

conduct, as well as for the gallant and determined manner in which, undaunted by all the dangers through which Speke and Grant had struggled he resolved to go forward into the country of King Kamrasi, there to work out that important portion of the source of the Nile, which was left undetermined, that we awarded him our Victoria Medal. I have here to announce, and with a pleasure and gratification that will, I know, be shared by everyone in this assembly, that in all his arduous and perilous travels our medallist was accompanied by Mrs. Baker (cheers) to whom, as he himself has told me, much of his success is due, and who, by her conduct, has shown what a courageous wife can do in duty to her husband.

Samuel Baker then stepped forward and gave his own vivid account of the journey. The audience were spellbound and the climax of the talk came when Samuel Baker held out a worn map to Sir Roderick, saying that it was the very map given him by Speke and Grant, which he had promised to return. The moment was made poignant by the recent death of John Hanning Speke, in a shooting accident. It was a great shock to Baker for he had looked forward to meeting his old friend on his return.

When the cheers had died away, Samuel had yet another surprise for his audience. In the words of his nephew, Robin Baily, "having paid his tribute to Speke and Grant, and to Sir Roderick Murchison he said these words:

'And there is one whom I must thank and whom I am truly glad to thank in your presence, one who though young and tender has the heart of a lion, and without whose devotion and courage I would not be alive to address you tonight. Mr. President, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to present my wife.'

Sam walked to the wings, bowed, and returned with a lovely young woman on his arm, perfectly dressed in the fashion of the day. She was just twenty four years old.

One can imagine the welcome, and how charmed London soon became with Florence — all doors were open to her, and she was soon the toast of the town."

It is a delightful account of the return of Samuel and Florence. They had taken a house in London and had with them Sam's four little girls, who were equally enchanted with their new Mama.

2. Love at First Sight

Samuel Baker had met Florence, Florence Barbara Mary Finnian von Sass, to give her her full name, some five years before. She was a Hungarian, and although her childhood is wrapped in mystery, all accounts agree that he met her during a hunting trip with the Maharajah Duleep Singh, in the winter of 1858-9, when the Maharajah and Sam sailed down the Danube together in search of wild boar, bears and antelope. In the late nineteenth century Hungary became a most popular hunting resort with the English aristocracy — it was later the fashion to take a hunting lodge — but in 1858 it can be said that Samuel Baker was more or less a pioneer in the discovery of the delights of sailing down the Danube, especially with so rich and distinguished a companion as the Maharajah. He wrote to his brother, John:

'We hired a covered boat, 60 or 70 feet long and fitted her comfortably at Pesth, and with a crew to row we descended the Danube, everyone prophesying all kinds of miseries and dangers. It was of course cold, but we had three good stoves on board, lots of wood and champagne, two casks of splendid beer and wine on deck, three English servants of the Maharajah, fowls, turkeys, guns, etc., therefore we were always jolly.'

At this time Sam was a widower, his adored first wife having died four years before. He had been restless and unhappy at home, unable to stay with the four young children of his marriage. He was already a most distinguished shot, and big-game hunter. Over the next few years he and his three brothers, Valentine (later to become General Valentine Baker Pasha) of the 10th Hussars, James of the 11th Hussars and John with whom Sam had already started a tea plantation in Ceylon, were destined to become famous each in their own fashion, but it was only in 1858, at the



time of the expedition with the Maharajah, that Sam first began to enjoy life again. As the expedition had been planned for November to March, it was not surprising that snow and ice eventually halted them, and it was at the little town of Widdin in Moldavia, some hundred miles from the Hungarian border, that the boat was eventually holed by ice, and Sam and the Maharajah decided to call upon the Pasha, who was 'very civil'. The fortress town of Widdin overlooking the Danube, with the village of Kalifat upon the opposite bank, was at this time swarming with Hungarian refugees, although under the protection of the Porte.

The terrible uprising and revolution of 1848 had had its repercussions here, as many hundreds of refugees from Hungary had poured into the little town. It was among these refugees that Florence had grown up. It was said that her father and brothers had been killed before her eyes, and Florence, then a child of only six years old, had been rescued by her nurse, and had fled with her to safety beyond the borders of Hungary. Sam and the Maharajah only stayed at Widdin for a few days, but during that time Sam fell deeply in love with the beautiful Hungarian girl, who was at that time only seventeen, and rescued her in a truly heroic manner. Rumour and a family story, combine to say that Florence was saved from some terrible fate — that her nurse had married and left her (probably in the first Amnesty of 1857), and that the beautiful girl found herself virtually alone. It is said that she was about to be sold to a Turk, when Sam accompanied by the Maharajah, strode forward, flung down far more money than the Turk, and claimed her as his bride. But there are other, equally dramatic stories — stories that her parents were among those Hungarians who had great estates in Romania, which were ransacked by the peasants in the rising of 1848. It has been suggested that after her rescue by her nurse, who figures in every version, Florence was brought up by a distinguished relation on the borders of Hungary. Whatever may be the true story of their meeting, it was love at first sight. Sam left the boat and abandoning all ideas of his hunting expedition — a letter home said that he obtained twenty-four fast horses, and a mysterious 'third carriage' — galloped with her, the no doubt astonished Maharajah, and his three servants across the plains of Wallachia to

Bucharest. Here Samuel and the Maharajah parted – Sam and Florence to stay in the Dubrushka where he had decided to become Director of a new railway being built by two enterprising Norfolk engineers, the Carter Brothers – the Maharajah to continue his holiday in Rome, perhaps in a meditative mood.

Florence was fond of saying later that she owed everything to Sam; he taught her English and it is said sought out her old nurse and heard from her of Florence's ancestry. They had been a branch of the von Sass family, spelt in Hungarian as 'von Sas' or sometimes 'von Sass, possibly descended from Andreas and Paul von Sas, who were ennobled by the Emperor Leopold I, or George von Sass and his son of the same name granted nobility by Leopold 1st in 1701.*

Florence never wanted to return to Hungary, or to discover her relatives; she was entirely devoted to the young and determined Englishman who had appeared so strangely in her life, and the quiet reserve, which became so much a part of her character later, was probably due in part to the unhappiness and persecution of her childhood. Sam lost no time in marrying Florence, most probably in Bucharest, before going on to the Dubrushka. It is not possible to establish exactly what legal form the marriage took, and Sir Samuel certainly promised himself that he would go through another ceremony in England on his return. Years later he wrote to Lord Wharnccliffe, his greatest friend:

'I had never mentioned my marriage to any of my people by letter as I thought it much better to introduce her to my children as "*un fait accompli*" instead of harassing them by letter on such a subject from a distance.'

Florence was very beautiful. Even in her old age, she was described as beautiful by those who can remember her. Her serene and regular features were lighted by an amazingly lovely smile, and at the age of seventeen her hair was golden and curled round a fair face, whilst she had the dark eyes of her country. Sam was devoted to her. He wrote home ordering his silver to be sent out to the bleak 'Director's house' which he had built as his home, his

*The source for this is Wappenbach-Aldels von Ungarn, Navenbury 1871-92.



Ceylon Carriage, and of course, his numerous guns—in those days it was not considered strange to take whole establishments of furniture abroad, usually in vast tea-chests and trunks, and Sam and his brother John had taken a pack of hounds to Ceylon only fifteen years before. Even so, Sam and Florence did not stay long in the Dubrushka. For the railway venture was not Sam's brain child. It was the young and enterprising Carter brothers who had visualised it, and Sam's heart was not in it.

Since 1855 Samuel Baker had been writing to Sir Roderick Murchison of the Royal Geographical Society, putting forward plans for exploring the Zambesi river, praying that he might go out to Africa to join David Livingstone and possibly help him in his discoveries. But each time the unknown Samuel Baker's application had not succeeded and now Sam was determined to finance his own expedition. He wrote to his sister:

Sabanga

26th January 1861

You will think me very mad; but every man has his own particular monomania. For the last few years my dreams have been of Africa, and for some time past I have cherished a secret determination to make a trip into the Unknown. Thus, I hope to be in Alexandria in a few weeks from this time, and en route to Khartoum, from which place I shall trudge on into Central Africa, ever pushing for the high ranges from which the Nile is supposed to derive its sources. A wandering spirit is my marrow, which defies not. The time may come when I shall delight in cities, but at present I abhor them. Unhappy the bird in its cage!

Sam lost no time in fitting out the expedition. His brother Valentine sent out his guns. His intention was to explore the Nile tributaries of Abyssinia; he mapped long stretches of the river Atbara, its tributary the Setit (or Takkaze) and the Rahad, a tributary of the Blue Nile. He would also master Arabic, a new language for him, and enjoy the hunting and shooting which a year in Abyssinia would bring.

He did his best to persuade Florence to return 'home' to the English Aunts, still so devotedly caring for Sam's children. But Florence was determined not only to go with Sam, but to help him in every way she could. It was this spirit which enabled her to cross the vast Nubian desert, on the back of a pack-camel — a feat which was astonishing in those days, even for a man, and was not even attempted by Lord Wolseley's army in 1884, who thus describes the desert as quite unfit for his army to cross.

'Now for all practical purposes the 250 miles between Suakim and Berber is nothing but a howling desert... Because Sir S. Baker went over that route with 20 or 30 horses, he thinks any troops could be marched over it.'

The crossing took Sam and Florence only 92 hours of actual marching. And Sam adds 'The average duration of daily march had been upward of thirteen hours'. It was an ordeal for Florence as well as Sam, but Abyssinia, where they spent a year, proved to be one of Florence's happiest memories.

Indeed the year proved to be something of a second honeymoon — the beautiful flowers; the marvellous scenery; Sam's enjoyment of sports, especially with the Hamran tribe of elephant hunters; the bower he made for Florence, high above a waterfall to 'do her work', were all new and exciting.

Work, for a Victorian lady, always meant some form of sewing, mostly of embroidery, *petit point* and fine linen. Florence's 'work' was of necessity more down-to-earth. First she made Sam's clothes, which Sam proudly describes in detail in his Diary:

'I now wear an admirable dress for this, or any country. A pair of black gaiters (i.e. gaiters made like stockings, to draw on at once, and these reach the knee) made of gazelle skin tanned *with the hair on* (which throws the thorns on one side). These *tie over* a pair of short trousers made of strong cotton cloth woven by the natives, which no thorn can tear, and the trousers fasten around my waist with a drawing string *under my shirt*. My shirt is made of the same stuff (sleeves not quite to the elbow) and I wear it outside my trousers with my belt and pouches round my waist — it has a turn down collar and no buttons, but the front ties with strings.'

We can imagine Florence making this practical shirt, with its



strings, and no buttons, Sam continues:

'I dyed the whole suit a rich brown with the mimosa fruit, and it matches well with the faded herbage and tree stumps. I wear moccasins which I made from the giraffe's hide, tanned. These are much better than European shoes, and having no heels they make no noise in walking over loose stones with which the country is covered — and they laugh at thorns although very light. My costume sounds rough but it is *particularly neat* and becoming. My hunting cap is of woven dome leaf, covered in gazelle skin.'

Later on Sam improved on the woven dome leaf cap, with one very much the same, but made by an Arab woman — Khertin, according to my own plan — the substance was about half-an-inch thick of dome palm leaves very neatly twisted and sewn together. Having a flat top, and a peak both before and behind, the whole affair was covered with tanned leather, with a curtain of the same material protecting the back of the neck from the sun. A strong chin-strap secured the cap upon the head, and the *tout-ensemble* formed a very effective roof, completely sunproof. When camping I packed my cartridge pouch and belt within it when inverted at night to form a pillow'.

It was in these amazing clothes that Sam felt really comfortable — and even when approaching the equator would still wear his loose shirt and trousers made by Florence, with his guns at his waist.

Florence wore a similar shirt and trousers as her husband, made of the native cotton, damur, for riding, and was often mistaken for a boy. Sam would proudly insist to the native tribes he met that Florence was his wife, and not his son.

3. *The Discovery of Albert Nyanza*

On arrival in Khartoum on March 21st, 1861, Sam set about preparing for the great discovery of the Nile Sources. He was also most anxious about the travellers Speke and Grant. They had set out for Zanzibar (the usual approach to the river) some five months before, with the determination to reach the Victoria Nyanza, and prove without doubt that the great river rose in that magnificent lake. But time had gone by, and the world was anxiously waiting. Petherick, the British Vice-Consul at Khartoum, was missing when the Bakers arrived, but had kindly left word that they were to stay at the Consulate.

It was while they were breakfasting in the courtyard of the Consulate that a little boy, Saat, who was only ten years old, ran forward, and burying his face in the folds of Florence's dress, begged to be taken with them. He had been captured by the slave traders, but had escaped and walked many miles to join the Christian Mission. He again appeared the next morning, kneeling beside Florence, and imploring to go with them. After visiting the Mission, which turned out to be closing down, Florence dressed the little boy in clean linen trousers, blouse and belt, and allowed him to join the expedition. Sam and Florence loved him. Sam wrote:

'We were very fond of this boy; he was thoroughly good; and in that land of iniquity, thousands of miles away from all except what was evil, there was comfort in having someone innocent and faithful in whom to trust.

He considered himself as belonging absolutely to his mistress. He was taught by her to sew while I taught him to shoot. In the evening, when the day's work was done, Saat was allowed to sit



near his mistress and he was at times amused and instructed by stories of Europe and Europeans, combined with the first principles of Christianity.'

They also had with them a kindly black woman, Karka, who looked after the girls and boys on board the diahkeah, and who was to join them later on their next expedition, and a faithful boy, Richam. The Bakers set out from Khartoum on December 18th, 1862, a journey which lasted almost three years, and was to take them to the shores of the Albert Nyanza, passing through the country of the Bari, Umiro and Unyoro, before returning safely to Khartoum on 5th May, 1865.

It was during their passage up the Nile, on 15th February 1863, at Gondokoro, that they met Speke and Grant who told the Bakers of their discoveries and gave them the map of their journey.

Samuel Baker wrote his own vivid account of the expedition, in his book the *Albert Nyanza*, which graphically describes their adventures and hardships. To make their discoveries they had to travel through the tribal lands of Ellyria, Obbo Shua, and above all the Acholi tribes, where often the only foreigners to be expected were the slave traders. On several occasions Florence was to prove her worth, and show that she possessed the courage and enterprise of a true explorer.

On one occasion, at night, a dark figure slipped into the tent in which they slept.

A slight pull at my sleeve (wrote Sam) showed me that my wife also noticed the object, as this was always the signal she made if anything occurred at night that required vigilance. Possessing a share of *sangfroid* admirably adapted for African travel, Mrs. Baker was not a screamer, and never even whispered in the moment of danger — a touch of my sleeve was considered a sufficient warning.'

On another occasion Florence rescued Sam during a mutiny among his own soldiers; Sam had just knocked down the chief mutineer with his fist, and the others were crowding round him menacingly. Florence, who was ill with fever in the cabin, heard the commotion and rushed among the mutineers, calling on those whom she knew were faithful to stand by their master — thus

giving a moment's pause in which Sam called upon the troops to 'Fall in'. Florence then begged Sam to forgive the ring-leader, saying that he would be pardoned if he kissed Sam's hand. The moment of crisis was over. The ring-leader never forgot Florence, and this man, Ferritch Ajoke later became one of the most trusted officers of the 'Forty Thieves'.

Finding the 'ivory' traders, and the Bari tribe hostile at Gondokoro, Sam and Florence had to escape at midnight, and with only seventeen followers set out alone. The country was infested with slave traders, and they soon saw the impossibility of going further south with so small a party. A large column of traders under the command of Ibrahim, a great slaver, walked insolently past them, the slave trader walking at the rear, and passing them without a look of recognition. Sam wrote:

'Had I been alone, I should have been too proud to have sought the friendship of the sullen trader, and the moment on which success depended would have been lost. The fate of the expedition was saved by Mrs. Baker.'

Florence called Ibrahim by name, he turned, and, dismounting from his donkey, came back. It was thus that Sam and Florence found themselves obliged to march south with the hated slavers, but it is interesting to find that when the party approached Kamrasi's country, Nyoro, it was Sam, although both he and Florence were weak with fever, who had gained an ascendancy over the trader, although the traders were soon to leave. It was he who attempted to make peace with Kamrasi, and it was here that Florence recovered herself sufficiently to visit the King. He demanded more and more presents, even the handkerchief which Florence was wearing on her head, and when at last they were allowed to start, suddenly demanded Sam's wife in exchange for one of his own.

Sam wrote:

'Drawing my revolver, I held it within two feet of his chest, and looking at him in undisguised contempt, I told him that if I touched the trigger, not all heaven could save him, and that if he dared to repeat the insult, I would shoot him on the spot. At the same time I explained to him that in my country such insolence would entail bloodshed; and that I looked upon him



With very very best love, and plenty of kisses to all. Goodbye
my own darling.

Ever your very loving

Florence Baker.

I should like to write more to you my dearest — but I have no
time.

It was at these dinner parties that Florence met the Empress Eugénie — both were having to face danger and terror in the next few months, and both were conscious of an approaching crisis. Perhaps it was this element of bravery, in the face of danger, which united them, in a friendship which was to last for life.

It was also at Alexandria that they were joined by Sam's nephew, Julian, a young naval lieutenant of twenty, who had been granted special leave from the Navy to accompany his uncle. Sam thought of Julian as his own son, as he was not only his brother John's child, but the son of his first wife's sister, as long ago Sam and John had married the two pretty Martin sisters, before setting out for Ceylon. Thus it seemed perfectly natural that Julian should go with Sam and Florence. His devotion and bravery, his lighthearted youthful enthusiasm and his knowledge of steamers and ships were to brighten and enhance the whole expedition.

As soon as Sam and Florence arrived in Khartoum, on January 6, 1870, they realized that things had only changed for the worse. The slave traders had become even more powerful, much of the countryside was neglected and burned and the neat villages they had once seen had disappeared. It seemed too that many of the slave traders had contracts with the government, thus completely undermining Sam's authority as a government representative. They were determined to do all they could to delay and harass the expedition. The 'Cavalry' provided by Ismail were so motley a mixture of thieves and undesirable characters, mounted on all manner of thin and useless horses, that Sam instantly dismissed them and decided to proceed with only his troops. These were but lately drawn from felons and thieves at Cairo; they were difficult to control, sulky, unwilling to start, and ready to listen to the persuasions of the slave traders.

Sam, however, with indomitable spirit, decided to train them in

because only about six weeks ago the sheikh of Lobbo wished to come and pay Sam a visit; but he has a disease of the feet — thus he asked for a donkey which Sam sent to him. The sheikh arrived with the donkey, and begged if he might ride the donkey home, and send him back immediately; but from that day, we have not seen the animal, as the sheikh refuses to send him back again.

I am sure that it is quite useless to think that the natives in all those countries we have seen can ever be civilized, as men. I think that the children might learn, if it would be possible to take them away from their own homes — but if the native is once grown up, woman or man, he remains a savage, in manner and ideas.

I am very pleased with all my boys; there could not be better boys in England, they do their work very well, and seem quite civilized now! but what will they be when we leave? Little Amarn we shall take home with us but we have quite given up the idea to take old Karka home, as she is too great a savage for Europe! She would be perfectly miserable to be among civilized people.

November 15th Wind from the East.

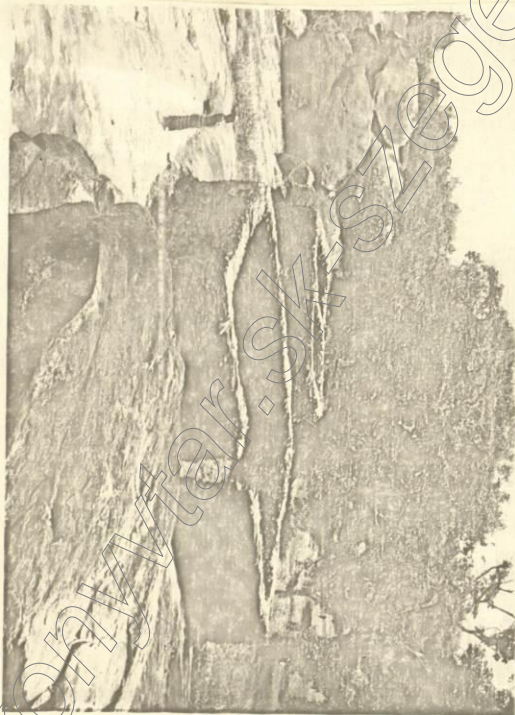
I have finished all my needle work.

Sam is going to send Wat-el-Mek and 150 of his men off to Ismailia, for cattle, and for some more troops if the boats have arrived there. One officer and ten of the troops will accompany Wat-el-Mek to Ismailia, with an order to Raouf Bey to arrest Abou Saoud should he be there.

We are very short of cattle, and there are none in this country; for about 50 miles around it would be impossible to collect a thousand head. The traders have eaten everything up in the way of flesh.

I am dreadfully afraid that we shall be obliged to stay until the middle of July or the beginning of August — because we must wait here until Wat-el-Mek will return from Ismailia with cattle, as the natives will not carry for beads. It will take Wat-el-Mek six weeks at least to come back and then we shall require about two weeks to prepare for our voyage, which will

The ruins of Fort Fariko, showing the grain and ammunition store



member of the family. Ethel, the youngest of Sir Samuel's daughters, lived with her stepmother until she died. Edith's children, Cyril, Ellen, Ida, Violet and Bernard were a constant joy, and nephews and nieces came from far and near to stay. There were gay balls for the children, dinner parties for Sir Samuel's old friends, and Julian, who later became an Admiral, was of course always treated as a son by his Aunt Florence. Helen Mills, Julian's niece, has recorded her memories of Florence:

'Aunt Florence was very good-looking, with regular features, dark brown hair, very smooth and parted in the middle, comfortably stout, and very kind. A wonderful housekeeper. Sandford Orleigh had a large staff: Aunt Florence was an early riser, and always was at her desk, saw her cook, ordered the meals etc. etc. before she met her guests at breakfast . . . She would arrange a trip, perhaps to Hay Tor, and the carriage or carriages would stop at the Hay Tor Hotel, and Aunt Florence would tell her guests to go off and enjoy themselves on the Moor, and then come back and have a comfortable tea with her "in zee hotel wiv me" — she always spoke slightly broken English with a Hungarian accent, which was very attractive. Aunt Florence hated picnics having had so much of that sort of life, with untold dangers thrown in, in Africa.' I think we can join with Helen in saying that she had indeed had quite enough of that sort of thing!

Florence would always welcome the Hungarian bands which would come to the house quite often in the winter, and would ask them in, and much enjoy listening to the music, which she must have loved as a child in far-off Moldavia and Hungary. Helen also writes that they often went to Torquay:

'On these occasions, when we got back to Sandford Orleigh, she would present me with some very pretty brooch or pendant she had got for me in Torquay, not very valuable, but in exquisite taste, and I constantly wear one or other of these presents to this day. In the evening, the curtains would be drawn, and Florence would sit and do her knitting whilst one of the family read to her; but at "precisely" 10 p.m. every night, a footman would come into the room where we were sitting and start to

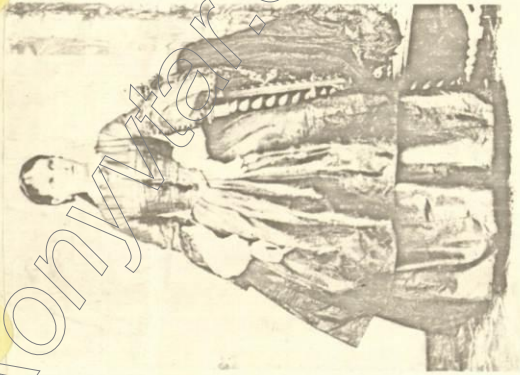
put out the lights, and off we would go to our rooms. We could dawdle there as long as we liked, but the staff must not be kept up late. Again, quite right. Aunt Florence was very dignified, and on occasions she could be cross, but she never was with me. I suppose, I managed to behave as she liked.'

Perhaps the latest memory of her is that of Valentine Baker, Ida's son, who remembers staying with his great-grandmother, at the age of only five, in 1915:

'I was the grandson of Colonel James Baker, Sir Samuel's brother; thus, Sir Samuel Baker was my great-grandfather on my mother's side, and my great uncle on my father's side. My happiest childhood memories were of staying at Sandford Orleigh. My last memories of "Grannie" as we always called Florence, were when I stayed at Sandford Orleigh from October 23rd 1915 to December 30th 1915, only a few months before Florence's death. I well remember being allowed down to tea - I was considered too young for the other more ceremonial meals, and being made much of by the numerous guests always present. I remember my Grannie Florence as a strict and rather formidable person, but immensely loved by all of us. On the stroke of six, I was allowed to go to her desk and take out of the second drawer down two chocolate "*langues de chat*" which were always kept there, and then was sent straight up to bed. All over the house were fascinating relics of Sir Samuel, the great hunter: a whole elephant's skull complete with tusks in the hall, the crocodile's head with the bead necklace hanging from it, which I used to gaze at in awe and wonder, and literally hundreds of heads of game shot in Ceylon, India and Africa, also Sir Sam's great gun, the "Baby" which had a two inch bore and fired a half pound shell. It was with this that he fired the famous "charge of sixpences" at a charging buffalo. This gun, repaired with elephant hide after having been trodden on by a charging elephant can be seen at the Royal Geographical Society in London.

Sir Samuel was plagued by small boys who tried to get into the lovely gardens and roll down the slopes, and had a large sign painted with the words "BEWARE OF THE HYMANET OPHELUM! NOT CHAINED UP! BITE POISONOUS". Some





Lady Baker, photographed in Alexandria



The locket sent by the Empress Eugénie to Lady Baker at Khartoum. The locket survived the journey from Masindi and remains a treasured possession of the Basmendi family. Photo Basmendi & Family

Sandford Orleigh, illustrated in 1895

