

**GILBERT KEITH
CHESTERTON**

LORD KITCHENER

Gilbert Chesterton

Lord Kitchener

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G. K. Chesterton

Lord Kitchener

LORD KITCHENER

Horatio Herbert Kitchener was Irish by birth but English by extraction, being born in County Kerry, the son of an English colonel. The fanciful might see in this first and accidental fact the presence of this simple and practical man amid the more mystical western problems and dreams which were very distant from his mind, an element which clings to all his career and gives it an unconscious poetry. He had many qualities of the epic hero, and especially this – that he was the last man in the world to be the epic poet. There is something almost provocative to superstition in the way in which he stands at every turn as the symbol of the special trials and the modern transfiguration of England; from this moment when he was born among the peasants of Ireland to the moment when he died upon the sea, seeking at the other end of the world the other great peasant civilisation of Russia. Yet at each of these symbolic moments he is, if not as unconscious as a symbol, then as silent as a symbol; he is speechless and supremely significant, like an ensign or a flag. The superficial picturesqueness of his life, at least, lies very much in this – that he was like a hero condemned by fate to act an allegory.

We find this, for instance, in one of the very first and perhaps one of the most picturesque of all the facts that are recorded or reported of him. As a youth, tall, very shy and quiet, he was only notable for intellectual interests of the soberest and most methodical sort, especially for the close study of mathematics. This also, incidentally, was typical enough, for his work in Egypt and the Soudan, by which his fame was established, was based wholly upon such calculations. It was not merely mathematical but literally geometrical. His work bore the same relation to Gordon's that a rigid mathematical diagram bears to a rough pencil sketch on which it is based. Yet the student thus bent on the strictest side of his profession, studying it at Woolwich and entering the Engineers as the most severely scientific branch of the army, had as a first experience of war something so romantic that it has been counted incredible, yet something so relevant to the great reality of to-day that it might have been made up centuries after his death, as a myth is made up about a god. He happened to be in France in the most tragic hour that France has ever known or, please God, will ever know. She was bearing alone the weight of that alien tyranny, of that hopeless and almost lifeless violence, which the other nations have since found to be the worst of all the terrors which God tolerates in this world. She trod that winepress alone; and of the peoples there were none to help her. In 1870 the Prussian had already encircled Paris, and General Chanzy was fighting against enormous odds to push northwards to its relief, when his army was joined by the young and silent traveller from England. All that was in Kitchener's mind or motives will perhaps never be known. France was still something of an ideal of civilisation for many of the more generous English gentry. Prussia was never really an ideal for anybody, even the Prussians, and mere success, which could not make her an ideal, had not yet calamitously made her a model. There was in it also, no doubt, a touch of the schoolboy who runs away to sea – that touch of the schoolboy without the sense of which the staidest Englishman will always be inexplicable. But considered historically there is something strangely moving about the incident – the fact that Kitchener was a French soldier almost before he was an English one. As Hannibal was dedicated in boyhood to war against the eagles of Rome, Kitchener was dedicated, almost in boyhood, to war against the eagles of Germany. Romance came to this realist, whether by impulse or by accident, like a wind from without, as first love will come to the woman-hater. He was already, both by fate and choice, something more than he had meant to be. The mathematician, we might almost say the calculating boy, was already gambling in the highest lottery which led to the

highest and most historic loss. The engineer devoted to discipline was already a free lance, because already a knight-errant.

He returned to England to continue his comparatively humdrum order of advancement; and the next call that came to him was of a strangely different and yet also of a strangely significant kind. The Palestine Exploration Fund sent him with another officer to conduct topographical and antiquarian investigations in a country where practical exertions are always relieved against a curiously incongruous background – as if they were setting up telegraph-posts through the Garden of Eden or opening a railway station at the New Jerusalem. But the contrast between antiquity and modernity was not the only one; there was still the sort of contrast that can be a collision. Kitchener was almost immediately to come in contact with what was to be, in various aspects, the problem of his life – the modern fanaticisms of the Near East. There is an English proverb which asks whether the mountain goes to Mahomet or he to the mountain, and it may be a question whether his religion be the cause or the effect of a certain spirit, vivid and yet strangely negative, which dwells in such deserts. Walking among the olives of Gaza or looking on the Philistine plain, such travellers may well feel that they are treading on cold volcanoes, as empty as the mountains of the moon. But the mountain of Mahomet is not yet an extinct volcano.

Kitchener, in these first days of seemingly mild and minute duties, was early aware of it. At Safed, in the Galilean hills, his small party had found itself surrounded by an Arab mob, stricken suddenly mad with emotions unintelligible to the political mobs of the West. He was himself wounded, but, defending himself as best he could with a walking-stick, not only saved his own life but that of his fellow-officer, Lieutenant Conder, who had been beaten to the earth with an Arab club. He continued his work indeed with prosaic pertinacity, and developed in the survey of the Holy Land all that almost secretive enthusiasm for detail which lasted all his life. Of the most famous English guide-book he made the characteristic remark, “Where Murray has seven names I have a hundred and sixteen.” Most men, in speaking or writing of such a thing, would certainly have said “a hundred.” It is characteristic of his type that he did not even think in round numbers. But there was in him, parallel to this almost arithmetical passion, another quality which is, in a double sense, the secret of his life. For it was the cause of at least half his success; and yet he very successfully concealed it – especially from his admirers.

The paradox of all this part of his life lies in this – that, destined as he was to be the greatest enemy of Mahomedanism, he was quite exceptionally a friend of Mahomedans. He had been first received in that land, so to speak, with a blow on the head with a club; he was destined to break the sword of the last Arab conqueror, to wreck his holy city and treat all the religious traditions of it with a deliberate desecration which has often been held oppressive and was undoubtedly ruthless. Yet with the individual Moslem he had a sort of natural brotherhood which has never been explained. Had it been shown by a soldier of the Crusades, it would have been called witchcraft. In this, as in many other cases, the advance of a larger enlightenment prevents us from calling it anything. There was mixed with it, no doubt, the deep Moslem admiration for mere masculinity, which has probably by its exaggeration permitted the Moslem subordination of women. But Kitchener (who was himself accused, rightly or wrongly, of a disdain for women) must have himself contributed some other element to the strangest of international sympathies. Whatever it was, it must be constantly kept in mind as running parallel to his scientific industry and particularity; for it was these two powers, used systematically for many years before the event, that prepared the ground for the overthrow of that wild papacy and wandering empire which so long hung in the desert, like a mirage to mislead and to destroy.

Kitchener was called away in 1878 to similar surveying duties in Cyprus, and afterwards in Anatolia, where the same faculty obtained him a *firman*, making him safe in all the Holy Cities of Islam. He also dealt much with the Turkish fugitives fleeing from the Russian guns to Erzerum – whither, so long after, the guns were to follow. But it is with his later summons to Egypt that we feel

he has returned to the theatre of the great things of his life. It is not necessary in this rough sketch to discuss the rights and wrongs or the general international origin of the British occupation of Egypt; the degree of praise or blame to be given to the Khedive, who was the nominal ruler, or to Arabi, the Nationalist leader, who for a time seized the chief power in his place. Kitchener's services in the operations by which Arabi was defeated were confined to some reconnaissance work immediately preceding the bombardment of Alexandria; and the problem with which his own personality became identified was not that of the Government of Egypt, but of the more barbaric power beyond, by which Egypt, and any powers ruling it, came to be increasingly imperilled. And what advanced him rapidly to posts of real responsibility in the new politics of the country was the knowledge he already had of wilder men and more mysterious forces than could be found in Egyptian courts or even Egyptian camps. It was the combination, of which we have already spoken, of detailed experience and almost eccentric sympathy. In practice it was his knowledge of Arabic, and still more his knowledge of Arabs.

There is in Islam a paradox which is perhaps a permanent menace. The great creed born in the desert creates a kind of ecstasy out of the very emptiness of its own land, and even, one may say, out of the emptiness of its own theology. It affirms, with no little sublimity, something that is not merely the singleness but rather the solitude of God. There is the same extreme simplification in the solitary figure of the Prophet; and yet this isolation perpetually reacts into its own opposite. A void is made in the heart of Islam which has to be filled up again and again by a mere repetition of the revolution that founded it. There are no sacraments; the only thing that can happen is a sort of apocalypse, as unique as the end of the world; so the apocalypse can only be repeated and the world end again and again. There are no priests; and yet this equality can only breed a multitude of lawless prophets almost as numerous as priests. The very dogma that there is only one Mahomet produces an endless procession of Mahomets. Of these the mightiest in modern times were the man whose name was Ahmed, and whose more famous title was the Mahdi; and his more ferocious successor Abdullahi, who was generally known as the Khalifa. These great fanatics, or great creators of fanaticism, succeeded in making a militarism almost as famous and formidable as that of the Turkish Empire on whose frontiers it hovered, and in spreading a reign of terror such as can seldom be organised except by civilisation. With Napoleonic suddenness and success the Mahdist hordes had fallen on the army of Hicks Pasha, when it left its camp at Omdurman, on the Nile opposite Khartoum, and had cut it to pieces in a fashion incredible. They had established at Omdurman their Holy City, the Rome of their nomadic Roman Empire. Towards that terrible place many adventurous men, like poor Hicks, had gone and were destined to go. The sands that encircled it were like that entrance to the lion's cavern in the fable, towards which many footprints pointed, and from which none returned.

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