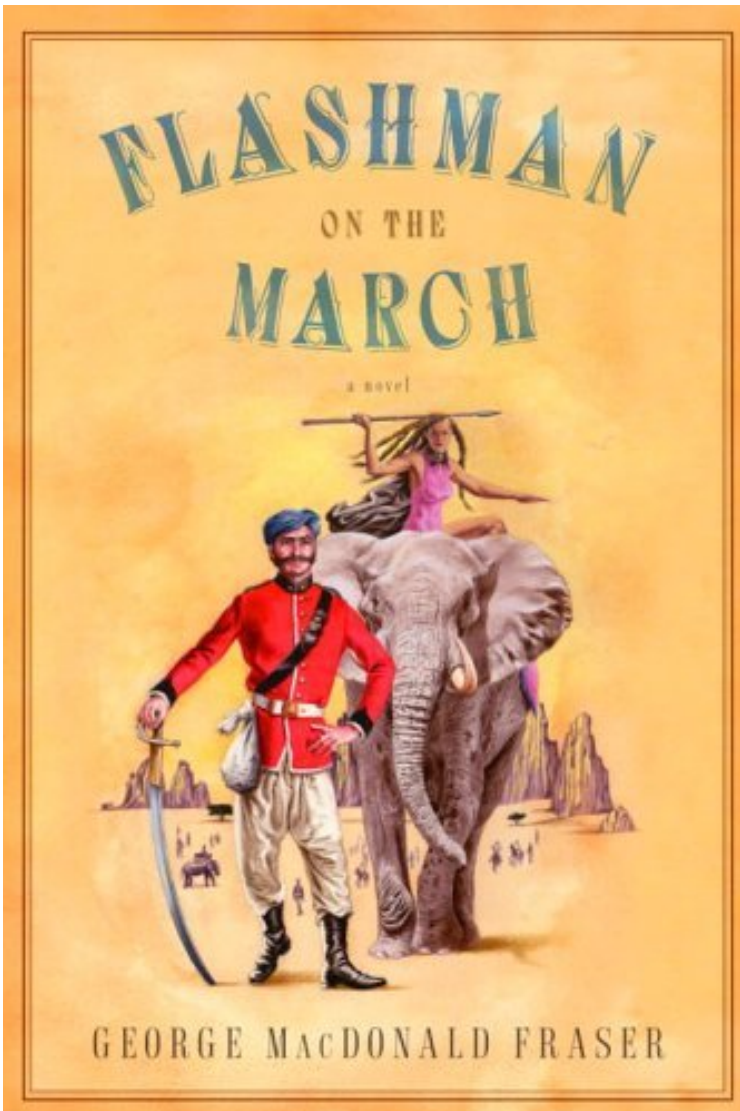


(Ebook free) File size: 29.Mb

Flashman on the March



Par George MacDonald Fraser
**Download PDF | ePub | DOC |*
audiobook | ebooks

Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #790161 dans eBooksPubli le: 2007-12-18Sorti le: 2007-12-18Format: Ebook Kindle

(Ebook free) Flashman on the March

Par George MacDonald Fraser :
Flashman on the March before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Flashman on the March:

Download

Read Online

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIts 1868 and Sir Harry Flashman, V.C., arch-cad, amatorist, cold-headed soldier, and reluctant hero, is back! Fleeing a chain of vengeful pursuers that includes Mexican bandits, the French Foreign Legion, and the relatives of an infatuated Austrian beauty, Flashy is desperate for somewhere to take cover. So desperate, in fact, that he embarks on a perilous secret intelligence-gathering mission to help free a group of Britons being held captive by a tyrannical Abyssinian king. Along the way, of course, are nightmare castles, brigands, massacres, rebellions, orgies, and the loveliest and most lethal women in Africa, all of which will test the limits of the great bounders talents for knavery, amorous intrigue, and survival.Flashman on the Marchthe twelfth book in George MacDonald Frasers ever-beloved, always scandalous Flashman Papers series--is Flashman and Fraser at their best.From the Trade Paperback

edition. Barry Forshaw There are certain authors whose very names are an absolute guarantee of quality, and George Macdonald Fraser has long been one of those. His Flashman books are much loved, and the exploits of his engaging rogue have been delighted readers for years. But is Flashman on the March up to the customary Fraser standard? After all, the number of Flashman books is now legion, and even the authors most dedicated admirers would admit that some Flashman outings (while diverting enough) have lacked the freshness of the early books. It's good to report, therefore, that Flashman on the March is almost vintage Fraser, with all the elements that have won him an ironclad following largely in place. There are, of course, two elements that make these books such fun: the vivid and pungent historical detail (always effortlessly integrated, and never self-consciously laid on as in so many historical novels, serious or otherwise); the author's refusal to be politically correct (the Flashman books have always played fast and loose with the accepted views of morality and society, and their bawdy, amoral charms are refreshing in an age in which such things are looked at askance -- even if Fraser, like Frederick Forsyth, is far better encountered in his entertaining books rather than in his more splenetic role as pundit). Here, that least heroic possessor of a Victoria Cross, Sir Harry Flashman, finds himself catapulted into a highly dangerous assignment in Abyssinia: he is to rescue British prisoners from a demented emperor. Abyssinia (as seen through Fraser's highly colourful imagination) is a land of lethal seductresses, terrifying warriors and a jawdropping female monarch whose idea of what she should feed her lions is unorthodox. It's up to Flashman (as so often before) to triumph over insuperable odds by the most unlikely methods. Needless to say, untrammelled sexual activity is firmly on the menu. If you're a George Macdonald Fraser fan, or a Flashman fan, what are you waiting for? --Barry Forshaw

Extrait Half a million in silver, did you say? In Maria Theresa dollars. Worth a hundred thou in quids. He held up a gleaming coin, broad as a crown, with the old girl double-chinned on one side and the Austrian arms on tother. Dam disinheritin old bitch, what? Mind, they say she was a plum in her youth, blonde and buxom, just your sort, Flashy Neer mind my sort. The cash must reach this place in Africa within four weeks? And the chap who was to have escorted it is laid up in Venice with yellow jack? Or the clap, or the sailors itch, or heaven knows what. He spun the coin, grinning foxy-like. Youve changed your mind, havent you? Youre game to do it yourself! Good old Flash! Dont rush your fences, Speed, my boy. Whens it due to be shipped out? Wednesday. Lloyd packet to Alexandria. But with Sturgess comin all over yellow in Venice, that wont do, and there aint another Alex boat for a fortnightfar too late, and the Embassyll run my guts up the flagpole, as though twas my fault, confound em Aye, its hell in the diplomatic. Well, tell you what, Speed Ill ride guard on your dollars to Alex for you, but I aint waiting till Wednesday. I want to be clear of this blasted town by dawn tomorrow, so youd best drum up a steam-launch and crew, and get your precious treasure aboard tonightwhere is it just now? At the station, the Strada Ferratabut dammit, Flash, a private charterll cost the moon Youve got Embassy dibs, havent you? Then use em! The station aint spitting distance from the Klutsch mole, and if you get a move on you can have the gelt loaded by midnight. Heavens, man, steam craft and spaghetti sailors are ten a penny in Trieste! If youre in such a sweat to get the dollars to Africa You may believe it! Let me see . . . quick run to Alex, then train to Cairo and on to Suezno camel caravans across the desert these days, but youll need to hire nigger porters For which youll furnish me cash! He waved a hand. Sturgess wouldve had to hire em, anyway. At Suez one of our Navy sloopsll take you down the Red Seathere are shoals of em, chasin the slavers, and Ill give you an Embassy order. Theyll have you at Zoolathats the port for Abyssiniaby the middle of February, and it cant take above a week to get the silver up-country to this place called Attegrat. Thats where General Napier will be. Napier? Not Bob the Bughunter? What the blazes is he doing in Abyssinia? We havent got a station there. We have by now, you may be sure! He was laughing in disbelief. Dyou mean to tell me you havent heard? Why, hes invadin the place! With an army from India! The silver is to help fund his campaign, dont you see? Good God, Flashy, where have you been? Oh, I was forgettin Mexico. Dash it, dont they have newspapers there? Hold up, cant you? Why is he invading? To rescue the captivesour consul, envoys, missionaries! Theyre held prisoner by this mad cannibal king, and hes chainin em, and floggin em, and kickin up no end of a row! Theodore, his name isand you mean to say youve not heard of him? Ill be damnedwhy, theres been uproar in Parliament, our gracious Queen writin letters, a penny or more on the income taxits true! Now dyou see why this silver must reach Napier double quickif it dont, hell be adrift in the middle of nowhere with not a penny to his name, and your old chum Speedicut will be a human sacrifice at the openin of the new Foreign Office! But why should Napier need Austrian silver? Hasnt he got any sterling? Abyssinian niggers wont touch it, or anythin except Maria Therasas. Purest silver, you see, and Napier must have it for food and forage when he marches up-country to fight his war. So its a war-chest? You never said a dam word about war last night.

You never gave me a chance, did you? Soon as I told you I was in Dickies meadow, with this damned fortune to be shipped and Sturgess in dock, what sympathy did dear old friend Flashy offer? The horses laugh, and wished me joy! All for England, home, and the beauteous Elspeth, you were . . . and now, says he, with that old leery Speedicut look, all of a sudden, youre in the dooce of a hurry to oblige . . . Whats up, Flash? Not a dam thing. Im sick of Trieste and want away, thats all! And cant wait a day? You and Hookey Walker! Now, see here, Speed, dye want me to shift your blasted bullion, or dont you? Well, I go tonight or not at all, and since this cash is so all-fired important to Napier, your Embassy funds can stand the row for my passage home, too, when the things done! Well, what dye say? That something is up, no error! His eyes widened. I say, the Austrian traps aint after you, are theycos if they were I darent assist your flight, silver or no silver! Dash it, Im a diplomat Of course taint the traps! What sort of fellow dye think I am? Good God, hant we been chums since boyhood? Yes, and its cos I know what kind of chum you can be that I repeat Whats up, Flash? He filled my glass and pushed it across. Come up, old boy! This is old Speed, remember, and you cant humbug him. Well, true enough, I couldnt, and since you, dear reader, may be sharing his curiosity, Ill tell you what I told him that night in the Htel Victorianot the smartest pub in Trieste, but as a patriotic little minion of our Vienna Embassy, Speedicut was bound to put up thereand it should explain the somewhat cryptic exchanges with which Ive begun this chapter of my memoirs. If theyve seemed a mite bewildering youll see presently that they were the simplest way of setting out the preliminaries to my tale of the strangest campaign in the whole history of British armsand that takes in some damned odd affairs, a few of which Ive borne a reluctant hand in myself. But Abyssinia took the cake, currants and all. Never anything like it, and never will be again. For me, the business began in the summer of 67, on the day when that almighty idiot, the Emperor Maximilian of Mexico, strode out before a Juarista firing squad, unbuttoned his shirt cool as a trout, and cried Viva Mjico! Viva la independencia! Shoot, soldiers, through the heart! Which they did, with surprising accuracy for a platoon of dagoes, thereby depriving Mexico of its crowned head and Flashy of his employer and protector. I was an anxious spectator skulking in cover on a rooftop nearby, and when I saw Max take a header into the dust I knew that the time had come for me to slip my cable. You see, Id been his fairly loyal aide-de-camp in his recent futile struggle against Juarezs republicansnot a post Id taken from choice, but Id been a deserter from the French Foreign Legion at the time. They were polluting Mexico with their presence in those days, supporting Max on behalf of his sponsor, that ghastly louse Louis Napoleon, and Id been only too glad of the refuge Max had offered mehad been under the mistaken impression that Id saved his life in an ambush at Texatl, poor ass, when in fact Id been one of Jess Monteros gang of ambushers, but we neednt go into that at the moment. What mattered was that Max had taken me on the strength, and had given the Legion peelers the right about when theyd come clamouring for my unhappy carcass. Then the Frogs cleared out in March of 67, leaving Max in the lurch with typical Gallic loyalty, but while that removed one menace to my well-being, there remained others from which Max could be no protection, quick or deadlike the Juaristas, whod rather have strung up a royalist a.d.c. than eaten their dinners, or that persevering old bandolero Jess Montero, who was bound to find out eventually that I didnt know where Montezumas treasure was. Hell of a place, Mexico, and dam confused. But all you need to know for the present is that after Max bought the bullet Id have joined him in the dead-cart if it hadnt been for the delectable Princess Agnes Salm-Salm, and the still happily ignorant Jess. Theyd been my associates in a botched attempt to rescue Max on the eve of his execution. Wed failed because (youll hardly credit this) the great clown had refused point-blank to escape because it didnt sort with his imperial dignity, Austro-Hungarian royalty preferring to die rather than go over the wall. Well, hell mend em, I say, and if the House of Hapsburg goes to the knackers it wont be my fault; Ive done my unwilling best for them, ungrateful bastards. At all events, darling Aggie and greasy Jesus had seen me safe to Vera Cruz, where she had devised the most capital scheme for getting me out of the country. Max having been brother to the Austrian Emperor Franz Josef, his death had caused a sensation in Vienna; they hadnt done a dam thing useful to save his life, but they made up for it with his corpse, sending a warship to ferry it home, with a real live admiral and a great retinue of court reptiles. And since Aggie was the wife of a German princeling, a heroine of the royalist campaign, and handsome as Hebe, they were all over her when we went aboard the Novara frigate at Sacraficios. Admiral Tegethoff, a bluff old sport, all beard and belly, munched her knuckles and gave glad welcome even to the begrimed and ragged peon whom she presented as the hoch und wohlgeboren Oberst Sir Harry Flashman, former aide, champion, and all-round hero of the campaign and the ill-starred attempt to snatch his imperial majesty from the firing squad. The Emperors English right arm, gentlemen! says Aggie, who was a great hand at the flashing-eyed flourish. So his majesty called him. Who more fitting to guard his

royal master and friend on his last journey home? Blessed if they could think of anyone fitter, and I was received with polite enthusiasm: the reptiles left off sneering at my beastly peasant appearance and clicked their heels, old Tegethoff stopped just short of embracing me, and I was aware of the awestruck admiration in the wide blue eyes of the enchanting blonde poppet whom he presented as his great-niece, Gertrude von und zum something-or-other. My worldly Aggie noticed it too, and observed afterwards, when we made our adieus at the ships rail, that if I looked like a scarecrow I was at least a most romantic one. The poor little idiot will doubtless break her foolish heart over you en voyage, says she. And afterwards wonder what she saw in the so dashing English rascal. Jealous of her, princess? says I, and she burst out laughing. Of her youth, perhaps not of her infatuation. She gave that slantendicular smile that had been driving me wild for months. Well, not very much. But if I were sixteen again, like her, who knows? Adis, dear Harry. And being royally careless of propriety, she kissed me full on the lips before the startled squareheads and for a delightful moment it was the kiss of the lover she'd never been, which I still count a real conquest. Pity she was so crazy about her husband, I remember thinking, as she waved an elegant hand from her carriage and was gone. After that they towed Max's coffin out to the ship in a barge and hoisted it inboard, and as the newly appointed escort to his cadaver I was bound to give Tegethoff and his entourage a squint at the deceased, so that they could be sure they'd got the right chap. It was no end of a business, for his Mexican courtiers had done him proud with no fewer than three coffins, one of rosewood, a second of zinc, and the third of cedar, with Max inside the last like one of those Russian dolls. He'd been embalmed, and I must say he looked in capital fettle, bar being a touch yellow and his hair starting to fall out. We screwed him in again, a chaplain said a prayer, and all that remained was to weigh anchor to thunderous salutes from various attendant warships, and for me to remind Tegethoff that a bath and a change of clobber would be in order. I've never had any great love for the cabbage-chewers, having been given my bellyful by Bismarck and his gang in the Schleswig-Holstein affair,* and Tegethoff's party included more than one of the crop-headed schlager-swingers whom I find especially detestable, but I'm bound to say that on that voyage, which lasted from late November '67 to the middle of January, they couldn't have been more amiable and hospitable until the very morning we dropped anchor off Trieste, when Tegethoff discovered that I'd been giving his great-niece a few exercises they don't usually teach in young ladies seminaries. Aggie had been right, you see: the silly chit had gone nutty on me at first sight, and who's to blame her? Stalwart Flashy all bronzed and war-weary in sombrero and whiskers might well flutter a maiden heart, and if at forty-five I was old enough to be her father, that never stopped an adoring innocent yet, and you may be sure it don't stop me either. Puppy-fat and golden sausage curls ain't my style as a rule, but combined with a creamy complexion, parted rosebud lips, and great forget-me-not eyes alight with idiotic worship, they have their attraction. For one thing they awoke blissful memories of Elspeth on that balmy evening when I first rattled her in the bushes by the Clyde. The resemblance was * See Royal Flash. more than physical, for both were brainless, although my darling half-wit is not without a certain native cunning, but what made dear little Frulein Gertrude specially irresistible was her truly unfathomable ignorance of the more interesting facts of life, and her touching faith in me as a guide and mentor. Her attachment to me on the voyage was treated as something of a joke by Tegethoff's people, who seemed to regard her as a child still, more fool they, and since her duenna was usually too seasick to interfere, we were together a good deal. She was the most artless prattler, and was soon confiding her girlish secrets, dreams, and fears; I learned that her doting great-uncle had brought her on the cruise as a betrothal present, and that on her return to Vienna she was to be married to a most aristocratic swell, a graf no less, whom she had never seen and who was on the brink of the grave, being all of thirty years old. It is such an honour, sighs she, and my duty, Mama says, but how am I to be worthy of it? I know nothing of how to be a wife, much less a great lady. I am too young, and foolish, and . . . and little! He is a great man, a cousin to the Emperor, and I am only a lesser person! How do I know how to please him, or what it is that men like, and who is to tell me? Yearning, dammit, drowning me in her blue limpid pools, with her fat young jugs heaving like blancmange. Strip off, lie back, and enjoy it, would have been the soundest advice, but I patted her hand, smiled paternally, and said she mustn't worry her pretty little head, her graf was sure to like her. Oh, so easy to say! cries she. But if he should not? How to win his affection? She rounded on me eagerly. If it were you and from her soulful flutter she plainly wished it was, sensible girl if it were you, how could I best win your heart? How make you . . . oh, admire me, and honour me, and . . . and love me! What would delight you most that I could do? You may talk about sitting birds, but where a lesser man might have taken swift advantage of that guileless purity, I'm proud to say that I did not. She might be the answer to a lecher's prayer, but I knew it would take delicate management and patience before we could have her setting

to partners in the Calcutta Quadrille. So I went gently to work, indulgent uncle in the first week, brotherly arm about her shoulders in the second, peck on the cheek in the third, touch on the lips at Christmas to make her think, sudden lustful growl and passionate kiss for New Year, meeting her startled-fawn bewilderment with a nice blend of wistful adoration and unholy desire which melted the little simpleton altogether, and bulled her speechless all the way along the Adriatic. Very discreet, mind; a ships a small place, and chaste young ladies tend to be excitable the first few times and need to be hushed. Elspeth, and my second wife, Duchess Irma, were like ecstatic banshees, I remember. Unfortunately, she shared another characteristic with Elspeth she had no more discretion than the town crier, and just as Elspeth had babbled joyfully of our jolly rogering to her elder sister, who had promptly relayed it to her horrified parents, so sweet imbecile Gertrude had confided in her duenna, who had swooned before passing on the glad news to old Tegethoff. This must have been on the very morning we dropped anchor off the Molo St. Carlo at Trieste and I was supervising the lifting of the coffin from below decks, and in the very act of securing Maxs crown and archducal cap to the lid, when Tegethoff damned near fell down the companion, with a couple of aides at his heels trying to restrain him. He was in full fig, cocked hat and ceremonial sword which he was trying to lug out, purple with rage, and bellowing Verrter! Vergewaltiger! Pirat!* which summed up things nicely and explained why he was behaving like Attila with apoplexy. One of the aides clung to his sword-arm and hauled him back by main force, while the other, a hulking junkerish brute with scars all over his ugly dial, whipped his glove across my face before dashing it at my feet and stamping off. That was all they * Traitor! Rapist! Pirate! had time for just then, what with the barge coming alongside to take Max on shore leave, the Duke of Wrtemberg and all the other big guns lined up on the landing stage, the waterfront swathed in black, and muted brass bands playing a cheery Wagnerian air. But I can take a hint, and saw that by the time theyd finished escorting Max to the Vienna train, I had best be in the nearest deep cover, lying doggo. So I let the pall-bearers get their load on deck, waited until the guns of the assembled shipping had started their salutes and Tegethoff and Co. would be safely away, and slunk ashore with a hastily packed valise. The cortge was proceeding along the boulevard beyond the Grand Canal which runs into the heart of the city; solemn music, mobs of chanting clergy, friars carrying crosses, battalions of infantry, and I thought Hasta la vista, old Max and hurried up-town to lose myself for a few hours. Tegethoffs gang would be off to Vienna with the corpse presently, nursing their wrath against me, no doubt, but unable to indulge it, and then I could consider how the devil I was to raise the blunt for a passage to England, for bar a few pesos and Yankee dollars my pockets were to let. Trieste aint much of a town unless youre in trade or banking or some other shady pursuit; Napoleons spymaster, Fouch, is buried there, and Richard the Lionheart did time in jail, but the only other excitements are the Tergesteum bazaar and the Corso, which is the main drag between the new and old cities, and you can stare at shop windows and drink coffee to bursting point. At evening I mooched up to the Exchange plaza and into the casino club, where the smart set foregathered and I thought I might run across some sporting rich widow eager for carnal amusement, but Id barely begun to survey the fashionable throng when I found myself face to face with the last man Id have thought to meet, my old chum of Rugby and the Cider Cellars, Speedicut, whom Id barely seen since the night the Minor Club in St. Jamess was raided, and wed fled from the peelers and Id found refuge in the carriage (and later the bed) of Lola Montez, bless her black heart. That had been all of twenty-five years before, but we knew each other on the instant, and there was great rejoicing, in a wary sort of way, for wed never been your usual bosom pals, both being leery by nature. So now I learned that he was in the diplomatic, which didnt surprise me, for he was a born toad-eater with a great gift of genteel sponging and an aversion to work. He was full of woe because, as youll already have gathered, hed brought this fortune in silver down from Vienna for shipment to Abyssinia, and lo! the appointed escort had fallen by the way and he was at his wits end to find another couldnt go himself, diplomatic duty bound him to Austrian soil, etc., etc. . . . It was at that point that it dawned on him that here was good old Harry, knight of the realm, hero of Crimea and the Mutiny, darling of Horse Guards, and just the chap who could be trusted with a vital mission in his countrys service. Why, I was heaven-sent and no mistake, dear old lad that I was! There wasnt a hope of touching him for a loan to see me home, for coming of nabob wealth he was as mean as Solomon Levi, but by pretending interest I was able to take a decent dinner off him at the Locanda Granda before telling him, fairly politely, for one hates to offend, what he could do with his cargo of dollars. He howled a bit, but didnt press me, for he hadnt really expected me to agree, and we parted on fair terms, he to visit the station to see that his minions were taking care of the doubloons, I to find a cheap bed for the night. And I hadnt turned the corner before I saw something that had me skipping for the nearest alleyway with my undigested dinner in sudden turmoil. Not twenty yards away

across the street, the Austrian lout whod slapped my face and hurled his challenge at my feet was conferring with two uniformed constables and a bearded villain in a billycock hat with plain-clothes peeler written all over him. And there were two armed troopers in tow as well. Even as I watched them disperse, the officer mounting the steps to the Locanda which Id just left, the fearful truth was dawning Tegethoff had left this swine behind to track me down and either hale me to justice as a ravisher of youth (squareheads have the most primitive views about this, as Id discovered in Munich in 47 when Bismarcks bullies interrupted my dalliance with that blubbery slut Baroness Pechmann), or more likely cut me up in a sabre duel. Trieste had suddenly become too hot to hold meso now you know why a couple of hours later I was in Speedicuts room at the Victoria, clamouring to be allowed to remove his bullion for him, to Abyssinia or Timbuctoo or any damned place away from Austrian vengeance. In my funk I even conjured up the nightmare thought that if Tegethoff got his hands on me and instituted inquiries, he might easily discover I was a Legion deserter and hand me over to the bloody Frogs, in which case Id end my days as a slave in their penal battalion in the Sahara. A groundless fear, looking back, but Im a great one for starting at shadows, as you may know. I didnt mention this particular phantasm to Speed, but I did tell him all about Gertrude, cos that sort of thing was nuts to him, and he was lost in admiration of my behaviour both as amorist and fugitive. How the blazes you always contrive to slide out o harms way beats meaye, often as not with some charmer languishin after you! Well, twas dam lucky for you I was here this time! Lucky for both of us. So, now that you know all about my guilty past, dyou still feel like trusting me with your half-million? No fears that I might tool along the coast to Monte Carlo and blue the lot at the wheel? Put like that, with a wink and a grin, he didnt care for it above half, but common sense told him I wasnt going to levant,* and hed no choice, anyway. So a couple of hours after midnight, there I was at the Klutsch mole, watching Speeds clerk settle up with the skipper of a neat little smack or yawl or whatever they call em, while its crew of Antonios chattered and loafed on * To steal away, abscond. the hatcheseven in those days Trieste was more Italian than Austrianand here came Speed in haste across the deserted plaza from the station, with a squad of Royal Marines from his Embassy wheeling the goods on a hand-cart: scores of little strong-boxes with the locks sealed with the royal arms. There were four of the Bootnecks under a sergeant with a jaw like a pike, all very trim with their Sniders slung; Speeds dollars would be safe from sea pirates and land banditti with this lot on hand. It may have been my jest about Monte or his natural fear at seeing his precious cargo pass out of his ken, but now that the die was cast Speed had a fit of the doubtfuls; earlier hed been begging me to come to his rescue, but now he was chewing his lip as they swung the boxes down to the deck with the Eyeties jabbering and the sergeant giving em Billingsgate, while I took an easy cheroot at the rail, trying my Italian pidgin on the skipper. This aint a joke, Flash! says Speed. Its bloody serious! Youre carryin my career along with those dollarsmy good name, dammit! As if he had one. Jesus, if anything should go wrong! You will take care, old chap, wont you? I mean, youll do nothin wild . . . you know, like . . . like . . . He broke off, not caring to say like bugging off to Pago Pago with the loot. Instead he concluded glumly: Taint insured, you knownot a penny of it! I assured him that his specie would reach Napier safely in less than four weeks, but he still looked blue and none too eager to hand over the Embassy passport requesting and requiring H.M. servants, civil and military, to speed me on my way, and a letter for Napier, asking him to give me a warrant and funds for my passage home. I shook hands briskly before he could change his mind, and as we shoved off and the skipper spun the wheel and his crew dragged the sail aloft, damned if he wasnt here again, running along the mole, waving and hollering: I say, Flash, I forgot to ask you for a receipt! I told him to forge my signature if it would make him sleep sounder, and his bleating faded on the warm night air as we stood out from the mole, the little vessel heeling over suddenly as the wind cracked in her sail; the skipper bawled commands as the hands scampered barefoot to tail on to the lines, and I looked back at the great brightly lit crescent of the Trieste waterfront and felt a mighty relief, thinking, well, Flashy my boy, thats another town youre glad to say good-bye to on short acquaintance, and heres to a jolly holiday cruise to a new horizon and an old friend, and then hey! for a swift passage home, and Elspeth waiting. Strange, little Gertrude was fading from memory already, but I found myself reflecting that thanks to my tuition her princeling husband would be either delighted or scandalised on his wedding nightpossibly both, the lucky fellow. You gather from this that I was in a tranquil, optimistic mood as I set off on my Abyssinian odyssey, ass that I was. Youd ha thought, after all Id seen and suffered in my time, that Id have remembered all the occasions when Id set off carefree and unsuspecting along some seemingly primrose path only to go head first into the pit of damnation at tother end. But you never can tell. I couldnt foresee, as I stood content in the bow, watching the green fire foaming up from the forefoot, feeling the soft Adriatic breeze on my face, hearing the oaths and

laughter of the Jollies and the strangled wailing of some frenzied tenor in the crew I couldnt foresee the screaming charge of long-haired warriors swinging their hideous sickle-blades against the Sikh bayonets, or the huge mound of rotting corpses under the precipice at Islamee, or the ghastly forest of crucifixes at Gondar, or feel the agonising bite of steel bars against my body as I swung caged in the freezing gale above a yawning void, or imagine the ghastly transformation of an urbane, cultivated monarch into a murderous tyrant shrieking with hysterical glee as he slashed and hacked at his bound victims. No, I foresaw none of those horrors, or that amazing unknown country, Prester Johns fabled land of inaccessible mountain barriers and bottomless chasms, and wild, war-loving beautiful folk, into which Napier was to lead such an expedition as had not been seen since Cortes and Pizarro (so Henty says), through impossible hazards and hopeless odds and somehow lead it out again. A land of mystery and terror and cruelty, and the loveliest women in all Africa . . . a smiling golden nymph in her little leather tunic, teasing me as she sat by a woodland stream plaiting her braids . . . a gaudy barbarian queen lounging on cushions surrounded by her tame lions . . . a tawny young beauty remarking to my captors: If we feed him into the fire, little by little, he will speak . . . Aye, its an interesting country, Abyssinia. If youve read my previous memoirs youll know me better than Speedicut did, and wont share his misgivings about trusting me with a cool half million in silver. Old Flash may be a model of the best viceslechery, treachery, poltroonery, deceit, and dereliction of duty, all present and correct, as you know, and theyre not the half of it but larceny aint his style at all. Oh, stern necessity may have led to my lifting this and that on occasion, but nothing on the grand scale why, you may remember I once had the chance to make away with the great Koh-i-noor diamond,* but wasnt tempted for an instant. If theres one thing your true-bred coward values, its peace of mind, and you cant have that if youre a hunted outlaw forever far from home. Also, pocketing a diamonds one thing, but stacks of strong-boxes weighing God knows what and guarded by five stout lads are a very different palaver. Speed had spoken lightly of a quick trip to Alexandria, but with that pack of dilatory dagoes tacking to and fro and putting about between the heel of Italy and Crete, we must have covered all of two thousand miles, and half the time allotted me to reach Napier had gone before we sighted Egypt. Its a sand-blown * See Flashman and the Mountain of Light. dunghill at any time, but I was dam glad to see it after that dead bore of a voyage and no dreary haul across the desert in prospect either. The camel journey was a penance Id endured in the past, but now it was rails all the way from Alex to Suez, by way of Cairo, and what had once taken days of arse-burning discomfort was now a journey of eight hours, thanks to our engineers whod won the concession in the teeth of frantic French opposition. They were hellish jealous of their great canal, which was then within a year of completion, with gangs of thousands of the unfortunate fellaheen being mercilessly flogged on the last lap, for it was built with slave labour in all but name. We didnt linger in Alexandria; Egypts the last place you want to carry a cargo of valuables, so I made a quick sortie to the Htel de lEurope for a bath and a civilised breakfast while the Marine sergeant drummed up the local donkey drivers to carry the boxes to the station, and then we were rattling away, four hours to Cairo, another four on the express to Suez, and before bed-time Id presented myself to the port captain and was dining in the Navy mess. Abyssinia was on every lip, and when it was understood that the celebrated Flashy was bringing Napier his war-chest, it was heave and ho with a vengeance. A steam sloop commanded by a cheerful infant named Ballantyne with a sun-peeled nose and a shock of fair hair bleached almost white by the sun was placed at my disposal, his tars hoisted the strong-boxes aboard and stowed them below, the Jollies were crammed into the tiny focsle, and as the sun came up next morning we were thrashing down the Gulf of Suez to the Red Sea proper, having been in and out of Egypt in twenty-four hours, which is a day longer than youd care to spend there. The Suez gulf isnt more than ten miles across at its narrowest point, and Ballantyne, who was as full of gas and high spirits as a twenty-year-old with an independent command can be, informed me that this was where the Children of Israel had made their famous crossing in the Exodus, but its all balls and Banbury about the sea being parted and Pharaohs army being drowned, you know. There are places where you can walk from Egypt to the Sinai at low tide, and an old Gyppo nigger told me it wasnt Pharaoh who was chasing em, either, but a lot of rascally Bedouin Arabs, and after Moses had got over at low water, the tide came in and the buddoos were drowned and serve em right. And there wasnt a blessed chariot to be seen when the tide went out, so there! From the Hardcover edition.