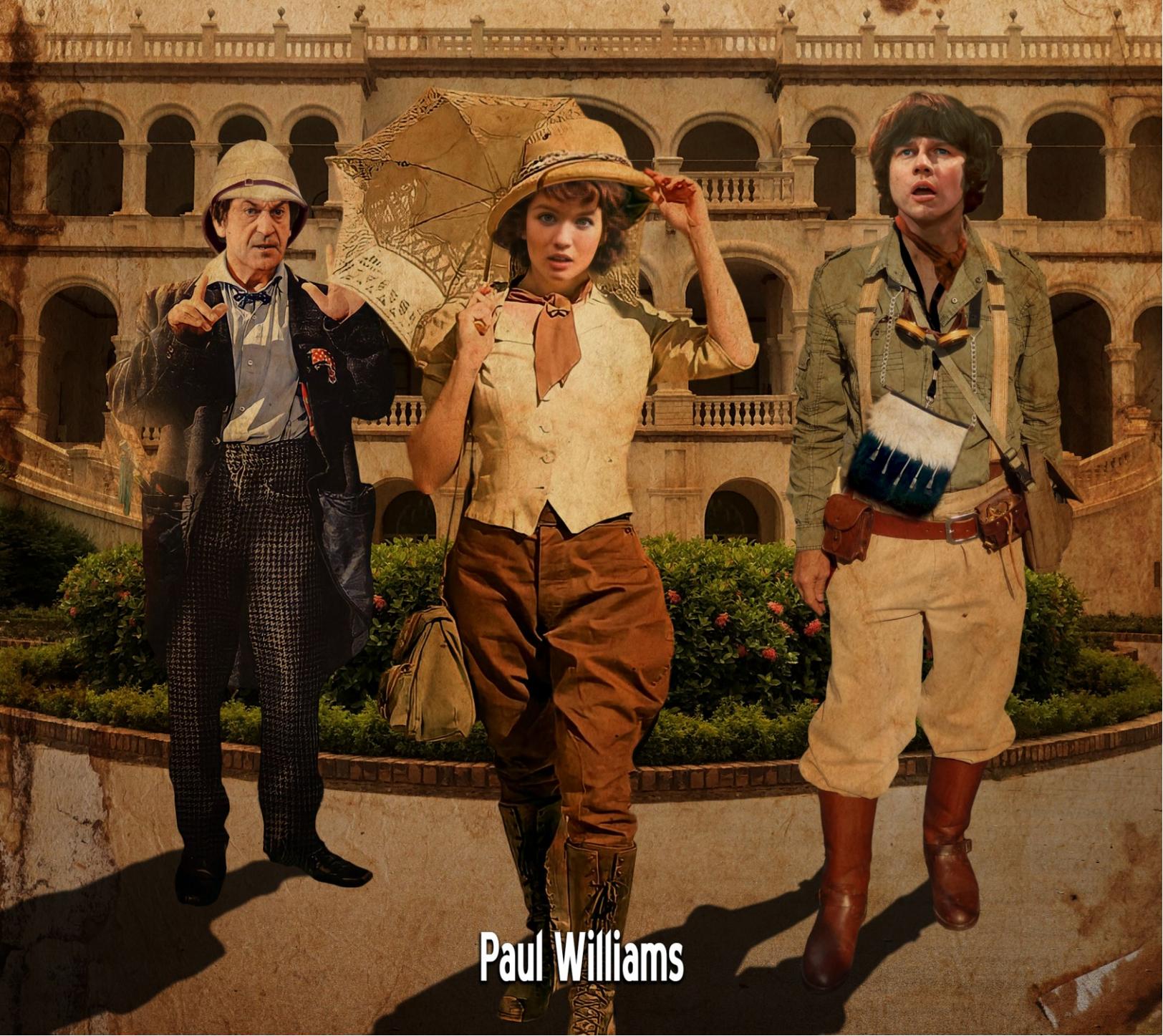


# BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Khartoum



Paul Williams



Published by Jigsaw Publications  
Vancouver, BC, Canada

First Published October 2022

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A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications E-Book

Cover designed by Alex Lydiate  
Interior Design by Bob Furnell

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Typeset in Corbel

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Victoria Waterfield breathed in the stale air of a biblical scene. A lifetime ago, she had sat on her mother's knee listening to stories from the Old Testament and prodding beautiful illustrations with her fingers. Happier days, before death claimed her mother, and returned a few years later for her father. Since then, she had seen much death and discovered a new family.

The Doctor and Jamie walked beside her, leaving footprints in the sand. The names of the cities from the stories were lost in distant echoes of her mother's voice but the pictures surrounded her. Mudbrick houses sprouted from uneven soil. Tall dark women walked gracefully with heavy jugs balanced on their heads. Stray emaciated dogs wandered around, watched by men in white robes playing dice in the corner shadows of a wall that shielded a palatial three-storey building in the shape of a T. Several of the men waved, cupping their hands to plead for food or money and shaking heads as the few pedestrians ignored them. There was a well with a small circle of bricks around it and a dirty bucket on a pulley.

For a moment, history seemed alive, the first time that Victoria's travels had taken her back in the history that she had read about. In the future so many things were unfamiliar. Then she spotted a soldier walking around the palace wall. He held a gun. Others stood at intervals, all armed. Most wore blue jerseys and sand-coloured trousers with red tassels and fezzes. The rest were clad in stained white tunics. All looked disengaged.

"It's hot," Jamie complained.

The Doctor fished a thermometer from the pocket his usual heavy black frock coat. The only sign that he was affected by the sultry conditions was his wilting polka-dot bow tie. "Thirty degrees Centigrade," he informed them. "Standard winter in Sub-Saharan Africa."

"Africa? That's where they wanted to send us as scavengers," he remembered from their recent trip to Britannicus Base.

"That was a long way in the future, Jamie. This is the nineteenth century, unless later generations use antique weapons. Your time, Victoria."

Victoria's disappointment about missing an excursion in the past was quickly offset by the realisation that she was close to home. Perhaps it was before her father died. Perhaps he was alive on the other side of the world. As they walked farther away from the palace, Victoria glanced back to see a familiar flag waving from its roof. A Union Jack with a box across its

middle. Even squinting, she was unable to decipher the words through the sun. A second flag flew beneath it, red with a crescent and three stars.

“We’re still in the Empire,” she said.

“Your empire,” snapped Jamie. She sometimes forgot that he had no love for the English who slew many of his people.

“Except we didn’t go to the Sahara,” she said. “And the other flag ... it’s the Ottoman Empire, I think.”

Like the sweltering Old Testament air, the sight of the flag propelled Victoria back to her childhood. Her father kept a picture book of flags and she once memorised them all. He was less appreciative than her mother of her finger marks on the pages and kept redirecting her to books that he considered more appropriate for children. But Victoria, a prodigious learner, would always recover the book and not be content until she could recall every flag.

“Or the Khedivate of Egypt,” said the Doctor. He stopped, frowning. “I think it’s time we left.”

“Feeling the heat now?” Jamie asked, grinning.

The Doctor shook his coat in stubborn defiance. “Not at all. I’m dressed for all weather conditions.”

Jamie arched his eyebrows dubiously. “Anyway, it isn’t like you, Doctor. We only just got here.”

“And where exactly is here, Jamie?” asked the Doctor. “What do you see?”

Jamie shrugged. He too looked back at the palace and the straight path they had taken. “A square,” he said.

“Exactly. A town square. The centre of economic activity. It should be full of traders and shoppers. Where are they?”

Jamie shrugged and retraced his steps to the beggars, clearly intending to ask them instead of the soldiers. The Doctor quickly pulled him away, indicating the knife in Jamie’s kilt. “Best not to offend anyone,” he said. Pushing in front of Jamie he said to the men, “We mean you no harm.”

The nearest player rose, bowed, and lifted his robes to show his own sheathed dagger. “We all carry weapons,” he said.

The man laughed. He only had four teeth and one of those was crooked. Beckoning them to follow he led them away from the square down narrow alleyways between buildings and across deserted streets. Victoria began to feel uneasy. Most buildings were empty, with gaps in the doorways. Pieces of rubbish, including rotten food, were left unattended. Dogs and insects fed on them. The ground sloped down towards a wide river. Before the land and water collided, a wall had been built with an inlet, like a moat. Inside the moat sat a series of paddle steamers, each holding a machine gun. Men sat pointing the guns out across the river. The wall then rose, broken up by a set of iron gates guarded by another troop of soldiers.

Their guide nodded confidently to the soldiers, stopped at the gates, and pointed through. The dark murky water smelt of sewage and something much worse. Shards of wood floated past, followed by the remnants of a ship’s mast. On the opposite bank, tents stood in neat rows, lining miles of desert. Bearded men with guns, some seated, others standing, were in front of the tents. Behind them were camels laden with bags.

“There is harm,” said the man. “The Madhists will reclaim the Islamic world.”

“Madhists?” repeated the Doctor.

The name meant nothing to Victoria or Jamie. The Doctor said it slowly. His tone alarmed Victoria. She sensed his agitation.

“I am Abdullahi,” the guide said proudly. “A name I share with the Madhi’s deputy, Allah be praised.”

“You’re on his side,” said Jamie. “Why aren’t you out there with him?”

“The gates keep people in as well as out.”

One of the soldiers laughed cruelly. “Don’t speak too much, slave.”

Abdullahi grimaced and began walking back. Jamie was sweating heavily. His arms looked browner. “We must go,” said the Doctor.

“What’s the rush?” asked Jamie. “Those soldiers aren’t attacking. Just waiting.”

“It’s the siege of Khartoum,” said the Doctor. “The town is being starved. That’s why the traders aren’t selling. They have no food left.”

The sense of biblical serenity vanished. They rushed to keep pace with Abdullahi, knowing that the path back was not a straight line. “My status does not bother you,” he said in surprise. “The General abolished slavery when he was last here. Then he brought it back.”

“You’re free now,” said Jamie.

“Only because my owners have fled.”

He took a right turn. Victoria trusted him to follow. Jamie looked uncertain. “We came the other way,” he said.

“I assumed you wanted to return to where you came, not the palace,” said Abdullahi smoothly. “You have been watched since the box appeared.” This time the Doctor could not hide his alarm. Abdullahi grinned. “The magic is not for me to comment on, but you must go back and cancel the relief force.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” said the Doctor.

“Then you must be accountable.”

“What’s he talking about?” asked Jamie.

Before the Doctor could answer the familiar shape of the TARDIS loomed in front of them. The alley was deserted when they had landed. Now three men, two women, and two soldiers stood around the TARDIS talking. Abdullahi vanished down the next street. One of the women pointed an accusing finger at the Doctor.

“Is this your box?” asked a soldier.

“In a manner of speaking.”

“How was it delivered?”

“That’s rather difficult to explain.”

“You’ll need to see the General.” The soldier motioned to his colleague who lifted his gun. Victoria grimaced and shook her head at Jamie.

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Abdullahi stood with a small group of beggars outside the palace. He smiled at Victoria. She smiled back. “Get lost,” said the soldier, lashing out with the butt of his gun. Jamie pushed the soldier, allowing Victoria to break away and help Abdullahi back to his feet. There was no bleeding, just a slight scratch. She stood in front of him, willing him not to reach for the dagger and start a fight.

“I am not their enemy,” he said. “The Madhi will spare all who agree to join him, even unbelievers and Egyptians.”

“Enough,” The soldier jabbed Jamie with his gun. Victoria followed them into the palace. The gates shut and the soldiers laughed at the men left outside. Victoria felt a tinge of regret, remembering how her father often paused beside the poor and gave them a shilling or sixpence. “Charity begins at home,” he always said. She knew he donated to many institutions. Yet, like most of his friends, he went home to a large house whilst the destitute slept outside in all weathers. And she had none of his money to give away. All his wealth and his library would now belong to someone else. A very distant relative, she presumed.

Once through the courtyard they came to a large, imposing pair of doors. The soldier called out. Wooden bolts were withdrawn. Two soldiers on the opposite side saluted as the gates swung back.

The palace interior might have been opulent once. Now it was drab, with spaces where carpets and mats used to lie. It had not been mopped or brushed for some time. The absence of furniture and of people spoke of neglect. Insects crawled across the dirty tiled floors to rest in dusty corners. They ascended a winding staircase with a beautifully carved rail and passed into a large study with a bay window at the end and a desk along its side wall. A man in the red uniform of the British Army stood facing the window. He did not turn around as the soldier saluted. “These people were found with a box sir,” said the soldier.

“A box? You think I have time to deal with petty smuggling?” Victoria tensed. There was something familiar about his voice.

“It was a large box sir. Had the word ‘Police’ written on it. And it wasn’t there this morning. Too heavy to lift.”

The General turned. He had a kindly face, albeit worn by days of not sleeping. His hair was smartly groomed but his moustache was unevenly cut. “Police,” he repeated. “Has Mr. Gladstone sent his infernal meddlers instead of the real army?”

Victoria stared at him. He stared back then, suddenly conscious of manners, blinked. “Surely,” he said. “Surely it’s Miss Waterfield.”

“Captain Gordon,” she said. Such a coincidence: she had just been thinking about her father’s charitable efforts, efforts that paled in comparison with Gordon’s generosity. Then she remembered that he had been promoted. “I’m sorry, Colonel. How wonderful to see you.”

“Out here,” he breathed. “Nobody has seen you for eighteen years and yet here you are, still a child. Impossible.” He gestured at the soldier to go away and waited for the door to close. “How can this be?”

Now Victoria knew the date: 1884, assuming that the eighteen years was correct. She remembered her conversations with Professor Travers, trying to explain how she had not aged whilst he grew old. Eighteen years was not as long but still required some commentary. She smiled and attempted to bypass it. “I have been travelling,” she said. “Let me introduce my dear friends and companions, the Doctor and Jamie McCrimmon.”

Gordon looked sceptically at them. “Your father ...” he said to Victoria.

“Entrusted Victoria’s care to me,” explained the Doctor.

“A legal arrangement?”

“It was his dying wish.”

“Dying? Yes, yes, I thought as much, but to hear it ...” Gordon turned back towards the window. She knew he was holding back a tear. When he faced them again, he spoke with the dull tone of a trained soldier delivering a memorial. “You have my utmost sympathies, Miss Waterfield. Your father, Edward, was a good man and a good friend.”

“Thank you,” said Victoria, suppressing her own tears. She thought of her father reading a letter from Gordon that arrived two weeks after her mother’s funeral. It was sent from the Chinese city of Suzhou, which Gordon had just captured. She presumed her father had written first, to inform him of the tragedy, then Gordon took time away from his military duties to respond. He cared, and that meant a lot to the bereaved daughter.

It occurred to her for the first time that nobody knew of her father’s death. Unlike with her mother, mourners had no grave to visit, no place to deposit flowers or pay their respects. Did his library sit gathering dust? Was Edward Waterfield forgotten?

“You must have refreshments,” said Gordon. “What little I have left is at your disposal. Rest, dine and I will do my best to protect you.”

“She already has protectors,” growled Jamie.

Gordon lit a cigar, offering one to first the Doctor, who refused, then Jamie, who was about to take it until the Doctor shook his head. They were Turkish cigars, which reminded Victoria of her friend Kemel. So many good people dead.

“The Madhists wait outside,” said Gordon between puffs. “I have no news of the relief force unless you, the police without uniforms, are the messengers.”

“Who are these Madhists?” asked Jamie.

“Followers of Muhammad Ahmad who is leading a rebellion against the Egyptian occupation of Sudan. We saw them camped on the other side of the Nile,” said the Doctor.

“There’s thousands of them.” Jamie commented.

“Recruited from other tribes who used to be our friends,” remarked Gordon. “I have commanded armies in three continents. I have fought in the bloodiest of conflicts and I will fight this one, but I cannot win with a few starving men. The time is approaching where I must choose between dying of hunger or at the end of an enemy sword. You will find many people here who need medical attention, Doctor, if you have time to practice your profession.” He opened the door, “Wait in the dining room. I will ensure there is sufficient food and will be with you shortly.”

As they walked whispered, “Aye, Doctor, looks like you were right earlier. We need to get out of here now.”

“Later,” said Victoria.

“This isn’t the time for a reunion,” said the Doctor.

“I disagree,” she said stubbornly. “General Gordon is a dear family friend. We have a lot to talk about. A few hours will not matter.” She saw that they were unconvinced and tried pleading. “Please, Doctor.” Reluctantly he nodded.

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They found the dining room where a male servant was laying the table and putting out drinks. If you ignored the heat, it could have been a middle or upper-class home in England. Queen Victoria, an old woman now, stared down from a photograph on the wall. Next to her was a photograph of Gordon with a caption stating: ‘Governor General of the Sudan 1876-1879’. He had risen through the ranks since 1864. There was also a map of the city and a calendar with the dates ticked off. Jamie picked up a cup of water. The Doctor took it from him. “Cholera,” he suggested.

“What’s that?”

Gordon came in, wearing a clean uniform. “The water is boiled,” he said. “Nothing from the Nile is safe otherwise. We endeavour to keep the disease out.”

Jamie drank eagerly then coughed. Victoria sipped more cautiously, relieved to have some liquid, even if it tasted foul. She had a nasty suspicion that it was pulled straight from the river outside with nothing, other than heat, to remove impurities. Gordon drank brandy in a large glass. The food arrived surprisingly quickly. It was meagre and overcooked. Meat that might have been chicken sunk in a watery stew. Gordon saw their disappointment and apologised. “I’m afraid there isn’t much left. Usually, I eat alone and try not to look at the plate.”

“Weren’t you supposed to evacuate?” said the Doctor. “That’s why the government sent you, wasn’t it? To get civilians out of Khartoum.”

“I chose to fight,” said Gordon.

“You once supported the freedom of the Sudanese. Now you stand against them.”

“The Madhi will not stop with Khartoum. After Sudan, Egypt will fall. Then the Ottoman Empire, allowing access into Europe. We must take a stand.”

“For your empire or your own reputation?”

Victoria thought the Doctor was being very rude to his host. Gordon, ever a gentleman, stayed calm. “There are thirty-four thousand people in this city,” he said “Their safety is my only priority. I see that you are a supporter of Gladstone. I will not take offence.”

“Gladstone is the Chancellor,” said Victoria for Jamie’s benefit. Jamie still looked bemused, not knowing what a chancellor’s job entailed. “In charge of money,” she hissed.

“Gladstone is our prime minister. His third spell in office.” Gordon stood up. “I will take coffee, which remains palatable, in my study. Miss Waterfield, please join me. I have a nurse who will chaperone.” A native woman had entered the room unnoticed. She bowed in acknowledgement. “Doctor, Mr. McCrimmon, you will wait here.” It was an order, not a request. Jamie looked mutinous but did not move.

Victoria obediently followed Gordon and the nurse to the study where he lit another cigar and walked again to the window. It was night now. Insects were flying around the cigar and the lamp. Some dived into the ashtray, dancing on discarded ash that held the bodies of their predecessors.

“You may speak freely now,” said Gordon. “Whatever the situation I promise to help.”

“I could speak freely before,” she responded.

“Miss Waterfield, you appear before me exactly as you were when I last saw you. You speak of travelling. Do you mean to tell me you travel unchaperoned with those two ruffians?” He shuddered at the thought.

“General Gordon, the Doctor and Jamie are *not* ruffians,” she protested, but Gordon’s voice drowned out her objections.

“You are ignorant not only of your own country’s leader, but of the terrible situation in this country, which must be a topic of discussion in the newspapers back home. You are in a besieged city, dressed most inappropriately and without regard for your personal safety. I can’t help but wonder if this Doctor isn’t some kind of mesmerist who’s put you under some heathen spell.” He sighed and took a long drag of his cigar. “Forgive me, Miss Waterfield. I’m sure I speak out of turn. Your father was a close friend of mine. He would expect me to look after you.”

“I can look after myself,” she said firmly.

“Very well, but please indulge my curiosity. How did you arrive in Khartoum? Recently, clearly, as none of your party came appropriately dressed and you are not tanned. No boats can safely pass the Mahdist camps, and the gates have not opened to admit any riders or pedestrians,

even if there was any safe path from which to walk. If I did not know your father, I would assume that you and your friends were spies, especially given that Doctor and his Scotch friend's manner, and as you carry no letters of introduction."

Victoria couldn't explain about the TARDIS. Only recently, it had got her into trouble with Harold Chorley. She dared not risk it, yet she longed to share the truth with her family friend so he might understand, and so that his lurid theories about the Doctor and Jamie's influence over her could be dispelled. "Please," she begged. "I assure you we are harmless."

"Let me speculate," said Gordon. "When last I saw your father, he told me of a friendship with Mr. Theodore Maxtible. I met Mr. Maxtible once. He spoke at some length of his desire to perfect the art of time travel. You referred to me as Captain Gordon, although my advancement and achievements have been well publicised." Gordon stubbed out his cigar, pausing as if unable to believe his own words. She understood. The concept of travelling through time was unthinkable to her, until the Daleks came through Maxtible's perfectly polished mirrors for her father. "Miss Waterfield, if time travel is possible and you have somehow gained access to the secret, I would ask you to share it with me, so that we can save the people of Khartoum."

"Save them from you," said the nurse suddenly. She grabbed the ashtray and hurled it at Gordon's face. He ducked and grabbed her before she could pull the sword from his desk. Holding her firmly with one hand, he opened the door and called out for a guard. Two came rushing in.

"Lock her away," he ordered.

Victoria watched, shocked, as the nurse was dragged out shouting curses.

"The Madhists have many supporters here," Gordon admitted. "I, as your guardian suggested, support the Sudanese right to self-governance, but I cannot allow a threat to the wider empire. Surely your Doctor cannot object to that aim?"

Victoria swallowed. Though she had never thought of it in such terms, her travels had shown her that most empires were rapacious and conquering, and the Doctor invariably stood against them and with the downtrodden. Though she could never put it that way to this dear family friend, she doubted he would think the aims of the British Empire were any different than Cybermen or Ice Warriors. Between General Gordon's heavily armed forces and the likes of Abdullahi, she knew whose rights the Doctor would defend.

Gordon drew nearer, his face sad from reading her thoughts. "Well, if I cannot persuade the Doctor, Miss Waterfield, what of you?"

"I must ask the Doctor," she said.

"And you will give me an answer in the morning?"

"Yes," she promised.

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Victoria found Jamie and the Doctor downstairs, still sitting in the dining room. The servant had left them with a jug of coffee and a plate of hard bread, which Jamie was chewing with some distaste. She told them what Gordon had said.

"Of course, we can help," said Jamie. "Whisk them all away in the TARDIS."

"To where?" asked the Doctor. "I cannot return them. Nor can I release them in the universe." Victoria knew he wanted to say more. Knew somehow that death bothered him as much as it bothered her and that he tried to conceal those feelings to prevent them from overwhelming him.

“Then I have to say no to the General,” she accepted.

“Or leave without saying anything,” said Jamie.

“No Jamie. I will tell him at breakfast.”

“Let’s hope it’s better than dinner,” Jamie said, grimacing at the small boulder of bread in his hand. “He did say there were beds upstairs.”

Jamie headed for the doorway. The Doctor stopped him, looking silently at the calendar. ‘24 January’ had been ticked off. “Today or yesterday?” asked the Doctor. Victoria associated January with ice and snow. It seemed odd to be worrying about heat.

“What difference does it make?” asked Jamie.

“Khartoum was attacked on the night of the 25<sup>th</sup>,” said the Doctor. “I think we would all be safer in the TARDIS.”

Jamie drank the last of the coffee, then moved cautiously into the hall. Two soldiers guarded the outside door. “There’ll be a window,” he said.

“There’ll also be a curfew,” said the Doctor. “Nocturnal pedestrians would face the death penalty. Including us.”

“Indeed,” said Gordon. He stood behind them on the stairs, one hand resting on the hilt of his sword. Jamie’s hand reached for his own weapon. “No,” said Victoria.

“You disappoint me, Miss Waterfield,” said Gordon. “I thought you would at least tell me of your refusal.”

“I intended to,” she protested.

“Would you have listened?” asked the Doctor. “Like you listened to Gladstone perhaps.”

“He did not believe in me. I, who was Governor General of this region. I, who nearly ended the foul trade of slavery here. I, who refused to work for King Leopold and his hideous company that murders innocent civilians. I, who prevented war between China and Russia. I who warned of the Madhi’s intention. I have met that man, Doctor. I have looked into his eyes and know he will not be satisfied with Khartoum.”

It was a direct challenge. The Doctor and Gordon were eye-to-eye, Gordon’s enthusiastic speech giving way to a passive expression.

“You had the chance to save them,” said the Doctor slowly. “You manipulated the press to persuade the government to send you here and then you disobeyed their orders. Everyone could have been safe in Cairo or elsewhere. *You* decided to stay and starve, not just yourself, but the remaining citizens. It’s your fault.”

“No,” breathed Gordon. “I can’t accept that charge. I governed this city for five years. I know it intimately. I cannot allow it to die.”

“Cannot or will not?”

“If the British government has abandoned me, then the deaths of the Khartoum citizens are on their conscience. If indeed they care.”

Victoria could not tell who was right but somehow felt sorry for them both. Then the screaming started. One voice at first, loud and surprised. Others followed, unequal sounds forming a chorus. The first soldier reached for the bolt to unlock the door.

“No,” said Gordon. He rushed upstairs, pushing past frightened servants coming down in their night attire. Victoria followed. It was a split-second decision. She was conscious of the Doctor and Jamie beside her. As they always were.

Gordon opened his study window and shone his light out. Streams of similarly lighted torches danced below, accompanied by sounds of chanting and singing that drowned out screams and gunfire. Smoke ascended from the direction of the exterior wall.

“They are through,” said Gordon desperately. He put the sword on the desk and picked up his gun, checking its chamber for bullets.

“You can’t go out there,” said Victoria.

“The Madhi may still accept my surrender, and let the others live.”

“They don’t look like they’re negotiating to me,” said Jamie.

“Then you are my only hope,” said Gordon to the Doctor. “We can reach your time machine. If you cannot save me then at least save the others. Evacuate them or fly across to the relief force and bring them here sooner.”

“I cannot do that,” said the Doctor.

Gordon retrieved the sword, turned it around and handed it to the Doctor. “Then you will stay and die with me.”

The Doctor pushed the sword away.

“Coward,” spat Gordon. “Or are you intending to serve the Madhi? He will need medical assistance.”

“I’ll fight for you,” said Jamie suddenly. “If you let the Doctor and Victoria go.” Victoria knew how hateful the Jacobite found the prospect.

“Christian names,” said Gordon. “Charles, please. You are a brave boy. Worthy, perhaps, of Miss Waterfield’s hand.”

“Why would I want her hand?” puzzled Jamie.

Victoria blushed. Jamie was stupid sometimes. She could not allow this to happen. Couldn’t allow him to die fighting for an empire he despised because of her.

“General Gordon,” she said. “I assure you I did not act dishonourably. The Doctor is bound by rules of time travel, rules that I cannot pretend to understand, and he cannot navigate his ship properly.” The Doctor looked shocked. “Jamie is brave, but this is not his time or place. I will stay with you. I belong in the nineteenth century. Please let the Doctor and Jamie go.”

“We’re not leaving you,” said the two men in unison.

“Then we all perish,” she said. “Is that what you want, General? Charles. You said earlier that you would protect me. The best way to do that is to let me leave with the Doctor and Jamie. I promise you that they will keep me safe.” As they had so far. She had survived every adventure and had to trust that this would continue.

A gunshot sounded close. Then came the sound of gates being torn apart. The cries escalated. Through the window they saw the lights rising in the courtyard and smelt fire. More smoke curled upwards. Someone hammered on the downstairs door. Victoria knew the two soldiers could not defend it for long. Their comrades in the courtyard were either dead or had fled.

“You’ll need a gun,” said Gordon to Jamie. He opened his drawer and took out a second revolver. “I used this in China, there are six bullets. Don’t use it at close quarters because of the recoil.” Jamie took the weapon. “Out the back way,” continued Gordon. “Through the servant’s quarters, and then go round the side and through the front gates. They will be clear when the enemy are all in the house. Go.”

Jamie stared, then prompted by the Doctor, stepped out. Gordon grabbed the Doctor’s arm. “You said that Edward Waterfield entrusted you to keep his daughter safe.”

“Indeed he did.”

“Then I hope his trust was not misplaced. I cannot stand in his way.”

The Doctor nodded, his eyes less cold.

“Doctor, I hope whatever reasons you have for refusing to help—”

“It isn’t refusing, I’m unable.”

He waved away the Doctor’s protests. “Be that as it may, Doctor ...” General Gordon drew himself erect. “I hope you realise I had to ask. For the people of Khartoum If there was any way out, I had to pursue it.”

“I do, General. And I know it brings you no comfort, but if there was any way to stop this bloodshed, I would.”

Gordon turned his back on the little man. The Doctor nodded sadly and followed Jamie onto the stairs.

Victoria felt a lump in her throat. She did not know what to say but managed to curtsy. “Thank you, General.”

“Miss Waterfield.” Gordon saluted. Then he returned to the window, levelled his gun, and fired out into the darkness. She imagined enemy soldiers falling as they had in China.

In the lobby, three servants and the soldiers were leaning on the doors, desperately trying to hold them back. The doors bulged. The Doctor led Jamie and Victoria the other way. The banging seemed louder. Closer. Victoria saw a key in one of the doors as they passed. She turned it. The nurse came out.

“Servant’s quarters,” said Jamie breathlessly, allowing the nurse to lead. Her pace was quick even as the light faded. They were soon under the palace, walking through cellars that might have held wine in more prosperous days. The sparse, damp bedrooms of the servants were unoccupied. Behind them was a door. The nurse reached down, unlocked it, and they stepped out into a crowd of Madhists. Jamie lashed out at one. A sword was placed against his throat. The circle closed. Victoria smelt their fetid breath and winced at the recent blood on their swords and tunics. The white robes flapped like ghosts summoning recruits.

“Stop.” Their leader came through, brandishing a gun that once belonged to a soldier. He reached out and grabbed the nurse by the neck. It was Abdullahi. “You did not open the palace gates as arranged.”

“I was captured,” said the nurse. “These people let me free.”

Abdullahi gazed at them. “We will go to the Madhi,” he decided. “Come.” Nobody moved. Abdullahi knocked the man who was holding the sword against Jamie. The sword came down. Then Abdullahi yelled at the crowd. “I brought you here,” he said. “You will listen.” One man stepped aside. A path formed. Victoria felt a hand on her dress but got through without quickening pace.

They walked silently around the palace walls and through the front gates, stepping over bodies from both sides. The Doctor and the nurse examined them, checking for signs of life, and finding none. Fresh fires burnt and savage cheers erupted. She heard shooting inside the building and wondered if it was Gordon.

“Won’t the Madhi come to the palace?” asked the Doctor.

“Eventually. Be silent please,” said Abdullahi.

Obediently, they continued. Abdullahi stopped in front of the TARDIS. “I still do not know how you arrived in this thing, but you should leave the same way.”

“Why are you helping us?” asked Jamie suspiciously.

“I endangered you. Now I save you. That is right.”

“You opened the city gates,” said the Doctor. “The Madhi was prepared to wait for Gordon’s surrender.”

“Until he knew of the relief force.”

“Which you thought we were bringing.”

“Forgive me,” said Abdullahi. “You arrived without warning in a box marked police. You are of the same race. You said that you could not stop the relief force. The Madhi gave his orders.” He bowed and walked off, extending a hand to the nurse who took it. The Doctor unlocked the door of the TARDIS.

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Inside the safety of Victoria’s unusual home, the Doctor bustled around the console activating the switch that would take them to another time and place. She had never seen him more relieved to depart, to flee this whole sad chapter of history—and forget his own inability to do anything to make it better.

Victoria asked suddenly, “Did he live?”

The Doctor shook his head, not meeting her gaze. “The relief force arrived two days too late.”

“Please tell me he has a grave.”

“A memorial. Years later the British sent an army to retake Khartoum.”

“They haven’t changed,” said Jamie. “Still slaughtering locals.”

“*He* wasn’t like that,” said Victoria. She left the control room and went to her own room, hearing the Doctor tell Jamie not to follow.

That night Victoria cried in her sleep, haunted by dreams of the dead. There she was back in her family home in Canterbury. There her father was also, hosting a dinner party, before Mother’s death and morbid obsession had overtaken him and allowed him to get caught up in Maxtible’s web. This was long ago, a lifetime ago: a summer evening, among friends and family, when it seemed all was right with the world.

In the parlour, her father read proudly from the *Times*. “If ever the actions of a soldier fighting in foreign service ought to be viewed with indulgence, and even with admiration, this exceptional tribute is due to Colonel Gordon.” Edward Waterfield looked significantly at the empty seat beside him, then raised a glass. “I am proud to know Colonel Gordon and to count him as a friend. Gentlemen, to all absent friends.”

Glasses clinked and everyone, including the youngest at table, thought of someone who was with them in happier days.

## **ALSO AVAILABLE FROM THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT**

### **THE GAR ANTITHESIS**

Written by: Daniel Tessier & Hamish Crawford

The Doctor and Turlough are still reeling from Tegan's departure when they arrive in a bucolic English setting. There are Easter eggs and a pub, and less invitingly, a great deal of litter to pick up. While enjoying the comforts of a ploughman's lunch, Turlough becomes increasingly convinced the stereotypical villagers he encounters are not what they seem, and their actions are part of a bewildering test that could have grave implications for all of Earth.

### **THE WISE WOMAN OF HENRIETTA STREET**

Written by: Michael Baxter

In the picturesque seaside resort of Whitby, beneath the stark, clifftop ruins of an ancient priory, a twisted and malicious hag is crushed beneath the wheels of a runaway brewer's dray. Many years later, her eccentric relative, Gadney Mace, witnesses the death of an old carthorse on cobbled Henrietta Street and is overcome with foreboding. In an old inn known as the White Horse and Griffin, the Doctor learns the story of Old Joan and the visions she beheld once a year. Has a death on a fateful anniversary liberated an evil-minded spirit from an isolated grave?

### **THE STARDUST SHOWER AFFAIR**

Written by: Richard Hoover

Unscrupulous crime boss Vigo Nax holds the Teardrop of the Savant, a gem with the power to manipulate time. Now it's up to Ramalan Maer and Ramalan Rine of the Ministry of Intergalactic Affairs to wrest it away by any means necessary. But when the Doctor, Maggie, and Kaylaar interfere with the operation, the time travelers will have to join forces with the two MIA agents to pull off an even greater heist.





The TARDIS lands in Khartoum, 1885, where the Mahdist forces are about to reclaim the city from the British and Egyptians. Realizing this the Doctor wants to get away, but Egyptian soldiers stop them and as they cannot produce identity documents escort them to General Gordon.

Gordon is an old friend of Edward Waterfield, Victoria's father. Recognizing her he invites the travelers to dinner with meagre rations. The British Government sent Gordon to organize an evacuation, but he chose to stay and fight.

Victoria inadvertently tells Gordon about the TARDIS – he believes that it can save the city. The Doctor tells Victoria that he cannot interfere and insists they escape, but the soldiers will not let them pass.

Will the Doctor, Victoria and Jamie manage to escape, or will they become victims of the eventual slaughter?

This story features the Second Doctor as played by Patrick Troughton

ISBN 0-918894-28-X



This is another in a series of original fan authored  
Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project

