

Theodore, to improve many things, had he shown intelligence and adaptability. But he cared for nothing except his own spiritual independence. The king was very amenable to good advice, and had also laid him under special obligations by forcibly repressing a large party of the priests that for dogmatic reasons was hostile to him; but instead of exercising a moderating influence upon him, the prelate soon brought matters to a complete breach. When the German missionary Krapf met the king in the heyday of his victorious career, in the spring of 1855, he still appeared to be in heart and soul at one with the Abuna; but any one who is acquainted with the quarrels that subsequently arose can mark the root of them in the jealous temper which the language of the bishop, reported by Krapf, even then revealed. Soon afterwards a mutiny broke out in the army in Shoa, which to all appearance had been stirred up by the Abuna and the second spiritual authority in the kingdom, the supreme head of the monks. This was repressed without leading to an open conflict with the clerics. But soon a worse controversy arose. The king began to lay hands on the vast revenues of the Church to meet the demands of his army,—a measure certainly contrary to every usage of the country, and dictated only by sheerest necessity. Further, he required the priests to uncover in his presence (he being filled with the Spirit of God), just as they uncovered in presence of the ark (or altar), which was the Seat of God. In these controversies the king had to give way at first, but soon it went hard with the clergy. The biographer, though as respectful in his feeling towards the bishop as towards the king, accumulates all sorts of details fitted to make plain the contempt and hatred which Theodore gradually and increasingly came to feel towards the haughty head of the Church and the entire clergy. Even the supreme head of that



Church, the patriarch of Alexandria, on one occasion when he visited Abyssinia, had seriously compromised himself in the king's eyes. Moreover, the Abuna appears to have been far from exemplary in his private life. Theodore, accordingly, in the course of time, broke loose from all clerical restraints. In his later years he deliberately set fire to sacred buildings, burned down the town of Gondar precisely because it was "the city of the priests," threw the Abuna into prison, and finally even, on his own authority, issued to himself and his soldiers a dispensation from fasting, perhaps the most important duty of Abyssinian Christianity; and all this the priesthood had silently to endure. On the other hand, of course, their hatred helped to alienate the people from the king, and the Abuna in his prison maintained close relations with the more important rebels.

In the first years of his reign Theodore had two faithful counsellors in Plowden, the British consul, and John Bell, who had come into the country along with Plowden, had almost become an Abyssinian, and adhered with touching fidelity to the master whose service he had joined. These two had a great influence in stimulating his desire for the introduction of European manners, or rather of the arts of Europe; when he compared them and what he learned from them about Europe with his own Abyssinians, the latter could not but fall greatly in his estimation, and perhaps in the end he even came to value his own people too lightly, and to judge them too severely. Plowden, unfortunately, was recalled by his Government to the port of Massowa, and on his journey (March 1860) fell into the hands of a rebel, a cousin of the king, receiving wounds of which he soon afterwards died. Theodore at once set out against the miscreant, who fell in the battle that followed, slain, it is said, by the hand of Bell, who in his



turn was killed while shielding the king with his own person. Theodore terribly avenged his two friends, whose loss was never repaired to him. Queen Tewabetch, to whom, as we have seen, he clung with all his soul, had died previously on 18th August 1858; Flad tells us that he regarded her death as a divine judgment on him for having shortly before caused the wife of an arch-rebel who had fallen into his hands to be cruelly butchered.

Continual conflicts left the king no leisure to carry out reforms, however much his heart may have been set on them. Before everything else the construction of roads, bridges, and viaducts was a necessity for the country, and with road-making he did actually make a beginning. The first section was completed in 1858, under the direction of Zander, a German painter. When he complained that the necessary assistance was not being given to him, the king caused the governor of the district to be whipped and laid in irons, rewarding Zander richly. Theodore desired nothing more ardently than the immigration of European artisans and mechanics. With more of these and fewer missionaries, much disaster would have been averted and much good done.

To outward seeming Theodore was at the height of his power between 1861 and 1863. It was only in these years that he actually wielded authority, through his governor, over the whole of Tigré, the one province which has tolerably easy communications with the coast. But his struggles with the Wollos wasted his strength, and continually gave rebels renewed opportunities to rise. From 1863 onwards, his difficulties increased day by day. At the same time the king's disposition steadily became gloomier. From the first he had been capricious, subject to violent outbursts of wrath, and in his passion capable of the most dreadful actions. But now he experienced



disappointment after disappointment. Prince Menilek of Shoa escaped from Makdala in 1865, and again set up the kingdom of his fathers; Theodore attempted to dethrone him once more, but was compelled to retire from Shoa without accomplishing his object. One province after another was lost, temporarily or permanently. Even in the earlier years of his sovereignty many of his grandees in whom he had reposed perfect confidence had left him and become rebels. This made him ever more mistrustful, and increased his contempt for his fellow-countrymen. Ultimately, on the slightest suspicion, or even out of mere caprice, he would put in irons, for a longer or shorter time, his most faithful servants, some of whom in the long-run proved their fidelity by dying with him. In his youthful days as robber chief and adventurer he had resembled David, who, secure of his future, had led a freebooter life among the mountains of southern Judah (of course one must remember that the African character is much ruder still than that of ancient Israel); now, in one aspect at least, he often resembled Saul when the evil spirit had come upon him. When Theodore sat gloomily brooding, every one who knew him took care to avoid him; kindly attendants sought to keep off visitors with the transparent pretence that the king was asleep.

It is no more true of Theodore than of any other extraordinary man, that his whole character was suddenly transformed. All his faults showed themselves at an early period, some of them in a very marked way; but in late years his bad qualities became more and more prominent, and overgrew his better nature. Terunesh, the proud daughter of the aged Ubié, whom he married some five years after the death of the beloved Tewabetch, was unable to hold his affections; and with the full consciousness that he was doing wrong he abandoned himself to the usual



polygamy of the native princes. Like most of the Abyssinian grandees, he had always been a heavy drinker; but in his last years, contrary to his earlier practice, he often got drunk, and when in this condition gave orders of the most bloody description, which he afterwards bitterly repented. But this man, who sometimes in anger or drunkenness, sometimes with the clear conscience of a ruler or judge sacrificing to the public weal or to the cause of righteousness, butchered thousands of people, and burned churches and cities to the ground—this very man played in the most genial way with little children, in his expeditions was scrupulously careful that the women and children, numbers of whom always accompany an Abyssinian army, should come to no harm, and was ready to assist personally the exhausted soldier who had fallen out of the ranks.

It would serve no purpose to go into details of the embroilment with England in which Theodore ultimately met his death. It was a singular combination of unfortunate circumstances, misunderstandings, blunders, and crimes. Consul Cameron, a man worthy of all respect, was not acquainted with Abyssinia and Theodore as Plowden, his predecessor, had been, neither does he seem to have been a *persona grata* to the king. In the letter of which he was the bearer (October 1862), Earl Russell thanked Theodore courteously and coldly for his treatment of Plowden, when the king felt entitled to expect a direct communication from the sovereign as between equals. Theodore lost no time in expressing to Cameron the hatred he felt against his hereditary enemies, the Turks. But Cameron had instructions to enter into communication with the Egyptian authorities, and this presently made him hateful to Theodore. The king himself, the servant of Christ, had refused all friendly agreement with the unbelieving Egyptians, although the Viceroy Saïd Pasha had taken much pains



in this direction, and it was incomprehensible to him how Christian Europe could hold alliance with Turks, or leave them in possession of lands formerly Christian. We smile at his narrowness; but how long is it since similar views prevailed all over Europe? And did not Russia in her last Eastern war succeed in reviving in Europe, and especially in England, the antipathy of Christians against the unchristian Turks, and in making it serve her own policy of conquest? It was inexcusable that Theodore's letter to the Queen, delivered to the consul, received no answer; the neglect was felt profoundly. Incautious oral, written, or printed utterances of Europeans, communicated idly or in malice, further embittered him. He was well aware that Europeans were his superiors in civilisation; but he had a just sense of his personal dignity, and it stung him to the quick to hear that he was spoken of as a savage. What irritated him above all was to learn that his mother, on whom he rested his claim as a legitimate sovereign, had been spoken of as a kousso-seller.<sup>1</sup> The Jewish missionary Stern made himself particularly obnoxious by utterances of this kind. Theodore had never conceded to the foreign consuls the privilege of inviolability, which is quite unknown to the Abyssinians. He claimed for himself a perfect right to treat discourteous guests exactly as he would treat his own subjects. Thus in 1863 he put in irons the French consul Lejean who had offended him, and afterwards expelled him. In like manner, in January 1864, he put consul Cameron in irons. The other Europeans also, who were under his control, were either imprisoned or kept under prison surveillance. These were for the most part Germans, some of them missionaries, others of them artisans, who had been sent into Abyssinia in the missionary interest, but had been employed by

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 265.



Theodore in cannon-founding and other works not of a particularly evangelistic character; there were, besides, a few travellers and adventurers of various descriptions. Most of them seem to have been worthy persons.

Britain, of course, could not submit quietly to the imprisonment of her consul. But the Government sought, in the first instance, very properly, to win the king to a better temper, and sent Rassam, a born Oriental (of Mosul), and a man of intelligence and address, with a letter from the Queen to Theodore. The latter gave Rassam a very friendly reception (March 1866), and promised to release the captives. But he could never make up his mind to fulfil this promise. Recollections of real or supposed insults continually came in the way. He had, moreover, the idea that in Cameron and the missionaries he possessed valuable hostages whose delivery might be made to depend on the arrival from England of the artisans and implements he so earnestly desired. Personal misunderstandings, and perhaps misrepresentations, did the rest; until, finally, the gloomy despot, hemmed in on every side by manifold straits, caused Rassam also and his suite to be sent to the rocky fastness of Makdala, and there confined. The captivity, judged according to Abyssinian ideas, was certainly of a mild description, and Theodore always maintained friendly feelings towards Rassam, while regarding Cameron, Stern, and some others as his enemies. He tacitly showed his high respect for the Europeans by the immunity for life and limb which he allowed them to enjoy, while he would mutilate or put to death his own subjects on the slightest provocation.

Rassam's imprisonment compelled Britain to declare war. When the troops landed on the Red Sea coast, not far from Massowa, in the end of 1867, Theodore was already in the



direst straits. But wherever he showed himself with his army, he still continued to be undisputed lord; for no one dared to meet him in the field. Had he in these circumstances simply retired before the British troops, and withdrawn with his captives into the hot fever-haunted wilderness of his native Quara, he would have involved his assailants in endless difficulties. Fortunately, however, he determined to choose Makdala—to Abyssinians impregnable—as the place where to concentrate all his fighting power. The same stronghold, more than 9000 feet above sea level, and nearly 4000 feet above the river Beshelo, less than five miles off, in a direct line, was also, as being the place where the prisoners were kept, the objective of the British. Theodore's last march was really a magnificent performance. For the transit of the heavy ordnance, cast by his European workmen, with which he proposed to defend Makdala, roads had first to be made, often along dizzy precipices. Theodore personally superintended all the works, and often personally took a share in them. In his heart what he hoped for was a peaceful arrangement with the British, though in moments of excitement he may sometimes have actually thought of their defeat and annihilation as possible. He reached Makdala, which, including its outworks, has accommodation for many thousands, only shortly before the arrival of the British. He had gone into the net almost with his eyes open.

The arrangements for the English expedition, which was commanded by Sir Robert Napier, were not at first particularly skilful; and the final success was mainly due to Colonel Merewether, to the never-to-be-forgotten Werner Munzinger, who had been appointed British vice-consul, and, as intimately acquainted with the land and its people, had charge of the negotiations with the native rulers, and, lastly, to Colonel Phayre. To within a short distance of Makdala the



route lay through the territory of princes who were in rebellion against Theodore, and indeed, to some extent, also at feud with each other. To secure free passage everywhere, accordingly, it was never necessary to resort to open force; diplomatic negotiation was enough. To conquer the physical obstacles, once Abyssinia proper had been reached, was no very difficult task for British troops with British resources.

At Arogé, near Makdala, a portion of Theodore's army fell upon the British, and was, of course, scattered (10th April 1868); no Abyssinian bravery could withstand Snider rifles, rockets, and artillery. The king recognised that he could never again bring his troops to face such a foe. Hope alternated with paroxysms of rage. He began to treat with Napier, and at last released all the Europeans unconditionally. It is possible that he may have done this because he had been informed that Napier was prepared to accept a present from him, and so had virtually conceded peace; but it is at least equally probable that he did not wish the Europeans to be involved in his ruin. Shortly before this, at any rate, he had made an attempt (prevented by his grandees) at suicide, without previously giving orders that he should be avenged on his prisoners. The intelligence he had received soon proved to have been false; the British pressed forward, and his army deserted him. The proud king could not yield to Napier's demand that he should surrender; with a few of his faithful followers he went to meet the foe, and after some of those beside him had fallen, he shot himself with his own pistol (Easter Monday, 14th April).

The British soldiers showed little respect for the body, but their commander afterwards caused it to be buried after the rites of the Abyssinian Church. The conquerors liberated all the captives in Makdala,—scions of ancient families, rebels, robbers, officials, and officers in disgrace,—people for the most part of very questionable antecedents. The young



queen Terunesh, along with the boy Alem-ayehu, Theodore's only legitimate son, accompanied the British on their return. She died of consumption before she could leave Abyssinia, the boy not long afterwards in England. The army quitted the country as promptly as might be, in view of the approach of the rainy season, which makes all communication impossible. It is to be regretted that so little care was taken to utilise the opportunity offered by the expedition for a more exact scientific survey of the country.<sup>1</sup>

Thus lies Theodore in the mountain fastness of the Wollo-Gallas. I do not know whether these savages have desecrated the grave of their mortal enemy, or whether, perhaps, their awe of him still keeps them at a distance. Legend is certain ultimately to glorify the memory of Theodore among the Christians of Abyssinia; songs will long be sung and stories told of the mighty king who restored the kingdom, triumphed over the infidel, and at last, worsted by the magical arts of strangers, preferred death to surrender.

The task of permanently uniting Abyssinia, in which Theodore failed, proved equally impracticable to John, who came to the front, in the first instance, as an ally of the British, and afterwards succeeded to the sovereignty. By his fall (10th March 1889) in the unhappy war against the "dervishes" or Moslem zealots of the Soudan, the path was cleared for Menilek of Shoa, who enjoyed the support of Italy. The establishment of the Italians on the Red Sea littoral, and their policy there, which, though not free from many mistakes, has been on the whole very intelligent and

<sup>1</sup> Of works upon the campaign that are not purely military, by far the best, so far as I know, is that of Markham (*A History of the Abyssinian Expedition*, London 1869). The writer is a keen observer, and an impartial judge.



effective, according to all appearance, promises a new era for Abyssinia. If Italy perseveres with firmness, prudence, and moderation on the laborious path on which she has entered, and if the policy represented by Count Antonelli and others is not frustrated by party exigencies or excessive parsimony, she may derive great advantages from her African enterprise. But Abyssinia will profit still more, though there be an end to the proud dream of an independent kingdom of all Abyssinia.



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