

Khartoum

Excerpt

Night was falling as Dieter Neufeld quickly made his way through the deserted streets of Khartoum. “Damned perfidious British fools! They’re leaving us all to be massacred by those fanatical Muslims,” he muttered to himself. The unusual quiet unnerved him. Khartoum at dusk was normally bustling as residents emerged from their homes into the cooling evening, but these days they remained hidden behind heavy doors, daring only to take the evening air in the courtyards of their heavily barricaded houses. “They encouraged us to settle here, and now they play politics in London and Cairo and have abandoned us.” Neufeld had just left a meeting of the city’s European residents with the recently arrived British Governor General of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, General Charles George “Chinese” Gordon.

For nearly three years, a violent rebellion of Sudan’s Arab population, fomented by a Muslim mystic, Muhammad Ahmad bin Abi Allah, had wracked the country. A few years earlier, in 1881, Ahmad had proclaimed himself the promised Mahdi, The Redeemer of all Islam, and had rallied the Sudanese tribes to his flag. His goal was to rid the Sudan of its hated Egyptian overlords and the infidel British occupiers, to establish a pure Muslim caliphate, and to impose his own radical version of Islam on the country. Through his fiery, hate-filled sermons, his religious and nationalistic ideas spread like wildfire through the Muslim population. He was now leading an ever-growing army of followers in a holy war against the hated Anglo-Egyptian government of the Sudan. He vowed to conquer Egypt, Central Africa, and Jerusalem. In a flight of fancy, he proclaimed that he would conquer the entire world and convert all infidels to the true religion.

The British government so far had displayed little initiative in defending their holdings in this part of Africa. Now, in January of 1884, the Mahdi’s army had captured Omdurman, which lay just across the Nile from Khartoum, and he was tightening a noose around the Anglo-Egyptian city. After a single boat carrying some of the city’s European residents to safety in Cairo had departed down the Nile, the Mahdi’s armies had closed the river and Khartoum’s remaining Europeans were trapped. Gordon had insufficient British and Egyptian troops to launch a full-scale assault on the Mahdi’s army or even to provide an adequate defense of the coming assault on Khartoum. General Gordon could only answer the residents’ demands for protection with feeble promises that British forces would be coming soon to lift the siege. No fools, Neufeld and most of the residents knew the truth—Khartoum would fall to the Mahdi.

Khartoum was the capital city of the Sudan. Its strategic location at the apex of the triangle formed by the confluence of the White and Blue Nile Rivers controlled access to central Africa. It was the seat of the British colonial government and an important commercial transshipment center. It was also the linchpin in Great Britain’s long-term goal of hegemony athwart central Africa from the Mediterranean to the Cape of Good Hope. Khartoum was a mid-sized, dusty squalor of mud brick huts, twisting dirt streets, and dark alleys. Its population was about thirty-four thousand souls—mostly Arabs. The Europeans who inhabited the city worked for the Anglo-Egyptian government, were engaged in commerce, or ran the Western schools and hospital. There were a few multi-story buildings, a number of European-style shops in the commercial center, and villas surrounded by shaded gardens in the European residential quarter. Numerous Muslim minarets dotted the skyline. Government and commercial buildings were concentrated in the apex of the two rivers and in the area that bordered the White Nile. To the south along the White Nile were a small-boat harbor and the commercial dock area with six industrial piers. Inland a few hundred feet were a number of large commercial warehouses and the military barracks. By most measures, Khartoum was a thriving, important colonial center. But the revolutionary chaos in the surrounding desert and occasional loud gatherings of the Mahdi’s supporters in the city’s main streets had placed a heavy pall of fear and suspense over the city.

Neufeld moved purposefully through the quiet streets, which were lit only by the vast panorama of desert stars in the black sky. His energy was driven by his impatience with General Gordon's dissembling and the perfidy of the British government, and by fear for the fate of his family, and he knew how deeply the Sudanese hated their Egyptian overlords and the Europeans who were reaping the riches of these desert lands. He also understood the volatile nature of the local Arabs and how easily they were seduced by the Mahdi, who was not only an inspiring leader but offered them a messianic vision of a new age governed by Islamic law.

"Khartoum is doomed!" he said to himself as he made his way down the street toward his home. Neufeld was a tall man with broad shoulders and graying hair, but thin to the point of gauntness. Several times during his short walk from the Governor's Palace, he was overcome by an attack of violent coughing that left him breathless and hunched against a wall. "Damn pipe," he gasped. "I must stop smoking."

Neufeld knew for certain, despite General Gordon's assurances, that there would be no help from the British army. The inhabitants of Khartoum had been abandoned by the British government, and the British garrison billeted in the city was too small and too poorly armed to defend it long against the Mahdi's army. The meeting had adjourned as the Europeans erupted in panic and outrage. Neufeld reckoned that soon Khartoum would fall to the Mahdi, and that escape for the besieged Western residents would be impossible.

However, for several months Neufeld has been devising a plan to save his two children--all that remained of his family. When he had been denied a place for them on the refugees' boat to Cairo--priority having been given to colonial personnel and their families, and to wealthy locals whose well-being was deemed critical by the British government--he had experienced several days of sickening helplessness, knowing the horror that lay ahead for all the Europeans who remained. Then he accepted the cruel reality that the Neufelds were on their own and he began to devise a desperate plan to save them.