

Stars and Stripes to Victory in North Africa

How Eaton Took Derna in 1805

Making America

This account of William Eaton's historic exploit in North Africa during the war between the United States and Tripoli is the second article of the "Making America" series. The third article of the series will appear in the Graphic Section at an early date.

By JOHN A. MENAUGH

MUSTAFA, bey of Derna, rejected upon the glory of Allah, the reputation of the prophet, and the far-reaching displeasure of the holy caliph in Stamboul.

Then he took his quill in hand and wrote with a fatalistic flourish the Arabic equivalent of: "My head or yours!"

Delivered under a flag of truce, this reply of the bey to a demand to surrender his city brought swift and dramatic action. William Eaton, intrepid and spectacular American, proceeded forthwith to capture Derna, a fortified port of Tripoli, on April 27, 1805. In storming the defenses of the city and planting the Stars and Stripes of far-off United States on its principal battery, Eaton brought to a climax an exploit unparalleled in the records of Yankee fighting men.

For nearly fifty days and over a distance of more than 500 miles Eaton had marched across the sun-scorched desert to seize the city of Derna (at that time it commonly was spelled Derne). His force in that historic march consisted of 9 Americans, 40 Greeks, 28 artillerymen of various European nationalities (in charge of one small field-piece), and a motley assortment of Egyptians, Turks, Arab cavalrymen, and cameliers, in all fewer than 400 combatants. Derna, goal of the campaign, was defended by a garrison of 800.

For an explanation of why the very Eaton 131 years ago trailed across the sand wastes of North Africa to attack and capture a relatively unimportant city on the shores of the Mediterranean it is necessary to turn briefly to the history of the Barbary states—Morocco, Algeria, Tunis, and Tripoli, with the insignificant Barca on the east generally included in Tripoli.

These Barbary states in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were ruled by men who had in their employ many crews of corsairs, or pirates, whose duty it was to prey upon foreign shipping. The Barbary states also were hotbeds of slavery, but the slaves in many instances were white men under the lash of dusky masters instead of black men under control of whites. Crews of captured ships generally were held in slavery to perform the heavy tasks of road building and fort building around the African cities.

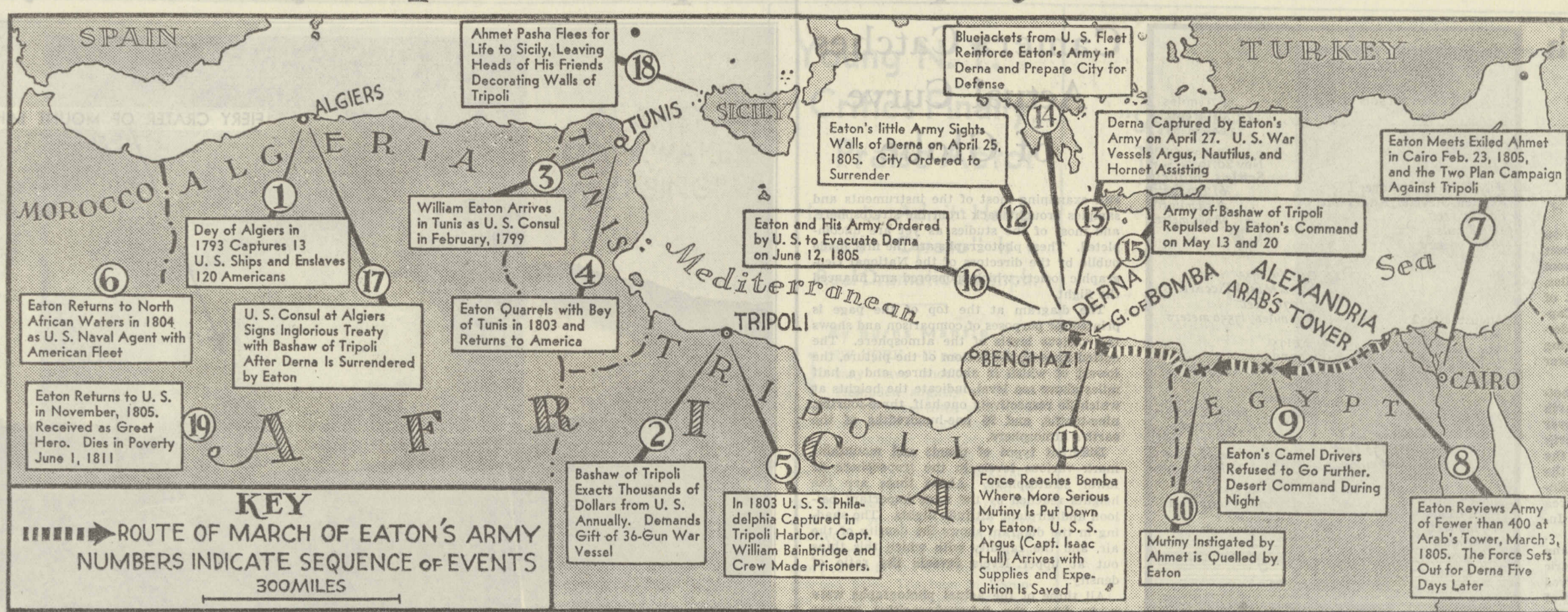
The United States in the early days after the Revolutionary war was a nation woefully weak at sea. And in addition it was a nation without a well formulated foreign policy. Its youth, of course, was the excuse for both weaknesses. The sinister and rakish crew that sailed out from the pirate nests of the Barbary states were prone to chase defenseless Yankee merchant ships. The United States, instead of making a row about matters such as that, was more likely than not to put up money to ransom the enslaved seamen. There was no great danger of America starting a war.

In October, 1784, the American brig Betsey was captured by a corsair and taken into Tangier. The captured ship and its crew were held six months and released, the sultan of Morocco expressing a wish to be on friendly terms with the Americans. In July, 1785, the schooner Maria, out of Boston, was captured by an Algerine xebec. From then on through a number of years ship after ship flying the American flag was seized by Barbary pirates. In 1793 alone the dey of Algiers caused 13 American vessels to be captured and 120 American citizens enslaved.

Algerian slave pens by 1795 were well stocked with Americans who virtually had abandoned hope of ever again seeing their native soil. The American public knew of this deplorable situation and finally prevailed upon congress to act. Did congress arrange to fit out a hostile expedition to Africa to liberate those held in slavery? It did not. It appropriated \$300,000 to purchase the liberty of the slaves and the signature of the dey of Algeria to a treaty of peace. Write the dey at the foot of the treaty:

"If I keep on making peace at this rate there will soon be no one left to fight. Then how shall I occupy my corsairs? What shall I do with my fighting men? If they have no one else to rob and slaughter, they will rob and slaughter me!"

Of the same breed of the dey of Algiers was the bashaw (pasha) of Tripoli, Yusuf Karamanli, who had deposed his elder brother, Ahmet (or Hamet), and seized control of the country. Despite the fact that America was paying an annual tribute of \$22,000 to Yusuf through the American consul at Tripoli and



The Barbary states of North Africa—with important events in their trouble with America designated on the map in chronological order.

twice a year distributing gifts valued at \$17,000 to the officials of the bashaw's court, the greedy ruler complained that he was not getting enough. Authorities in Washington ordered a vessel to be loaded with arms and ammunition to the value of \$34,000 and hurriedly dispatched to the bashaw. Like all racketeers, Yusuf was not satisfied. He demanded the gift of a 36-gun American war vessel. This was not forthcoming, so Tripoli declared war on the United States on May 10, 1801. On the last day of October, 1803, the American frigate Philadelphia, while blockading the harbor of the city of Tripoli, was driven fast onto rocks by a heavy blow. Capt. William Bainbridge and his crew of 306 officers and men were taken prisoner. Tripolitan sailors, with the aid of a high tide, soon after pulled the frigate free from the rocks and towed it into the harbor, a vessel equally as fine as the one. The bashaw had demanded (the Philadelphia was armed with 36 guns).

It was not long after the loss of the Philadelphia that there popped into the Tripolitan war picture one of history's most picturesque figures, the swaggering soldier and suave diplomat William Eaton.

Born Feb. 23, 1764, on his father's farm at Woodstock, Conn., Eaton had been too young to play an important rôle in the American war of independence. At the age of 16,

bringing to an end the war with Tripoli in a manner to place the United States in an improved international position.

Eaton's proposal was to enlist the services of the deposed Ahmet, brother of Yusuf, bashaw of Tripoli, enroll Ahmet's followers in a campaign against Yusuf, depose the bashaw, put Ahmet on the throne, and conclude a treaty with Tripoli in which that nation would agree forever to respect American shipping and never again exact tribute from the United States or enslave its citizens. The President and his cabinet members thought highly of the plan, but the government was too timid to give it its whole-hearted endorsement. The upshot was that Eaton was told to go ahead with his program, the government to take credit if it succeeded, Eaton to take the blame if it failed.

Writes E. Alexander Powell in his "Gentleman Traders" in connection with this unwillingness on the part of the government to assume responsibility: "The only way to explain the astounding apathy of the American government to events in the Mediterranean is that a bitter political struggle was then in progress in the United States and that the very remoteness of the theater of war probably lessened its importance in the eyes of the administration."

There was more than mere domestic politics back of Jefferson's caution, however. There was the knowledge that certain European



William Eaton

powers, particularly Great Britain, were secretly encouraging the Barbary states to consider American ships and American citizens lawful prey. The President did not want to permit his country to become involved with a European nation. When the second war with Great Britain finally did come James Madison was President.

Eaton was appointed American naval agent in the Mediterranean on May 26, 1804, and placed under the orders of Commodore Samuel Barron. Shortly after his appointment the new naval agent sailed away to North African waters and on Nov. 27, 1804, disembarked at Alexandria, Egypt, from the U. S. S. Argus. He was in search of Ahmet.

The deposed brother of the bashaw of Tripoli at that time was engaged with a few Tripolitans and Arabs in assisting in the revolt of the Mamelukes and was besieged at Minieh, 150 miles up the Nile from Cairo. Eaton's plans for the time were blocked by seemingly insurmountable obstacles, but finally he succeeded in making contact with Ahmet. History records that on Feb. 23, 1805, the American naval agent in the Mediterranean and the brother of the bashaw, who turned out to be an unreliable fellow, held a conference in Cairo and planned a campaign against Derna, where Ahmet had resided until the autumn of 1802.

Eaton had been led to believe that he would be given a force of several hundred marines from the

American fleet in the Mediterranean to serve as a nucleus of his desert army. He actually was given nine men in all from the war vessels—two officers, Lieutenant O'Bannon and Midshipman Peck; one sergeant, and six privates. The whole of the army that he and Ahmet took across the uninhabited desert to Derna consisted of the meager handful previously described—an absurd army, apparently with far too few worth-while fighters for the task ahead.

On March 3, 1805, Eaton's forces were assembled at Arab's Tower (Burj el Arab), an ancient stone fort of Roman or Ptolemaic origin some forty miles southwest of Alexandria. Eaton reviewed his troops that day, and five days later the campaign against Derna was under way.

Never was there another march across a desert quite like the one led by Eaton—perhaps never was there one quite so harrowing. For seven weeks he and his men, many of them mutinous, struggled across a trackless waste. Nothing but burning sand and blazing skies. And during the seven weeks the mercury in the thermometer during daylight never dropped below 120 degrees.

Two hundred miles out from Arab's Tower the camel drivers who had been engaged by Ahmet refused to go farther. Eaton borrowed money from the Americans and Greeks in his force, turning over a sum of more than \$600 to the rebellious cameliers on their promise to continue. The next day all but four deserted.

A Harrowing March in Desert

Captain Hull had given up the land expedition as lost. What persuaded him to take his vessel back into Bomba again was a reconsideration of his promise made to Eaton.

It was April 16 that the Argus landed the much needed supplies. Eaton was given \$7,000 with which to pay his men instead of the \$10,000 he had expected. But 100 marines who were expected to join the expedition at Bomba were not there. Commodore Barron had found they could not be spared from the fleet. Midshipmen Eli Danielson and George Mann were lent to Eaton by Captain Hull. The army rested up at Bomba until April 23, when it resumed its march on Derna.

On the evening of April 25 the vanguard of Eaton's forces sighted the walls of Derna, second largest center of population in Tripoli, a little city, or rather a sizable town, sprawling over both banks of the Wadi Derne, a watercourse that ran a full-sized river in the rainy season and remained virtually dry the rest of the time. The town was defended by a sea battery of eight 5-pound cannon; the boy's castle, armed with a 24-inch mortar and loopholed for muskets; and temples and barricades such as breastworks and battlements. Under Mustafa, the bey, and Muhammad el Layyas, sheik of the By Mansur quarter of the town, were 800 defenders. Reinforcements dispatched by Yusuf, numbering between 500 and 900 men, were on their way.

Eaton was compelled to act swiftly. On April 26 he addressed the following message to the bey of Derna:

"I want no territory. With me is advancing the legitimate sovereign of your country—give us passage through your city; and for the supplies which we shall need you shall receive full compensation. "No differences of religion induces us to shed the blood of fellow-men who think little and do nothing. If you are a man of liberal mind you will not balance on the propositions I offer. Hamet (Ahmet) Bashaw pledges himself to me that you shall be established in your government. I shall see you tomorrow in a way of your choice."

Eaton's letter to Mustafa indicated a determination on the part of the American leader to push on with his forces to the city of Tripoli itself. To the letter, as previously mentioned, the bey replied briefly: "My head or yours."

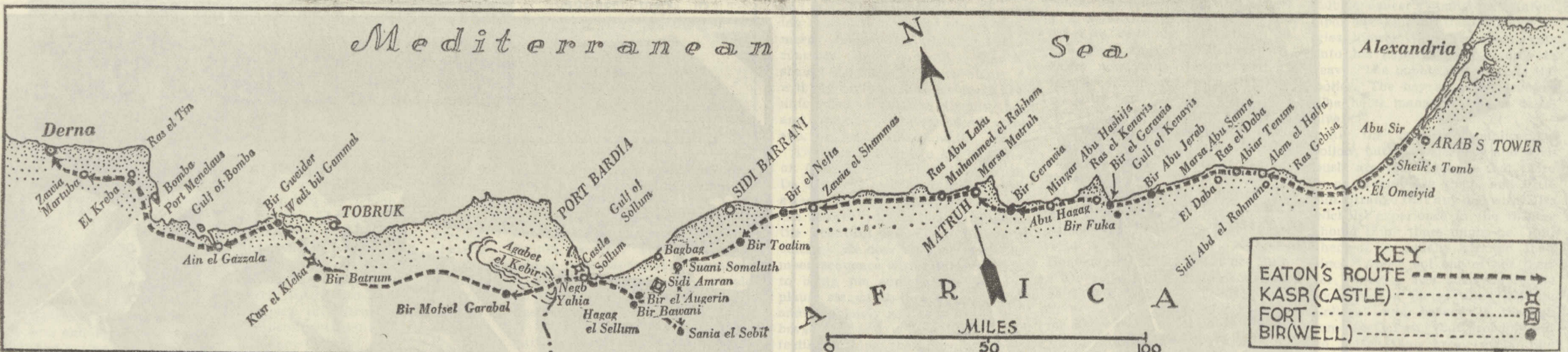
The next day, April 27, the handful of men who had marched across the desert with Eaton, and some other camp followers who had joined the expedition at Bomba, stormed the defenses of Derna, after a muck-skin skirmish of several hours' duration. The war craft Argus, Hornet, and Nautilus swept into the harbor and joined in the attack. The main battery and the bey's castle were taken. Mustafa's army was routed. The force under Eaton suffered a loss of 15 killed and wounded (and of whom were Americans and Greeks). Eaton himself was wounded. How many of the city's defenders were killed no one knows.

For a week after the capture of Derna, Eaton kept his men busily engaged in strengthening his fortifications. Ruins of one of the defenses built at that time, and known as the American fort, remain to this day. Bluejackets from the fleet reinforced the army in possession of the city, and on May 13 and again on May 15 Eaton repulsed attacks made by the forces of the bashaw. Eaton, the victor in possession of a city captured in war, on June 12 was ordered by his government to evacuate Derna. He moved out with his army. The bashaw traded the captured seamen of the Philadelphia for prisoners seized by Eaton in the taking of Derna. In addition the bashaw received \$60,000 from the United States government. The victory so boldly won by Eaton thus was thrown away by his government. Ahmet fled to Sicily. The war was over.

Eaton returned to the United States, where for a brief spell he was a national hero. But he soon was forgotten. A patriot to the last, however, he steered clear of Aaron Burr's efforts to lure him into what has been called a conspiracy. He died, broken-hearted and in poverty, June 1, 1811.

People in general not long after his death forgot the brave services of William Eaton. His writings have been preserved, a few authors have written briefly of him, a street in Boston was named Derna in memory of his exploit in North Africa, and John Greenleaf Whittier in 1850 wrote a poem in praise of him entitled "Derne," which appears upon this page and the literary merits of which the reader may determine for himself. In the half dozen or so volumes of biography and history used as reference in the preparation of this article no mention was found of Eaton liberating any white Christian slaves in the taking of Derna. Any lapse in favor of sentiment and emotion on the part of Whittier, therefore, may be charged off to poetic license.

Eaton was a real, two-fisted man and deserved a noble poem for his deeds!



Large-scale map of the African coastal region between Derna and Alexandria, showing the route of Eaton's historic march.

In 1780, he had enlisted in the Continental army, serving only briefly and being discharged because of illness. A second enlistment kept him in the war to the end, and he was discharged finally at the age of 17 with the rank of sergeant. Eaton next turned to school teaching, and then entered Dartmouth college, to be graduated with a degree of bachelor of arts in 1790. In March, 1792, he obtained a captain's commission in the army, serving against the Indians in Ohio and Georgia.

In 1798 Eaton managed to win appointment as American consular agent at Tunis. He arrived at his new post in February of the following year. A bold and energetic man, he soon found a way to handle the bey of Tunis. He alternately flattered and bullied that petty ruler of an unimportant nation until the bey was sick and tired of him. Eaton haggled over the payment of American tribute to Tunis. He outwitted the grafting underlings of the bey. So daring was he in his treatment of the high officials of Tunis that he secured for the commerce of his country complete immunity from Tunisian privateers. Then in 1801, as aforementioned, came Tripoli's declaration of war against America.

Historical accounts say that the bey of Tunis ordered Eaton to leave that country two years after Tripoli's declaration of war against the United States, because of the American consul's half-insolent, half-patronizing treatment of the ruler. Back of the dismissal, however, must have been considerable intrigue in the Mohammedan courts of the Barbary states. At any rate Eaton returned to America. He laid before President Jefferson and his cabinet an ingenious plan for

FAVORITE POEMS

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER'S poem, "Derne," was inspired by the storming and capture of the African city of Derna in 1805 by William Eaton at the head of a handful of Americans and Greeks and a motley array of Turks and Arabs.

DERNE

Night on the city of the Moor!
On mosque and tomb, and white-walled shore,
Of sea-waves, to whose ceaseless knock
The narrow harbor-gates unlock,
On corsair's gallery, carack tall,
And plundered Christian caravel!
The sounds of Moslem life are still;
No mule-bell tinkles down the hill;
Stretched in the broad court of the khan,
The dusty Bournou caravan
Lies heaped in slumber, beast and man;
The Sheik is dreaming in his tent,
His noisy Arab tongue o'er-spent;
The kiosk's glimmering lights are gone,
The merchant with his wares withdrawn;
Rough pillowed on some pirate breast,
The dancing-gil has sunk to rest;
And, scarce where measured footsteps fall
Along the Bashaw's guarded wall,
Or where, like some bad dream, the Jew
Creeps stealthily his quarter through,
Or counts with fear his golden heaps,
The City of the Corsair sleeps!

But where your prison, long and low,
Stands black against the pale star-glow,
Chiefed by the ceaseless wash of waves,
There watch and pine the Christian slaves;
Rough-bearded men, whose far-off wives
Wear out with grief their lonely lives;
And youth, still flashing from his eyes
The clear blue of New England skies,
A treasured lock of whose soft hair
Now wakes some sorrowing mother's prayer;
Or, worn upon some maiden's breast,
Stirs with the loving heart's unrest!

A bitter cup each life must drain,
The gloaming earth is cursed with pain,
And, like the scall the angel bore
The shuddering Hebrew seer before,
O'erwrite alike, without, within,
With all the woes which follow sin;
But, bitterest of the ills beneath
Whose load man totters down to death,

Is that which plucks the regal crown
Of Freedom from his forehead down,
And natches from his powerless hand
The sceptered sign of self-command,
Effacing with the chain and rod
The image and the seal of God;
Till from his nature, day by day,
The many virtues fall away,
And leaves him naked, blind and mute,
The godlike merging in the brute!

Why mourn the quiet ones who die
Beneath affection's tender eye,
Unto their household and their kin
Like ripened corn-sheaves gathered in?
O weeper, from that tranquil sod,
That holy harvest-home of God,
Turn to the quick and suffering, shed
Thy tears upon the living dead!
Thank God above thy dear ones' graves,
They sleep with Him, they are not slaves.

What dark mass, down the mountain-sides
Swift-pouring, like a stream divides?
A long, loose, struggling caravan,
Camel and horse and armed man,
The moon's low crescent, glimmering o'er
Its grove of waters to the shore,
Lights up the mountain cavalcade,
And gleams from gun and spear and blade
Near and more near! now o'er them falls
The shadow of the city walls.
Hark to the sentry's challenge drowned
In the fierce trumpet's charging sound!
The rush of men, the musket's peal,
The short, sharp clang of meeting steel!

Vain, Moslem, vain thy lifeblood poured!
So freely on the foe's sword!
Not to the swift nor to the strong
The battles of the right belong;
For he who strikes for Freedom wears
The armor of the captive's prayers,
And Nature proffers to his cause

The strength of her eternal laws;
While he whose arm essays to bind
And herd with common brutes his kind,
Strives evermore at fearful odds
With Nature and the jealous gods,
And dares the dread recoil which late
Or soon their right shall vindicate.

'Tis done, the horned crescent falls!
The star-flag flouts the broken walls!
Joy to the captive husband joy!
To thy sick heart, O brown-locked boy!
In sullen wrath the conquered Moor
Wide open flings your dungeon-door,
And leaves ye free from cell and chain,
The owners of yourselves again.
Dark as his allies desert-born,
Soiled with the battle's stain, and worn
With the long marches of his band
Through hottest wastes of rock and sand,
Scorched by the sun and furnace-breath
Of the red desert's wind of death,
With welcome words and grasping hands,
The victor and deliver stands!

The tale is one of distant skies;
The dust of half a century lies
Upon it yet its hero's name
Still lingers on the lips of Fame.
Men speak the praise of him who gave
Deliverance to the Moslem's slave,
Yet dare to brand with shame and crime
The heroes of our land and time—
The self-forgotten ones, who stake
Home, name, and life for Freedom's sake.
God mend his heart who cannot feel
The impulse of a holy zeal,
And sees not, with his sordid eyes,
The beauty of self-sacrifice!
Though in the sacred place he stands,
Uplifting consecrated hands,
Unworthy are his lips to tell
Of Jesus' martyr-miracle,
Or name aught that dread embrace
Of suffering for a fallen race!

The Tribune suggests "Favorite Poems" be saved for your scrapbook. Next Sunday—"Waterloo," by Lord Byron.