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# Arabi and his household



## ARABI AND HIS HOUSEHOLD.

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‘REPORT me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied.’ I wrote these last words of Hamlet on a photograph of Arabi which a friend asked me for at Cairo. But that friend had personal reason for supporting the rule of the English officials in Egypt, and had also doubt as to the possibility of a constitutional government succeeding in a country which could not boast a House of Peers. Other Englishmen have said to me, since I have come home : ‘Arabi is a good man, and his aims are honest. I know it and you know it, but we dare not say it. A lady may say what she likes, but a man is called unpatriotic who ventures to say a word that is good of the man England is determined to crush ; it may injure us if we speak as we think.’ But I, like Master Shadow, present no mark to the enemy. I have spoken what I knew to be the truth all through the war, and I wrote down these recollections of Arabi and his family, which I knew must make him appear less of an ogre than he was generally supposed to be some time ago, though not intending them for immediate publication. But now news has reached me from Cairo that Arabi’s wife has had to find a refuge with a high-minded princess, who has always been known as one who loved Egypt, and that that princess is consequently in danger of arrest ; that Arabi’s mother is hidden in a poor quarter of the town, afraid to face the vengeance of his enemies now in power ; and it is hoping to interest Englishmen in this family—simple, honest, hospitable, as I found them, and who are now poor, hunted, in danger—that I publish them now.

In appearance Arabi is a tall, strongly-built man ; his face is

grave, almost stern, but his smile is very pleasant. His photographs reproduce the sternness, but not the smile, and are, I believe, partly responsible for the ready belief which the absurd tales of his ferocity and bloodthirstiness have gained. He always wears the blue Egyptian uniform, the red tarboosh pushed back on his head, and the sword, whose imaginary feats rival those of Excalibur, by his side. 'I make no more jokes,' said M. de Blignières, the sharp-tongued Controller, after Arabi had been made Minister of War; 'Arabi comes to the Council with his big sword on, and I think it better to be silent.' 'Arabi drew his sword, threatened the Notables, and told Sultan Pasha he would make his children fatherless and his wife a widow,' was the story sent to England when the Chamber demanded the right of voting the Budget. It was hardly necessary for the old and childless Sultan Pasha to deny this story altogether when brought to his ears. 'Arabi flourished his sword and broke several windows,' cries the hysterical correspondent of an English newspaper later on.

As a matter of fact, I believe him to be exceedingly gentle and humane. An English official, one of the fairest of his class, said to me: 'He has too much of the gentleness of the fellah, and too little of the brute in him to succeed. If he would take lessons in brutality at 100 francs a week, he would have a much better chance of getting on.' He was for months the 'almost absolute ruler of Egypt, and even from his enemies comes no story of cruelty or oppression, except that of the torture of the Circassian officers; and having searched the Blue-book laid before Parliament for proof of this, I can only find a despatch from our Minister saying a European gentleman has told him that two natives had told him that they had heard cries proceeding from the prison where the Circassians were confined, from which is inferred that they were being tortured.

I do not understand Arabic, the only language spoken by Arabi, so could not judge of his eloquence. It is said to be striking, and his words well chosen. His intimate knowledge of the Koran and all the literature of his religion, including our own Old Testament books, will account for this, just as a life-long

study of the English Bible is said to lend force and vigour to the language of one of our own great orators. He speaks very earnestly, looking you straight in the face with honest eyes. I have an entire belief in his truthfulness ; partly from his manner ; partly because from everyone, without exception, who had known him long or watched his career—some of them members of the Viceregal family—I heard on this point the same report—‘ He is incapable of speaking untruth ’ ; partly because it was many months ago—it was in November—that my husband first saw and spoke with him, and to every word he said then he has adhered ever since. The abhorrence of Ismail which he then expressed has been proved to be real, though long disbelieved, by the refusal to allow his emissaries to land at Alexandria in April, and the proposal to cut his name out of the Civil List when he was found to be spending his money in intrigues in Egypt. And his sentiments towards the Sultan seem to be the same now as when he said : ‘ We honour him as Caliph and as suzerain ; we belong to him ; his dominion is a great house, and Egypt is one of the rooms in that house ; we acknowledge him as our lord, but we like to have our room to ourselves.’ ‘ You may believe every word spoken by him,’ said a Princess of the family of Mehemet Ali, ‘ because he is a man who fears God.’ I believe it is the implicit faith in his honesty and truth which prevails that accounts for much of his immense influence, which undoubtedly exists. At Luxor, in January, we noticed the eager interest taken by the people in hearing of him ; and European gentlemen, living as overseers on estates still higher up, told us that his was the name continually on men’s lips. I have been told that when Sir Rivers Wilson first went to Egypt, and found the people groaning under the tyranny of Ismail, his name took possession of the people in the same way, and whenever a man suffered an injustice or a wrong, he said : ‘ The Wilson will be sure to set it right.’ But later on the Control did not inspire enthusiasm, and Arabi became the centre of the people’s desire. Of his childhood I know nothing, except that his old mother told me he was ‘ always a good son.’ The first noteworthy action of his I can hear of was in the days of Said Pasha. Said devoted himself



to his army, its drill and discipline. At one time he took it into his head that keeping the Fast of Ramadan was injurious to the troops, and he issued an order that the fast was not to be observed. After a few days he was told that some of the soldiers were neglecting his orders. Indignant at their disobedience, he himself went out, and, walking along the ranks, asked each man, 'Do you fast?' 'Do you?' A few confessed with fear and trembling—many denied. At last a young soldier stepped forward and said very respectfully, 'Oh, Effendina! I have read in the Commandment of God, given in the Koran, that we must fast. If I neglect the commands of my God, how shall I be faithful to those of an earthly ruler?' 'What is your name?' 'Ahmed Arabi.' 'Take him from my sight!' No one expected ever to see him again, but next day he was not only sent back to his regiment, but with the increased rank of corporal. This is the man of whom we read in the despatches of last winter that the motive power of all his actions is cowardice.

I next hear of him in the disastrous Abyssinian War. His duty was to arrange for the transport of provisions and baggage—not much glory or fame to be gathered there, though no fault was found with his efficiency or discipline. But even then, I have been told by a European officer who went through the campaign, his influence was growing. Each night, when the day's work was done, it was round him that the soldiers gathered, and he preached, or spoke, or recited the Koran to them.

It was in February, last year, that the Egyptian authorities, having no ground of accusation against Arabi, but distrusting him as 'a man with ideas,' tried to put him out of the way quietly, but failed. He had a short time before, in conjunction with two other colonels, Abdullal, of the Black Regiment, and Ali Fehmy, presented a petition asking for an inquiry into the grievances of the army, which was accepted. In February, these three colonels received a summons from the Khedive to come to the Abdin Palace to receive orders for the arrangement of a procession which was to be formed next day on the occasion of the marriage of one of the Princesses. Their suspicions were aroused, and before going to the Palace they left a message with their regi-

ments—‘ If we are not back at sunset, come for us.’ As soon as they arrived at the Palace they were seized, thrown into a room, their swords taken from them, and the doors locked. Whether their friends would ever have seen them again is a matter for speculation ; all Cairo to this day says ‘ No ’ ; but at sunset the soldiers arrived, demanding their officers, and then it was too late to do anything but throw the doors open as quickly as might be and let the prisoners out. Those who saw the release say that the two other colonels seemed in a great hurry to be safe in their barracks again, but Arabi walked slowly out, calm and unmoved as usual. Those who take the trouble may read this story, plainly told in the Blue-books published in June. Why is it that one hears so often of Arabi’s mutiny, but never of the first act in the piece which led to it ?

I am not writing a history of Arabi, and need not go into the details of the September demonstration, when the soldiers who had learnt their way to the Palace to release the colonels appeared there again with a demand for a Constitution, which was promised them. In December the Khedive made him Under-Secretary of War, whether with the idea of strengthening the Government, or that Arabi’s popularity would be lessened by his acceptance of office, I cannot tell.

In the Government of Mahmoud Samy, which came into office on the 3rd of February, he became Minister of War. His popularity was then at its height in Cairo. Many European officials paying the necessary formal visits to the new Ministers met him for the first time, and one and all came away with a more favourable impression of him than they had before. Men who a month earlier had spoken of him as beneath contempt now boasted of a few civil words from him. At the American public dinner, at which he was a guest and made a short speech in Arabic, those who were present, unable to judge of his eloquence, could talk of nothing but the charm of his smile.

It was just at this time that the Sacred Carpet was brought back from Mecca. It is a time of great rejoicing among the people, and all Cairo went out to meet it. When Arabi appeared in the procession the enthusiasm of the people knew no bounds.



They threw themselves upon him, kissed his hands, his knees, his feet, tore his gloves into fragments to keep in memory of him. The soldiers tried in vain to beat them back, but he stopped them, and, lifting his hand, said quietly, 'Go back, my children,' and in an instant was obeyed. The Khedive's wife was looking on from a window ill-pleased. 'See,' she said, 'how this man is stealing the hearts of the people.' Her own husband had passed, receiving but little notice, just before.

I had already seen and spoken with Arabi, but it was not until the end of February that I went, with Lady Anne Blunt, to see his wife. They had moved some little time before to a new house, large and dilapidated looking, and which Arabi was represented as having fitted up in a luxurious style ; in fact, at that time the crime most frequently alleged against him was that he had bought carpets to the amount of £120. I must confess that there were some pieces of new and not beautiful European carpets in the chief rooms, but I must add that if Arabi paid £120 for them he made a very bad bargain. I do not know how he has spent his official salary, but I have heard very lately, from one who has taken the trouble to investigate the truth of the stories of his avarice, that he has the same small amount of money to his credit now that he had before he was either Pasha or Minister, and that the foundation of the story of his having become a large landed proprietor is his having become trustee for the orphan child of an old friend of his who had been kind to him.

The sole furniture of the reception room of Arabi's wife consisted of small hard divans covered with brown linen and a tiny table with a crochet antimacassar thrown over it. On the white-washed walls the only ornaments were photographs of him in black wooden frames, and one larger photograph of the Sacred Stone at Mecca. In the room where Arabi himself sat and received were a similar hard divan, two or three chairs, a table, and an ink-stand covered with stains. His wife was ready to receive us, having heard an hour or two earlier of our intended visit. She greeted us warmly, speaking in Arabic, which Lady Anne interpreted to me. She has a pleasant, intelligent expression ; but, having five children living out of fourteen that have been born to her, looked

rather overcome with the cares of maternity, her beauty dimmed since the time when the tall, grave soldier she had seen passing under her window every day looked up at last, and saw and loved her. She wore a long dress of green silk. 'My husband hates this long train,' she told us afterwards; 'he would like to take a knife and cut it off, but I say I must have a fashionable dress to wear when I visit the Khedive's wife and other ladies.' I think there are English husbands who, in this grievance at least, will sympathise with Arabi.

An old woman with white hair, dressed in the common country fashion—a woollen petticoat and blue cotton jacket—came into the room and occupied herself with the children. Presently we found that she was Arabi's mother. She spoke with great energy and vivacity, welcoming us and talking of her son with much affection and pride. 'I am only a fellah woman,' she said, 'but I am the mother of Ahmed Arabi.' She took me twice into another room to see an oleograph, of which she was very proud, representing him in staring colours. After a short time, a negro boy, the only visible attendant, brought in a tray, and we were invited to sit down and eat. The meal began with boiled chicken and broth, which were followed by forcemeat balls, rice, vegetables, sweet pastry, and other native dishes in abundance, though our hostess lamented the short notice she had been given of our visit. If she had known in time she would have had a cow killed. Two little girls, her daughters, waited on us, and brought water to wash our hands. She, herself, kept up an animated conversation, and gave us a vivid account of the imprisonment of the three colonels and their rescue. When they were in prison the others were frightened, but Arabi was not. He said: 'It is not the will of God that we should perish.' 'When I heard what had happened, though I was almost too ill to leave the house, I hired a carriage and drove up towards the palace to ask for news of them, but could hear nothing, and soon I had to come back, and that evening my baby was born. At the moment of her birth came the news that my husband had been released by the soldiers, so I called her "Bushra"' (good tidings). She was brought in for us to see, a tiny, thin, black-eyed creature, clinging to her grand-

mother. She is her father's favourite, they said—she and Saida, the eldest girl, who was with him when he was quartered at Alexandria, and Hassan, a bright-eyed little imp of four years. We had paid a long visit, and got away after many leave-takings and hopes for their wellbeing as well as that of 'El Bey.' 'Inshallah,' his wife, answered rather sadly. 'They say the Christian Powers want to do something to my husband. I don't understand it at all. We can't get on without the Christians, or they without us. Why can't we all live in peace together?'

In November I had been taken to see Madame Sherif Pasha, a voluble lady, full of importance, and telling us between the puffs of her cigarette how she had had a visit from Arabi's wife, and had spoken severely to her, and told her to go home and make her husband behave better and keep him from these *bêtises*, and the poor woman had cried and promised to do her best. Now, in February, Madame Sherif had retired to obscurity, and Madame Arabi was wife of the Minister of War.

Sherif himself I did not know, but those who knew him found him a pleasant companion, a plausible speaker, and a crack billiard-player. Arabi, terribly in earnest about some important question, calling at his house and finding him engrossed in a game of billiards, would retire in disgust. A clear-sighted foreign Consul said of him: 'Sherif is full of good intentions, but he has never any intention of carrying them out.' The most able of our English officials said of him, 'He is honest in intention, hazy in his ideas, indolent in action; but, as partisanship for his Ministry seems to be one of the chief causes that has led us into war, let us say the best of him now.'

Towards the end of March, before we left Cairo, Arabi came to say good-bye to us. A little worried and troubled by false accusations made against him in English newspapers, he was still confident that some day his character would be cleared. 'They must know some day that it is the good of the people that we seek.' A little time before their work was judged, that was all he asked. This has been denied him, and those who thought it well to 'bring things to a crisis and hasten intervention' by raising a quarrel between him and the Khedive have done their work. I



spoke of my visit to his house, and he said: 'Our women have not been in the habit of receiving the visits of the ladies of Europe, so if in any way they failed in the courtesy and attention due to a guest, I hope you will understand it was not from want of goodwill, but from want of knowledge.' I showed him a picture of my little boy; he raised it to his lips and kissed it, hoping he would some day come to Egypt to be the friend of his children. Perhaps I have not been a fair judge in his cause since then.

A day or two before we left I went again to see his wife. She looked a little sadder, a little more anxious, than when I had last seen her, but was on hospitable cares intent, and soon went out of the room to see to the preparation of dinner. I had an Italian lady with me as interpreter, who spoke French and Arabic very well. They had expected me this time, and made more preparations, and when the meal was ready and I saw dish after dish coming in, I was in despair until I found that one of the children, my little bright-eyed friend Hassan, was quite ready to sit by me, and be fed from my plate, and so I disposed of my share to his great satisfaction. 'I like this better than having to wait downstairs till dinner is over,' he said; 'then they forget me and eat up all the good things.' By the time dessert arrived he said he liked me but hated other ladies, and would like to come and see me in England, but did not know how he could manage it, as his papa wanted the carriage every day. I advised him to learn English, and his mother said she would like to send him to one of the Christian schools in Cairo, 'But how can I send him where he would hear his father spoken ill of?' She seemed troubled, poor woman, because the Khedive's wife, who used to be good and kind to her, now says: 'How can we be friends when your husband is such a bad man?' The old mother sat in the corner attending to the children and counting over her beads. I said, 'Are you not proud now your son is a Pasha?' 'No,' she said, 'we were happier in the old days when we had him with us always and feared nothing. Now he gets up at daybreak and has only time to say his prayers before there are people waiting for him with petitions, and he has to attend to them and then go to his business, and often he is not back here until after midnight,

and until he comes I cannot sleep, I cannot rest ; I can do nothing but pray for him all the time. There are many who wish him evil and they will try to destroy him. A few days ago he came home suffering great pain, and I was sure then he had been poisoned ; but I got him a hot bath and remedies and he grew better, and since then I keep even the water that he drinks locked up. But, say all I can, I cannot frighten him or make him take care of himself ; he always says, " God will preserve me."

' God will preserve me ! ' ' It is not the will of God that we should perish.' The words of a man who believes God has given him work to do and will support him while he does it—not the words of a coward. But those who wrote the published despatches say that cowardice is the mainspring of his character, and surely they know better than his old mother !

' The Khedive is unjust to him,' she went on ; ' he will give him no help or support, and yet if anything goes wrong, or there is a disturbance ever so far away, Arabi is blamed for it.' She had a grievance against her son also. He had been already working hard towards the abolition of slavery, and I found that in this matter his foes were they of his own household. ' He ought not to do it,' the old woman said ; ' he does not see the consequences as I do. All the slaves will leave as soon as they are freed, and European women will take their places, and they will seduce their masters, and their children will be stronger than ours, and we shall be driven out of the country.' Poor old soul ! she must have had sore and anxious days since then. I often think of her, and of the poor wife, puzzled and troubled, ' Why should the Christian Powers want to harm my husband ? '