

# **The Soul of a Regiment**

Talbot Mundy



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## The Soul of a Regiment

### I

So long as its colors remain, and there is one man left to carry them, a regiment can never die; they can recruit it again around that one man, and the regiment will continue on its road to future glory with the same old traditions behind it and the same atmosphere surrounding it that made brave men of it forbears. So although the colors are not exactly the soul of a regiment, they are the concrete embodiment of it, and are even more sacred than the person of a reigning sovereign.

The First Egyptian Foot had colors — and has them still, thanks to Billy Grogram; so the First Egyptian Foot is still a regiment. It was the very first of all the regiments raised in Egypt, and the colors were lovely crimson things on a brand new polished pole, cased in the regulation jacket of black waterproof and housed with all pomp and ceremony in the mess-room at the barracks. There were people who said it was bad policy to present colors to a native regiment; that they were nothing more than a symbol of a decadent and waning monarchism in any case, and that the respect which would be due them might lead dangerously near to fetish-worship. As a matter of cold fact, though, the raw recruits of the regiment failed utterly to understand them, and it was part of Billy Grogram's business to instill in them a wholesome respect for the sacred symbol of regimental honor.

He was Sergeant-Instructor William Stanford Grogram, V. C., D. S. M., to give him his full name and title, late a sergeant-major of the True and Tried, time expired, and retired from service on a pension. His pension would have been enough for him to live on, for he was unmarried, his habits were exemplary, and his wants were few; but an elder brother had been a ne'er-do-well, and Grogram, who was the type that will die rather than let any one of his depend on charity, left the army with a sister-in-law and a small tribe of children dependent on him. Work, of course, was the only thing left for it, and he applied promptly for the only kind of work that he knew how to do.

The British are always making new regiments out of native material in some part of the world; they come cheaper than white troops, and, with a sprinkling of white troops among them, they do wonderfully good service in time of war — thanks to the sergeant instructors. The officers get the credit for it, but it is the ex-noncommissioned officers of the Line who do the work, as Grogram was destined to discover. They sent him out to instruct the First Egyptian Foot, and it turned out to be the toughest proposition that any one lonely, determined, homesick fighting-man ever ran up against.

He was not looking for a life of idleness and ease, so the discomfort of his new quarters did not trouble him overmuch, though they would have disgusted another man at the very beginning. They gave him a little, white-washed, mud-walled hut, with two bare rooms in it, and a lovely view on three sides of aching desert sand; on the fourth a blind wall.

It was as hot inside as a baker's oven, but it had the one great advantage of being easily kept clean, and Grogram, whose fetish was cleanliness, bore that in mind, and forebore to grumble at the absence of a sergeant's mess and the various creature comforts that his position had entitled him to for years.

What did disgust him, though, was the unfairness of saddling the task that lay in front of him on the shoulders of one lone man; his officers made it quite clear that they had no intention of helping him in the least; from the Colonel downward they were ashamed of the regiment, and they expected Grogram to work it into something like shape before they even began to take an interest in it. The Colonel went even further than that; he put in an appearance at Orderly Room every morning and once a week attended a parade out on the desert where nobody could see the awful evolutions of his raw command, but he, actually threw cold water on Grogram's efforts at enthusiasm.

"You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," he told him a few mornings after Grogram joined, "or well drilled soldiers out of Gypies. Heaven only knows what the Home Government means by trying to raise a regiment out here; at the very best we'll be only teaching the enemy to fight us! But you'll find they won't learn. However, until the Government finds out what a ghastly mistake's being made, there's nothing for it but to obey orders and drill Gypies. Go ahead, Grogram; I give you a free hand. Try anything you like on them, but don't ask me to believe there'll be any result from it. Candidly I don't."

But Grogram happened to be a different type of man from his new Colonel. After a conversation such as that,

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he could have let things go hang had he chosen to, drawing his pay, doing his six hours' work a day along the line of least resistance, and blaming the inevitable consequences on the Colonel. But to him a duty was something to be done; an impossibility was something to set his clean-shaven, stubborn jaw at and to overcome; and a regiment was a regiment, to be kneaded and pummelled and damned and coaxed and drilled, till it began to look as the True and Tried used to look in the days when he was sergeant-major. So he twisted his little brown mustache and drew himself up to the full height of his five feet eight inches, spread his well-knit shoulders, straightened his ramrod of a back and got busy on the job, while his Colonel and the other officers did the social rounds in Cairo and cursed their luck.

The material that Grogram had to work with were fellaheen — good, honest coal-black negroes, giants in stature, the embodiment of good-humored incompetence, children of the soil weaned on raw-hide whips under the blight of Turkish misrule and Arab cruelty. They had no idea that they were even men till Grogram taught them; and he had to learn Arabic first before he could teach them even that.

They began by fearing him, as their ancestors had feared every new breed of task-master for centuries; gradually they learned to look for instant and amazing justice at his hands, and from then on they respected him. He caned them instead of getting them fined by the Colonel or punished with pack-drill for failing things they did not understand; they were thoroughly accustomed to the lash, and his light swagger-cane laid on their huge shoulders was a joke that served merely to point his arguments and fix his lessons in their memories; they would not have understood the Colonel's wrath had he known that the men of his regiment were being beaten by a non-commissioned officer.

They began to love him when he harked back to the days when he was a recruit himself, and remembered the steps of a double-shuffle that he had learned in the barrack-room; when he danced a buck and wing dance for them they recognized him as a man and a brother, and from that time on, instead of giving him all the trouble they could and laughing at his lectures when his back was turned, they genuinely tried to please him.

So he studied out more steps, and danced his way into their hearts, growing daily stricter on parade, daily more exacting of pipe-clay and punctuality, and slowly, but surely as the march of time, molding them into something like a regiment.

Even he could not teach them to shoot, though he sweated over them on the dazzling range until the sun dried every drop of sweat out of him. And for a long time he could not even teach them how to march; they would keep step for a hundred yards or so, and then lapse into the listless shrinking stride that was the birthright of centuries.

He pestered the Colonel for a band of sorts until the Colonel told him angrily to go to blazes; then he wrote home and purchased six fifes with his own money, bought a native drum in the bazaar, and started a band on his own account.

Had he been able to read music himself he would have been no better off, because of course the fellaheen he had to teach could not have read it either, though possibly he might have slightly increased the number of tunes in their repertory.

As it was, he knew only two tunes himself — "The Campbells Are Coming," and the National Anthem.

He picked the six most intelligent men he could find and whistled those two tunes to them until his lips were dry and his cheeks ached and his very soul revolted at the sound of them. But the six men picked them up; and, of course, any negro in the world can beat a drum. One golden morning before the sun had heated up the desert air the regiment marched past in really good formation, all in step, and tramping to the tune of "God Save the Queen."

The Colonel nearly had a fit, but the regiment tramped on and the band played them back to barracks with a swing and a rhythm that was new not only to the First Egyptian Foot; it was new to Egypt! The tune was half a tone flat maybe, and the drum was a sheepskin business bought in the bazaar, but a new regiment marched behind it. And behind the regiment — two paces right flank, as the regulations specify — marched a sergeant-instructor with a new light in his eyes — the gray eyes that had looked out so wearily from beneath the shaggy eyebrows, and that shone now with the pride of a deed well done.

Of course the Colonel was still scornful. But Billy Grogram, who had handled men when the Colonel was cutting his teeth at Sandhurst, and who knew men from the bottom up, knew that the mob of unambitious countrymen, who had grinned at him in uncomfortable silence when he first arrived, was beginning to forget its mobdom. He, who spent his hard-earned leisure talking to them and answering their childish questions in

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hard-won Arabic, knew that they were slowly grasping the theory of the thing — that a soul was forming in the regiment — an indefinable, unexplainable, but obvious change, perhaps not unlike the change from infancy to manhood.

And Billy Grogram, who above all was a man of clean ideals, began to feel content. He still described them in his letters home as "blooming mummies made of Nile mud, roasted black for their sins, and good for nothing but the ash-heap." He still damned them on parade, whipped them when the Colonel wasn't looking, and worked at them until he was much too tired to sleep; but he began to love them. And to a big, black, grinning man of them, they loved him. To encourage that wondrous band of his, he set them to playing their two tunes on guest nights outside the officers' mess; and the officers endured it until the Colonel returned from furlough. He sent for Grogram and offered to pay him back all he had spent on instruments, provided the band should keep away in future.

Grogram refused the money and took the hint, inventing weird and hitherto unheard-of reasons why it should be unrighteous for the band to play outside the mess, and preaching respect for officers in spite of it. Like all great men he knew when he had made a mistake, and how to minimize it.

His hardest task was teaching the Gypsies what their colors meant. The men were Mohammedans; they believed in Allah; they had been taught from the time when they were old enough to speak that idols and the outward symbols of religion are the signs of heresy; and Grogram's lectures, delivered in stammering and uncertain Arabic, seemed to them like the ground-plan of a new religion. But Grogram stuck to it. He made opportunities for saluting the colors — took them down each morning and uncased them, and treated them with an ostentatious respect that would have been laughed at among his own people.

When his day's work was done and he was too tired to dance for them, he would tell them long tales, done into halting Arabic, of how regiments had died rallying round their colors; of a brand new paradise, invented by himself and suitable to all religions, where soldiers went who honored their colors as they ought to do; of the honor that befell a man who died fighting for them, and of the tenfold honor of the man whose privilege it was to carry them into action. And in the end, although they did not understand him, they respected the colors because he told them to.

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### II

When England hovered on the brink of indecision and sent her greatest general to hold Khartum with only a handful of native troops to help him, the First Egyptian Foot refused to leave their gaudy crimson behind them. They marched with colors flying down to the steamer that was to take them on the first long stage of their journey up the Nile, and there were six fifes and a drum in front of them that told whoever cared to listen that "The Campbells were coming — hurrah! hurrah!"

They marched with the measured tramp of a real regiment; they carried their chins high; their tarbooshes were cocked at a knowing angle and they swung from the hips like grown men. At the head of the regiment rode a Colonel whom the regiment scarcely knew, and beside it marched a dozen officers in a like predicament; but behind it, his sword strapped to his side and his little swagger-cane tucked under his left arm-pit, Inconspicuous, smiling and content, marched Sergeant-Instructor Grogram, whom the regiment knew and loved, and who had made and knew the regiment.

The whole civilized world knows — and England knows to her enduring shame — what befell General Gordon and his handful of men when they reached Khartum. Gordon surely guessed what was in store for him even before he started, his subordinates may have done so, and the native soldiers knew. But Sergeant-Instructor Grogram neither knew nor cared.

He looked no further than his duty, which was to nurse the big black babies of his regiment and to keep them good tempered, grinning and efficient; he did that as no other living man could have done it, and kept on doing it until the bitter end.

And his task can have been no sinecure. The Mahdi — the ruthless terror of the Upper Nile who ruled by systematized and savage cruelty and lived by plunder — was as much a bogey to peaceful Egypt as Napoleon used to be in Europe, and with far more reason. Mothers frightened their children into prompt obedience by the mere mention of his name, and the coal-black natives of the Nile-mouth country are never more than grown-up children.

It must have been as easy to take that regiment to Khartum as to take a horse into a burning building, but when they reached there not a man was missing; they marched in with colors flying and their six-fife band playing, and behind them — two paces right flank rear — marched Billy Grogram, his little swagger-cane under his left arm-pit, neat, respectful and very wide awake. For a little while Cairo kept in touch with them, and then communication ceased. Nobody ever learned all the details of the tragedy that followed; there was a curtain drawn — of mystery and silence such as has always veiled the heart of darkest Africa.

Lord Wolseley took his expedition up the Nile, whipped the Dervishes at El Teb and Tel-el-Kebir, and reached Khartum, to learn of Gordon's death, but not the details of it. Then he came back again; and the Mahdi followed him, closing up the route behind him, wiping all trace of civilization off the map and placing what he imagined was an insuperable barrier between him and the British — a thousand miles of plundered, ravished, depopulated wilderness.

So a clerk in a musty office drew a line below the record of the First Egyptian Foot; widows were duly notified; a pension or two was granted; and the regiment that Billy Grogram had worked so hard to build was relegated to the past, like Billy Grogram.

Rumors had come back along with Wolseley's men that Grogram had gone down fighting with his regiment; there was a story that the band had been taken alive and turned over to the Mahdi's private service, and one prisoner, taken near Khartum, swore that he had seen Grogram speared as he lay wounded before the Residency. There was a battalion of the True and Tried with Wolseley; and the men used methods that may have been not strictly ethical in seeking tidings of their old sergeant-major; but even they could get no further details; he had gone down fighting with his regiment, and that was all about him.

Then men forgot him. The long steady preparation soon began for the new campaign that was to wipe the

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Mahdi off the map, restore peace to Upper Egypt, regain Khartum and incidentally avenge Gordon. Regiments were slowly drafted out from home as barracks could be built for them; new regiments of native troops were raised and drilled by ex-sergeants of the Line who never heard of Grogram; new men took charge; and the Sirdar superintended everything and laid his reputation brick by brick, of bricks which he made himself, and men were too busy under him to think of anything except the work in hand.

But rumors kept coming in, as they always do in Egypt, filtering in from nowhere over the illimitable desert, borne by stray camel-drivers, carried by Dervish spies, tossed from tongue to tongue through the fishmarket, and carried up back stairs to Clubs and Department Offices. There were tales of a drummer and three men who played the fife and a wonderful mad feringhee who danced as no man surely ever danced before. The tales varied, but there were always four musicians and a feringhee.

When one Dervish spy was caught and questioned he swore by the beard of the prophet that he had seen the men himself. He was told promptly that he was a liar; how came it that a feringhee — a pork-fed, infidel Englishman — should be allowed to live anywhere the Mahdi's long arm reached?

"Whom God hath touched—" the Dervish quoted; and men remembered that madness is the surest passport throughout the whole of Northern Africa. But nobody connected Grogram with the feringhee who danced.

But another man was captured who told a similar tale; and then a Greek trader, turned Mohammedan to save his skin, who had made good his escape from the Mahdi's camp. He swore to having seen this man as he put in one evening at a Nile-bank village in a native dhow. He was dressed in an ancient khaki tunic and a loin-cloth; he was bare-legged, shoeless, and his hair was long over his shoulders and plastered thick with mud. No, he did not look in the least like a British soldier, though he danced as soldiers sometimes did beside the camp-fires.

Three natives who were with him played fifes while the feringhee danced, and one man beat a drum. Yes, the tunes were English tunes, though very badly played; he had heard them before, and recognized them. No, he could not hum them; he knew no music. Why had he not spoken to the man who danced? He had not dared. The man appeared to be a prisoner and so were the natives with him; the man had danced that evening until he could dance no longer, and then the Dervishes had beaten him with a koorbash for encouragement: the musicians had tried to interfere, and they had all been beaten and left lying there for dead. He was not certain, but he was almost certain they were dead before he came away.

Then, more than three years after Gordon died, there came another rumor, this time from closer at hand — somewhere in the neutral desert zone that lay between the Dervish outpost and the part of Lower Egypt that England held. This time the dancer was reported to be dying, but the musicians were still with him. They got the name of the dancer this time; it was reported to be Goglam, and though that was not at all a bad native guess for Grogram, nobody apparently noted the coincidence.

Men were too busy with their work; the rumor was only one of a thousand that filtered across the desert every month, and nobody remembered the non-commissioned officer who had left for Khartum with the First Egyptian Foot; they could have recalled the names of all the officers almost without an effort, but not Grogram's.

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### III

Egypt was busy with the hum of building — empire building under a man who knew his job. Almost the only game the Sirdar countenanced was polo, and that only because it kept officers and civilians fit. He gave them all the polo, though, that they wanted, and the men grew keen on it, spent money on it, and needless to say, grew extraordinarily proficient.

And with the proficiency of course came competition — matches between regiments for the regimental cup and finally the biggest event of the Cairo season, the match between the Civil Service and the Army of Occupation, or, as it was more usually termed, "The Army vs. The Rest." That was the one society event that the Sirdar made a point of presiding over in person.

He attended it in mufti always, but sat in the seat of honor, just outside the touch-line, half-way down the field; and behind him, held back by ropes, clustered the whole of Cairene society, on foot, on horseback and in dog-carts, buggies, gigs and every kind of carriage imaginable. Opposite and at either end, the garrison lined up — all the British and native troops rammed in together; and the native population crowded in between them and wherever they could find standing-room.

It was the one event of the year for which all Egypt, Christian and Mohammedan, took a holiday. Regimental bands were there to play before the game and between the chukkers, and nothing was left undone that could in any way tend to make the event spectacular.

Two games had been played since the cup had been first presented by the Khedive, and honors lay even — one match for the Army and one for the Civil Service. So on the third anniversary feeling ran fairly high. It ran higher still when half time was called and honors still lay even at one goal all; to judge by the excitement of the crowd, a stranger might have guessed that polo was the most important thing in Egypt. The players rode off the pavillion for the half-time interval, and the infantry band that came out onto the field was hard put to drown the noise of conversation and laughter and argument. At that minute there was surely nothing in the world to talk about but polo.

But suddenly the band stopped playing, as suddenly as though the music were a concrete thing and had been severed with an ax. The Sirdar turned his head suddenly and gazed at one corner of the field, and the noise of talking ceased — not so suddenly as the music had done, for not everybody could see what was happening at first — but dying down gradually and fading away to nothing as the amazing thing came into view.

It was a detachment of five men — a drummer and three fifes, and one other man who marched behind them — though he scarcely resembled a man. He marched, though, like a British soldier.

He was ragged — they all were — dirty and unkempt. He seemed very nearly starved, for his bare legs were thinner than a mummy's; round his loins was a native loin-cloth, and his hair was plastered down with mud like a religious fanatic's. His only other garment was a tattered khaki tunic that might once have been a soldier's, and he wore no shoes or sandals of any kind.

He marched though, with a straight back and his chin up, and anybody who was half observant might have noticed that he was marching two paces right flank rear; it is probable, though, that in the general amazement, nobody did notice it.

As the five debouched upon the polo ground, four of them abreast and one behind, the four men raised their arms, the man behind issued a sharp command, the right hand man thumped his drum, and a wail proceeded from the fifes. They swung into a regimental quickstep now, and the wail grew louder, rising and falling fitfully and distinctly keeping time with the drum.

Then the tune grew recognizable. The crowd listened now in awe-struck silence. The five approaching figures were grotesque enough to raise a laugh and the tune was grotesquer, and more pitiable still; but there was something electric in the atmosphere that told of tragedy, and not even the natives made a sound as the five marched straight across the field to where the Sirdar sat beneath the Egyptian flag.

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Louder and louder grew the tune as the fifes warmed up to it; louder thumped the drum. It was flat, and notes were missing here and there. False notes appeared at unexpected intervals, but the tune was unmistakable. "The Campbells are coming! Hurrah! Hurrah!" wailed the three fifes, and the five men marched to it as no undrilled natives ever did.

"Halt!" ordered the man behind when the strange cortege had reached the Sirdar; and his "Halt!" rang out in good clean military English.

"Front!" he ordered, and they "fronted" like a regiment. "Right Dress!" They were in line already, but they went through the formality of shuffling their feet. "Eyes Front!" The five men faced the Sirdar, and no one breathed. "General salute — pre—sent arms!"

They had no arms. The band stood still at attention. The fifth man he of the bare legs and plastered hair — whipped his right hand to his forehead in the regulation military salute — held it there for the regulation six seconds, swaying as he did so and tottering from the knees, then whipped it to his side again, and stood at rigid attention. He seemed able to stand better that way, for his knees left off shaking.

"Who are you?" asked the Sirdar then.

"First Egyptian Foot, sir."

The crowd behind was leaning forward, listening; those that had been near enough to hear that gasped. The Sirdar's face changed suddenly to the look of cold indifference behind which a certain type of Englishman hides his emotion.

Then came the time—honored question, prompt as the ax of a guillotine — inevitable as Fate itself:

"Where are your colors?"

The fifth man — he who had issued the commands fumbled with his tunic. The buttons were missing, and the front of it was fastened up with a string; his fingers seemed to have grown feeble; he plucked at it, but it would not come undone.

"Where are——"

The answer to that question should be like an echo, and nobody should need to ask it twice. But the string burst suddenly, and the first time of asking sufficed. The ragged, unkempt long—haired mummy undid his tunic and pulled it open.

"Here, sir!" he answered.

The colors, blood—soaked, torn — unrecognizable almost — were round his body! As the ragged tunic fell apart, the colors fell with it; Grogram caught them, and stood facing the Sirdar with them in his hand. His bare chest was seared with half—healed wounds and criss—crossed with the marks of floggings, and his skin seemed to be drawn tight as a mummy's across his ribs. He was a living skeleton!

The Sirdar sprang to his feet and raised his hat; for the colors of a regiment are second, in holiness, to the Symbols of the Church. The watching, listening crowd followed suit; there was a sudden rustling as a sea of hats and helmets rose and descended. The band of four, that had stood in stolid silence while all this was happening, realized that the moment was auspicious to play their other tune.

They had only one other, and they had played "The Campbells are coming" across the polo field; so up went the fifes, "Bang!" went the drum, and, "God Save Our Gracious Queen" wailed the three in concert, while strong men hid their faces and women sobbed.

Grogram whipped his hand up to the answering salute, faced the crowd in front of him for six palpitating seconds, and fell dead at the Sirdar's feet.

And so they buried him; his shroud was the flag that had flown above the Sirdar at that ever—memorable match, and his soul went into the regiment.

They began recruiting it again next day round the blood—soaked colors he had carried with him, and the First Egyptian Foot did famously at the Atbara and Omdurman. They buried him in a hollow square formed by massed brigades, European and native regiments alternating, and saw him on his way with twenty—one parting volleys, instead of the regulation five. His tombstone is a monolith of rough—hewn granite, tucked away in a quiet corner of the European graveyard at Cairo — quiet and inconspicuous as Grogram always was — but the truth is graven on it in letters two inches deep:

HERE LIES A MAN

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