

NAPOLEON IN EGYPT.

HIS DESERT CAMPAIGN AND VICTORY OVER THE MAMELUKES.

The Expedition in the Nature of a Forlorn Hope—Desperate Straits of the Army in the Desert—The Barbarian Cavalry Destroyed at One Blow.

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APOLÉON made no two campaigns alike. Not one but is a marvel, not one that would serve as a model for the others, or, taken alone, illustrate his martial genius and energy. That in Egypt stands out as his first really foreign expedition. French history declares that the republican directory was so glad to be rid of the rising young soldier, whose sudden fame and restless personality was a menace to their usurped authority, they permitted him to carry away the strength and flower of the nation. It is a fact that he cut loose from France, from Europe and placed his army in a position, as he afterward said, where it must die or do things "as great as the ancients." With him went 30,000 soldiers and for leaders of divisions and brigades Kleber, Davoust and Reynier, Caffarelli, Murat and Lannes, Marmont, Berthier and Junot, every promising warrior on the list who possessed youth and daring.

A piece of good fortune inaugurated the campaign. The English fleet in the Mediterranean, which, under Nelson, was to bring disaster upon the expedition at a later stage, was blown away from the African coast by a hurricane and for the time being dispersed. Then the French set sail from the rendezvous at Toulon. The sun arose in splendor, and the incident was one of many when it seemed to burst forth as an omen of victory for this brilliant and imaginative soldier. Again and again during his career the day of great achievements was ushered in by a "Napoleon sun." The squadrons were imposing, and the spectacle at Toulon had in it that element of the picturesque and dramatic which Napoleon managed so effectively to inspire in his followers. The battle-ships stretched out in a single line three miles, and the convoy of transports formed a vast semicircle, six leagues around the bow. Napoleon and the son of Josephine embarked on the Orient, the mammoth ship of the fleet, which mounted 120 guns. The signal for hoisting sail was moved by the future empress from a balcony overlooking the roadstead of the harbor.

The first conquest was a bloodless one, that of Malta, an island well nigh impregnable if well defended. While at Malta word came that Nelson's fleet had united again and was searching for the French. It was still a secret in the expedition what the ultimate destination would be, and when the English entered the harbor to find it empty they didn't know which way to sail. Meantime Napoleon was in front of Alexandria, the first point for conquest, and Nelson had left there only two days before for the Hellespont. Without losing a moment's time troops were put ashore on the desert beach three leagues from the ancient city. The coast did not admit of landing horses and cannon, but as the utmost haste was necessary Napoleon risked the issue with men alone.

Acting on the rule that every hour of time gives a chance for misfortune, he led forward the first 3,000 soldiers in person to the walls of Alexandria, stirring them to the highest enthusiasm by his energetic bearing. Seeing that Caffarelli, who wore a wooden leg as a memento of Crenzuauch, was on shore, he told him to wait until a horse was landed for his use. "No, no," said the hero, "I go with my men if I go on crutches," and took his place at the head of column to make the painful march. At daylight the three small divisions of Kleber, Caffarelli and Desaix stood under the walls, hatted and seeking to make parley. Overtures from the French were answered by a volley from the cannon on the ancient battlements, and Napoleon instantly ordered a charge. Kleber was struck in the head by a shot, but his followers pressed on against the towers, whose occupants held out well, and then into the streets, where the Turks resisted hand to hand. There were many French wounded in the assault, but only 30 killed. These Napoleon caused to be buried at the foot of Pompey's pillar and their names engraved on the tablet, a ceremony witnessed by the whole army and evoking that enthusiasm their leader knew so well how to arouse and, what is more, to direct. At this point the troops and the warships parted company, never to meet until disaster had overtaken the expedition through the destruction of the fleet in Aboukir bay. But the flotilla conveying the artillery, provisions and ammunition passed along the Mediterranean shores to the western branch of the Nile, where it was to ascend and meet the army 30 miles below Cairo.

Meanwhile the soldiers had 60 miles to march in the burning summer season over the dreary desert, barren, waterless and sun parched. There, too, they encountered in all their barbaric fierceness and strength the hordes of Mamelukes.

The Mamelukes at the close of the eighteenth century resembled the terrible Janizaries of Turkey—except that the former were mounted—and the Praetorian bands of Rome. They were at once the protectors and the terror of the sovereigns. At the time of the invasion Egypt was divided into 24 districts, each ruled by a bey. The bays each maintained a force of 500 or 600 horsemen, originally bought as slaves from the borders of the Caspian and Black seas and trained to war, after embracing Mohammedanism. They always fought on horseback and in line. Being completely armed, intrepid and skillful, they formed the best cavalry in the world, while their gross and mercenary natures and unsparing cruelty made them the real lords of Egypt, the oppressors of the people. Sir Walter Scott thus describes their meeting with the French on the march from Alexandria to Cairo: "The whole plain was covered with Mamelukes, mounted on the finest Arabian steeds and armed with pistols, carbines and blunderbusses of the best English workmanship, their plumed turbans waving in the air, and their rich dresses and arms glittering in the sun. Entertaining a high contempt for the French force as consisting almost entirely of infantry, this splendid barbaric cavalry watched every opportunity for charging them, nor did a single straggler escape the unrelenting edge of their sabres. Their charge was almost as swift as the wind, and as their severe bits enabled them to halt or wheel their horses at full gallop their retreat was as rapid as their advance. Even the practiced veterans of Italy were embarrassed by this mode of fighting."

Napoleon promptly adapted his formation of lines to the Mameluke style of warfare. The five divisions were drilled to throw themselves into five squares, six ranks deep on the fronts, with the artillery at angles and cavalry, with baggage, in the center. These squares moved across the desert intact, all facing in one direction, the side columns marching by the flank. When charged by the Mamelukes, the masses came to a halt and the side and rear lines fronted, thus facing the foe in all directions. In close action the front ranks knelt so that the rear rank could fire over them. Several small encounters on the way to Cairo brought the army to high efficiency in repelling or attacking the Mamelukes.

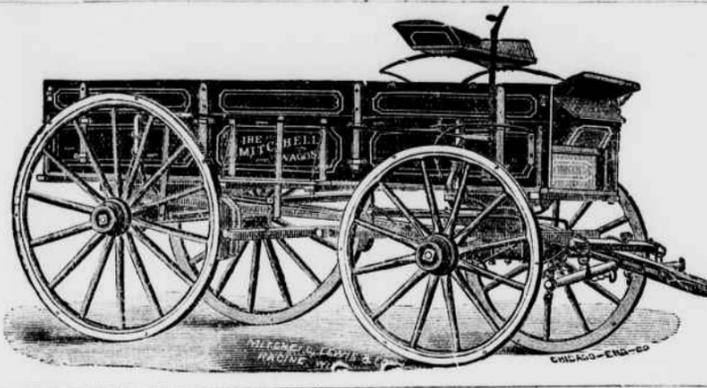


DESTRUCTION OF THE MAMELUKES.

On the tedious march Napoleon strode on ahead, giving his men an example of hardihood and determination. Though his face was habitually gloomy and sphinxlike, his restless activity could but arouse enthusiasm, and enthusiasm was needed. The soldiers grumbled at their hardships, and the officers openly expressed disgust. Marat and Lannes, the future favorites of their chief, trod their cockades in the sand and railed at the mad folly of the expedition.

Finally the column reached the Nile and united with the flotilla. Seven days later it reached Cairo, where Murad Bey, the chief of the Mameluke horde, had assembled 12,000 followers, each having two armed slaves to fight on foot. The latter, numbering 24,000, were placed behind intrenchments on the western bank of the Nile, covering the city opposite. After deploying his squares en echelon, or like steps, with the right flank of each refused, Napoleon marched upon the trenches, but discovering that the cannon of the Egyptians were in stationary rests and not on carriages, to be turned right or left, he directed a flank movement to escape their direct front fire.

Murad Bey instantly saw the danger and gave the order to charge. With a yell the Mamelukes swept from their places on the flanks of the batteries and circled around the advancing lines. Napoleon allowed them to ride up within half pistol shot before opening fire. Meanwhile he harangued the legions, calling upon them to stand fast. To the division in front of the pyramids he exclaimed, "Soldiers, from yon lofty summits 40 centuries look down upon you." His face beamed with the ardor of combat as the veterans remembered it from Italy, and the squares stood the shock



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like invincibles. Musketry, grapeshot and shells from the lines and the angles mowed down the fierce riders of the desert, and with unparalleled desperation they forced their horses through the deep ranks, then backed them out to clear a pathway with their iron heels. Failing in that, they hurled upon the solid ranks their pistols and poniards, while those who fell unhorsed crawled on the ground and slashed at the legs of the French soldiers with knives and scimitars. But the barbaric valor was wasted. The bands one by one deserted and plunged into the Nile. Then the slaves abandoned the trenches, and the French rushed to the bank of the river, keeping up the slaughter until only Murad and a bodyguard of a few hundred horsemen remained. Thus, at a swoop, was destroyed the finest body of horseback fighters ever seen upon the earth. Napoleon, viewing the wrecks of the once mighty host, declared, "Could I have united the Mameluke horse to my French infantry, I would have reckoned myself master of the world." Their overwhelming defeat struck terror to the Moslems, and Napoleon was named, in memory of the rolling flash of his musketry and cannon volleys, Sultan Kebir, king of fire.

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