after day, in pitilessly falling snow, or in drenching rain, clad in uniforms that had become mere rags, cold and hungry, tired and wet, the English soldiers had to line the trenches before Sebastopol.

These trenches were deep ditches, with the earth thrown up to protect the men who fired from them, and in them the men often had to stand hour after hour, knee deep in mud, and in cold that froze the blood in their veins.

Illness broke out in the camp, and many men died from cholera. Many had no better bed than leaves spread on stones in the open could give them.

Some of those who had tents, and used little charcoal fires to warm them, were killed by the fumes of charcoal.

A "Black Winter" it was called, and the Black Winter was not over when Gordon arrived. He had been sent out in

charge of 320 huts, which had followed him in the collier from Portsmouth, so that now, at least, some of the men were better sheltered than they had been before. But they were still half-starved, and in very low spirits. Officers and men had constantly to go foraging for food, or else to go hungry, and men died every day of the bitter cold. And all the time the guns of the Russians were never idle.

It was not a very gay beginning for a young officer's active service, but Gordon, like his mother, had a way of making the best of things. Even when, as he wrote, the ink was frozen, and he broke the nib of his pen as he dipped it, "There are really no hardships for the officers," he wrote home; "the men are the sufferers."

Before he had been a month out, Gordon was put on duty in the trenches before Sebastopol, a great fortified town by the sea.

On the night of 14th February, with eight men with picks and shovels, and five double sentries, he was sent to make a connection between the French and English outposts by means of rifle-pits. It was a pitch black night, and as yet Gordon did not know the trenches as well as he had known the earthworks at Woolwich Arsenal. He led his men, and, missing his way, nearly walked into the town filled with Russians. Turning back, they crept up the trenches to some caves which the English should have held, but found no sentries there. Taking one man with him, Gordon explored the caves. He feared that the Russians, finding them undefended, might have taken

possession of them when darkness fell, but he found them empty. He then posted two sentries on the hill above the caves, and went back to post two others down below. No sooner did he and these two appear below than "Bang! bang!" went two rifles, and the bullets ripped up the ground at Gordon's feet. Off rushed the two men who were with him, and off scampered the eight sappers, thinking that the whole Russian army was at their heels. But all that had really happened was that the sentries on the hill above, seeing Gordon and his men coming stealthily out of the caves in the darkness, had taken them for Russians, and fired straight at them. The mischief did not end there. A Russian picket was stationed only 150 yards away, and the sound of the shots made them also send a shower of bullets, one of which hit a man on the breast, passed through his coats, grazed his ribs, and passed out again without hurting him. But no serious harm was done, and by working all night Gordon and his men carried out their orders.

It was not long before Gordon learned so thoroughly all the ins and outs of the trenches that the darkest night made no difference to him. "Come with me after dark, and I will show you over the trenches," he said to a friend who had been away on sick leave, and who complained to him that he could not find his way about. "He drew me a very clear sketch of the lines," writes his friend, Sir Charles Stavely, "explained every nook and corner, and took me along outside our most advanced trench, the

bouquets (volleys of small shells fired from mortars) and other missiles flying about us in, to me, a very unpleasant manner, he taking the matter remarkably coolly."

Before many weeks were past, Gordon not only knew the trenches as well as any other officer or man there, but he knew more of the enemy's movements than did any other officer, old or young. He had "a special aptitude for war," says one general. "We used to send him to find out what new move the Russians were making."

Shortly after his adventure in the caves, Gordon had another narrow escape. A bullet fired at him from one of the Russian rifle-pits, 180 yards away, passed within an inch of his head. "It passed an inch above my nut into a bank I was passing," wrote Gordon, who had not forgotten his school-boy slang. But the only other remark he makes about his escape in his letter home is, "They (the Russians) are very good marksmen; their bullet is large and pointed."

Three months later, one of his brothers wrote home—"Charlie has had a miraculous escape. The day before yesterday he saw the smoke from an embrasure on his left and heard a shell coming, but did not see it. It struck the ground five yards in front of him, and burst, not touching him. If it had not burst, it would have taken his head off."

The soldiers at Sebastopol were not long in learning that amongst their officers there was one slight, wiry young lieutenant of sappers, with curly hair and keen

blue eyes, who was like the man in the fairy tale, and did not know how to shiver and shake.

One day as Gordon was going the round of the trenches he heard a corporal and a sapper having hot words. He stopped and asked what the quarrel was about, and was told that the men were putting fresh gabions (baskets full of earth behind which they sheltered from the fire of the enemy's guns) in the battery. The corporal had ordered the sapper to stand up on a parapet where the fire from the guns would hail upon him, while he himself, in safety down below, handed the baskets up to him. In one moment Gordon had jumped up on to the parapet, and ordered the corporal to stand beside him while the sapper handed up baskets to them. The Russian bullets pattered around them as they worked, but they finished their work in safety. When it was done, Gordon turned to the corporal and said: "Never order a man to do anything that you are afraid to do yourself."

On 6th June there was a great duel between the guns of the Russians and those of their besiegers. A stone from a round shot struck Gordon, and stunned him for some time, and he was reported "Wounded" by the surgeon, greatly to his disgust. All day and all night, and until four o'clock next day, the firing went on. At four o'clock on the second day the English and their allies began to fire from new batteries. A thousand guns kept up a steady, terrible fire of shells, and, protected by the fire, the French dashed forward and seized one of the Russians' most

important positions. Attacking and being driven back, attacking again and gaining some ground, once more attacking and losing what they had gained, leaving men lying dead and dying where the fight had been fiercest, so the weary days and nights dragged past.

"Charlie is all right," his brother wrote home, "and has escaped amidst a terrific shower of grape and shells of every description.... He is now fast asleep in his tent, having been in the trenches from two o'clock yesterday morning during the cannonade until seven last night, and again from 12:30 this morning until noon."

Both sides agreed to stop fighting for a few days after this, in order to bury the dead.

The whole ground before Sebastopol was, Gordon wrote, "one great graveyard of men, freshly made mounds of dark earth covering English, French, and Russians."

From this time until September the war dragged on. It was a dull and dreary time, and as September drew near Gordon thought of happy days in England, with the scent of autumn leaves, and the whir of a covey of birds rising from the stubble, and he longed for partridge-shooting. But they shot men, not birds, in the Crimea. "The Russians are brave," he wrote, "certainly inferior to none; their work is stupendous, their shell practice is beautiful." Gordon was never one to grudge praise to his enemies.

Every day men died of disease, or were killed or wounded. On 31st August 1855, Gordon wrote that "Captain Wolseley (90th Regiment), an assistant engineer,

has been wounded by a stone." In spite of stones and shells, Captain Wolseley fought many brave fights, and years afterwards became Lord Wolseley, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, a gallant soldier and a brilliant leader of men.

On 8th September one of the chief holds of the Russians was stormed by the French, who took it after a fierce fight and hoisted on it their flag. This was the signal for the English to attack the great fort of the Redan. With a rush they got to the ditch between them and the fortress, put up their ladders, and entered it. For half-an-hour they held it nobly. Then enormous numbers of fresh Russian troops came to the attack, and our men were driven out with terrible loss. At the same time, at another point, the French were driven back. Nothing was left for the allied troops but to wait till morning. It was decided that when morning came the Highland soldiers must storm and take the Redan. But this the Russians gave them no chance to do.

While Gordon was on duty in the trenches that night he heard a terrific explosion.

"At four next morning," he writes, "I saw a splendid sight. The whole of Sebastopol was in flames, and every now and then great explosions took place, while the rising sun shining on the place had a most beautiful effect. The Russians were leaving the town by the bridge; all the three-deckers were sunk, the steamers alone remaining. Tons and tons of powder must have been blown up. About

eight o'clock I got an order to commence a plan of the works, for which purpose I went to the Redan, where a dreadful sight was presented. The dead were buried in the ditch—the Russians with the English—Mr. Wright" (an English chaplain), "reading the burial service over them."

The fires went on all day, and there were still some prowling Russians in the town, so that it was not safe to enter it.

When the allied forces did go in, they found many dreadful sights. For a whole day and night 3000 wounded men had been untended, and a fourth of them were dead. The town was strewn with shot and shell; buildings were wrecked, or burned down.

"As to plunder," wrote Gordon, "there is nothing but rubbish and fleas, the Russians having carried off everything else."

For some time after the fall of Sebastopol, Gordon and his men were kept busy clearing roads, burning rubbish, counting captured guns, and trying to make the town less unhealthy.

He then went with the troops that attacked Kinburn, a town many miles from Sebastopol, but also on the shores of the Black Sea. When it was taken, he returned to Sebastopol.

For four months he was there, destroying forts, quays, storehouses, barracks, and dockyards; sometimes being fired on by the Russians from across the harbour; never idle, always putting his whole soul into all that he did.

His work was finished in February 1856, and in March peace was declared between Russia and Britain.

The name of Lieutenant Gordon was included by his general in a list of officers who had done gallant service in the war.

By the French Government he was decorated with the Legion of Honour, a reward not often given to so young a man.

A little more than a year of hard training in war had turned Charlie Gordon the boy into Gordon the soldier.

In May 1856 Gordon was sent to Bessarabia, to help to arrange new frontiers for Russia, Turkey, and Roumania. In 1857 he was sent to do the same work in Armenia.

The end of 1858 saw him on his way home to England, a seasoned soldier, and a few months later he was made a captain.

"Chinese Gordon"

For a year after his return from Armenia Gordon was at Chatham, as Field-Work Instructor and Adjutant, teaching the future officers of Engineers what he himself had learned in the trenches.

While he was there, a war that had been going on for some years between Britain and China grew very serious.

Gordon volunteered for service, but when he reached China, in September 1860, the war was nearly at an end. "I am rather late for the amusement, which won't vex mother," he wrote. He found, however, that a number of Englishmen, some of them friends of his, were being kept as prisoners in Pekin by the Chinese. The English and their allies at once marched to Pekin, and demanded that the prisoners should be given up.

The Chinese, scared at the sight of the armies and their big guns, opened the gates. But in the case of many of the prisoners, help had come too late. The Chinese had treated them most brutally, and many had died under torture.

Nothing was left for the allied armies to do but to punish the Chinese for their cruelty, and especially to punish the Emperor for having allowed such vile things to go on in his own great city.