THE GREAT BOER WAR

By Arthur Conan Doyle

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PREFACE TO THE FINAL EDITION.

During the course of the war some sixteen Editions of this work have

appeared, each of which was, I hope, a little more full and accurate

than that which preceded it. I may fairly claim, however, that the

absolute mistakes made have been few in number, and that I have never

had occasion to reverse, and seldom to modify, the judgments which I

have formed. In this final edition the early text has been carefully

revised and all fresh available knowledge has been added within the

limits of a single volume narrative. Of the various episodes in the

latter half of the war it is impossible to say that the material is

available for a complete and final chronicle. By the aid, however, of

the official dispatches, of the newspapers, and of many private letters,

I have done my best to give an intelligible and accurate account of

the matter. The treatment may occasionally seem too brief but some

proportion must be observed between the battles of 1899-1900 and the

skirmishes of 1901-1902.

My private informants are so numerous that it would be hardly possible,

even if it were desirable, that I should quote their names. Of the

correspondents upon whose work I have drawn for my materials, I would

acknowledge my obligations to Messrs. Burleigh, Nevinson, Battersby,

Stuart, Amery, Atkins, Baillie, Kinneir, Churchill, James, Ralph,

Barnes, Maxwell, Pearce, Hamilton, and others. Especially I would

mention the gentleman who represented the 'Standard' in the last year

of the war, whose accounts of Vlakfontein, Von Donop's Convoy, and

Tweebosch were the only reliable ones which reached the public.

Arthur Conan Doyle, Undershaw, Hindhead: September 1902.

CHAPTER 1. THE BOER NATIONS.

Take a community of Dutchmen of the type of those who defended

themselves for fifty years against all the power of Spain at a time when

Spain was the greatest power in the world. Intermix with them a strain

of those inflexible French Huguenots who gave up home and fortune and

left their country for ever at the time of the revocation of the Edict

of Nantes. The product must obviously be one of the most rugged, virile,

unconquerable races ever seen upon earth. Take this formidable people

and train them for seven generations in constant warfare against savage

men and ferocious beasts, in circumstances under which no weakling could

survive, place them so that they acquire exceptional skill with weapons

and in horsemanship, give them a country which is eminently suited to

the tactics of the huntsman, the marksman, and the rider. Then, finally,

put a finer temper upon their military qualities by a dour fatalistic

Old Testament religion and an ardent and consuming patriotism. Combine

all these qualities and all these impulses in one individual, and you

have the modern Boer--the most formidable antagonist who ever crossed

the path of Imperial Britain. Our military history has largely consisted

in our conflicts with France, but Napoleon and all his veterans have

never treated us so roughly as these hard-bitten farmers with their

ancient theology and their inconveniently modern rifles.

Look at the map of South Africa, and there, in the very centre of the

British possessions, like the stone in a peach, lies the great stretch

of the two republics, a mighty domain for so small a people. How came

they there? Who are these Teutonic folk who have burrowed so deeply into

Africa? It is a twice-told tale, and yet it must be told once again if

this story is to have even the most superficial of introductions. No one

can know or appreciate the Boer who does not know his past, for he is

what his past has made him.

It was about the time when Oliver Cromwell was at his zenith--in 1652,

to be pedantically accurate--that the Dutch made their first lodgment at

the Cape of Good Hope. The Portuguese had been there before them, but,

repelled by the evil weather, and lured forwards by rumours of gold,

they had passed the true seat of empire and had voyaged further to

settle along the eastern coast. Some gold there was, but not much, and

the Portuguese settlements have never been sources of wealth to the

mother country, and never will be until the day when Great Britain

signs her huge cheque for Delagoa Bay. The coast upon which they settled

reeked with malaria. A hundred miles of poisonous marsh separated it

from the healthy inland plateau. For centuries these pioneers of South

African colonisation strove to obtain some further footing, but save

along the courses of the rivers they made little progress. Fierce

natives and an enervating climate barred their way.

But it was different with the Dutch. That very rudeness of climate

which had so impressed the Portuguese adventurer was the source of their

success. Cold and poverty and storm are the nurses of the qualities

which make for empire. It is the men from the bleak and barren lands who

master the children of the light and the heat. And so the Dutchmen at

the Cape prospered and grew stronger in that robust climate. They did

not penetrate far inland, for they were few in number and all they

wanted was to be found close at hand. But they built themselves houses,

and they supplied the Dutch East India Company with food and water,

gradually budding off little townlets, Wynberg, Stellenbosch, and

pushing their settlements up the long slopes which lead to that great

central plateau which extends for fifteen hundred miles from the edge

of the Karoo to the Valley of the Zambesi. Then came the additional

Huguenot emigrants--the best blood of France three hundred of them, a

handful of the choicest seed thrown in to give a touch of grace and soul

to the solid Teutonic strain. Again and again in the course of history,

with the Normans, the Huguenots, the Emigres, one can see the great hand

dipping into that storehouse and sprinkling the nations with the same

splendid seed. France has not founded other countries, like her great

rival, but she has made every other country the richer by the mixture

with her choicest and best. The Rouxs, Du Toits, Jouberts, Du Plessis,

Villiers, and a score of other French names are among the most familiar

in South Africa.

For a hundred more years the history of the colony was a record of the

gradual spreading of the Afrikaners over the huge expanse of veld which

lay to the north of them. Cattle raising became an industry, but in

a country where six acres can hardly support a sheep, large farms are

necessary for even small herds. Six thousand acres was the usual size,

and five pounds a year the rent payable to Government. The diseases

which follow the white man had in Africa, as in America and Australia,

been fatal to the natives, and an epidemic of smallpox cleared the

country for the newcomers. Further and further north they pushed,

founding little towns here and there, such as Graaf-Reinet and

Swellendam, where a Dutch Reformed Church and a store for the sale

of the bare necessaries of life formed a nucleus for a few scattered

dwellings. Already the settlers were showing that independence of

control and that detachment from Europe which has been their most

prominent characteristic. Even the sway of the Dutch Company (an older

but weaker brother of John Company in India) had caused them to revolt.

The local rising, however, was hardly noticed in the universal cataclysm

which followed the French Revolution. After twenty years, during which

the world was shaken by the Titanic struggle between England and France

in the final counting up of the game and paying of the stakes, the Cape

Colony was added in 1814 to the British Empire.

In all our vast collection of States there is probably not one the

title-deeds to which are more incontestable than to this one. We had it

by two rights, the right of conquest and the right of purchase. In 1806

our troops landed, defeated the local forces, and took possession of

Cape Town. In 1814 we paid the large sum of six million pounds to the

Stadholder for the transference of this and some South American land.

It was a bargain which was probably made rapidly and carelessly in that

general redistribution which was going on. As a house of call upon the

way to India the place was seen to be of value, but the country itself

was looked upon as unprofitable and desert. What would Castlereagh or

Liverpool have thought could they have seen the items which we were

buying for our six million pounds? The inventory would have been a mixed

one of good and of evil; nine fierce Kaffir wars, the greatest

diamond mines in the world, the wealthiest gold mines, two costly and

humiliating campaigns with men whom we respected even when we fought

with them, and now at last, we hope, a South Africa of peace and

prosperity, with equal rights and equal duties for all men. The future

should hold something very good for us in that land, for if we merely

count the past we should be compelled to say that we should have been

stronger, richer, and higher in the world's esteem had our possessions

there never passed beyond the range of the guns of our men-of-war. But

surely the most arduous is the most honourable, and, looking back from

the end of their journey, our descendants may see that our long record

of struggle, with its mixture of disaster and success, its outpouring

of blood and of treasure, has always tended to some great and enduring

goal.

The title-deeds to the estate are, as I have said, good ones, but there

is one singular and ominous flaw in their provisions. The ocean has

marked three boundaries to it, but the fourth is undefined. There is

no word of the 'Hinterland;' for neither the term nor the idea had

then been thought of. Had Great Britain bought those vast regions which

extended beyond the settlements? Or were the discontented Dutch at

liberty to pass onwards and found fresh nations to bar the path of the

Anglo-Celtic colonists? In that question lay the germ of all the trouble

to come. An American would realise the point at issue if he could

conceive that after the founding of the United States the Dutch

inhabitants of the State of New York had trekked to the westward and

established fresh communities under a new flag. Then, when the American

population overtook these western States, they would be face to face

with the problem which this country has had to solve. If they found

these new States fiercely anti-American and extremely unprogressive,

they would experience that aggravation of their difficulties with which

our statesmen have had to deal.

At the time of their transference to the British flag the

colonists--Dutch, French, and German--numbered some thirty thousand.

They were slaveholders, and the slaves were about as numerous as

themselves. The prospect of complete amalgamation between the British

and the original settlers would have seemed to be a good one, since

they were of much the same stock, and their creeds could only be

distinguished by their varying degrees of bigotry and intolerance. Five

thousand British emigrants were landed in 1820, settling on the Eastern

borders of the colony, and from that time onwards there was a slow but

steady influx of English speaking colonists. The Government had the

historical faults and the historical virtues of British rule. It was

mild, clean, honest, tactless, and inconsistent. On the whole, it might

have done very well had it been content to leave things as it found

them. But to change the habits of the most conservative of Teutonic

races was a dangerous venture, and one which has led to a long series

of complications, making up the troubled history of South Africa. The

Imperial Government has always taken an honourable and philanthropic

view of the rights of the native and the claim which he has to the

protection of the law. We hold and rightly, that British justice, if not

blind, should at least be colour-blind. The view is irreproachable in

theory and incontestable in argument, but it is apt to be irritating

when urged by a Boston moralist or a London philanthropist upon men

whose whole society has been built upon the assumption that the black

is the inferior race. Such a people like to find the higher morality

for themselves, not to have it imposed upon them by those who live under

entirely different conditions. They feel--and with some reason--that

it is a cheap form of virtue which, from the serenity of a well-ordered

household in Beacon Street or Belgrave Square, prescribes what the

relation shall be between a white employer and his half-savage,

half-childish retainers. Both branches of the Anglo-Celtic race have

grappled with the question, and in each it has led to trouble.

The British Government in South Africa has always played the unpopular

part of the friend and protector of the native servants. It was upon

this very point that the first friction appeared between the old

settlers and the new administration. A rising with bloodshed followed

the arrest of a Dutch farmer who had maltreated his slave. It was

suppressed, and five of the participants were hanged. This punishment

was unduly severe and exceedingly injudicious. A brave race can forget

the victims of the field of battle, but never those of the scaffold. The

making of political martyrs is the last insanity of statesmanship. It

is true that both the man who arrested and the judge who condemned the

prisoners were Dutch, and that the British Governor interfered on the

side of mercy; but all this was forgotten afterwards in the desire to

make racial capital out of the incident. It is typical of the enduring

resentment which was left behind that when, after the Jameson raid, it

seemed that the leaders of that ill-fated venture might be hanged,

the beam was actually brought from a farmhouse at Cookhouse Drift to

Pretoria, that the Englishmen might die as the Dutchmen had died in

1816. Slagter's Nek marked the dividing of the ways between the British

Government and the Afrikaners.

And the separation soon became more marked. There were injudicious

tamperings with the local government and the local ways, with a

substitution of English for Dutch in the law courts. With vicarious

generosity, the English Government gave very lenient terms to the Kaffir

tribes who in 1834 had raided the border farmers. And then, finally, in

this same year there came the emancipation of the slaves throughout the

British Empire, which fanned all smouldering discontents into an active

flame.

It must be confessed that on this occasion the British philanthropist

was willing to pay for what he thought was right. It was a noble

national action, and one the morality of which was in advance of its

time, that the British Parliament should vote the enormous sum of twenty

million pounds to pay compensation to the slaveholders, and so to remove

an evil with which the mother country had no immediate connection. It

was as well that the thing should have been done when it was, for had we

waited till the colonies affected had governments of their own it could

never have been done by constitutional methods. With many a grumble the

good British householder drew his purse from his fob, and he paid for

what he thought to be right. If any special grace attends the virtuous

action which brings nothing but tribulation in this world, then we may

hope for it over this emancipation. We spent our money, we ruined our

West Indian colonies, and we started a disaffection in South Africa, the

end of which we have not seen. Yet if it were to be done again we should

doubtless do it. The highest morality may prove also to be the highest

wisdom when the half-told story comes to be finished.

But the details of the measure were less honourable than the principle.

It was carried out suddenly, so that the country had no time to adjust

itself to the new conditions. Three million pounds were ear-marked for

South Africa, which gives a price per slave of from sixty to seventy

pounds, a sum considerably below the current local rates. Finally, the

compensation was made payable in London, so that the farmers sold their

claims at reduced prices to middlemen. Indignation meetings were held in

every little townlet and cattle camp on the Karoo. The old Dutch spirit

was up--the spirit of the men who cut the dykes. Rebellion was useless.

But a vast untenanted land stretched to the north of them. The nomad

life was congenial to them, and in their huge ox-drawn wagons--like

those bullock-carts in which some of their old kinsmen came to

Gaul--they had vehicles and homes and forts all in one. One by one they

were loaded up, the huge teams were inspanned, the women were seated

inside, the men, with their long-barrelled guns, walked alongside,

and the great exodus was begun. Their herds and flocks accompanied the

migration, and the children helped to round them in and drive them. One

tattered little boy of ten cracked his sjambok whip behind the bullocks.

He was a small item in that singular crowd, but he was of interest to

us, for his name was Paul Stephanus Kruger.

It was a strange exodus, only comparable in modern times to the sallying

forth of the Mormons from Nauvoo upon their search for the promised laud

of Utah. The country was known and sparsely settled as far north as the

Orange River, but beyond there was a great region which had never

been penetrated save by some daring hunter or adventurous pioneer. It

chanced--if there be indeed such an element as chance in the graver

affairs of man--that a Zulu conqueror had swept over this land and left

it untenanted, save by the dwarf bushmen, the hideous aborigines,

lowest of the human race. There were fine grazing and good soil for

the emigrants. They traveled in small detached parties, but their total

numbers were considerable, from six to ten thousand according to their

historian, or nearly a quarter of the whole population of the colony.

Some of the early bands perished miserably. A large number made a

trysting-place at a high peak to the east of Bloemfontein in what was

lately the Orange Free State. One party of the emigrants was cut off

by the formidable Matabeli, a branch of the great Zulu nation. The

survivors declared war upon them, and showed in this, their first

campaign, the extraordinary ingenuity in adapting their tactics to their

adversary which has been their greatest military characteristic. The

commando which rode out to do battle with the Matabeli numbered, it is

said, a hundred and thirty-five farmers. Their adversaries were twelve

thousand spearmen. They met at the Marico River, near Mafeking. The

Boers combined the use of their horses and of their rifles so cleverly

that they slaughtered a third of their antagonists without any loss to

themselves. Their tactics were to gallop up within range of the enemy,

to fire a volley, and then to ride away again before the spearmen could

reach them. When the savages pursued the Boers fled. When the pursuit

halted the Boers halted and the rifle fire began anew. The strategy was

simple but most effective. When one remembers how often since then our

own horsemen have been pitted against savages in all parts of the world,

one deplores that ignorance of all military traditions save our own

which is characteristic of our service.

This victory of the 'voortrekkers' cleared all the country between the

Orange River and the Limpopo, the sites of what has been known as the

Transvaal and the Orange Free State. In the meantime another body of

the emigrants had descended into what is now known as Natal, and had

defeated Dingaan, the great Chief of the Zulus. Being unable, owing to

the presence of their families, to employ the cavalry tactics which had

been so effective against the Matabeli, they again used their ingenuity

to meet this new situation, and received the Zulu warriors in a square

of laagered wagons, the men firing while the women loaded. Six burghers

were killed and three thousand Zulus. Had such a formation been used

forty years afterwards against these very Zulus, we should not have had

to mourn the disaster of Isandhlwana.

And now at the end of their great journey, after overcoming the

difficulties of distance, of nature, and of savage enemies, the Boers

saw at the end of their travels the very thing which they desired

least--that which they had come so far to avoid--the flag of Great

Britain. The Boers had occupied Natal from within, but England had

previously done the same by sea, and a small colony of Englishmen

had settled at Port Natal, now known as Durban. The home Government,

however, had acted in a vacillating way, and it was only the conquest of

Natal by the Boers which caused them to claim it as a British colony.

At the same time they asserted the unwelcome doctrine that a British

subject could not at will throw off his allegiance, and that, go where

they might, the wandering farmers were still only the pioneers of

British colonies. To emphasise the fact three companies of soldiers

were sent in 1842 to what is now Durban--the usual Corporal's guard with

which Great Britain starts a new empire. This handful of men was waylaid

by the Boers and cut up, as their successors have been so often since.

The survivors, however, fortified themselves, and held a defensive

position--as also their successors have done so many times since--until

reinforcements arrived and the farmers dispersed. It is singular how in

history the same factors will always give the same result. Here in this

first skirmish is an epitome of all our military relations with these

people. The blundering headstrong attack, the defeat, the powerlessness

of the farmer against the weakest fortifications--it is the same tale

over and over again in different scales of importance. Natal from this

time onward became a British colony, and the majority of the Boers

trekked north and east with bitter hearts to tell their wrongs to their

brethren of the Orange Free State and of the Transvaal.

Had they any wrongs to tell? It is difficult to reach that height of

philosophic detachment which enables the historian to deal absolutely

impartially where his own country is a party to the quarrel. But

at least we may allow that there is a case for our adversary. Our

annexation of Natal had been by no means definite, and it was they and

not we who first broke that bloodthirsty Zulu power which threw its

shadow across the country. It was hard after such trials and such

exploits to turn their back upon the fertile land which they had

conquered, and to return to the bare pastures of the upland veld. They

carried out of Natal a heavy sense of injury, which has helped to

poison our relations with them ever since. It was, in a way, a momentous

episode, this little skirmish of soldiers and emigrants, for it was the

heading off of the Boer from the sea and the confinement of his ambition

to the land. Had it gone the other way, a new and possibly formidable

flag would have been added to the maritime nations.

The emigrants who had settled in the huge tract of country between

the Orange River in the south and the Limpopo in the north had been

recruited by newcomers from the Cape Colony until they numbered some

fifteen thousand souls. This population was scattered over a space

as large as Germany, and larger than Pennsylvania, New York, and New

England. Their form of government was individualistic and democratic to

the last degree compatible with any sort of cohesion. Their wars with

the Kaffirs and their fear and dislike of the British Government appear

to have been the only ties which held them together. They divided

and subdivided within their own borders, like a germinating egg.

The Transvaal was full of lusty little high-mettled communities,

who quarreled among themselves as fiercely as they had done with the

authorities at the Cape. Lydenburg, Zoutpansberg, and Potchefstroom were

on the point of turning their rifles against each other. In the south,

between the Orange River and the Vaal, there was no form of government

at all, but a welter of Dutch farmers, Basutos, Hottentots, and

halfbreeds living in a chronic state of turbulence, recognising neither

the British authority to the south of them nor the Transvaal republics

to the north. The chaos became at last unendurable, and in 1848 a

garrison was placed in Bloemfontein and the district incorporated in the

British Empire. The emigrants made a futile resistance at Boomplaats,

and after a single defeat allowed themselves to be drawn into the

settled order of civilised rule.

At this period the Transvaal, where most of the Boers had settled,

desired a formal acknowledgment of their independence, which the British

authorities determined once and for all to give them. The great barren

country, which produced little save marksmen, had no attractions for a

Colonial Office which was bent upon the limitation of its liabilities.

A Convention was concluded between the two parties, known as the Sand

River Convention, which is one of the fixed points in South African

history. By it the British Government guaranteed to the Boer farmers the

right to manage their own affairs, and to govern themselves by their

own laws without any interference upon the part of the British. It

stipulated that there should be no slavery, and with that single

reservation washed its hands finally, as it imagined, of the whole

question. So the South African Republic came formally into existence.

In the very year after the Sand River Convention a second republic, the

Orange Free State, was created by the deliberate withdrawal of Great

Britain from the territory which she had for eight years occupied. The

Eastern Question was already becoming acute, and the cloud of a great

war was drifting up, visible to all men. British statesmen felt that

their commitments were very heavy in every part of the world, and

the South African annexations had always been a doubtful value and an

undoubted trouble. Against the will of a large part of the inhabitants,

whether a majority or not it is impossible to say, we withdrew our

troops as amicably as the Romans withdrew from Britain, and the new

republic was left with absolute and unfettered independence. On a

petition being presented against the withdrawal, the Home Government

actually voted forty-eight thousand pounds to compensate those who had

suffered from the change. Whatever historical grievance the Transvaal

may have against Great Britain, we can at least, save perhaps in one

matter, claim to have a very clear conscience concerning our dealings

with the Orange Free State. Thus in 1852 and in 1854 were born those

sturdy States who were able for a time to hold at bay the united forces

of the empire.

In the meantime Cape Colony, in spite of these secessions, had prospered

exceedingly, and her population--English, German, and Dutch--had grown

by 1870 to over two hundred thousand souls, the Dutch still slightly

predominating. According to the Liberal colonial policy of Great

Britain, the time had come to cut the cord and let the young nation

conduct its own affairs. In 1872 complete self-government was given

to it, the Governor, as the representative of the Queen, retaining a

nominal unexercised veto upon legislation. According to this system

the Dutch majority of the colony could, and did, put their own

representatives into power and run the government upon Dutch lines.

Already Dutch law had been restored, and Dutch put on the same footing

as English as the official language of the country. The extreme

liberality of such measures, and the uncompromising way in which they

have been carried out, however distasteful the legislation might seem

to English ideas, are among the chief reasons which made the illiberal

treatment of British settlers in the Transvaal so keenly resented at the

Cape. A Dutch Government was ruling the British in a British colony,

at a moment when the Boers would not give an Englishman a vote upon a

municipal council in a city which he had built himself. Unfortunately,

however, 'the evil that men do lives after them,' and the ignorant Boer

farmer continued to imagine that his southern relatives were in bondage,

just as the descendant of the Irish emigrant still pictures an Ireland

of penal laws and an alien Church.

For twenty-five years after the Sand River Convention the burghers

of the South African Republic had pursued a strenuous and violent

existence, fighting incessantly with the natives and sometimes with

each other, with an occasional fling at the little Dutch republic to the

south. The semi-tropical sun was waking strange ferments in the placid

Friesland blood, and producing a race who added the turbulence and

restlessness of the south to the formidable tenacity of the north.

Strong vitality and violent ambitions produced feuds and rivalries

worthy of medieval Italy, and the story of the factious little

communities is like a chapter out of Guicciardini. Disorganisation

ensued. The burghers would not pay taxes and the treasury was empty. One

fierce Kaffir tribe threatened them from the north, and the Zulus on

the east. It is an exaggeration of English partisans to pretend that our

intervention saved the Boers, for no one can read their military history

without seeing that they were a match for Zulus and Sekukuni combined.

But certainly a formidable invasion was pending, and the scattered

farmhouses were as open to the Kaffirs as our farmers' homesteads were

in the American colonies when the Indians were on the warpath. Sir

Theophilus Shepstone, the British Commissioner, after an inquiry of

three months, solved all questions by the formal annexation of the

country. The fact that he took possession of it with a force of

some twenty-five men showed the honesty of his belief that no armed

resistance was to be feared. This, then, in 1877 was a complete reversal

of the Sand River Convention and the opening of a new chapter in the

history of South Africa.

There did not appear to be any strong feeling at the time against the

annexation. The people were depressed with their troubles and weary of

contention. Burgers, the President, put in a formal protest, and took

up his abode in Cape Colony, where he had a pension from the British

Government. A memorial against the measure received the signatures of a

majority of the Boer inhabitants, but there was a fair minority who took

the other view. Kruger himself accepted a paid office under Government.

There was every sign that the people, if judiciously handled, would

settle down under the British flag. It is even asserted that they would

themselves have petitioned for annexation had it been longer withheld.

With immediate constitutional government it is possible that even

the most recalcitrant of them might have been induced to lodge their

protests in the ballot boxes rather than in the bodies of our soldiers.

But the empire has always had poor luck in South Africa, and never

worse than on that occasion. Through no bad faith, but simply through

preoccupation and delay, the promises made were not instantly fulfilled.

Simple primitive men do not understand the ways of our circumlocution

offices, and they ascribe to duplicity what is really red tape and

stupidity. If the Transvaalers had waited they would have had their

Volksraad and all that they wanted. But the British Government had some

other local matters to set right, the rooting out of Sekukuni and the

breaking of the Zulus, before they would fulfill their pledges. The

delay was keenly resented. And we were unfortunate in our choice of

Governor. The burghers are a homely folk, and they like an occasional

cup of coffee with the anxious man who tries to rule them. The three

hundred pounds a year of coffee money allowed by the Transvaal to its

President is by no means a mere form. A wise administrator would fall

into the sociable and democratic habits of the people. Sir Theophilus

Shepstone did so. Sir Owen Lanyon did not. There was no Volksraad and

no coffee, and the popular discontent grew rapidly. In three years the

British had broken up the two savage hordes which had been threatening

the land. The finances, too, had been restored. The reasons which had

made so many favour the annexation were weakened by the very power which

had every interest in preserving them.

It cannot be too often pointed out that in this annexation, the

starting-point of our troubles, Great Britain, however mistaken she may

have been, had no obvious selfish interest in view. There were no Rand

mines in those days, nor was there anything in the country to tempt the

most covetous. An empty treasury and two native wars were the reversion

which we took over. It was honestly considered that the country was

in too distracted a state to govern itself, and had, by its weakness,

become a scandal and a danger to its neighbours. There was nothing

sordid in our action, though it may have been both injudicious and

high-handed.

In December 1880 the Boers rose. Every farmhouse sent out its riflemen,

and the trysting-place was the outside of the nearest British fort. All

through the country small detachments were surrounded and besieged

by the farmers. Standerton, Pretoria, Potchefstroom, Lydenburg,

Wakkerstroom, Rustenberg, and Marabastad were all invested and all

held out until the end of the war. In the open country we were less

fortunate. At Bronkhorst Spruit a small British force was taken by

surprise and shot down without harm to their antagonists. The surgeon

who treated them has left it on record that the average number of

wounds was five per man. At Laing's Nek an inferior force of British

endeavoured to rush a hill which was held by Boer riflemen. Half of our

men were killed and wounded. Ingogo may be called a drawn battle, though

our loss was more heavy than that of the enemy. Finally came the

defeat of Majuba Hill, where four hundred infantry upon a mountain were

defeated and driven off by a swarm of sharpshooters who advanced under

the cover of boulders. Of all these actions there was not one which

was more than a skirmish, and had they been followed by a final British

victory they would now be hardly remembered. It is the fact that they

were skirmishes which succeeded in their object which has given them

an importance which is exaggerated. At the same time they may mark the

beginning of a new military era, for they drove home the fact--only too

badly learned by us--that it is the rifle and not the drill which makes

the soldier. It is bewildering that after such an experience the

British military authorities continued to serve out only three hundred

cartridges a year for rifle practice, and that they still encouraged

that mechanical volley firing which destroys all individual aim. With

the experience of the first Boer war behind them, little was done,

either in tactics or in musketry, to prepare the soldier for the second.

The value of the mounted rifleman, the shooting with accuracy at unknown

ranges, the art of taking cover--all were equally neglected.

The defeat at Majuba Hill was followed by the complete surrender of the

Gladstonian Government, an act which was either the most pusillanimous

or the most magnanimous in recent history. It is hard for the big man

to draw away from the small before blows are struck but when the big man

has been knocked down three times it is harder still. An overwhelming

British force was in the field, and the General declared that he held

the enemy in the hollow of his hand. Our military calculations have been

falsified before now by these farmers, and it may be that the task

of Wood and Roberts would have been harder than they imagined; but on

paper, at least, it looked as if the enemy could be crushed without

difficulty. So the public thought, and yet they consented to the

upraised sword being stayed. With them, as apart from the politicians,

the motive was undoubtedly a moral and Christian one. They considered

that the annexation of the Transvaal had evidently been an injustice,

that the farmers had a right to the freedom for which they fought, and

that it was an unworthy thing for a great nation to continue an unjust

war for the sake of a military revenge. It was the height of idealism,

and the result has not been such as to encourage its repetition.

An armistice was concluded on March 5th, 1881, which led up to a peace

on the 23rd of the same month. The Government, after yielding to force

what it had repeatedly refused to friendly representations, made

a clumsy compromise in their settlement. A policy of idealism and

Christian morality should have been thorough if it were to be tried

at all. It was obvious that if the annexation were unjust, then the

Transvaal should have reverted to the condition in which it was before

the annexation, as defined by the Sand River Convention. But the

Government for some reason would not go so far as this. They niggled

and quibbled and bargained until the State was left as a curious hybrid

thing such as the world has never seen. It was a republic which was

part of the system of a monarchy, dealt with by the Colonial Office,

and included under the heading of 'Colonies' in the news columns of the

'Times.' It was autonomous, and yet subject to some vague suzerainty,

the limits of which no one has ever been able to define. Altogether, in

its provisions and in its omissions, the Convention of Pretoria appears

to prove that our political affairs were as badly conducted as our

military in this unfortunate year of 1881.

It was evident from the first that so illogical and contentious an

agreement could not possibly prove to be a final settlement, and indeed

the ink of the signatures was hardly dry before an agitation was on foot

for its revision. The Boers considered, and with justice, that if they

were to be left as undisputed victors in the war then they should have

the full fruits of victory. On the other hand, the English-speaking

colonies had their allegiance tested to the uttermost. The proud

Anglo-Celtic stock is not accustomed to be humbled, and yet they found

themselves through the action of the home Government converted into

members of a beaten race. It was very well for the citizen of London to

console his wounded pride by the thought that he had done a magnanimous

action, but it was different with the British colonist of Durban or Cape

Town, who by no act of his own, and without any voice in the settlement,

found himself humiliated before his Dutch neighbour. An ugly feeling of

resentment was left behind, which might perhaps have passed away had the

Transvaal accepted the settlement in the spirit in which it was meant,

but which grew more and more dangerous as during eighteen years our

people saw, or thought that they saw, that one concession led always

to a fresh demand, and that the Dutch republics aimed not merely at

equality, but at dominance in South Africa. Professor Bryce, a friendly

critic, after a personal examination of the country and the question,

has left it upon record that the Boers saw neither generosity nor

humanity in our conduct, but only fear. An outspoken race, they conveyed

their feelings to their neighbours. Can it be wondered at that South

Africa has been in a ferment ever since, and that the British Africander

has yearned with an intensity of feeling unknown in England for the hour

of revenge?

The Government of the Transvaal after the war was left in the hands of a

triumvirate, but after one year Kruger became President, an office which

he continued to hold for eighteen years. His career as ruler vindicates

the wisdom of that wise but unwritten provision of the American

Constitution by which there is a limit to the tenure of this office.

Continued rule for half a generation must turn a man into an autocrat.

The old President has said himself, in his homely but shrewd way, that

when one gets a good ox to lead the team it is a pity to change him.

If a good ox, however, is left to choose his own direction without

guidance, he may draw his wagon into trouble.

During three years the little State showed signs of a tumultuous

activity. Considering that it was as large as France and that the

population could not have been more than 50,000, one would have thought

that they might have found room without any inconvenient crowding.

But the burghers passed beyond their borders in every direction. The

President cried aloud that he had been shut up in a kraal, and he

proceeded to find ways out of it. A great trek was projected for the

north, but fortunately it miscarried. To the east they raided Zululand,

and succeeded, in defiance of the British settlement of that country,

in tearing away one third of it and adding it to the Transvaal. To

the west, with no regard to the three-year-old treaty, they invaded

Bechuanaland, and set up the two new republics of Goshen and Stellaland.

So outrageous were these proceedings that Great Britain was forced

to fit out in 1884 a new expedition under Sir Charles Warren for the

purpose of turning these freebooters out of the country. It may be

asked, why should these men be called freebooters if the founders of

Rhodesia were pioneers? The answer is that the Transvaal was limited

by treaty to certain boundaries which these men transgressed, while no

pledges were broken when the British power expanded to the north. The

upshot of these trespasses was the scene upon which every drama of South

Africa rings down. Once more the purse was drawn from the pocket of

the unhappy taxpayer, and a million or so was paid out to defray the

expenses of the police force necessary to keep these treaty-breakers in

order. Let this be borne in mind when we assess the moral and material

damage done to the Transvaal by that ill-conceived and foolish

enterprise, the Jameson Raid.

In 1884 a deputation from the Transvaal visited England, and at their

solicitation the clumsy Treaty of Pretoria was altered into the still

more clumsy Convention of London. The changes in the provisions were all

in favour of the Boers, and a second successful war could hardly have

given them more than Lord Derby handed them in time of peace. Their

style was altered from the Transvaal to the South African Republic, a

change which was ominously suggestive of expansion in the future. The

control of Great Britain over their foreign policy was also relaxed,

though a power of veto was retained. But the most important thing of

all, and the fruitful cause of future trouble, lay in an omission. A

suzerainty is a vague term, but in politics, as in theology, the more

nebulous a thing is the more does it excite the imagination and the

passions of men. This suzerainty was declared in the preamble of the

first treaty, and no mention of it was made in the second. Was it

thereby abrogated or was it not? The British contention was that only

the articles were changed, and that the preamble continued to hold good

for both treaties. They pointed out that not only the suzerainty, but

also the independence, of the Transvaal was proclaimed in that preamble,

and that if one lapsed the other must do so also. On the other hand,

the Boers pointed to the fact that there was actually a preamble to the

second Convention, which would seem, therefore, to have taken the place

of the first. The point is so technical that it appears to be eminently

one of those questions which might with propriety have been submitted to

the decision of a board of foreign jurists--or possibly to the Supreme

Court of the United States. If the decision had been given against Great

Britain, we might have accepted it in a chastened spirit as a fitting

punishment for the carelessness of the representative who failed to

make our meaning intelligible. Carlyle has said that a political mistake

always ends in a broken head for somebody. Unfortunately the somebody is

usually somebody else. We have read the story of the political mistakes.

Only too soon we shall come to the broken heads.

This, then, is a synopsis of what had occurred up to the signing of

the Convention, which finally established, or failed to establish, the

position of the South African Republic. We must now leave the larger

questions, and descend to the internal affairs of that small State, and

especially to that train of events which has stirred the mind of our

people more than anything since the Indian Mutiny.

CHAPTER 2. THE CAUSE OF QUARREL.

There might almost seem to be some subtle connection between the

barrenness and worthlessness of a surface and the value of the minerals

which lie beneath it. The craggy mountains of Western America, the arid

plains of West Australia, the ice-bound gorges of the Klondyke, and the

bare slopes of the Witwatersrand veld--these are the lids which cover

the great treasure chests of the world.

Gold had been known to exist in the Transvaal before, but it was only in

1886 that it was realised that the deposits which lie some thirty miles

south of the capital are of a very extraordinary and valuable nature.

The proportion of gold in the quartz is not particularly high, nor are

the veins of a remarkable thickness, but the peculiarity of the Rand

mines lies in the fact that throughout this 'banket' formation the metal

is so uniformly distributed that the enterprise can claim a certainty

which is not usually associated with the industry. It is quarrying

rather than mining. Add to this that the reefs which were originally

worked as outcrops have now been traced to enormous depths, and present

the same features as those at the surface. A conservative estimate of

the value of the gold has placed it at seven hundred millions of pounds.

Such a discovery produced the inevitable effect. A great number of

adventurers flocked into the country, some desirable and some very much

the reverse. There were circumstances, however, which kept away

the rowdy and desperado element who usually make for a newly opened

goldfield. It was not a class of mining which encouraged the individual

adventurer. There were none of those nuggets which gleamed through

the mud of the dollies at Ballarat, or recompensed the forty-niners in

California for all their travels and their toils. It was a field for

elaborate machinery, which could only be provided by capital. Managers,

engineers, miners, technical experts, and the tradesmen and middlemen

who live upon them, these were the Uitlanders, drawn from all the races

under the sun, but with the Anglo-Celtic vastly predominant. The best

engineers were American, the best miners were Cornish, the best managers

were English, the money to run the mines was largely subscribed in

England. As time went on, however, the German and French interests

became more extensive, until their joint holdings are now probably as

heavy as those of the British. Soon the population of the mining centres

became greater than that of the whole Boer community, and consisted

mainly of men in the prime of life--men, too, of exceptional

intelligence and energy.

The situation was an extraordinary one. I have already attempted to

bring the problem home to an American by suggesting that the Dutch

of New York had trekked west and founded an anti-American and highly

unprogressive State. To carry out the analogy we will now suppose that

that State was California, that the gold of that State attracted a

large inrush of American citizens, who came to outnumber the original

inhabitants, that these citizens were heavily taxed and badly used, and

that they deafened Washington with their outcry about their injuries.

That would be a fair parallel to the relations between the Transvaal,

the Uitlanders, and the British Government.

That these Uitlanders had very real and pressing grievances no one could

possibly deny. To recount them all would be a formidable task, for their

whole lives were darkened by injustice. There was not a wrong which had

driven the Boer from Cape Colony which he did not now practise himself

upon others--and a wrong may be excusable in 1885 which is monstrous

in 1895. The primitive virtue which had characterised the farmers broke

down in the face of temptation. The country Boers were little affected,

some of them not at all, but the Pretoria Government became a most

corrupt oligarchy, venal and incompetent to the last degree. Officials

and imported Hollanders handled the stream of gold which came in from

the mines, while the unfortunate Uitlander who paid nine-tenths of the

taxation was fleeced at every turn, and met with laughter and taunts

when he endeavoured to win the franchise by which he might peaceably

set right the wrongs from which he suffered. He was not an unreasonable

person. On the contrary, he was patient to the verge of meekness,

as capital is likely to be when it is surrounded by rifles. But his

situation was intolerable, and after successive attempts at peaceful

agitation, and numerous humble petitions to the Volksraad, he began at

last to realise that he would never obtain redress unless he could find

some way of winning it for himself.

Without attempting to enumerate all the wrongs which embittered the

Uitlanders, the more serious of them may be summed up in this way.

1. That they were heavily taxed and provided about seven-eighths of the

revenue of the country. The revenue of the South African Republic--which

had been 154,000 pounds in 1886, when the gold fields were opened--had

grown in 1899 to four million pounds, and the country through the

industry of the newcomers had changed from one of the poorest to the

richest in the whole world (per head of population).

2. That in spite of this prosperity which they had brought, they, the

majority of the inhabitants of the country, were left without a vote,

and could by no means influence the disposal of the great sums which

they were providing. Such a case of taxation without representation has

never been known.

3. That they had no voice in the choice or payment of officials. Men of

the worst private character might be placed with complete authority over

valuable interests. Upon one occasion the Minister of Mines attempted

himself to jump a mine, having officially learned some flaw in its

title. The total official salaries had risen in 1899 to a sum sufficient

to pay 40 pounds per head to the entire male Boer population.

4. That they had no control over education. Mr. John Robinson, the

Director General of the Johannesburg Educational Council, has reckoned

the sum spent on Uitlander schools as 650 pounds out of 63,000 pounds

allotted for education, making one shilling and tenpence per head per

annum on Uitlander children, and eight pounds six shillings per head

on Boer children--the Uitlander, as always, paying seven-eighths of the

original sum.

5. No power of municipal government. Watercarts instead of pipes,

filthy buckets instead of drains, a corrupt and violent police, a high

death-rate in what should be a health resort--all this in a city which

they had built themselves.

6. Despotic government in the matter of the press and of the right of

public meeting.

7. Disability from service upon a jury.

8. Continual harassing of the mining interest by vexatious legislation.

Under this head came many grievances, some special to the mines and some

affecting all Uitlanders. The dynamite monopoly, by which the miners had

to pay 600,000 pounds extra per annum in order to get a worse quality

of dynamite; the liquor laws, by which one-third of the Kaffirs were

allowed to be habitually drunk; the incompetence and extortions of the

State-owned railway; the granting of concessions for numerous articles

of ordinary consumption to individuals, by which high prices were

maintained; the surrounding of Johannesburg by tolls from which the town

had no profit--these were among the economical grievances, some large,

some petty, which ramified through every transaction of life.

And outside and beyond all these definite wrongs imagine to a free born

progressive man, an American or a Briton, the constant irritation of

being absolutely ruled by a body of twenty-five men, twenty-one of

whom had in the case of the Selati Railway Company been publicly and

circumstantially accused of bribery, with full details of the bribes

received, while to their corruption they added such crass ignorance that

they argue in the published reports of the Volksraad debates that using

dynamite bombs to bring down rain was firing at God, that it is impious

to destroy locusts, that the word 'participate' should not be used

because it is not in the Bible, and that postal pillar boxes are

extravagant and effeminate. Such obiter dicta may be amusing at a

distance, but they are less entertaining when they come from an autocrat

who has complete power over the conditions of your life.

From the fact that they were a community extremely preoccupied by

their own business, it followed that the Uitlanders were not ardent

politicians, and that they desired to have a share in the government of

the State for the purpose of making the conditions of their own industry

and of their own daily lives more endurable. How far there was need of

such an interference may be judged by any fair-minded man who reads the

list of their complaints. A superficial view may recognise the Boers as

the champions of liberty, but a deeper insight must see that they (as

represented by their elected rulers) have in truth stood for all

that history has shown to be odious in the form of exclusiveness and

oppression. Their conception of liberty has been a selfish one, and they

have consistently inflicted upon others far heavier wrongs than those

against which they had themselves rebelled.

As the mines increased in importance and the miners in numbers, it

was found that these political disabilities affected some of that

cosmopolitan crowd far more than others, in proportion to the amount of

freedom to which their home institutions had made them accustomed. The

continental Uitlanders were more patient of that which was unendurable

to the American and the Briton. The Americans, however, were in so great

a minority that it was upon the British that the brunt of the struggle

for freedom fell. Apart from the fact that the British were more

numerous than all the other Uitlanders combined, there were special

reasons why they should feel their humiliating position more than the

members of any other race. In the first place, many of the British were

British South Africans, who knew that in the neighbouring countries

which gave them birth the most liberal possible institutions had been

given to the kinsmen of these very Boers who were refusing them the

management of their own drains and water supply. And again, every Briton

knew that Great Britain claimed to be the paramount power in South

Africa, and so he felt as if his own land, to which he might have looked

for protection, was conniving at and acquiescing in his ill treatment.

As citizens of the paramount power, it was peculiarly galling that they

should be held in political subjection. The British, therefore, were the

most persistent and energetic of the agitators.

But it is a poor cause which cannot bear to fairly state and honestly

consider the case of its opponents. The Boers had made, as has been

briefly shown, great efforts to establish a country of their own. They

had travelled far, worked hard, and fought bravely. After all their

efforts they were fated to see an influx of strangers into their

country, some of them men of questionable character, who outnumbered

the original inhabitants. If the franchise were granted to these,

there could be no doubt that though at first the Boers might control

a majority of the votes, it was only a question of time before the

newcomers would dominate the Raad and elect their own President, who

might adopt a policy abhorrent to the original owners of the land. Were

the Boers to lose by the ballot-box the victory which they had won by

their rifles? Was it fair to expect it? These newcomers came for gold.

They got their gold. Their companies paid a hundred per cent. Was not

that enough to satisfy them? If they did not like the country why did

they not leave it? No one compelled them to stay there. But if they

stayed, let them be thankful that they were tolerated at all, and not

presume to interfere with the laws of those by whose courtesy they were

allowed to enter the country.

That is a fair statement of the Boer position, and at first sight an

impartial man might say that there was a good deal to say for it; but

a closer examination would show that, though it might be tenable in

theory, it is unjust and impossible in practice.

In the present crowded state of the world a policy of Thibet may be

carried out in some obscure corner, but it cannot be done in a great

tract of country which lies right across the main line of industrial

progress. The position is too absolutely artificial. A handful of people

by the right of conquest take possession of an enormous country over

which they are dotted at such intervals that it is their boast that one

farmhouse cannot see the smoke of another, and yet, though their numbers

are so disproportionate to the area which they cover, they refuse to

admit any other people upon equal terms, but claim to be a privileged

class who shall dominate the newcomers completely. They are outnumbered

in their own land by immigrants who are far more highly educated and

progressive, and yet they hold them down in a way which exists nowhere

else upon earth. What is their right? The right of conquest. Then the

same right may be justly invoked to reverse so intolerable a situation.

This they would themselves acknowledge. 'Come on and fight! Come on!'

cried a member of the Volksraad when the franchise petition of the

Uitlanders was presented. 'Protest! Protest! What is the good of

protesting?' said Kruger to Mr. W. Y. Campbell; 'you have not got the

guns, I have.' There was always the final court of appeal. Judge Creusot

and Judge Mauser were always behind the President.

Again, the argument of the Boers would be more valid had they received

no benefit from these immigrants. If they had ignored them they might

fairly have stated that they did not desire their presence. But even

while they protested they grew rich at the Uitlander's expense. They

could not have it both ways. It would be consistent to discourage him

and not profit by him, or to make him comfortable and build the State

upon his money; but to ill-treat him and at the same time to grow strong

by his taxation must surely be an injustice.

And again, the whole argument is based upon the narrow racial

supposition that every naturalised citizen not of Boer extraction must

necessarily be unpatriotic. This is not borne out by the examples

of history. The newcomer soon becomes as proud of his country and

as jealous of her liberty as the old. Had President Kruger given the

franchise generously to the Uitlander, his pyramid would have been

firm upon its base and not balanced upon its apex. It is true that the

corrupt oligarchy would have vanished, and the spirit of a broader more

tolerant freedom influenced the counsels of the State. But the republic

would have become stronger and more permanent, with a population who,

if they differed in details, were united in essentials. Whether such a

solution would have been to the advantage of British interests in South

Africa is quite another question. In more ways than one President Kruger

has been a good friend to the empire.

So much upon the general question of the reason why the Uitlander should

agitate and why the Boer was obdurate. The details of the long struggle

between the seekers for the franchise and the refusers of it may be

quickly sketched, but they cannot be entirely ignored by any one who

desires to understand the inception of that great contest which was the

outcome of the dispute.

At the time of the Convention of Pretoria (1881) the rights of

burghership might be obtained by one year's residence. In 1882 it was

raised to five years, the reasonable limit which obtains both in Great

Britain and in the United States. Had it remained so, it is safe to say

that there would never have been either an Uitlander question or a great

Boer war. Grievances would have been righted from the inside without

external interference.

In 1890 the inrush of outsiders alarmed the Boers, and the franchise was

raised so as to be only attainable by those who had lived fourteen years

in the country. The Uitlanders, who were increasing rapidly in numbers

and were suffering from the formidable list of grievances already

enumerated, perceived that their wrongs were so numerous that it was

hopeless to have them set right seriatim, and that only by obtaining the

leverage of the franchise could they hope to move the heavy burden which

weighed them down. In 1893 a petition of 13,000 Uitlanders, couched

in most respectful terms, was submitted to the Raad, but met with

contemptuous neglect. Undeterred, however, by this failure, the National

Reform Union, an association which organised the agitation, came back to

the attack in 1894. They drew up a petition which was signed by 35,000

adult male Uitlanders, a greater number than the total Boer male

population of the country. A small liberal body in the Raad supported

this memorial and endeavoured in vain to obtain some justice for the

newcomers. Mr. Jeppe was the mouthpiece of this select band. 'They own

half the soil, they pay at least three quarters of the taxes,' said he.

'They are men who in capital, energy, and education are at least our

equals.

What will become of us or our children on that day when we may find

ourselves in a minority of one in twenty without a single friend among

the other nineteen, among those who will then tell us that they wished

to be brothers, but that we by our own act have made them strangers to

the republic?' Such reasonable and liberal sentiments were combated by

members who asserted that the signatures could not belong to law-abiding

citizens, since they were actually agitating against the law of the

franchise, and others whose intolerance was expressed by the defiance of

the member already quoted, who challenged the Uitlanders to come out and

fight. The champions of exclusiveness and racial hatred won the day. The

memorial was rejected by sixteen votes to eight, and the franchise law

was, on the initiative of the President, actually made more stringent

than ever, being framed in such a way that during the fourteen years of

probation the applicant should give up his previous nationality, so that

for that period he would really belong to no country at all. No hopes

were held out that any possible attitude upon the part of the Uitlanders

would soften the determination of the President and his burghers. One

who remonstrated was led outside the State buildings by the President,

who pointed up at the national flag. 'You see that flag?' said he. 'If I

grant the franchise, I may as well pull it down.' His animosity against

the immigrants was bitter. 'Burghers, friends, thieves, murderers,

newcomers, and others,' is the conciliatory opening of one of his public

addresses. Though Johannesburg is only thirty-two miles from Pretoria,

and though the State of which he was the head depended for its revenue

upon the gold fields, he paid it only three visits in nine years.

This settled animosity was deplorable, but not unnatural. A man imbued

with the idea of a chosen people, and unread in any book save the one

which cultivates this very idea, could not be expected to have learned

the historical lessons of the advantages which a State reaps from a

liberal policy. To him it was as if the Ammonites and Moabites had

demanded admission into the twelve tribes. He mistook an agitation

against the exclusive policy of the State for one against the existence

of the State itself. A wide franchise would have made his republic

firm-based and permanent. It was a small minority of the Uitlanders who

had any desire to come into the British system. They were a cosmopolitan

crowd, only united by the bond of a common injustice. But when every

other method had failed, and their petition for the rights of freemen

had been flung back at them, it was natural that their eyes should

turn to that flag which waved to the north, the west, and the south of

them--the flag which means purity of government with equal rights and

equal duties for all men. Constitutional agitation was laid aside, arms

were smuggled in, and everything prepared for an organised rising.

The events which followed at the beginning of 1896 have been so thrashed

out that there is, perhaps, nothing left to tell--except the truth. So

far as the Uitlanders themselves are concerned, their action was most

natural and justifiable, and they have no reason to exculpate themselves

for rising against such oppression as no men of our race have ever been

submitted to. Had they trusted only to themselves and the justice of

their cause, their moral and even their material position would have

been infinitely stronger. But unfortunately there were forces behind

them which were more questionable, the nature and extent of which have

never yet, in spite of two commissions of investigation, been properly

revealed. That there should have been any attempt at misleading inquiry,

or suppressing documents in order to shelter individuals, is deplorable,

for the impression left--I believe an entirely false one--must be that

the British Government connived at an expedition which was as immoral as

it was disastrous.

It had been arranged that the town was to rise upon a certain night,

that Pretoria should be attacked, the fort seized, and the rifles and

ammunition used to arm the Uitlanders. It was a feasible device, though

it must seem to us, who have had such an experience of the military

virtues of the burghers, a very desperate one. But it is conceivable

that the rebels might have held Johannesburg until the universal

sympathy which their cause excited throughout South Africa would have

caused Great Britain to intervene. Unfortunately they had complicated

matters by asking for outside help. Mr. Cecil Rhodes was Premier of the

Cape, a man of immense energy, and one who had rendered great services

to the empire. The motives of his action are obscure--certainly, we

may say that they were not sordid, for he has always been a man whose

thoughts were large and whose habits were simple. But whatever they may

have been--whether an ill-regulated desire to consolidate South Africa

under British rule, or a burning sympathy with the Uitlanders in their

fight against injustice--it is certain that he allowed his lieutenant,

Dr. Jameson, to assemble the mounted police of the Chartered Company, of

which Rhodes was founder and director, for the purpose of co-operating

with the rebels at Johannesburg. Moreover, when the revolt at

Johannesburg was postponed, on account of a disagreement as to which

flag they were to rise under, it appears that Jameson (with or without

the orders of Rhodes) forced the hand of the conspirators by invading

the country with a force absurdly inadequate to the work which he had

taken in hand. Five hundred policemen and three field guns made up the

forlorn hope who started from near Mafeking and crossed the Transvaal

border upon December 29th, 1895. On January 2nd they were surrounded by

the Boers amid the broken country near Dornkop, and after losing many

of their number killed and wounded, without food and with spent horses,

they were compelled to lay down their arms. Six burghers lost their

lives in the skirmish.

The Uitlanders have been severely criticised for not having sent out a

force to help Jameson in his difficulties, but it is impossible to see

how they could have acted in any other manner. They had done all they

could to prevent Jameson coming to their relief, and now it was rather

unreasonable to suppose that they should relieve their reliever. Indeed,

they had an entirely exaggerated idea of the strength of the force which

he was bringing, and received the news of his capture with incredulity.

When it became confirmed they rose, but in a halfhearted fashion

which was not due to want of courage, but to the difficulties of their

position. On the one hand, the British Government disowned Jameson

entirely, and did all it could to discourage the rising; on the other,

the President had the raiders in his keeping at Pretoria, and let it

be understood that their fate depended upon the behaviour of the

Uitlanders. They were led to believe that Jameson would be shot unless

they laid down their arms, though, as a matter of fact, Jameson and

his people had surrendered upon a promise of quarter. So skillfully did

Kruger use his hostages that he succeeded, with the help of the British

Commissioner, in getting the thousands of excited Johannesburgers to

lay down their arms without bloodshed. Completely out-manoeuvred by the

astute old President, the leaders of the reform movement used all their

influence in the direction of peace, thinking that a general amnesty

would follow; but the moment that they and their people were helpless

the detectives and armed burghers occupied the town, and sixty of their

number were hurried to Pretoria Gaol.

To the raiders themselves the President behaved with great generosity.

Perhaps he could not find it in his heart to be harsh to the men who

had managed to put him in the right and won for him the sympathy of the

world. His own illiberal and oppressive treatment of the newcomers was

forgotten in the face of this illegal inroad of filibusters. The true

issues were so obscured by this intrusion that it has taken years

to clear them, and perhaps they will never be wholly cleared. It was

forgotten that it was the bad government of the country which was the

real cause of the unfortunate raid. From then onwards the government

might grow worse and worse, but it was always possible to point to

the raid as justifying everything. Were the Uitlanders to have the

franchise? How could they expect it after the raid? Would Britain object

to the enormous importation of arms and obvious preparations for war?

They were only precautions against a second raid. For years the raid

stood in the way, not only of all progress, but of all remonstrance.

Through an action over which they had no control, and which they had

done their best to prevent, the British Government was left with a bad

case and a weakened moral authority.

The raiders were sent home, where the rank and file were very properly

released, and the chief officers were condemned to terms of imprisonment

which certainly did not err upon the side of severity. Cecil Rhodes was

left unpunished, he retained his place in the Privy Council, and his

Chartered Company continued to have a corporate existence. This was

illogical and inconclusive. As Kruger said, 'It is not the dog which

should be beaten, but the man who set him on to me.' Public opinion--in

spite of, or on account of, a crowd of witnesses--was ill informed upon

the exact bearings of the question, and it was obvious that as Dutch

sentiment at the Cape appeared already to be thoroughly hostile to us,

it would be dangerous to alienate the British Africanders also by

making a martyr of their favourite leader. But whatever arguments may be

founded upon expediency, it is clear that the Boers bitterly resented,

and with justice, the immunity of Rhodes.

In the meantime, both President Kruger and his burghers had shown a

greater severity to the political prisoners from Johannesburg than to

the armed followers of Jameson. The nationality of these prisoners is

interesting and suggestive. There were twenty-three Englishmen, sixteen

South Africans, nine Scotchmen, six Americans, two Welshmen, one

Irishman, one Australian, one Hollander, one Bavarian, one Canadian,

one Swiss, and one Turk. The prisoners were arrested in January, but the

trial did not take place until the end of April. All were found guilty

of high treason. Mr. Lionel Phillips, Colonel Rhodes (brother of Mr.

Cecil Rhodes), George Farrar, and Mr. Hammond, the American engineer,

were condemned to death, a sentence which was afterwards commuted to the

payment of an enormous fine. The other prisoners were condemned to two

years' imprisonment, with a fine of 2000 pounds each. The imprisonment

was of the most arduous and trying sort, and was embittered by the

harshness of the gaoler, Du Plessis. One of the unfortunate men cut

his throat, and several fell seriously ill, the diet and the sanitary

conditions being equally unhealthy. At last at the end of May all the

prisoners but six were released. Four of the six soon followed, two

stalwarts, Sampson and Davies, refusing to sign any petition and

remaining in prison until they were set free in 1897. Altogether the

Transvaal Government received in fines from the reform prisoners the

enormous sum of 212,000 pounds. A certain comic relief was immediately

afterwards given to so grave an episode by the presentation of a bill to

Great Britain for 1,677, 938 pounds 3 shillings and 3 pence--the greater

part of which was under the heading of moral and intellectual damage.

The raid was past and the reform movement was past, but the causes which

produced them both remained. It is hardly conceivable that a statesman

who loved his country would have refrained from making some effort to

remove a state of things which had already caused such grave dangers,

and which must obviously become more serious with every year that

passed. But Paul Kruger had hardened his heart, and was not to be moved.

The grievances of the Uitlanders became heavier than ever. The one

power in the land to which they had been able to appeal for some sort

of redress amid their grievances was the law courts. Now it was decreed

that the courts should be dependent on the Volksraad. The Chief Justice

protested against such a degradation of his high office, and he was

dismissed in consequence without a pension. The judge who had condemned

the reformers was chosen to fill the vacancy, and the protection of a

fixed law was withdrawn from the Uitlanders.

A commission appointed by the State was sent to examine into the

condition of the mining industry and the grievances from which the

newcomers suffered. The chairman was Mr. Schalk Burger, one of the most

liberal of the Boers, and the proceedings were thorough and impartial.

The result was a report which amply vindicated the reformers, and

suggested remedies which would have gone a long way towards satisfying

the Uitlanders. With such enlightened legislation their motives for

seeking the franchise would have been less pressing. But the President

and his Raad would have none of the recommendations of the commission.

The rugged old autocrat declared that Schalk Burger was a traitor to

his country for having signed such a document, and a new reactionary

committee was chosen to report upon the report. Words and papers were

the only outcome of the affair. No amelioration came to the newcomers.

But at least they had again put their case publicly upon record, and it

had been endorsed by the most respected of the burghers. Gradually in

the press of the English-speaking countries the raid was ceasing to

obscure the issue. More and more clearly it was coming out that no

permanent settlement was possible where the majority of the population

was oppressed by the minority. They had tried peaceful means and failed.

They had tried warlike means and failed. What was there left for them

to do? Their own country, the paramount power of South Africa, had never

helped them. Perhaps if it were directly appealed to it might do so. It

could not, if only for the sake of its own imperial prestige, leave its

children for ever in a state of subjection. The Uitlanders determined

upon a petition to the Queen, and in doing so they brought their

grievances out of the limits of a local controversy into the broader

field of international politics. Great Britain must either protect them

or acknowledge that their protection was beyond her power. A direct

petition to the Queen praying for protection was signed in April 1899 by

twenty-one thousand Uitlanders. From that time events moved inevitably

towards the one end. Sometimes the surface was troubled and sometimes

smooth, but the stream always ran swiftly and the roar of the fall

sounded ever louder in the ears.

CHAPTER 3. THE NEGOTIATIONS.

The British Government and the British people do not desire any direct

authority in South Africa. Their one supreme interest is that the

various States there should live in concord and prosperity, and that

there should be no need for the presence of a British redcoat within the

whole great peninsula. Our foreign critics, with their misapprehension

of the British colonial system, can never realise that whether

the four-coloured flag of the Transvaal or the Union Jack of a

self-governing colony waved over the gold mines would not make the

difference of one shilling to the revenue of Great Britain. The

Transvaal as a British province would have its own legislature, its

own revenue, its own expenditure, and its own tariff against the mother

country, as well as against the rest of the world, and England be none

the richer for the change. This is so obvious to a Briton that he has

ceased to insist upon it, and it is for that reason perhaps that it is

so universally misunderstood abroad. On the other hand, while she is no

gainer by the change, most of the expense of it in blood and in money

falls upon the home country. On the face of it, therefore, Great Britain

had every reason to avoid so formidable a task as the conquest of the

South African Republic. At the best she had nothing to gain, and at the

worst she had an immense deal to lose. There was no room for ambition or

aggression. It was a case of shirking or fulfilling a most arduous duty.

There could be no question of a plot for the annexation of the

Transvaal. In a free country the Government cannot move in advance of

public opinion, and public opinion is influenced by and reflected in the

newspapers. One may examine the files of the press during all the months

of negotiations and never find one reputable opinion in favour of such a

course, nor did one in society ever meet an advocate of such a measure.

But a great wrong was being done, and all that was asked was the minimum

change which would set it right, and restore equality between the white

races in Africa. 'Let Kruger only be liberal in the extension of the

franchise,' said the paper which is most representative of the sanest

British opinion, 'and he will find that the power of the republic will

become not weaker, but infinitely more secure. Let him once give the

majority of the resident males of full age the full vote, and he will

have given the republic a stability and power which nothing else can. If

he rejects all pleas of this kind, and persists in his present policy,

he may possibly stave off the evil day, and preserve his cherished

oligarchy for another few years; but the end will be the same.'

The extract reflects the tone of all of the British press, with the

exception of one or two papers which considered that even the

persistent ill usage of our people, and the fact that we were peculiarly

responsible for them in this State, did not justify us in interfering

in the internal affairs of the republic. It cannot be denied that

the Jameson raid and the incomplete manner in which the circumstances

connected with it had been investigated had weakened the force of those

who wished to interfere energetically on behalf of British subjects.

There was a vague but widespread feeling that perhaps the capitalists

were engineering the situation for their own ends. It is difficult to

imagine how a state of unrest and insecurity, to say nothing of a

state of war, can ever be to the advantage of capital, and surely it

is obvious that if some arch-schemer were using the grievances of the

Uitlanders for his own ends the best way to checkmate him would be to

remove those grievances. The suspicion, however, did exist among those

who like to ignore the obvious and magnify the remote, and throughout

the negotiations the hand of Great Britain was weakened, as her

adversary had doubtless calculated that it would be, by an earnest

but fussy and faddy minority. Idealism and a morbid, restless

conscientiousness are two of the most dangerous evils from which a

modern progressive State has to suffer.

It was in April 1899 that the British Uitlanders sent their petition

praying for protection to their native country. Since the April previous

a correspondence had been going on between Dr. Leyds, Secretary of State

for the South African Republic, and Mr. Chamberlain, Colonial Secretary,

upon the existence or non-existence of the suzerainty. On the one

hand, it was contended that the substitution of a second convention

had entirely annulled the first; on the other, that the preamble of

the first applied also to the second. If the Transvaal contention were

correct it is clear that Great Britain had been tricked and jockeyed

into such a position, since she had received no quid pro quo in the

second convention, and even the most careless of Colonial Secretaries

could hardly have been expected to give away a very substantial

something for nothing. But the contention throws us back upon the

academic question of what a suzerainty is. The Transvaal admitted a

power of veto over their foreign policy, and this admission in itself,

unless they openly tore up the convention, must deprive them of the

position of a sovereign State. On the whole, the question must be

acknowledged to have been one which might very well have been referred

to trustworthy arbitration.

But now to this debate, which had so little of urgency in it that seven

months intervened between statement and reply, there came the bitterly

vital question of the wrongs and appeal of the Uitlanders. Sir Alfred

Milner, the British Commissioner in South Africa, a man of liberal

views who had been appointed by a Conservative Government, commanded the

respect and confidence of all parties. His record was that of an

able, clear-headed man, too just to be either guilty of or tolerant of

injustice. To him the matter was referred, and a conference was arranged

between President Kruger and him at Bloemfontein, the capital of the

Orange Free State. They met on May 30th. Kruger had declared that all

questions might be discussed except the independence of the Transvaal.

'All, all, all!' he cried emphatically. But in practice it was found

that the parties could not agree as to what did or what did not threaten

this independence. What was essential to one was inadmissible to the

other. Milner contended for a five years' retroactive franchise, with

provisions to secure adequate representation for the mining districts.

Kruger offered a seven years' franchise, coupled with numerous

conditions which whittled down its value very much, promised five

members out of thirty-one to represent a majority of the male

population, and added a provision that all differences should be subject

to arbitration by foreign powers, a condition which is incompatible with

any claim to suzerainty. The proposals of each were impossible to the

other, and early in June Sir Alfred Milner was back in Cape Town and

President Kruger in Pretoria, with nothing settled except the extreme

difficulty of a settlement. The current was running swift, and the roar

of the fall was already sounding louder in the ear.

On June 12th Sir Alfred Milner received a deputation at Cape Town and

reviewed the situation. 'The principle of equality of races was,' he

said, essential for South Africa. The one State where inequality existed

kept all the others in a fever. Our policy was one not of aggression,

but of singular patience, which could not, however, lapse into

indifference.' Two days later Kruger addressed the Raad. 'The other side

had not conceded one tittle, and I could not give more. God has always

stood by us. I do not want war, but I will not give more away. Although

our independence has once been taken away, God has restored it.' He

spoke with sincerity no doubt, but it is hard to hear God invoked with

such confidence for the system which encouraged the liquor traffic to

the natives, and bred the most corrupt set of officials that the modern

world has seen.

A dispatch from Sir Alfred Milner, giving his views upon the situation,

made the British public recognise, as nothing else had done, how serious

the position was, and how essential it was that an earnest national

effort should be made to set it right. In it he said:

'The case for intervention is overwhelming. The only attempted answer

is that things will right themselves if left alone. But, in fact, the

policy of leaving things alone has been tried for years, and it has led

to their going from bad to worse. It is not true that this is owing to

the raid. They were going from bad to worse before the raid. We were on

the verge of war before the raid, and the Transvaal was on the verge

of revolution. The effect of the raid has been to give the policy of

leaving things alone a new lease of life, and with the old consequences.

'The spectacle of thousands of British subjects kept permanently in the

position of helots, constantly chafing under undoubted grievances, and

calling vainly to her Majesty's Government for redress, does steadily

undermine the influence and reputation of Great Britain within the

Queen's dominions. A section of the press, not in the Transvaal only,

preaches openly and constantly the doctrine of a republic embracing all

South Africa, and supports it by menacing references to the armaments of

the Transvaal, its alliance with the Orange Free State, and the active

sympathy which, in case of war, it would receive from a section of her

Majesty's subjects. I regret to say that this doctrine, supported as it

is by a ceaseless stream of malignant lies about the intentions of her

Majesty's Government, is producing a great effect on a large number of

our Dutch fellow colonists. Language is frequently used which seems to

imply that the Dutch have some superior right, even in this colony,

to their fellow-citizens of British birth. Thousands of men peaceably

disposed, and if left alone perfectly satisfied with their position

as British subjects, are being drawn into disaffection, and there is a

corresponding exasperation upon the part of the British.

'I can see nothing which will put a stop to this mischievous propaganda

but some striking proof of the intention of her Majesty's Government not

to be ousted from its position in South Africa.'

Such were the grave and measured words with which the British pro-consul

warned his countrymen of what was to come. He saw the storm-cloud piling

in the north, but even his eyes had not yet discerned how near and how

terrible was the tempest.

Throughout the end of June and the early part of July much was hoped

from the mediation of the heads of the Afrikander Bond, the political

union of the Dutch Cape colonists. On the one hand, they were the

kinsmen of the Boers; on the other, they were British subjects, and

were enjoying the blessings of those liberal institutions which we were

anxious to see extended to the Transvaal. 'Only treat our folk as we

treat yours! Our whole contention was compressed into that prayer. But

nothing came of the mission, though a scheme endorsed by Mr. Hofmeyer

and Mr. Herholdt, of the Bond, with Mr. Fischer of the Free State, was

introduced into the Raad and applauded by Mr. Schreiner, the Africander

Premier of Cape Colony. In its original form the provisions were obscure

and complicated, the franchise varying from nine years to seven under

different conditions. In debate, however, the terms were amended until

the time was reduced to seven years, and the proposed representation of

the gold fields placed at five. The concession was not a great one,

nor could the representation, five out of thirty-one, be considered a

generous provision for the majority of the population; but the reduction

of the years of residence was eagerly hailed in England as a sign that a

compromise might be effected. A sigh of relief went up from the country.

'If,' said the Colonial Secretary, 'this report is confirmed, this

important change in the proposals of President Kruger, coupled with

previous amendments, leads Government to hope that the new law may prove

to be the basis of a settlement on the lines laid down by Sir Alfred

Milner in the Bloemfontein Conference.' He added that there were some

vexatious conditions attached, but concluded, 'Her Majesty's Government

feel assured that the President, having accepted the principle for which

they have contended, will be prepared to reconsider any detail of

his scheme which can be shown to be a possible hindrance to the full

accomplishment of the object in view, and that he will not allow them

to be nullified or reduced in value by any subsequent alterations of the

law or acts of administration.' At the same time, the 'Times' declared

the crisis to be at an end. 'If the Dutch statesmen of the Cape have

induced their brethren in the Transvaal to carry such a Bill, they will

have deserved the lasting gratitude, not only of their own countrymen

and of the English colonists in South Africa, but of the British Empire

and of the civilised world.'

But this fair prospect was soon destined to be overcast. Questions of

detail arose which, when closely examined, proved to be matters of very

essential importance. The Uitlanders and British South Africans, who had

experienced in the past how illusory the promises of the President might

be, insisted upon guarantees. The seven years offered were two years

more than that which Sir Alfred Milner had declared to be an irreducible

minimum. The difference of two years would not have hindered

their acceptance, even at the expense of some humiliation to our

representative. But there were conditions which excited distrust when

drawn up by so wily a diplomatist. One was that the alien who aspired to

burghership had to produce a certificate of continuous registration for

a certain time. But the law of registration had fallen into disuse in

the Transvaal, and consequently this provision might render the whole

Bill valueless. Since it was carefully retained, it was certainly meant

for use. The door had been opened, but a stone was placed to block it.

Again, the continued burghership of the newcomers was made to depend

upon the resolution of the first Raad, so that should the mining members

propose any measure of reform, not only their Bill but they also might

be swept out of the house by a Boer majority. What could an Opposition

do if a vote of the Government might at any moment unseat them all? It

was clear that a measure which contained such provisions must be very

carefully sifted before a British Government could accept it as a final

settlement and a complete concession of justice to its subjects. On the

other hand, it naturally felt loth to refuse those clauses which offered

some prospect of an amelioration in their condition. It took the course,

therefore, of suggesting that each Government should appoint delegates

to form a joint commission which should inquire into the working of

the proposed Bill before it was put into a final form. The proposal was

submitted to the Raad upon August 7th, with the addition that when

this was done Sir Alfred Milner was prepared to discuss anything else,

including arbitration without the interference of foreign powers.

The suggestion of this joint commission has been criticised as an

unwarrantable intrusion into the internal affairs of another country.

But then the whole question from the beginning was about the internal

affairs of another country, since the internal equality of the white

inhabitants was the condition upon which self-government was restored

to the Transvaal. It is futile to suggest analogies, and to imagine what

France would do if Germany were to interfere in a question of French

franchise. Supposing that France contained as many Germans as Frenchmen,

and that they were ill-treated, Germany would interfere quickly enough

and continue to do so until some fair modus vivendi was established.

The fact is that the case of the Transvaal stands alone, that such a

condition of things has never been known, and that no previous precedent

can apply to it, save the general rule that a minority of white men

cannot continue indefinitely to tax and govern a majority. Sentiment

inclines to the smaller nation, but reason and justice are all on the

side of England.

A long delay followed upon the proposal of the Secretary of the

Colonies. No reply was forthcoming from Pretoria. But on all sides there

came evidence that those preparations for war which had been quietly

going on even before the Jameson raid were now being hurriedly

perfected. For so small a State enormous sums were being spent upon

military equipment. Cases of rifles and boxes of cartridges streamed

into the arsenal, not only from Delagoa Bay, but even, to the

indignation of the English colonists, through Cape Town and Port

Elizabeth. Huge packing-cases, marked 'Agricultural Instruments' and

'Mining Machinery,' arrived from Germany and France, to find their

places in the forts of Johannesburg or Pretoria. Men of many nations

but of a similar type showed their martial faces in the Boer towns.

The condottieri of Europe were as ready as ever to sell their blood for

gold, and nobly in the end did they fulfill their share of the bargain.

For three weeks and more during which Mr. Kruger was silent these

eloquent preparations went on. But beyond them, and of infinitely more

importance, there was one fact which dominated the situation. A burgher

cannot go to war without his horse, his horse cannot move without grass,

grass will not come until after rain, and it was still some weeks before

the rain would be due. Negotiations, then, must not be unduly hurried

while the veld was a bare russet-coloured dust-swept plain. Mr.

Chamberlain and the British public waited week after week for their

answer. But there was a limit to their patience, and it was reached on

August 26th, when the Colonial Secretary showed, with a plainness of

speech which is as unusual as it is welcome in diplomacy, that the

question could not be hung up for ever. 'The sands are running down

in the glass,' said he. 'If they run out, we shall not hold ourselves

limited by that which we have already offered, but, having taken the

matter in hand, we will not let it go until we have secured conditions

which once for all shall establish which is the paramount power in

South Africa, and shall secure for our fellow-subjects there those equal

rights and equal privileges which were promised them by President Kruger

when the independence of the Transvaal was granted by the Queen, and

which is the least that in justice ought to be accorded them.' Lord

Salisbury, a little time before, had been equally emphatic. 'No one

in this country wishes to disturb the conventions so long as it is

recognised that while they guarantee the independence of the Transvaal

on the one side, they guarantee equal political and civil rights for

settlers of all nationalities upon the other. But these conventions are

not like the laws of the Medes and the Persians. They are mortal, they

can be destroyed...and once destroyed they can never be reconstructed

in the same shape.' The long-enduring patience of Great Britain was

beginning to show signs of giving way.

In the meantime a fresh dispatch had arrived from the Transvaal which

offered as an alternative proposal to the joint commission that the Boer

Government should grant the franchise proposals of Sir Alfred Milner

on condition that Great Britain withdrew or dropped her claim to a

suzerainty, agreed to arbitration, and promised never again to interfere

in the internal affairs of the republic. To this Great Britain answered

that she would agree to arbitration, that she hoped never again to have

occasion to interfere for the protection of her own subjects, but that

with the grant of the franchise all occasion for such interference would

pass away, and, finally, that she would never consent to abandon

her position as suzerain power. Mr. Chamberlain's dispatch ended by

reminding the Government of the Transvaal that there were other matters

of dispute open between the two Governments apart from the franchise,

and that it would be as well to have them settled at the same time. By

these he meant such questions as the position of the native races and

the treatment of Anglo-Indians.

On September 2nd the answer of the Transvaal Government was returned.

It was short and uncompromising. They withdrew their offer of the

franchise. They re-asserted the non-existence of the suzerainty. The

negotiations were at a deadlock. It was difficult to see how they could

be re-opened. In view of the arming of the burghers, the small garrison

of Natal had been taking up positions to cover the frontier. The

Transvaal asked for an explanation of their presence. Sir Alfred Milner

answered that they were guarding British interests, and preparing

against contingencies. The roar of the fall was sounding loud and near.

On September 8th there was held a Cabinet Council--one of the most

important in recent years. A message was sent to Pretoria, which even

the opponents of the Government have acknowledged to be temperate, and

offering the basis for a peaceful settlement. It begins by repudiating

emphatically the claim of the Transvaal to be a sovereign international

State in the same sense in which the Orange Free State is one. Any

proposal made conditional upon such an acknowledgment could not be

entertained.

The British Government, however, was prepared to accept the five years'

'franchise' as stated in the note of August 19th, assuming at the same

time that in the Raad each member might talk his own language.

'Acceptance of these terms by the South African Republic would at once

remove tension between the two Governments, and would in all probability

render unnecessary any future intervention to secure redress for

grievances which the Uitlanders themselves would be able to bring to the

notice of the Executive Council and the Volksraad.

'Her Majesty's Government are increasingly impressed with the danger of

further delay in relieving the strain which has already caused so much

injury to the interests of South Africa, and they earnestly press for an

immediate and definite reply to the present proposal. If it is acceded

to they will be ready to make immediate arrangements...to settle all

details of the proposed tribunal of arbitration...If, however, as they

most anxiously hope will not be the case, the reply of the South African

Republic should be negative or inconclusive, I am to state that her

Majesty's Government must reserve to themselves the right to reconsider

the situation de novo, and to formulate their own proposals for a final

settlement.'

Such was the message, and Great Britain waited with strained attention

for the answer. But again there was a delay, while the rain came and the

grass grew, and the veld was as a mounted rifleman would have it. The

burghers were in no humour for concessions. They knew their own power,

and they concluded with justice that they were for the time far the

strongest military power in South Africa. 'We have beaten England

before, but it is nothing to the licking we shall give her now,' cried

a prominent citizen, and he spoke for his country as he said it. So

the empire waited and debated, but the sounds of the bugle were already

breaking through the wrangles of the politicians, and calling the nation

to be tested once more by that hammer of war and adversity by which

Providence still fashions us to some nobler and higher end.

CHAPTER 4. THE EVE OF WAR.

The message sent from the Cabinet Council of September 8th was evidently

the precursor either of peace or of war. The cloud must burst or blow

over. As the nation waited in hushed expectancy for a reply it spent

some portion of its time in examining and speculating upon those

military preparations which might be needed. The War Office had for

some months been arranging for every contingency, and had made certain

dispositions which appeared to them to be adequate, but which our future

experience was to demonstrate to be far too small for the very serious

matter in hand.

It is curious in turning over the files of such a paper as the 'Times'

to observe how at first one or two small paragraphs of military

significance might appear in the endless columns of diplomatic and

political reports, how gradually they grew and grew, until at last the

eclipse was complete, and the diplomacy had been thrust into the tiny

paragraphs while the war filled the journal. Under July 7th comes the

first glint of arms amid the drab monotony of the state papers. On

that date it was announced that two companies of Royal Engineers and

departmental corps with reserves of supplies and ammunition were being

dispatched. Two companies of engineers! Who could have foreseen that

they were the vanguard of the greatest army which ever at any time of

the world's history has crossed an ocean, and far the greatest which a

British general has commanded in the field?

On August 15th, at a time when the negotiations had already assumed a

very serious phase, after the failure of the Bloemfontein conference and

the dispatch of Sir Alfred Milner, the British forces in South Africa

were absolutely and absurdly inadequate for the purpose of the defence

of our own frontier. Surely such a fact must open the eyes of those who,

in spite of all the evidence, persist that the war was forced on by the

British. A statesman who forces on a war usually prepares for a war, and

this is exactly what Mr. Kruger did and the British authorities did not.

The overbearing suzerain power had at that date, scattered over a huge

frontier, two cavalry regiments, three field batteries, and six and a

half infantry battalions--say six thousand men. The innocent pastoral

States could put in the field forty or fifty thousand mounted riflemen,

whose mobility doubled their numbers, and a most excellent artillery,

including the heaviest guns which have ever been seen upon a

battlefield. At this time it is most certain that the Boers could have

made their way easily either to Durban or to Cape Town. The British

force, condemned to act upon the defensive, could have been masked and

afterwards destroyed, while the main body of the invaders would have

encountered nothing but an irregular local resistance, which would have

been neutralised by the apathy or hostility of the Dutch colonists. It

is extraordinary that our authorities seem never to have contemplated

the possibility of the Boers taking the initiative, or to have

understood that in that case our belated reinforcements would certainly

have had to land under the fire of the republican guns.

In July Natal had taken alarm, and a strong representation had been

sent from the prime minister of the colony to the Governor, Sir W. Hely

Hutchinson, and so to the Colonial Office. It was notorious that the

Transvaal was armed to the teeth, that the Orange Free State was

likely to join her, and that there had been strong attempts made, both

privately and through the press, to alienate the loyalty of the Dutch

citizens of both the British colonies. Many sinister signs were observed

by those upon the spot. The veld had been burned unusually early to

ensure a speedy grass-crop after the first rains, there had been a

collecting of horses, a distribution of rifles and ammunition. The Free

State farmers, who graze their sheep and cattle upon Natal soil during

the winter, had driven them off to places of safety behind the line

of the Drakensberg. Everything pointed to approaching war, and Natal

refused to be satisfied even by the dispatch of another regiment. On

September 6th a second message was received at the Colonial Office,

which states the case with great clearness and precision.

'The Prime Minister desires me to urge upon you by the unanimous advice

of the Ministers that sufficient troops should be dispatched to Natal

immediately to enable the colony to be placed in a state of defence

against an attack from the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. I am

informed by the General Officer Commanding, Natal, that he will not have

enough troops, even when the Manchester Regiment arrives, to do more

than occupy Newcastle and at the same time protect the colony south of

it from raids, while Laing's Nek, Ingogo River and Zululand must be left

undefended. My Ministers know that every preparation has been made, both

in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, which would enable an attack

to be made on Natal at short notice. My Ministers believe that the Boers

have made up their minds that war will take place almost certainly, and

their best chance will be, when it seems unavoidable, to deliver a blow

before reinforcements have time to arrive. Information has been received

that raids in force will be made by way of Middle Drift and Greytown and

by way of Bond's Drift and Stangar, with a view to striking the railway

between Pietermaritzburg and Durban and cutting off communications of

troops and supplies. Nearly all the Orange Free State farmers in the

Klip River division, who stay in the colony usually till October at

least, have trekked, at great loss to themselves; their sheep are

lambing on the road, and the lambs die or are destroyed. Two at least of

the Entonjanani district farmers have trekked with all their belongings

into the Transvaal, in the first case attempting to take as hostages the

children of the natives on the farm. Reliable reports have been received

of attempts to tamper with loyal natives, and to set tribe against tribe

in order to create confusion and detail the defensive forces of the

colony. Both food and warlike stores in large quantities have been

accumulated at Volksrust, Vryheid and Standerton. Persons who are

believed to be spies have been seen examining the bridges on the Natal

Railway, and it is known that there are spies in all the principal

centres of the colony. In the opinion of Ministers, such a catastrophe

as the seizure of Laing's Nek and the destruction of the northern

portion of the railway, or a successful raid or invasion such as

they have reason to believe is contemplated, would produce a most

demoralising effect on the natives and on the loyal Europeans in the

colony, and would afford great encouragement to the Boers and to their

sympathisers in the colonies, who, although armed and prepared, will

probably keep quiet unless they receive some encouragement of the sort.

They concur in the policy of her Majesty's Government of exhausting all

peaceful means to obtain redress of the grievances of the Uitlanders and

authoritatively assert the supremacy of Great Britain before resorting

to war; but they state that this is a question of defensive precaution,

not of making war.'

In answer to these and other remonstrances the garrison of Natal was

gradually increased, partly by troops from Europe, and partly by the

dispatch of five thousand British troops from India. The 2nd Berkshires,

the 1st Royal Munster Fusiliers, the 1st Manchesters, and the 2nd Dublin

Fusiliers arrived in succession with reinforcements of artillery. The

5th Dragoon Guards, 9th Lancers, and 19th Hussars came from India, with

the 1st Devonshires, 1st Gloucesters, 2nd King's Royal Rifles and 2nd

Gordon Highlanders. These with the 21st, 42nd, and 53rd batteries of

Field Artillery made up the Indian Contingent. Their arrival late in

September raised the number of troops in South Africa to 22,000, a force

which was inadequate to a contest in the open field with the numerous,

mobile, and gallant enemy to whom they were to be opposed, but which

proved to be strong enough to stave off that overwhelming disaster

which, with our fuller knowledge, we can now see to have been impending.

As to the disposition of these troops a difference of opinion broke out

between the ruling powers in Natal and the military chiefs at the spot.

Prince Kraft has said, 'Both strategy and tactics may have to yield to

politics '; but the political necessity should be very grave and very

clear when it is the blood of soldiers which has to pay for it. Whether

it arose from our defective intelligence, or from that caste feeling

which makes it hard for the professional soldier to recognise (in spite

of deplorable past experiences) a serious adversary in the mounted

farmer, it is certain that even while our papers were proclaiming that

this time, at least, we would not underrate our enemy, we were most

seriously underrating him. The northern third of Natal is as vulnerable

a military position as a player of kriegspiel could wish to have

submitted to him. It runs up into a thin angle, culminating at the apex

in a difficult pass, the ill-omened Laing's Nek, dominated by the

even more sinister bulk of Majuba. Each side of this angle is open to

invasion, the one from the Transvaal and the other from the Orange Free

State. A force up at the apex is in a perfect trap, for the mobile

enemy can flood into the country to the south of them, cut the line

of supplies, and throw up a series of entrenchments which would make

retreat a very difficult matter. Further down the country, at such

positions as Ladysmith or Dundee, the danger, though not so imminent,

is still an obvious one, unless the defending force is strong enough to

hold its own in the open field and mobile enough to prevent a mounted

enemy from getting round its flanks. To us, who are endowed with that

profound military wisdom which only comes with a knowledge of the event,

it is obvious that with a defending force which could not place more

than 12,000 men in the fighting line, the true defensible frontier was

the line of the Tugela. As a matter of fact, Ladysmith was chosen, a

place almost indefensible itself, as it is dominated by high hills in at

least two directions.

Such an event as the siege of the town appears never to have been

contemplated, as no guns of position were asked for or sent. In spite

of this, an amount of stores, which is said to have been valued at

more than a million of pounds, was dumped down at this small railway

junction, so that the position could not be evacuated without a

crippling loss. The place was the point of bifurcation of the main line,

which divides at this little town into one branch running to Harrismith

in the Orange Free State, and the other leading through the Dundee coal

fields and Newcastle to the Laing's Nek tunnel and the Transvaal. An

importance, which appears now to have been an exaggerated one, was

attached by the Government of Natal to the possession of the coal

fields, and it was at their strong suggestion, but with the concurrence

of General Penn Symons, that the defending force was divided, and a

detachment of between three and four thousand sent to Dundee, about

forty miles from the main body, which remained under General Sir George

White at Ladysmith. General Symons underrated the power of the invaders,

but it is hard to criticise an error of judgment which has been so

nobly atoned and so tragically paid for. At the time, then, which our

political narrative has reached, the time of suspense which followed the

dispatch of the Cabinet message of September 8th, the military situation

had ceased to be desperate, but was still precarious. Twenty-two

thousand regular troops were on the spot who might hope to be reinforced

by some ten thousand colonials, but these forces had to cover a great

frontier, the attitude of Cape Colony was by no means whole-hearted and

might become hostile, while the black population might conceivably throw

in its weight against us. Only half the regulars could be spared to

defend Natal, and no reinforcements could reach them in less than a

month from the outbreak of hostilities. If Mr. Chamberlain was really

playing a game of bluff, it must be confessed that he was bluffing from

a very weak hand.

For purposes of comparison we may give some idea of the forces which

Mr. Kruger and Mr. Steyn could put in the field, for by this time it was

evident that the Orange Free State, with which we had had no shadow of

a dispute, was going, in a way which some would call wanton and some

chivalrous, to throw in its weight against us. The general press

estimate of the forces of the two republics varied from 25,000 to 35,000

men. Mr. J. B. Robinson, a personal friend of President Kruger's and

a man who had spent much of his life among the Boers, considered the

latter estimate to be too high. The calculation had no assured basis to

start from. A very scattered and isolated population, among whom large

families were the rule, is a most difficult thing to estimate. Some

reckoned from the supposed natural increase during eighteen years, but

the figure given at that date was itself an assumption. Others took

their calculation from the number of voters in the last presidential

election: but no one could tell how many abstentions there had been,

and the fighting age is five years earlier than the voting age in the

republics. We recognise now that all calculations were far below the

true figure. It is probable, however, that the information of the

British Intelligence Department was not far wrong. According to this

the fighting strength of the Transvaal alone was 32,000 men, and of the

Orange Free State 22,000. With mercenaries and rebels from the colonies

they would amount to 60, 000, while a considerable rising of the Cape

Dutch would bring them up to 100,000. In artillery they were known to

have about a hundred guns, many of them (and the fact will need much

explaining) more modern and powerful than any which we could bring

against them. Of the quality of this large force there is no need to

speak. The men were brave, hardy, and fired with a strange religious

enthusiasm. They were all of the seventeenth century, except their

rifles. Mounted upon their hardy little ponies, they possessed a

mobility which practically doubled their numbers and made it an

impossibility ever to outflank them. As marksmen they were supreme. Add

to this that they had the advantage of acting upon internal lines with

shorter and safer communications, and one gathers how formidable a

task lay before the soldiers of the empire. When we turn from such an

enumeration of their strength to contemplate the 12,000 men, split into

two detachments, who awaited them in Natal, we may recognise that, far

from bewailing our disasters, we should rather congratulate ourselves

upon our escape from losing that great province which, situated as it

is between Britain, India, and Australia, must be regarded as the very

keystone of the imperial arch.

At the risk of a tedious but very essential digression, something must

be said here as to the motives with which the Boers had for many years

been quietly preparing for war. That the Jameson raid was not the cause

is certain, though it probably, by putting the Boer Government into a

strong position, had a great effect in accelerating matters. What had

been done secretly and slowly could be done more swiftly and openly when

so plausible an excuse could be given for it. As a matter of fact, the

preparations were long antecedent to the raid. The building of the forts

at Pretoria and Johannesburg was begun nearly two years before that

wretched incursion, and the importation of arms was going on apace.

In that very year, 1895, a considerable sum was spent in military

equipment.

But if it was not the raid, and if the Boers had no reason to fear the

British Government, with whom the Transvaal might have been as friendly

as the Orange Free State had been for forty years, why then should they

arm? It was a difficult question, and one in answering which we find

ourselves in a region of conjecture and suspicion rather than of

ascertained fact. But the fairest and most unbiased of historians must

confess that there is a large body of evidence to show that into the

heads of some of the Dutch leaders, both in the northern republics

and in the Cape, there had entered the conception of a single Dutch

commonwealth, extending from Cape Town to the Zambesi, in which flag,

speech, and law should all be Dutch. It is in this aspiration that

many shrewd and well-informed judges see the true inner meaning of this

persistent arming, of the constant hostility, of the forming of ties

between the two republics (one of whom had been reconstituted and made

a sovereign independent State by our own act), and finally of that

intriguing which endeavoured to poison the affection and allegiance of

our own Dutch colonists, who had no political grievances whatever. They

all aimed at one end, and that end was the final expulsion of British

power from South Africa and the formation of a single great Dutch

republic. The large sum spent by the Transvaal in secret service

money--a larger sum, I believe, than that which is spent by the whole

British Empire--would give some idea of the subterranean influences at

work. An army of emissaries, agents, and spies, whatever their mission,

were certainly spread over the British colonies. Newspapers were

subsidised also, and considerable sums spent upon the press in France

and Germany.

In the very nature of things a huge conspiracy of this sort to

substitute Dutch for British rule in South Africa is not a matter which

can be easily and definitely proved. Such questions are not discussed

in public documents, and men are sounded before being taken into the

confidence of the conspirators. But there is plenty of evidence of

the individual ambition of prominent and representative men in this

direction, and it is hard to believe that what many wanted individually

was not striven for collectively, especially when we see how the course

of events did actually work towards the end which they indicated. Mr.

J.P. FitzPatrick, in 'The Transvaal from Within'--a book to which

all subsequent writers upon the subject must acknowledge their

obligations--narrates how in 1896 he was approached by Mr. D.P. Graaff,

formerly a member of the Cape Legislative Council and a very prominent

Afrikander Bondsman, with the proposition that Great Britain should be

pushed out of South Africa. The same politician made the same proposal

to Mr. Beit. Compare with this the following statement of Mr. Theodore

Schreiner, the brother of the Prime Minister of the Cape:

'I met Mr. Reitz, then a judge of the Orange Free State, in Bloemfontein

between seventeen and eighteen years ago, shortly after the retrocession

of the Transvaal, and when he was busy establishing the Afrikander Bond.

It must be patent to every one that at that time, at all events, England

and its Government had no intention of taking away the independence of

the Transvaal, for she had just "magnanimously" granted the same; no

intention of making war on the republics, for she had just made peace;

no intention to seize the Rand gold fields, for they were not yet

discovered. At that time, then, I met Mr. Reitz, and he did his best to

get me to become a member of his Afrikander Bond, but, after studying

its constitution and programme, I refused to do so, whereupon the

following colloquy in substance took place between us, which has been

indelibly imprinted on my mind ever since:

'REITZ: Why do you refuse? Is the object of getting the people to take

an interest in political matters not a good one?

'MYSELF: Yes, it is; but I seem to see plainly here between the lines of

this constitution much more ultimately aimed at than that.

'REITZ: What?

'MYSELF: I see quite clearly that the ultimate object aimed at is the

overthrow of the British power and the expulsion of the British flag

from South Africa.

'REITZ (with his pleasant conscious smile, as of one whose secret

thought and purpose had been discovered, and who was not altogether

displeased that such was the case): Well, what if it is so?

'MYSELF: You don't suppose, do you, that that flag is going to disappear

from South Africa without a tremendous struggle and fight?

'REITZ (with the same pleasant self-conscious, self satisfied, and yet

semi-apologetic smile): Well, I suppose not; but even so, what of that?

'MYSELF: Only this, that when that struggle takes place you and I will

be on opposite sides; and what is more, the God who was on the side of

the Transvaal in the late war, because it had right on its side will

be on the side of England, because He must view with abhorrence any

plotting and scheming to overthrow her power and position in South

Africa, which have been ordained by Him.

'REITZ: We'll see.

'Thus the conversation ended, but during the seventeen years that have

elapsed I have watched the propaganda for the overthrow of British power

in South Africa being ceaselessly spread by every possible means--the

press, the pulpit, the platform, the schools, the colleges, the

Legislature--until it has culminated in the present war, of which Mr.

Reitz and his co-workers are the origin and the cause. Believe me, the

day on which F.W. Reitz sat down to pen his ultimatum to Great Britain

was the proudest and happiest moment of his life, and one which had

for long years been looked forward to by him with eager longing and

expectation.'

Compare with these utterances of a Dutch politician of the Cape, and of

a Dutch politician of the Orange Free State, the following passage from

a speech delivered by Kruger at Bloemfontein in the year 1887:

'I think it too soon to speak of a United South Africa under one flag.

Which flag was it to be? The Queen of England would object to having

her flag hauled down, and we, the burghers of the Transvaal, object to

hauling ours down. What is to be done? We are now small and of little

importance, but we are growing, and are preparing the way to take our

place among the great nations of the world.'

'The dream of our life,' said another, 'is a union of the States of

South Africa, and this has to come from within, not from without. When

that is accomplished, South Africa will be great.'

Always the same theory from all quarters of Dutch thought, to be

followed by many signs that the idea was being prepared for in practice.

I repeat that the fairest and most unbiased historian cannot dismiss the

conspiracy as a myth.

And to this one may retort, why should they not conspire? Why should

they not have their own views as to the future of South Africa? Why

should they not endeavour to have one universal flag and one common

speech? Why should they not win over our colonists, if they can, and

push us into the sea? I see no reason why they should not. Let them try

if they will. And let us try to prevent them. But let us have an end

of talk about British aggression, of capitalist designs upon the gold

fields, of the wrongs of a pastoral people, and all the other veils

which have been used to cover the issue. Let those who talk about

British designs upon the republics turn their attention for a moment to

the evidence which there is for republican designs upon the colonies.

Let them reflect that in the one system all white men are equal, and

that on the other the minority of one race has persecuted the majority

of the other, and let them consider under which the truest freedom lies,

which stands for universal liberty and which for reaction and racial

hatred. Let them ponder and answer all this before they determine where

their sympathies lie.

Leaving these wider questions of politics, and dismissing for the

time those military considerations which were soon to be of such vital

moment, we may now return to the course of events in the diplomatic

struggle between the Government of the Transvaal and the Colonial

Office. On September 8th, as already narrated, a final message was sent

to Pretoria, which stated the minimum terms which the British Government

could accept as being a fair concession to her subjects in the

Transvaal. A definite answer was demanded, and the nation waited with

sombre patience for the reply.

There were few illusions in this country as to the difficulties of

a Transvaal war. It was clearly seen that little honour and immense

vexation were in store for us. The first Boer war still smarted in our

minds, and we knew the prowess of the indomitable burghers. But our

people, if gloomy, were none the less resolute, for that national

instinct which is beyond the wisdom of statesmen had borne it in upon

them that this was no local quarrel, but one upon which the whole

existence of the empire hung. The cohesion of that empire was to be

tested. Men had emptied their glasses to it in time of peace. Was it a

meaningless pouring of wine, or were they ready to pour their

hearts' blood also in time of war? Had we really founded a series of

disconnected nations, with no common sentiment or interest, or was

the empire an organic whole, as ready to thrill with one emotion or to

harden into one resolve as are the several States of the Union? That was

the question at issue, and much of the future history of the world was

at stake upon the answer.

Already there were indications that the colonies appreciated the fact

that the contention was no affair of the mother country alone, but that

she was upholding the rights of the empire as a whole, and might fairly

look to them to support her in any quarrel which might arise from it. As

early as July 11th, Queensland, the fiery and semitropical, had offered

a contingent of mounted infantry with machine guns; New Zealand, Western

Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales, and South Australia

followed in the order named. Canada, with the strong but more deliberate

spirit of the north, was the last to speak, but spoke the more firmly

for the delay. Her citizens were the least concerned of any, for

Australians were many in South Africa but Canadians few. None the less,

she cheerfully took her share of the common burden, and grew the readier

and the cheerier as that burden came to weigh more heavily. From all

the men of many hues who make up the British Empire, from Hindoo Rajahs,

from West African Houssas, from Malay police, from Western Indians,

there came offers of service. But this was to be a white man's war, and

if the British could not work out their own salvation then it were well

that empire should pass from such a race. The magnificent Indian army

of 150,000 soldiers, many of them seasoned veterans, was for the same

reason left untouched. England has claimed no credit or consideration

for such abstention, but an irresponsible writer may well ask how many

of those foreign critics whose respect for our public morality appears

to be as limited as their knowledge of our principles and history would

have advocated such self denial had their own countries been placed in

the same position.

On September 18th the official reply of the Boer Government to the

message sent from the Cabinet Council was published in London. In manner

it was unbending and unconciliatory; in substance, it was a complete

rejection of all the British demands. It refused to recommend or propose

to the Raad the five years' franchise and the other measures which had

been defined as the minimum which the Home Government could accept as a

fair measure of justice towards the Uitlanders. The suggestion that the

debates of the Raad should be bilingual, as they have been in the

Cape Colony and in Canada, was absolutely waived aside. The British

Government had stated in their last dispatch that if the reply should

be negative or inconclusive they reserved to themselves the right to

'reconsider the situation de novo and to formulate their own proposals

for a final settlement.' The reply had been both negative and

inconclusive, and on September 22nd a council met to determine what the

next message should be. It was short and firm, but so planned as not to

shut the door upon peace. Its purport was that the British Government

expressed deep regret at the rejection of the moderate proposals which

had been submitted in their last dispatch, and that now, in accordance

with their promise, they would shortly put forward their own plans for

a settlement. The message was not an ultimatum, but it foreshadowed an

ultimatum in the future.

In the meantime, upon September 21st the Raad of the Orange Free State

had met, and it became more and more evident that this republic, with

whom we had no possible quarrel, but, on the contrary, for whom we had a

great deal of friendship and admiration, intended to throw in its weight

against Great Britain. Some time before, an offensive and defensive

alliance had been concluded between the two States, which must, until

the secret history of these events comes to be written, appear to have

been a singularly rash and unprofitable bargain for the smaller one. She

had nothing to fear from Great Britain, since she had been voluntarily

turned into an independent republic by her and had lived in peace with

her for forty years. Her laws were as liberal as our own. But by this

suicidal treaty she agreed to share the fortunes of a State which was

deliberately courting war by its persistently unfriendly attitude, and

whose reactionary and narrow legislation would, one might imagine, have

alienated the sympathy of her progressive neighbour. There may have

been ambitions like those already quoted from the report of Dr. Reitz's

conversation, or there may have been a complete hallucination as to the

comparative strength of the two combatants and the probable future of

South Africa; but however that may be, the treaty was made, and the time

had come to test how far it would hold.

The tone of President Steyn at the meeting of the Raad, and the support

which he received from the majority of his burghers, showed unmistakably

that the two republics would act as one. In his opening speech Steyn

declared uncompromisingly against the British contention, and declared

that his State was bound to the Transvaal by everything which was near

and dear. Among the obvious military precautions which could no longer

be neglected by the British Government was the sending of some small

force to protect the long and exposed line of railway which lies just

outside the Transvaal border from Kimberley to Rhodesia. Sir Alfred

Milner communicated with President Steyn as to this movement of troops,

pointing out that it was in no way directed against the Free State. Sir

Alfred Milner added that the Imperial Government was still hopeful of

a friendly settlement with the Transvaal, but if this hope were

disappointed they looked to the Orange Free State to preserve strict

neutrality and to prevent military intervention by any of its citizens.

They undertook that in that case the integrity of the Free State

frontier would be strictly preserved. Finally, he stated that there was

absolutely no cause to disturb the good relations between the Free

State and Great Britain, since we were animated by the most friendly

intentions towards them. To this the President returned a somewhat

ungracious answer, to the effect that he disapproved of our action

towards the Transvaal, and that he regretted the movement of troops,

which would be considered a menace by the burghers. A subsequent

resolution of the Free State Raad, ending with the words, 'Come what

may, the Free State will honestly and faithfully fulfill its obligations

towards the Transvaal by virtue of the political alliance existing

between the two republics,' showed how impossible it was that this

country, formed by ourselves and without a shadow of a cause of quarrel

with us, could be saved from being drawn into the whirlpool. Everywhere,

from over both borders, came the news of martial preparations. Already

at the end of September troops and armed burghers were gathering

upon the frontier, and the most incredulous were beginning at last to

understand that the shadow of a great war was really falling across

them. Artillery, war munitions, and stores were being accumulated

at Volksrust upon the Natal border, showing where the storm might be

expected to break. On the last day of September, twenty-six military

trains were reported to have left Pretoria and Johannesburg for that

point. At the same time news came of a concentration at Malmani, upon

the Bechuanaland border, threatening the railway line and the British

town of Mafeking, a name destined before long to be familiar to the

world.

On October 3rd there occurred what was in truth an act of war, although

the British Government, patient to the verge of weakness, refused to

regard it as such, and continued to draw up their final state paper. The

mail train from the Transvaal to Cape Town was stopped at Vereeniging,

and the week's shipment of gold for England, amounting to about half a

million pounds, was taken by the Boer Government. In a debate at Cape

Town upon the same day the Africander Minister of the Interior admitted

that as many as 404 trucks had passed from the Government line over

the frontier and had not been returned. Taken in conjunction with

the passage of arms and cartridges through the Cape to Pretoria and

Bloemfontein, this incident aroused the deepest indignation among the

Colonial English and the British public, which was increased by the

reports of the difficulty which border towns, such as Kimberley and

Vryburg, had had in getting cannon for their own defence. The Raads had

been dissolved, and the old President's last words had been a statement

that war was certain, and a stern invocation of the Lord as final

arbiter. England was ready less obtrusively but no less heartily to

refer the quarrel to the same dread Judge.

On October 2nd President Steyn informed Sir Alfred Milner that he had

deemed it necessary to call out the Free State burghers--that is, to

mobilise his forces. Sir A. Milner wrote regretting these preparations,

and declaring that he did not yet despair of peace, for he was sure that

any reasonable proposal would be favourably considered by her Majesty's

Government. Steyn's reply was that there was no use in negotiating

unless the stream of British reinforcements ceased coming into South

Africa. As our forces were still in a great minority, it was impossible

to stop the reinforcements, so the correspondence led to nothing. On

October 7th the army reserves for the First Army Corps were called out

in Great Britain and other signs shown that it had been determined to

send a considerable force to South Africa. Parliament was also summoned

that the formal national assent might be gained for those grave measures

which were evidently pending.

It was on October 9th that the somewhat leisurely proceedings of the

British Colonial Office were brought to a head by the arrival of an

unexpected and audacious ultimatum from the Boer Government. In contests

of wit, as of arms, it must be confessed that the laugh has been usually

upon the side of our simple and pastoral South African neighbours. The

present instance was no exception to the rule. While our Government

was cautiously and patiently leading up to an ultimatum, our opponent

suddenly played the very card which we were preparing to lay upon the

table. The document was very firm and explicit, but the terms in which

it was drawn were so impossible that it was evidently framed with the

deliberate purpose of forcing an immediate war. It demanded that the

troops upon the borders of the republic should be instantly withdrawn,

that all reinforcements which had arrived within the last year should

leave South Africa, and that those who were now upon the sea should be

sent back without being landed. Failing a satisfactory answer within

forty-eight hours, 'the Transvaal Government will with great regret be

compelled to regard the action of her Majesty's Government as a formal

declaration of war, for the consequences of which it will not hold

itself responsible.' The audacious message was received throughout the

empire with a mixture of derision and anger. The answer was dispatched

next day through Sir Alfred Milner.

'10th October.--Her Majesty's Government have received with great regret

the peremptory demands of the Government of the South African Republic,

conveyed in your telegram of the 9th October. You will inform the

Government of the South African Republic in reply that the conditions

demanded by the Government of the South African Republic are such as her

Majesty's Government deem it impossible to discuss.'

And so we have come to the end of the long road, past the battle of the

pens and the wrangling of tongues, to the arbitration of the Lee-Metford

and the Mauser. It was pitiable that it should come to this. These

people were as near akin to us as any race which is not our own. They

were of the same Frisian stock which peopled our own shores. In habit

of mind, in religion, in respect for law, they were as ourselves. Brave,

too, they were, and hospitable, with those sporting instincts which are

dear to the Anglo-Celtic race. There was no people in the world who had

more qualities which we might admire, and not the least of them was

that love of independence which it is our proudest boast that we have

encouraged in others as well as exercised ourselves. And yet we had come

to this pass, that there was no room in all vast South Africa for both

of us. We cannot hold ourselves blameless in the matter. 'The evil that

men do lives after them,' and it has been told in this small superficial

sketch where we have erred in the past in South Africa. On our hands,

too, is the Jameson raid, carried out by Englishmen and led by

officers who held the Queen's Commission; to us, also, the blame of the

shuffling, half-hearted inquiry into that most unjustifiable business.

These are matches which helped to set the great blaze alight, and it is

we who held them. But the fagots which proved to be so inflammable,

they were not of our setting. They were the wrongs done to half the

community, the settled resolution of the minority to tax and vex the

majority, the determination of a people who had lived two generations in

a country to claim that country entirely for themselves. Behind them all

there may have been the Dutch ambition to dominate South Africa. It

was no petty object for which Britain fought. When a nation struggles

uncomplainingly through months of disaster she may claim to have proved

her conviction of the justice and necessity of the struggle. Should

Dutch ideas or English ideas of government prevail throughout that huge

country? The one means freedom for a single race, the other means equal

rights to all white men beneath one common law. What each means to

the coloured races let history declare. This was the main issue to

be determined from the instant that the clock struck five upon the

afternoon of Wednesday, October the eleventh, eighteen hundred and

ninety-nine. That moment marked the opening of a war destined to

determine the fate of South Africa, to work great changes in the

British Empire, to seriously affect the future history of the world, and

incidentally to alter many of our views as to the art of war. It is the

story of this war which, with limited material but with much aspiration

to care and candour, I shall now endeavour to tell.

CHAPTER 5. TALANA HILL.

It was on the morning of October 12th, amid cold and mist, that the Boer

camps at Sandspruit and Volksrust broke up, and the burghers rode to the

war. Some twelve thousand of them, all mounted, with two batteries of

eight Krupp guns each, were the invading force from the north, which

hoped later to be joined by the Freestaters and by a contingent of

Germans and Transvaalers who were to cross the Free State border. It

was an hour before dawn that the guns started, and the riflemen followed

close behind the last limber, so that the first light of day fell upon

the black sinuous line winding down between the hills. A spectator upon

the occasion says of them: 'Their faces were a study. For the most part

the expression worn was one of determination and bulldog pertinacity.

No sign of fear there, nor of wavering. Whatever else may be laid to the

charge of the Boer, it may never truthfully be said that he is a coward

or a man unworthy of the Briton's steel.' The words were written early

in the campaign, and the whole empire will endorse them to-day. Could we

have such men as willing fellow-citizens, they are worth more than all

the gold mines of their country.

This main Transvaal body consisted of the commando of Pretoria, which

comprised 1800 men, and those of Heidelberg, Middelburg, Krugersdorp,

Standerton, Wakkerstroom, and Ermelo, with the State Artillery, an

excellent and highly organised body who were provided with the best guns

that have ever been brought on to a battlefield. Besides their sixteen

Krupps, they dragged with them two heavy six-inch Creusot guns, which

were destined to have a very important effect in the earlier part of the

campaign. In addition to these native forces there were a certain number

of European auxiliaries. The greater part of the German corps were with

the Free State forces, but a few hundred came down from the north. There

was a Hollander corps of about two hundred and fifty and an Irish--or

perhaps more properly an Irish-American-corps of the same number, who

rode under the green flag and the harp.

The men might, by all accounts, be divided into two very different

types. There were the town Boers, smartened and perhaps a little

enervated by prosperity and civilisation, men of business and

professional men, more alert and quicker than their rustic comrades.

These men spoke English rather than Dutch, and indeed there were many

men of English descent among them. But the others, the most formidable

both in their numbers and in their primitive qualities, were the

back-veld Boers, the sunburned, tangle-haired, full-bearded farmers, the

men of the Bible and the rifle, imbued with the traditions of their own

guerrilla warfare. These were perhaps the finest natural warriors upon

earth, marksmen, hunters, accustomed to hard fare and a harder couch.

They were rough in their ways and speech, but, in spite of many

calumnies and some few unpleasant truths, they might compare with most

disciplined armies in their humanity and their desire to observe the

usages of war.

A few words here as to the man who led this singular host. Piet Joubert

was a Cape Colonist by birth--a fellow countryman, like Kruger himself,

of those whom the narrow laws of his new country persisted in regarding

as outside the pale. He came from that French Huguenot blood which has

strengthened and refined every race which it has touched, and from it

he derived a chivalry and generosity which made him respected and liked

even by his opponents. In many native broils and in the British campaign

of 1881 he had shown himself a capable leader. His record in standing

out for the independence of the Transvaal was a very consistent one, for

he had not accepted office under the British, as Kruger had done, but

had remained always an irreconcilable. Tall and burly, with hard grey

eyes and a grim mouth half hidden by his bushy beard, he was a fine type

of the men whom he led. He was now in his sixty-fifth year, and the fire

of his youth had, as some of the burghers urged, died down within him;

but he was experienced, crafty, and warwise, never dashing and never

brilliant, but slow, steady, solid, and inexorable.

Besides this northern army there were two other bodies of burghers

converging upon Natal. One, consisting of the commandoes from Utrecht

and the Swaziland districts, had gathered at Vryheid on the flank of the

British position at Dundee. The other, much larger, not less probably

than six or seven thousand men, were the contingent from the Free State

and a Transvaal corps, together with Schiel's Germans, who were making

their way through the various passes, the Tintwa Pass, and Van Reenen's

Pass, which lead through the grim range of the Drakensberg and open out

upon the more fertile plains of Western Natal. The total force may have

been something between twenty and thirty thousand men. By all accounts

they were of an astonishingly high heart, convinced that a path of easy

victory lay before them, and that nothing could bar their way to the

sea. If the British commanders underrated their opponents, there is

ample evidence that the mistake was reciprocal.

A few words now as to the disposition of the British forces, concerning

which it must be borne in mind that Sir George White, though in

actual command, had only been a few days in the country before war was

declared, so that the arrangements fell to General Penn Symons, aided

or hampered by the advice of the local political authorities. The main

position was at Ladysmith, but an advance post was strongly held at

Glencoe, which is five miles from the station of Dundee and forty from

Ladysmith. The reason for this dangerous division of force was to secure

each end of the Biggarsberg section of the railway, and also to cover

the important collieries of that district. The positions chosen seem in

each case to show that the British commander was not aware of the number

and power of the Boer guns, for each was equally defensible against

rifle fire and vulnerable to an artillery attack. In the case of Glencoe

it was particularly evident that guns upon the hills above would, as

they did, render the position untenable. This outlying post was held

by the 1st Leicester Regiment, the 2nd Dublin Fusiliers, and the first

battalion of Rifles, with the 18th Hussars, three companies of mounted

infantry, and three batteries of field artillery, the 13th, 67th, and

69th. The 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers were on their way to reinforce

it, and arrived before the first action. Altogether the Glencoe camp

contained some four thousand men.

The main body of the army remained at Ladysmith. These consisted of the

1st Devons, the 1st Liverpools, and the 2nd Gordon Highlanders, with the

1st Gloucesters, the 2nd King's Royal Rifles, and the 2nd Rifle Brigade,

reinforced later by the Manchesters. The cavalry included the 5th

Dragoon Guards, the 5th Lancers, a detachment of 19th Hussars, the Natal

Carabineers, the Natal Mounted Police, and the Border Mounted Rifles,

reinforced later by the Imperial Light Horse, a fine body of men raised

principally among the refugees from the Rand. For artillery there

were the 21st, 42nd, and 53rd batteries of field artillery, and No. 10

Mountain Battery, with the Natal Field Artillery, the guns of which were

too light to be of service, and the 23rd Company of Royal Engineers. The

whole force, some eight or nine thousand strong, was under the immediate

command of Sir George White, with Sir Archibald Hunter, fresh from the

Soudan, General French, and General Ian Hamilton as his lieutenants.

The first shock of the Boers, then, must fall upon 4000 men. If these

could be overwhelmed, there were 8000 more to be defeated or masked.

Then what was there between them and the sea? Some detachments of local

volunteers, the Durban Light Infantry at Colenso, and the Natal Royal

Rifles, with some naval volunteers at Estcourt. With the power of the

Boers and their mobility it is inexplicable how the colony was saved. We

are of the same blood, the Boers and we, and we show it in our failings.

Over-confidence on our part gave them the chance, and over-confidence

on theirs prevented them from instantly availing themselves of it. It

passed, never to come again.

The outbreak of war was upon October 11th. On the 12th the Boer forces

crossed the frontier both on the north and on the west. On the 13th they

occupied Charlestown at the top angle of Natal. On the 15th they had

reached Newcastle, a larger town some fifteen miles inside the border.

Watchers from the houses saw six miles of canvas-tilted bullock wagons

winding down the passes, and learned that this was not a raid but an

invasion. At the same date news reached the British headquarters of

an advance from the western passes, and of a movement from the

Buffalo River on the east. On the 13th Sir George White had made a

reconnaissance in force, but had not come in touch with the enemy. On

the 15th six of the Natal Police were surrounded and captured at one of

the drifts of the Buffalo River. On the 18th our cavalry patrols came

into touch with the Boer scouts at Acton Homes and Besters Station,

these being the voortrekkers of the Orange Free State force. On the 18th

also a detachment was reported from Hadders Spruit, seven miles north of

Glencoe Camp. The cloud was drifting up, and it could not be long before

it would burst.

Two days later, on the early morning of October 20th, the forces came

at last into collision. At half-past three in the morning, well before

daylight, the mounted infantry picket at the junction of the roads from

Landmans and Vants Drifts was fired into by the Doornberg commando, and

retired upon its supports. Two companies of the Dublin Fusiliers were

sent out, and at five o'clock on a fine but misty morning the whole of

Symons's force was under arms with the knowledge that the Boers were

pushing boldly towards them. The khaki-clad lines of fighting men stood

in their long thin ranks staring up at the curves of the saddle-back

hills to the north and east of them, and straining their eyes to catch a

glimpse of the enemy. Why these same saddle-back hills were not occupied

by our own people is, it must be confessed, an insoluble mystery. In a

hollow on one flank were the 18th Hussars and the mounted infantry. On

the other were the eighteen motionless guns, limbered up and ready, the

horses fidgeting and stamping in the raw morning air.

And then suddenly--could that be they? An officer with a telescope

stared intently and pointed. Another and another turned a steady field

glass towards the same place. And then the men could see also, and a

little murmur of interest ran down the ranks.

A long sloping hill--Talana Hill--olive-green in hue, was stretching

away in front of them. At the summit it rose into a rounded crest. The

mist was clearing, and the curve was hard-outlined against the limpid

blue of the morning sky. On this, some two and a half miles or three

miles off, a little group of black dots had appeared. The clear edge of

the skyline had become serrated with moving figures. They clustered into

a knot, then opened again, and then--

There had been no smoke, but there came a long crescendo hoot, rising

into a shrill wail. The shell hummed over the soldiers like a great

bee, and sloshed into soft earth behind them. Then another--and yet

another--and yet another. But there was no time to heed them, for there

was the hillside and there the enemy. So at it again with the good old

murderous obsolete heroic tactics of the British tradition! There are

times when, in spite of science and book-lore, the best plan is the

boldest plan, and it is well to fly straight at your enemy's throat,

facing the chance that your strength may fail before you can grasp it.

The cavalry moved off round the enemy's left flank. The guns dashed to

the front, unlimbered, and opened fire. The infantry were moved round in

the direction of Sandspruit, passing through the little town of Dundee,

where the women and children came to the doors and windows to cheer

them. It was thought that the hill was more accessible from that side.

The Leicesters and one field battery--the 67th--were left behind to

protect the camp and to watch the Newcastle Road upon the west. At seven

in the morning all was ready for the assault.

Two military facts of importance had already been disclosed. One was

that the Boer percussion-shells were useless in soft ground, as hardly

any of them exploded; the other that the Boer guns could outrange our

ordinary fifteen-pounder field gun, which had been the one thing perhaps

in the whole British equipment upon which we were prepared to pin our

faith. The two batteries, the 13th and the 69th, were moved nearer,

first to 3000, and then at last to 2300 yards, at which range they

quickly dominated the guns upon the hill. Other guns had opened from

another crest to the east of Talana, but these also were mastered by the

fire of the 13th Battery. At 7.30 the infantry were ordered to advance,

which they did in open order, extended to ten paces. The Dublin

Fusiliers formed the first line, the Rifles the second, and the Irish

Fusiliers the third.

The first thousand yards of the advance were over open grassland, where

the range was long, and the yellow brown of the khaki blended with the

withered veld. There were few casualties until the wood was reached,

which lay halfway up the long slope of the hill. It was a plantation of

larches, some hundreds of yards across and nearly as many deep. On

the left side of this wood--that is, the left side to the advancing

troops--there stretched a long nullah or hollow, which ran

perpendicularly to the hill, and served rather as a conductor of bullets

than as a cover. So severe was the fire at this point that both in the

wood and in the nullah the troops lay down to avoid it. An officer of

Irish Fusiliers has narrated how in trying to cut the straps from a

fallen private a razor lent him for that purpose by a wounded sergeant

was instantly shot out of his hand. The gallant Symons, who had refused

to dismount, was shot through the stomach and fell from his horse

mortally wounded. With an excessive gallantry, he had not only attracted

the enemy's fire by retaining his horse, but he had been accompanied

throughout the action by an orderly bearing a red pennon. 'Have they got

the hill? Have they got the hill?' was his one eternal question as they

carried him dripping to the rear. It was at the edge of the wood that

Colonel Sherston met his end.

From now onwards it was as much a soldiers' battle as Inkermann. In the

shelter of the wood the more eager of the three battalions had pressed

to the front until the fringe of the trees was lined by men from all of

them. The difficulty of distinguishing particular regiments where all

were clad alike made it impossible in the heat of action to keep any

sort of formation. So hot was the fire that for the time the advance

was brought to a standstill, but the 69th battery, firing shrapnel at a

range of 1400 yards, subdued the rifle fire, and about half-past eleven

the infantry were able to push on once more.

Above the wood there was an open space some hundreds of yards across,

bounded by a rough stone wall built for herding cattle. A second wall

ran at right angles to this down towards the wood. An enfilading rifle

fire had been sweeping across this open space, but the wall in front

does not appear to have been occupied by the enemy, who held the kopje

above it. To avoid the cross fire the soldiers ran in single file under

the shelter of the wall, which covered them to the right, and so reached

the other wall across their front. Here there was a second long delay,

the men dribbling up from below, and firing over the top of the wall and

between the chinks of the stones. The Dublin Fusiliers, through being in

a more difficult position, had been unable to get up as quickly as the

others, and most of the hard-breathing excited men who crowded under the

wall were of the Rifles and of the Irish Fusiliers. The air was so full

of bullets that it seemed impossible to live upon the other side of this

shelter. Two hundred yards intervened between the wall and the crest of

the kopje. And yet the kopje had to be cleared if the battle were to be

won.

Out of the huddled line of crouching men an officer sprang shouting, and

a score of soldiers vaulted over the wall and followed at his heels. It

was Captain Connor, of the Irish Fusiliers, but his personal magnetism

carried up with him some of the Rifles as well as men of his own

command. He and half his little forlorn hope were struck down--he, alas!

to die the same night--but there were other leaders as brave to take his

place. 'Forrard away, men, forrard away!' cried Nugent, of the Rifles.

Three bullets struck him, but he continued to drag himself up the

boulder-studded hill. Others followed, and others, from all sides

they came running, the crouching, yelling, khaki-clad figures, and the

supports rushed up from the rear. For a time they were beaten down by

their own shrapnel striking into them from behind, which is an amazing

thing when one considers that the range was under 2000 yards. It was

here, between the wall and the summit, that Colonel Gunning, of the

Rifles, and many other brave men met their end, some by our own bullets

and some by those of the enemy; but the Boers thinned away in front

of them, and the anxious onlookers from the plain below saw the waving

helmets on the crest, and learned at last that all was well.

But it was, it must be confessed, a Pyrrhic victory. We had our hill,

but what else had we? The guns which had been silenced by our fire had

been removed from the kopje. The commando which seized the hill was that

of Lucas Meyer, and it is computed that he had with him about 4000

men. This figure includes those under the command of Erasmus, who made

halfhearted demonstrations against the British flank. If the shirkers

be eliminated, it is probable that there were not more than a thousand

actual combatants upon the hill. Of this number about fifty were killed

and a hundred wounded. The British loss at Talana Hill itself was 41

killed and 180 wounded, but among the killed were many whom the army

could ill spare. The gallant but optimistic Symons, Gunning of the

Rifles, Sherston, Connor, Hambro, and many other brave men died that

day. The loss of officers was out of all proportion to that of the men.

An incident which occurred immediately after the action did much to rob

the British of the fruits of the victory. Artillery had pushed up the

moment that the hill was carried, and had unlimbered on Smith's Nek

between the two hills, from which the enemy, in broken groups of 50

and 100, could be seen streaming away. A fairer chance for the use of

shrapnel has never been. But at this instant there ran from an old iron

church on the reverse side of the hill, which had been used all day as

a Boer hospital, a man with a white flag. It is probable that the action

was in good faith, and that it was simply intended to claim a protection

for the ambulance party which followed him. But the too confiding gunner

in command appears to have thought that an armistice had been declared,

and held his hand during those precious minutes which might have turned

a defeat into a rout. The chance passed, never to return. The double

error of firing into our own advance and of failing to fire into the

enemy's retreat makes the battle one which cannot be looked back to with

satisfaction by our gunners.

In the meantime some miles away another train of events had led to a

complete disaster to our small cavalry force--a disaster which robbed

our dearly bought infantry victory of much of its importance. That

action alone was undoubtedly a victorious one, but the net result of the

day's fighting cannot be said to have been certainly in our favour.

It was Wellington who asserted that his cavalry always got him into

scrapes, and the whole of British military history might furnish

examples of what he meant. Here again our cavalry got into trouble.

Suffice it for the civilian to chronicle the fact, and leave it to the

military critic to portion out the blame.

One company of mounted infantry (that of the Rifles) had been told off

to form an escort for the guns. The rest of the mounted infantry with

part of the 18th Hussars (Colonel Moller) had moved round the right

flank until they reached the right rear of the enemy. Such a movement,

had Lucas Meyer been the only opponent, would have been above criticism;

but knowing, as we did, that there were several commandoes converging

upon Glencoe it was obviously taking a very grave and certain risk

to allow the cavalry to wander too far from support. They were soon

entangled in broken country and attacked by superior numbers of the

Boers. There was a time when they might have exerted an important

influence upon the action by attacking the Boer ponies behind the hills,

but the opportunity was allowed to pass. An attempt was made to get back

to the army, and a series of defensive positions were held to cover

the retreat, but the enemy's fire became too hot to allow them to be

retained. Every route save one appeared to be blocked, so the horsemen

took this, which led them into the heart of a second commando of the

enemy. Finding no way through, the force took up a defensive position,

part of them in a farm and part on a kopje which overlooked it.

The party consisted of two troops of Hussars, one company of mounted

infantry of the Dublin Fusiliers, and one section of the mounted

infantry of the Rifles--about two hundred men in all. They were

subjected to a hot fire for some hours, many being killed and wounded.

Guns were brought up, and fired shell into the farmhouse. At 4.30 the

force, being in a perfectly hopeless position, laid down their arms.

Their ammunition was gone, many of their horses had stampeded, and they

were hemmed in by very superior numbers, so that no slightest slur can

rest upon the survivors for their decision to surrender, though the

movements which brought them to such a pass are more open to criticism.

They were the vanguard of that considerable body of humiliated and

bitter-hearted men who were to assemble at the capital of our brave and

crafty enemy. The remainder of the 18th Hussars, who under Major Knox

had been detached from the main force and sent across the Boer rear,

underwent a somewhat similar experience, but succeeded in extricating

themselves with a loss of six killed and ten wounded. Their efforts were

by no means lost, as they engaged the attention of a considerable body

of Boers during the day and were able to bring some prisoners back with

them.

The battle of Talana Hill was a tactical victory but a strategic defeat.

It was a crude frontal attack without any attempt at even a feint of

flanking, but the valour of the troops, from general to private, carried

it through. The force was in a position so radically false that the only

use which they could make of a victory was to cover their own retreat.

From all points Boer commandoes were converging upon it, and already

it was understood that the guns at their command were heavier than any

which could be placed against them. This was made more clear on October

21st, the day after the battle, when the force, having withdrawn

overnight from the useless hill which they had captured, moved across

to a fresh position on the far side of the railway. At four in the

afternoon a very heavy gun opened from a distant hill, altogether beyond

the extreme range of our artillery, and plumped shell after shell into

our camp. It was the first appearance of the great Creusot. An officer

with several men of the Leicesters, and some of our few remaining

cavalry, were bit. The position was clearly impossible, so at two in the

morning of the 22nd the whole force was moved to a point to the south

of the town of Dundee. On the same day a reconnaissance was made in the

direction of Glencoe Station, but the passes were found to be strongly

occupied, and the little army marched back again to its original

position. The command had fallen to Colonel Yule, who justly considered

that his men were dangerously and uselessly exposed, and that his

correct strategy was to fall back, if it were still possible, and join

the main body at Ladysmith, even at the cost of abandoning the two

hundred sick and wounded who lay with General Symons in the hospital at

Dundee. It was a painful necessity, but no one who studies the situation

can have any doubt of its wisdom. The retreat was no easy task, a march

by road of some sixty or seventy miles through a very rough country with

an enemy pressing on every side. Its successful completion without any

loss or any demoralisation of the troops is perhaps as fine a military

exploit as any of our early victories. Through the energetic and loyal

co-operation of Sir George White, who fought the actions of Elandslaagte

and of Rietfontein in order to keep the way open for them, and owing

mainly to the skillful guidance of Colonel Dartnell, of the Natal

Police, they succeeded in their critical manoeuvre. On October 23rd they

were at Beith, on the 24th at Waselibank Spruit, on the 25th at Sunday

River, and next morning they marched, sodden with rain, plastered with

mud, dog-tired, but in the best of spirits, into Ladysmith amid the

cheers of their comrades. A battle, six days without settled sleep, four

days without a proper meal, winding up with a single march of thirty-two

miles over heavy ground and through a pelting rain storm--that was the

record of the Dundee column. They had fought and won, they had striven

and toiled to the utmost capacity of manhood, and the end of it all was

that they had reached the spot which they should never have left. But

their endurance could not be lost--no worthy deed is ever lost. Like the

light division, when they marched their fifty odd unbroken miles to

be present at Talavera, they leave a memory and a standard behind them

which is more important than success. It is by the tradition of such

sufferings and such endurance that others in other days are nerved to do

the like.

CHAPTER 6. ELANDSLAAGTE AND RIETFONTEIN.

While the Glencoe force had struck furiously at the army of Lucas Meyer,

and had afterwards by hard marching disengaged itself from the numerous

dangers which threatened it, its comrades at Ladysmith had loyally

co-operated in drawing off the attention of the enemy and keeping the

line of retreat open.

On October 20th--the same day as the Battle of Talana Hill--the line was

cut by the Boers at a point nearly midway between Dundee and Ladysmith.

A small body of horsemen were the forerunners of a considerable

commando, composed of Freestaters, Transvaalers, and Germans, who had

advanced into Natal through Botha's Pass under the command of General

Koch. They had with them the two Maxim-Nordenfelds which had been

captured from the Jameson raiders, and were now destined to return

once more to British hands. Colonel Schiel, the German artillerist, had

charge of these guns.

On the evening of that day General French, with a strong reconnoitering

party, including the Natal Carabineers, the 5th Lancers, and the 21st

battery, had defined the enemy's position. Next morning (the 21st) he

returned, but either the enemy had been reinforced during the night or

he had underrated them the day before, for the force which he took with

him was too weak for any serious attack. He had one battery of the Natal

artillery, with their little seven-pounder popguns, five squadrons

of the Imperial Horse, and, in the train which slowly accompanied his

advance, half a battalion of the Manchester Regiment. Elated by the news

of Talana Hill, and anxious to emulate their brothers of Dundee, the

little force moved out of Ladysmith in the early morning.

Some at least of the men were animated by feelings such as seldom find a

place in the breast of the British soldier as he marches into battle.

A sense of duty, a belief in the justice of his cause, a love for his

regiment and for his country, these are the common incentives of every

soldier. But to the men of the Imperial Light Horse, recruited as they

were from among the British refugees of the Rand, there was added a

burning sense of injustice, and in many cases a bitter hatred against

the men whose rule had weighed so heavily upon them. In this singular

corps the ranks were full of wealthy men and men of education, who,

driven from their peaceful vocations in Johannesburg, were bent upon

fighting their way back to them again. A most unmerited slur had been

cast upon their courage in connection with the Jameson raid--a slur

which they and other similar corps have washed out for ever in their own

blood and that of their enemy. Chisholm, a fiery little Lancer, was in

command, with Karri Davis and Wools-Sampson, the two stalwarts who had

preferred Pretoria Gaol to the favours of Kruger, as his majors. The

troopers were on fire at the news that a cartel had arrived in Ladysmith

the night before, purporting to come from the Johannesburg Boers and

Hollanders, asking what uniform the Light Horse wore, as they were

anxious to meet them in battle. These men were fellow townsmen and knew

each other well. They need not have troubled about the uniform, for

before evening the Light Horse were near enough for them to know their

faces.

It was about eight o'clock on a bright summer morning that the small

force came in contact with a few scattered Boer outposts, who retired,

firing, before the advance of the Imperial Light Horse. As they fell

back the green and white tents of the invaders came into view upon the

russet-coloured hillside of Elandslaagte. Down at the red brick railway

station the Boers could be seen swarming out of the buildings in which

they had spent the night. The little Natal guns, firing with obsolete

black powder, threw a few shells into the station, one of which, it

is said, penetrated a Boer ambulance which could not be seen by the

gunners. The accident was to be regretted, but as no patients could have

been in the ambulance the mischance was not a serious one.

But the busy, smoky little seven-pounder guns were soon to meet their

master. Away up on the distant hillside, a long thousand yards beyond

their own furthest range, there was a sudden bright flash. No smoke,

only the throb of flame, and then the long sibilant scream of the shell,

and the thud as it buried itself in the ground under a limber. Such

judgment of range would have delighted the most martinet of inspectors

at Okehampton. Bang came another, and another, and another, right

into the heart of the battery. The six little guns lay back at their

extremest angle, and all barked together in impotent fury. Another shell

pitched over them, and the officer in command lowered his field-glass in

despair as he saw his own shells bursting far short upon the hillside.

Jameson's defeat does not seem to have been due to any defect in his

artillery. French, peering and pondering, soon came to the

conclusion that there were too many Boers for him, and that if those

fifteen-pounders desired target practice they should find some other

mark than the Natal Field Artillery. A few curt orders, and his whole

force was making its way to the rear. There, out of range of those

perilous guns, they halted, the telegraph wire was cut, a telephone

attachment was made, and French whispered his troubles into the

sympathetic ear of Ladysmith. He did not whisper in vain. What he had

to say was that where he had expected a few hundred riflemen he found

something like two thousand, and that where he expected no guns he found

two very excellent ones. The reply was that by road and by rail as many

men as could be spared were on their way to join him.

Soon they began to drop in, those useful reinforcements--first the

Devons, quiet, business-like, reliable; then the Gordons, dashing,

fiery, brilliant. Two squadrons of the 5th Lancers, the 42nd R.F.A., the

21st R.F.A., another squadron of Lancers, a squadron of the 5th Dragoon

Guards--French began to feel that he was strong enough for the task in

front of him. He had a decided superiority of numbers and of guns. But

the others were on their favourite defensive on a hill. It would be a

fair fight and a deadly one.

It was late after noon before the advance began. It was hard, among

those billowing hills, to make out the exact limits of the enemy's

position. All that was certain was that they were there, and that

we meant having them out if it were humanly possible. 'The enemy are

there,' said Ian Hamilton to his infantry; 'I hope you will shift

them out before sunset--in fact I know you will.' The men cheered and

laughed. In long open lines they advanced across the veld, while the

thunder of the two batteries behind them told the Boer gunners that it

was their turn now to know what it was to be outmatched.

The idea was to take the position by a front and a flank attack, but

there seems to have been some difficulty in determining which was the

front and which the flank. In fact, it was only by trying that one

could know. General White with his staff had arrived from Ladysmith,

but refused to take the command out of French's hands. It is typical of

White's chivalrous spirit that within ten days he refused to identify

himself with a victory when it was within his right to do so, and took

the whole responsibility for a disaster at which he was not present.

Now he rode amid the shells and watched the able dispositions of his

lieutenant.

About half-past three the action had fairly begun. In front of the

advancing British there lay a rolling hill, topped by a further one. The

lower hill was not defended, and the infantry, breaking from column of

companies into open order, advanced over it. Beyond was a broad grassy

valley which led up to the main position, a long kopje flanked by a

small sugar-loaf one Behind the green slope which led to the ridge of

death an ominous and terrible cloud was driving up, casting its black

shadow over the combatants. There was the stillness which goes before

some great convulsion of nature. The men pressed on in silence, the soft

thudding of their feet and the rattle of their sidearms filling the air

with a low and continuous murmur. An additional solemnity was given to

the attack by that huge black cloud which hung before them.

The British guns had opened at a range of 4400 yards, and now against

the swarthy background there came the quick smokeless twinkle of the

Boer reply. It was an unequal fight, but gallantly sustained. A shot and

another to find the range; then a wreath of smoke from a bursting

shell exactly where the guns had been, followed by another and another.

Overmatched, the two Boer pieces relapsed into a sulky silence,

broken now and again by short spurts of frenzied activity. The British

batteries turned their attention away from them, and began to search the

ridge with shrapnel and prepare the way for the advancing infantry.

The scheme was that the Devonshires should hold the enemy in front while

the main attack from the left flank was carried out by the Gordons,

the Manchesters, and the Imperial Light Horse. The words 'front' and

'flank,' however, cease to have any meaning with so mobile and elastic

a force, and the attack which was intended to come from the left became

really a frontal one, while the Devons found themselves upon the right

flank of the Boers. At the moment of the final advance the great black

cloud had burst, and a torrent of rain lashed into the faces of the men.

Slipping and sliding upon the wet grass, they advanced to the assault.

And now amid the hissing of the rain there came the fuller, more

menacing whine of the Mauser bullets, and the ridge rattled from end to

end with the rifle fire. Men fell fast, but their comrades pressed

hotly on. There was a long way to go, for the summit of the position was

nearly 800 feet above the level of the railway. The hillside, which had

appeared to be one slope, was really a succession of undulations, so

that the advancing infantry alternately dipped into shelter and emerged

into a hail of bullets. The line of advance was dotted with khaki-clad

figures, some still in death, some writhing in their agony. Amid the

litter of bodies a major of the Gordons, shot through the leg, sat

philosophically smoking his pipe. Plucky little Chisholm, Colonel of the

Imperials, had fallen with two mortal wounds as he dashed forward waving

a coloured sash in the air. So long was the advance and so trying the

hill that the men sank panting upon the ground, and took their breath

before making another rush. As at Talana Hill, regimental formation was

largely gone, and men of the Manchesters, Gordons, and Imperial Light

Horse surged upwards in one long ragged fringe, Scotchman, Englishman,

and British Africander keeping pace in that race of death. And now at

last they began to see their enemy. Here and there among the boulders

in front of them there was the glimpse of a slouched hat, or a peep at

a flushed bearded face which drooped over a rifle barrel. There was a

pause, and then with a fresh impulse the wave of men gathered themselves

together and flung themselves forward. Dark figures sprang up from the

rocks in front. Some held up their rifles in token of surrender. Some

ran with heads sunk between their shoulders, jumping and ducking among

the rocks. The panting breathless climbers were on the edge of the

plateau. There were the two guns which had flashed so brightly, silenced

now, with a litter of dead gunners around them and one wounded officer

standing by a trail. A small body of the Boers still resisted. Their

appearance horrified some of our men. 'They were dressed in black

frock coats and looked like a lot of rather seedy business men,' said a

spectator. 'It seemed like murder to kill them.' Some surrendered, and

some fought to the death where they stood. Their leader Koch, an old

gentleman with a white beard, lay amidst the rocks, wounded in three

places. He was treated with all courtesy and attention, but died in

Ladysmith Hospital some days afterwards.

In the meanwhile the Devonshire Regiment had waited until the attack

had developed and had then charged the hill upon the flank, while

the artillery moved up until it was within 2000 yards of the enemy's

position. The Devons met with a less fierce resistance than the others,

and swept up to the summit in time to head off some of the fugitives.

The whole of our infantry were now upon the ridge.

But even so these dour fighters were not beaten. They clung desperately

to the further edges of the plateau, firing from behind the rocks.

There had been a race for the nearest gun between an officer of the

Manchesters and a drummer sergeant of the Gordons. The officer won, and

sprang in triumph on to the piece. Men of all regiments swarmed round

yelling and cheering, when upon their astonished ears there sounded the

'Cease fire' and then the 'Retire.' It was incredible, and yet it pealed

out again, unmistakable in its urgency. With the instinct of discipline

the men were slowly falling back. And then the truth of it came upon

the minds of some of them. The crafty enemy had learned our bugle calls.

'Retire be damned! shrieked a little bugler, and blew the 'Advance' with

all the breath that the hillside had left him. The men, who had retired

a hundred yards and uncovered the guns, flooded back over the plateau,

and in the Boer camp which lay beneath it a white flag showed that

the game was up. A squadron of the 5th Lancers and of the 5th Dragoon

Guards, under Colonel Gore of the latter regiment, had prowled round

the base of the hill, and in the fading light they charged through and

through the retreating Boers, killing several, and making from twenty to

thirty prisoners. It was one of the very few occasions in the war where

the mounted Briton overtook the mounted Boer.

'What price Majuba?' was the cry raised by some of the infantry as they

dashed up to the enemy's position, and the action may indeed be said to

have been in some respects the converse of that famous fight. It is true

that there were many more British at Elandslaagte than Boers at Majuba,

but then the defending force was much more numerous also, and the

British had no guns there. It is true, also, that Majuba is very much

more precipitous than Elandslaagte, but then every practical soldier

knows that it is easier to defend a moderate glacis than an abrupt

slope, which gives cover under its boulders to the attacker while the

defender has to crane his head over the edge to look down. On the whole,

this brilliant little action may be said to have restored things to

their true proportion, and to have shown that, brave as the Boers

undoubtedly are, there is no military feat within their power which

is not equally possible to the British soldier. Talana Hill and

Elandslaagte, fought on successive days, were each of them as gallant an

exploit as Majuba.

We had more to show for our victory than for the previous one at Dundee.

Two Maxim-Nordenfeld guns, whose efficiency had been painfully evident

during the action, were a welcome addition to our artillery. Two hundred

and fifty Boers were killed and wounded and about two hundred taken

prisoners, the loss falling most heavily upon the Johannesburgers, the

Germans, and the Hollanders. General Koch, Dr. Coster, Colonel Schiel,

Pretorius, and other well-known Transvaalers fell into our hands. Our

own casualty list consisted of 41 killed and 220 wounded, much the same

number as at Talana Hill, the heaviest losses falling upon the Gordon

Highlanders and the Imperial Light Horse.

In the hollow where the Boer tents had stood, amid the laagered wagons

of the vanquished, under a murky sky and a constant drizzle of rain, the

victors spent the night. Sleep was out of the question, for all night

the fatigue parties were searching the hillside and the wounded were

being carried in. Camp-fires were lit and soldiers and prisoners crowded

round them, and it is pleasant to recall that the warmest corner and the

best of their rude fare were always reserved for the downcast Dutchmen,

while words of rude praise and sympathy softened the pain of defeat. It

is the memory of such things which may in happier days be more potent

than all the wisdom of statesmen in welding our two races into one.

Having cleared the Boer force from the line of the railway, it is

evident that General White could not continue to garrison the point, as

he was aware that considerable forces were moving from the north,

and his first duty was the security of Ladysmith. Early next morning

(October 22nd), therefore, his weary but victorious troops returned

to the town. Once there he learned, no doubt, that General Yule had

no intention of using the broken railway for his retreat, but that he

intended to come in a circuitous fashion by road. White's problem was

to hold tight to the town and at the same time to strike hard at any

northern force so as to prevent them from interfering with Yule's

retreat. It was in the furtherance of this scheme that he fought upon

October 24th the action of Rietfontein, an engagement slight in itself,

but important on account of the clear road which was secured for the

weary forces retiring from Dundee.

The army from the Free State, of which the commando vanquished at

Elandslaagte was the vanguard, had been slowly and steadily debouching

from the passes, and working south and eastwards to cut the line between

Dundee and Ladysmith. It was White's intention to prevent them from

crossing the Newcastle Road, and for this purpose he sallied out of

Ladysmith on Tuesday the 24th, having with him two regiments of cavalry,

the 5th Lancers and the 19th Hussars, the 42nd and 53rd field batteries

with the 10th mountain battery, four infantry regiments, the Devons,

Liverpools, Gloucesters, and 2nd King's Royal Rifles, the Imperial Light

Horse, and the Natal Volunteers--some four thousand men in all.

The enemy were found to be in possession of a line of hills within

seven miles of Ladysmith, the most conspicuous of which is called Tinta

Inyoni. It was no part of General White's plan to attempt to drive him

from this position--it is not wise generalship to fight always upon

ground of the enemy's choosing--but it was important to hold him where

he was, and to engage his attention during this last day of the march

of the retreating column. For this purpose, since no direct attack was

intended, the guns were of more importance than the infantry--and indeed

the infantry should, one might imagine, have been used solely as an

escort for the artillery. A desultory and inconclusive action ensued

which continued from nine in the morning until half-past one in the

afternoon. A well-directed fire of the Boer guns from the hills was

dominated and controlled by our field artillery, while the advance of

their riflemen was restrained by shrapnel. The enemy's guns were more

easily marked down than at Elandslaagte, as they used black powder. The

ranges varied from three to four thousand yards. Our losses in the

whole action would have been insignificant had it not happened that the

Gloucester Regiment advanced somewhat incautiously into the open and was

caught in a cross fire of musketry which struck down Colonel Wilford and

fifty of his officers and men. Within four days Colonel Dick-Cunyngham,

of the Gordons, Colonel Chisholm, of the Light Horse, Colonel Gunning,

of the Rifles, and now Colonel Wilford, of the Gloucesters, had all

fallen at the head of their regiments. In the afternoon General White,

having accomplished his purpose and secured the safety of the Dundee

column while traversing the dangerous Biggarsberg passes, withdrew his

force to Ladysmith. We have no means of ascertaining the losses of the

Boers, but they were probably slight. On our side we lost 109 killed and

wounded, of which only 13 cases were fatal. Of this total 64 belonged

to the Gloucesters and 25 to the troops raised in Natal. Next day, as

already narrated, the whole British army was re-assembled once more at

Ladysmith, and the campaign was to enter upon a new phase.

At the end of this first vigorous week of hostilities it is interesting

to sum up the net result. The strategical advantage had lain with the

Boers. They had made our position at Dundee untenable and had driven us

back to Ladysmith. They had the country and the railway for the northern

quarter of the colony in their possession. They had killed and wounded

between six and seven hundred of our men, and they had captured some two

hundred of our cavalry, while we had been compelled at Dundee to leave

considerable stores and our wounded, including General Penn Symons, who

actually died while a prisoner in their hands. On the other hand, the

tactical advantages lay with us. We had twice driven them from their

positions, and captured two of their guns. We had taken two hundred

prisoners, and had probably killed and wounded as many as we had lost.

On the whole, the honours of that week's fighting in Natal may be said

to have been fairly equal--which is more than we could claim for many a

weary week to come.

CHAPTER 7. THE BATTLE OF LADYSMITH.

Sir George White had now reunited his force, and found himself in

command of a formidable little army some twelve thousand in number. His

cavalry included the 5th Lancers, the 5th Dragoons, part of the 18th and

the whole of the 19th Hussars, the Natal Carabineers, the Border Rifles,

some mounted infantry, and the Imperial Light Horse. Among his infantry

were the Royal Irish Fusiliers, the Dublin Fusiliers, and the King's

Royal Rifles, fresh from the ascent of Talana Hill, the Gordons, the

Manchesters, and the Devons who had been blooded at Elandslaagte,

the Leicesters, the Liverpools, the 2nd battalion of the King's Royal

Rifles, the 2nd Rifle Brigade, and the Gloucesters, who had been so

roughly treated at Rietfontein. He had six batteries of excellent field

artillery--the 13th, 21st, 42nd, 53rd, 67th, 69th, and No. 10 Mountain

Battery of screw guns. No general could have asked for a more compact

and workmanlike little force.

It had been recognised by the British General from the beginning that

his tactics must be defensive, since he was largely outnumbered and

since also any considerable mishap to his force would expose the

whole colony of Natal to destruction. The actions of Elandslaagte and

Rietfontein were forced upon him in order to disengage his compromised

detachment, but now there was no longer any reason why he should

assume the offensive. He knew that away out on the Atlantic a trail of

transports which already extended from the Channel to Cape de Verde

were hourly drawing nearer to him with the army corps from England. In a

fortnight or less the first of them would be at Durban. It was his game,

therefore, to keep his army intact, and to let those throbbing engines

and whirling propellers do the work of the empire. Had he entrenched

himself up to his nose and waited, it would have paid him best in the

end.

But so tame and inglorious a policy is impossible to a fighting soldier.

He could not with his splendid force permit himself to be shut in

without an action. What policy demands honour may forbid. On October

27th there were already Boers and rumours of Boers on every side of

him. Joubert with his main body was moving across from Dundee. The

Freestaters were to the north and west. Their combined numbers were

uncertain, but at least it was already proved that they were far more

numerous and also more formidable than had been anticipated. We had had

a taste of their artillery also, and the pleasant delusion that it would

be a mere useless encumbrance to a Boer force had vanished for ever.

It was a grave thing to leave the town in order to give battle, for

the mobile enemy might swing round and seize it behind us. Nevertheless

White determined to make the venture.

On the 29th the enemy were visibly converging upon the town. From a high

hill within rifleshot of the houses a watcher could see no fewer than

six Boer camps to the east and north. French, with his cavalry, pushed

out feelers, and coasted along the edge of the advancing host. His

report warned White that if he would strike before all the scattered

bands were united he must do so at once. The wounded were sent down to

Pietermaritzburg, and it would bear explanation why the non-combatants

did not accompany them. On the evening of the same day Joubert in person

was said to be only six miles off, and a party of his men cut the water

supply of the town. The Klip, however, a fair-sized river, runs through

Ladysmith, so that there was no danger of thirst. The British had

inflated and sent up a balloon, to the amazement of the back-veld Boers;

its report confirmed the fact that the enemy was in force in front of

and around them.

On the night of the 29th General White detached two of his best

regiments, the Irish Fusiliers and the Gloucesters, with No. 10 Mountain

Battery, to advance under cover of the darkness and to seize and hold

a long ridge called Nicholson's Nek, which lay about six miles to the

north of Ladysmith. Having determined to give battle on the next day,

his object was to protect his left wing against those Freestaters who

were still moving from the north and west, and also to keep a pass

open by which his cavalry might pursue the Boer fugitives in case of a

British victory. This small detached column numbered about a thousand

men--whose fate will be afterwards narrated.

At five o'clock on the morning of the 30th the Boers, who had already

developed a perfect genius for hauling heavy cannon up the most

difficult heights, opened fire from one of the hills which lie to the

north of the town. Before the shot was fired, the forces of the British

had already streamed out of Ladysmith to test the strength of the

invaders.

White's army was divided into three columns. On the extreme left, quite

isolated from the others, was the small Nicholson's Nek detachment under

the command of Colonel Carleton of the Fusiliers (one of three gallant

brothers each of whom commands a British regiment). With him was Major

Adye of the staff. On the right British flank Colonel Grimwood commanded

a brigade composed of the 1st and 2nd battalions of the King's Royal

Rifles, the Leicesters, the Liverpools, and the Royal Dublin Fusiliers.

In the centre Colonel Ian Hamilton commanded the Devons, the Gordons,

the Manchesters, and the 2nd battalion of the Rifle Brigade, which

marched direct into the battle from the train which had brought them

from Durban. Six batteries of artillery were massed in the centre under

Colonel Downing. French with the cavalry and mounted infantry was on the

extreme right, but found little opportunity for the use of the mounted

arm that day.

The Boer position, so far as it could be seen, was a formidable one.

Their centre lay upon one of the spurs of Signal Hill, about three miles

from the town. Here they had two forty-pounders and three other lighter

guns, but their artillery strength developed both in numbers and in

weight of metal as the day wore on. Of their dispositions little could

be seen. An observer looking westward might discern with his glass

sprays of mounted riflemen galloping here and there over the downs,

and possibly small groups where the gunners stood by their guns, or the

leaders gazed down at that town which they were destined to have in view

for such a weary while. On the dun-coloured plains before the town, the

long thin lines, with an occasional shifting sparkle of steel, showed

where Hamilton's and Grimwood's infantry were advancing. In the clear

cold air of an African morning every detail could be seen, down to the

distant smoke of a train toiling up the heavy grades which lead from

Frere over the Colenso Bridge to Ladysmith.

The scrambling, inconsequential, unsatisfactory action which ensued is

as difficult to describe as it must have been to direct. The Boer

front covered some seven or eight miles, with kopjes, like chains of

fortresses, between. They formed a huge semicircle of which our advance

was the chord, and they were able from this position to pour in

a converging artillery fire which grew steadily hotter as the day

advanced. In the early part of the day our forty-two guns, working

furiously, though with a want of accuracy which may be due to those

errors of refraction which are said to be common in the limpid air of

the veld, preserved their superiority. There appears to have been a want

of concentration about our fire, and at some periods of the action

each particular battery was firing at some different point of the Boer

half-circle. Sometimes for an hour on end the Boer reply would die

away altogether, only to break out with augmented violence, and with

an accuracy which increased our respect for their training. Huge

shells--the largest that ever burst upon a battlefield--hurled from

distances which were unattainable by our fifteen-pounders, enveloped our

batteries in smoke and flame. One enormous Creusot gun on Pepworth Hill

threw a 96-pound shell a distance of four miles, and several 40-pound

howitzers outweighted our field guns. And on the same day on which we

were so roughly taught how large the guns were which labour and good

will could haul on to the field of battle, we learned also that our

enemy--to the disgrace of our Board of Ordnance be it recorded--was more

in touch with modern invention than we were, and could show us not only

the largest, but also the smallest, shell which had yet been used. Would

that it had been our officials instead of our gunners who heard the

devilish little one-pound shells of the Vickers-Maxim automatic gun,

exploding with a continuous string of crackings and bangings, like a

huge cracker, in their faces and about their ears!

Up to seven o'clock our infantry had shown no disposition to press the

attack, for with so huge a position in front of them, and so many hills

which were held by the enemy, it was difficult to know what line of

advance should be taken, or whether the attack should not be converted

into a mere reconnaissance. Shortly after that hour, however, the Boers

decided the question by themselves developing a vigorous movement upon

Grimwood and the right flank. With field guns, Maxims, and rifle fire,

they closed rapidly in upon him. The centre column was drafted off,

regiment by regiment, to reinforce the right. The Gordons, Devons,

Manchesters, and three batteries were sent over to Grimwood's relief,

and the 5th Lancers, acting as infantry, assisted him to hold on.

At nine o'clock there was a lull, but it was evident that fresh

commandoes and fresh guns were continually streaming into the firing

line. The engagement opened again with redoubled violence, and

Grimwood's three advanced battalions fell back, abandoning the ridge

which they had held for five hours. The reason for this withdrawal was

not that they could not continue to hold their position, but it was

that a message had just reached Sir George White from Colonel Knox,

commanding in Ladysmith, to the effect that it looked as if the enemy

was about to rush the town from the other side. Crossing the open in

some disorder, they lost heavily, and would have done so more had not

the 13th Field Battery, followed after an interval by the 53rd, dashed

forward, firing shrapnel at short ranges, in order to cover the retreat

of the infantry. Amid the bursting of the huge 96-pound shells, and the

snapping of the vicious little automatic one-pounders, with a cross-fire

of rifles as well, Abdy's and Dawkins' gallant batteries swung round

their muzzles, and hit back right and left, flashing and blazing, amid

their litter of dead horses and men. So severe was the fire that the

guns were obscured by the dust knocked up by the little shells of the

automatic gun. Then, when their work was done and the retiring infantry

had straggled over the ridge, the covering guns whirled and bounded

after them. So many horses had fallen that two pieces were left until

the teams could be brought back for them, which was successfully done

through the gallantry of Captain Thwaites. The action of these batteries

was one of the few gleams of light in a not too brilliant day's work.

With splendid coolness and courage they helped each other by alternate

retirements after the retreating infantry had passed them. The 21st

Battery (Blewitt's) also distinguished itself by its staunchness in

covering the retirement of the cavalry, while the 42nd (Goulburn's)

suffered the heaviest losses of any. On the whole, such honours as fell

to our lot were mainly with the gunners.

White must have been now uneasy for his position, and it had become

apparent that his only course was to fall back and concentrate upon the

town. His left flank was up in the air, and the sound of distant firing,

wafted over five miles of broken country, was the only message which

arrived from them. His right had been pushed back, and, most dangerous

of all, his centre had ceased to exist, for only the 2nd Rifle Brigade

remained there. What would happen if the enemy burst rudely through

and pushed straight for the town? It was the more possible, as the

Boer artillery had now proved itself to be far heavier than ours. That

terrible 96-pounder, serenely safe and out of range, was plumping its

great projectiles into the masses of retiring troops. The men had had

little sleep and little food, and this unanswerable fire was an ordeal

for a force which is retreating. A retirement may very rapidly become

a rout under such circumstances. It was with some misgivings that the

officers saw their men quicken their pace and glance back over their

shoulders at the whine and screech of the shell. They were still some

miles from home, and the plain was open. What could be done to give them

some relief?

And at that very moment there came the opportune and unexpected answer.

That plume of engine smoke which the watcher had observed in the

morning had drawn nearer and nearer, as the heavy train came puffing and

creaking up the steep inclines. Then, almost before it had drawn up at

the Ladysmith siding, there had sprung from it a crowd of merry bearded

fellows, with ready hands and strange sea cries, pulling and hauling,

with rope and purchase to get out the long slim guns which they had

lashed on the trucks. Singular carriages were there, specially invented

by Captain Percy Scott, and labouring and straining, they worked

furiously to get the 12-pounder quick-firers into action. Then at last

it was done, and the long tubes swept upwards to the angle at which they

might hope to reach that monster on the hill at the horizon. Two of them

craned their long inquisitive necks up and exchanged repartees with the

big Creusot. And so it was that the weary and dispirited British troops

heard a crash which was louder and sharper than that of their field

guns, and saw far away upon the distant hill a great spurt of smoke

and flame to show where the shell had struck. Another and another and

another--and then they were troubled no more. Captain Hedworth Lambton

and his men had saved the situation. The masterful gun had met its own

master and sank into silence, while the somewhat bedraggled field force

came trailing back into Ladysmith, leaving three hundred of their number

behind them. It was a high price to pay, but other misfortunes were

in store for us which made the retirement of the morning seem

insignificant.

In the meantime we may follow the unhappy fortunes of the small column

which had, as already described, been sent out by Sir George White in

order, if possible, to prevent the junction of the two Boer armies, and

at the same time to threaten the right wing of the main force, which was

advancing from the direction of Dundee, Sir George White throughout the

campaign consistently displayed one quality which is a charming one in

an individual, but may be dangerous in a commander. He was a confirmed

optimist. Perhaps his heart might have failed him in the dark days to

come had he not been so. But whether one considers the non-destruction

of the Newcastle Railway, the acquiescence in the occupation of Dundee,

the retention of the non combatants in Ladysmith until it was too late

to get rid of their useless mouths, or the failure to make any serious

preparations for the defence of the town until his troops were beaten

back into it, we see always the same evidence of a man who habitually

hopes that all will go well, and is in consequence remiss in making

preparations for their going ill. But unhappily in every one of these

instances they did go ill, though the slowness of the Boers enabled

us, both at Dundee and at Ladysmith, to escape what might have been

disaster.

Sir George White has so nobly and frankly taken upon himself the blame

of Nicholson's Nek that an impartial historian must rather regard his

self-condemnation as having been excessive. The immediate causes of the

failure were undoubtedly the results of pure ill-fortune, and depended

on things outside his control. But it is evident that the strategic plan

which would justify the presence of this column at Nicholson's Nek

was based upon the supposition that the main army won their action at

Lombard's Kop. In that case White might swing round his right and pin

the Boers between himself and Nicholson's Nek. In any case he could then

re-unite with his isolated wing. But if he should lose his battle--what

then? What was to become of this detachment five miles up in the air?

How was it to be extricated? The gallant Irishman seems to have waved

aside the very idea of defeat. An assurance was, it is reported, given

to the leaders of the column that by eleven o'clock next morning they

would be relieved. So they would if White had won his action. But--

The force chosen to operate independently consisted of four and a half

companies of the Gloucester regiment, six companies of the Royal Irish

Fusiliers, and No. 10 Mountain Battery of six seven-pounder screw-guns.

They were both old soldier regiments from India, and the Fusiliers had

shown only ten days before at Talana Hill the stuff of which they were

made. Colonel Carleton, of the Fusiliers, to whose exertions much of the

success of the retreat from Dundee was due, commanded the column, with

Major Adye as staff officer. On the night of Sunday, October 29th,

they tramped out of Ladysmith, a thousand men, none better in the army.

Little they thought, as they exchanged a jest or two with the outlying

pickets, that they were seeing the last of their own armed countrymen

for many a weary month.

The road was irregular and the night was moonless. On either side the

black loom of the hills bulked vaguely through the darkness. The column

tramped stolidly along, the Fusiliers in front, the guns and Gloucesters

behind. Several times a short halt was called to make sure of the

bearings. At last, in the black cold hours which come between midnight

and morning, the column swung to the left out of the road. In front

of them, hardly visible, stretched a long black kopje. It was the very

Nicholson's Nek which they had come to occupy. Carleton and Adye must

have heaved a sigh of relief as they realised that they had actually

struck it. The force was but two hundred yards from the position, and

all had gone without a hitch. And yet in those two hundred yards there

came an incident which decided the fate both of their enterprise and of

themselves.

Out of the darkness there blundered and rattled five horsemen, their

horses galloping, the loose stones flying around them. In the dim light

they were gone as soon as seen. Whence coming, whither going, no one

knows, nor is it certain whether it was design or ignorance or panic

which sent them riding so wildly through the darkness. Somebody fired.

A sergeant of the Fusiliers took the bullet through his hand. Some

one else shouted to fix bayonets. The mules which carried the spare

ammunition kicked and reared. There was no question of treachery, for

they were led by our own men, but to hold two frightened mules, one with

either hand, is a feat for a Hercules. They lashed and tossed and bucked

themselves loose, and an instant afterwards were flying helter skelter

through the column. Nearly all the mules caught the panic. In vain the

men held on to their heads. In the mad rush they were galloped over and

knocked down by the torrent of frightened creatures. In the gloom of

that early hour the men must have thought that they were charged by

cavalry. The column was dashed out of all military order as effectively

as if a regiment of dragoons had ridden over them. When the cyclone had

passed, and the men had with many a muttered curse gathered themselves

into their ranks once more, they realised how grave was the misfortune

which had befallen them. There, where those mad hoofs still rattled

in the distance, were their spare cartridges, their shells, and their

cannon. A mountain gun is not drawn upon wheels, but is carried in

adjustable parts upon mule-back. A wheel had gone south, a trail east, a

chase west. Some of the cartridges were strewn upon the road. Most were

on their way back to Ladysmith. There was nothing for it but to face

this new situation and to determine what should be done.

It has been often and naturally asked, why did not Colonel Carleton make

his way back at once upon the loss of his guns and ammunition, while

it was still dark? One or two considerations are evident. In the first

place, it is natural to a good soldier to endeavour to retrieve a

situation rather than to abandon his enterprise. His prudence, did he

not do so, might become the subject of public commendation, but might

also provoke some private comment. A soldier's training is to take

chances, and to do the best he can with the material at his disposal.

Again, Colonel Carleton and Major Adye knew the general plan of the

battle which would be raging within a very few hours, and they quite

understood that by withdrawing they would expose General White's left

flank to attack from the forces (consisting, as we know now, of the

Orange Freestaters and of the Johannesburg Police) who were coming from

the north and west. He hoped to be relieved by eleven, and he believed

that, come what might, he could hold out until then. These are the

most obvious of the considerations which induced Colonel Carleton to

determine to carry out so far as he could the programme which had been

laid down for him and his command. He marched up the hill and occupied

the position.

His heart, however, must have sunk when he examined it. It was very

large--too large to be effectively occupied by the force which he

commanded. The length was about a mile and the breadth four hundred

yards. Shaped roughly like the sole of a boot, it was only the heel end

which he could hope to hold. Other hills all round offered cover for

Boer riflemen. Nothing daunted, however, he set his men to work at once

building sangars with the loose stones. With the full dawn and the first

snapping of Boer Mausers from the hills around they had thrown up some

sort of rude defences which they might hope to hold until help should

come.

But how could help come when there was no means by which they could let

White know the plight in which they found themselves? They had brought

a heliograph with them, but it was on the back of one of those accursed

mules. The Boers were thick around them, and they could not send a

messenger. An attempt was made to convert a polished biscuit tin into a

heliograph, but with poor success. A Kaffir was dispatched with promises

of a heavy bribe, but he passed out of history. And there in the clear

cold morning air the balloon hung to the south of them where the first

distant thunder of White's guns was beginning to sound. If only they

could attract the attention of that balloon! Vainly they wagged flags at

it. Serene and unresponsive it brooded over the distant battle.

And now the Boers were thickening round them on every side. Christian

de Wet, a name soon to be a household word, marshaled the Boer attack,

which was soon strengthened by the arrival of Van Dam and his Police. At

five o'clock the fire began, at six it was warm, at seven warmer still.

Two companies of the Gloucesters lined a sangar on the tread of

the sole, to prevent any one getting too near to the heel. A fresh

detachment of Boers, firing from a range of nearly one thousand yards,

took this defence in the rear. Bullets fell among the men, and smacked

up against the stone breastwork. The two companies were withdrawn, and

lost heavily in the open as they crossed it. An incessant rattle and

crackle of rifle fire came from all round, drawing very slowly but

steadily nearer. Now and then the whisk of a dark figure from one

boulder to another was all that ever was seen of the attackers. The

British fired slowly and steadily, for every cartridge counted, but the

cover of the Boers was so cleverly taken that it was seldom that there

was much to aim at. 'All you could ever see,' says one who was present,

'were the barrels of the rifles.' There was time for thought in

that long morning, and to some of the men it may have occurred what

preparation for such fighting had they ever had in the mechanical

exercises of the parade ground, or the shooting of an annual bagful of

cartridges at exposed targets at a measured range. It is the warfare of

Nicholson's Nek, not that of Laffan's Plain, which has to be learned in

the future.

During those weary hours lying on the bullet-swept hill and listening

to the eternal hissing in the air and clicking on the rocks, the British

soldiers could see the fight which raged to the south of them. It was

not a cheering sight, and Carleton and Adye with their gallant comrades

must have felt their hearts grow heavier as they watched. The Boers'

shells bursting among the British batteries, the British shells bursting

short of their opponents. The Long Toms laid at an angle of forty-five

plumped their huge shells into the British guns at a range where the

latter would not dream of unlimbering. And then gradually the rifle fire

died away also, crackling more faintly as White withdrew to Ladysmith.

At eleven o'clock Carleton's column recognised that it had been left to

its fate. As early as nine a heliogram had been sent to them to retire

as the opportunity served, but to leave the hill was certainly to court

annihilation.

The men had then been under fire for six hours, and with their losses

mounting and their cartridges dwindling, all hope had faded from their

minds. But still for another hour, and yet another, and yet another,

they held doggedly on. Nine and a half hours they clung to that pile

of stones. The Fusiliers were still exhausted from the effect of their

march from Glencoe and their incessant work since. Many fell asleep

behind the boulders. Some sat doggedly with their useless rifles

and empty pouches beside them. Some picked cartridges off their dead

comrades. What were they fighting for? It was hopeless, and they knew

it. But always there was the honour of the flag, the glory of the

regiment, the hatred of a proud and brave man to acknowledge defeat. And

yet it had to come. There were some in that force who were ready for

the reputation of the British army, and for the sake of an example

of military virtue, to die stolidly where they stood, or to lead the

'Faugh-a-ballagh' boys, or the gallant 28th, in one last death-charge

with empty rifles against the unseen enemy. They may have been right,

these stalwarts. Leonidas and his three hundred did more for the Spartan

cause by their memory than by their living valour. Man passes like the

brown leaves, but the tradition of a nation lives on like the oak that

sheds them--and the passing of the leaves is nothing if the bole be the

sounder for it. But a counsel of perfection is easy at a study table.

There are other things to be said--the responsibility of officers for

the lives of their men, the hope that they may yet be of service to

their country. All was weighed, all was thought of, and so at last the

white flag went up. The officer who hoisted it could see no one unhurt

save himself, for all in his sangar were hit, and the others were

so placed that he was under the impression that they had withdrawn

altogether. Whether this hoisting of the flag necessarily compromised

the whole force is a difficult question, but the Boers instantly left

their cover, and the men in the sangars behind, some of whom had not

been so seriously engaged, were ordered by their officers to desist from

firing. In an instant the victorious Boers were among them.

It was not, as I have been told by those who were there, a sight which

one would wish to have seen or care now to dwell upon. Haggard officers

cracked their sword-blades and cursed the day that they had been born.

Privates sobbed with their stained faces buried in their hands. Of all

tests of discipline that ever they had stood, the hardest to many was

to conform to all that the cursed flapping handkerchief meant to them.

'Father, father, we had rather have died,' cried the Fusiliers to

their priest. Gallant hearts, ill paid, ill thanked, how poorly do

the successful of the world compare with their unselfish loyalty and

devotion!

But the sting of contumely or insult was not added to their misfortunes.

There is a fellowship of brave men which rises above the feuds of

nations, and may at last go far, we hope, to heal them. From every rock

there rose a Boer--strange, grotesque figures many of them--walnut-brown

and shaggy-bearded, and swarmed on to the hill. No term of triumph or

reproach came from their lips. 'You will not say now that the young Boer

cannot shoot,' was the harshest word which the least restrained of them

made use of. Between one and two hundred dead and wounded were scattered

over the hill. Those who were within reach of human help received all

that could be given. Captain Rice, of the Fusiliers, was carried wounded

down the hill on the back of one giant, and he has narrated how the man

refused the gold piece which was offered him. Some asked the soldiers

for their embroidered waist-belts as souvenirs of the day. They will

for generations remain as the most precious ornaments of some colonial

farmhouse. Then the victors gathered together and sang psalms, not

jubilant but sad and quavering. The prisoners, in a downcast column,

weary, spent, and unkempt, filed off to the Boer laager at Waschbank,

there to take train for Pretoria. And at Ladysmith a bugler of

Fusiliers, his arm bound, the marks of battle on his dress and person,

burst in upon the camp with the news that two veteran regiments had

covered the flank of White's retreating army, but at the cost of their

own annihilation.

CHAPTER 8. LORD METHUEN'S ADVANCE.

At the end of a fortnight of actual hostilities in Natal the situation

of the Boer army was such as to seriously alarm the public at home,

and to cause an almost universal chorus of ill-natured delight from

the press of all European nations. Whether the reason was hatred of

ourselves, or the sporting instinct which backs the smaller against

the larger, or the influence of the ubiquitous Dr. Leyds and his secret

service fund, it is certain that the continental papers have never

been so unanimous as in their premature rejoicings over what, with

an extraordinary want of proportion, and ignorance of our national

character, they imagined to be a damaging blow to the British Empire.

France, Russia, Austria, and Germany were equally venomous against us,

nor can the visit of the German Emperor, though a courteous and timely

action in itself, entirely atone for the senseless bitterness of the

press of the Fatherland. Great Britain was roused out of her habitual

apathy and disregard for foreign opinion by this chorus of execration,

and braced herself for a greater effort in consequence. She was cheered

by the sympathy of her friends in the United States, and by the good

wishes of the smaller nations of Europe, notably of Italy, Denmark,

Greece, Turkey, and Hungary.

The exact position at the end of this fortnight of hard slogging was

that a quarter of the colony of Natal and a hundred miles of railway

were in the hands of the enemy. Five distinct actions had been fought,

none of them perhaps coming within the fair meaning of a battle. Of

these one had been a distinct British victory, two had been indecisive,

one had been unfortunate, and one had been a positive disaster. We had

lost about twelve hundred prisoners and a battery of small guns.

The Boers had lost two fine guns and three hundred prisoners. Twelve

thousand British troops had been shut up in Ladysmith, and there was no

serious force between the invaders and the sea. Only in those distant

transports, where the grimy stokers shoveled and strove, were there

hopes for the safety of Natal and the honour of the Empire. In Cape

Colony the loyalists waited with bated breath, knowing well that there

was nothing to check a Free State invasion, and that if it came no

bounds could be placed upon how far it might advance, or what effect it

might have upon the Dutch population.

Leaving Ladysmith now apparently within the grasp of the Boers, who had

settled down deliberately to the work of throttling it, the narrative

must pass to the western side of the seat of war, and give a consecutive

account of the events which began with the siege of Kimberley and led to

the ineffectual efforts of Lord Methuen's column to relieve it.

On the declaration of war two important movements had been made by the

Boers upon the west. One was the advance of a considerable body under

the formidable Cronje to attack Mafeking, an enterprise which demands a

chapter of its own. The other was the investment of Kimberley by a force

which consisted principally of Freestaters under the command of Wessels

and Botha. The place was defended by Colonel Kekewich, aided by the

advice and help of Mr. Cecil Rhodes, who had gallantly thrown himself

into the town by one of the last trains which reached it. As the founder

and director of the great De Beers diamond mines he desired to be with

his people in the hour of their need, and it was through his initiative

that the town had been provided with the rifles and cannon with which to

sustain the siege.

The troops which Colonel Kekewich had at his disposal consisted of four

companies of the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment (his own regiment),

with some Royal Engineers, a mountain battery, and two machine guns. In

addition there were the extremely spirited and capable local forces, a

hundred and twenty men of the Cape Police, two thousand Volunteers,

a body of Kimberley Light Horse, and a battery of light seven-pounder

guns. There were also eight Maxims which were mounted upon the huge

mounds of debris which surrounded the mines and formed most efficient

fortresses.

A small reinforcement of police had, under tragic circumstances, reached

the town. Vryburg, the capital of British Bechuanaland, lies 145 miles

to the north of Kimberley. The town has strong Dutch sympathies, and on

the news of the approach of a Boer force with artillery it was evident

that it could not be held. Scott, the commandant of police, made some

attempt to organise a defence, but having no artillery and finding

little sympathy, he was compelled to abandon his charge to the invaders.

The gallant Scott rode south with his troopers, and in his humiliation

and grief at his inability to preserve his post he blew out his brains

upon the journey. Vryburg was immediately occupied by the Boers, and

British Bechuanaland was formally annexed to the South African Republic.

This policy of the instant annexation of all territories invaded was

habitually carried out by the enemy, with the idea that British subjects

who joined them would in this way be shielded from the consequences of

treason. Meanwhile several thousand Freestaters and Transvaalers with

artillery had assembled round Kimberley, and all news of the town was

cut off. Its relief was one of the first tasks which presented itself

to the inpouring army corps. The obvious base of such a movement must be

Orange River, and there and at De Aar the stores for the advance began

to be accumulated. At the latter place especially, which is the

chief railway junction in the north of the colony, enormous masses of

provisions, ammunition, and fodder were collected, with thousands of

mules which the long arm of the British Government had rounded up from

many parts of the world. The guard over these costly and essential

supplies seems to have been a dangerously weak one. Between Orange River

and De Aar, which are sixty miles apart, there were the 9th Lancers, the

Royal Munsters, the 2nd King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, and the

1st Northumberland Fusiliers, under three thousand men in all, with two

million pounds' worth of stores and the Free State frontier within a

ride of them. Verily if we have something to deplore in this war we have

much also to be thankful for.

Up to the end of October the situation was so dangerous that it is

really inexplicable that no advantage was taken of it by the enemy. Our

main force was concentrated to defend the Orange River railway bridge,

which was so essential for our advance upon Kimberley. This left only a

single regiment without guns for the defence of De Aar and the valuable

stores. A fairer mark for a dashing leader and a raid of mounted

riflemen was never seen. The chance passed, however, as so many others

of the Boers' had done. Early in November Colesberg and Naauwpoort were

abandoned by our small detachments, who concentrated at De Aar. The

Berkshires joined the Yorkshire Light Infantry, and nine field guns

arrived also. General Wood worked hard at the fortifying of the

surrounding kopjes, until within a week the place had been made

tolerably secure.

The first collision between the opposing forces at this part of the seat

of war was upon November 10th, when Colonel Gough of the 9th Lancers

made a reconnaissance from Orange River to the north with two squadrons

of his own regiment, the mounted infantry of the Northumberland

Fusiliers, the Royal Munsters, and the North Lancashires, with a battery

of field artillery. To the east of Belmont, about fifteen miles off,

he came on a detachment of the enemy with a gun. To make out the Boer

position the mounted infantry galloped round one of their flanks, and in

doing so passed close to a kopje which was occupied by sharpshooters.

A deadly fire crackled suddenly out from among the boulders. Of six

men hit four were officers, showing how cool were the marksmen and how

dangerous those dress distinctions which will probably disappear

hence forwards upon the field of battle. Colonel Keith-Falconer of the

Northumberlands, who had earned distinction in the Soudan, was shot

dead. So was Wood of the North Lancashires. Hall and Bevan of the

Northumberlands were wounded. An advance by train of the troops in camp

drove back the Boers and extricated our small force from what might

have proved a serious position, for the enemy in superior numbers were

working round their wings. The troops returned to camp without any good

object having been attained, but that must be the necessary fate of many

a cavalry reconnaissance.

On November 12th Lord Methuen arrived at Orange River and proceeded to

organise the column which was to advance to the relief of Kimberley.

General Methuen had had some previous South African experience when in

1885 he had commanded a large body of irregular horse in Bechuanaland.

His reputation was that of a gallant fearless soldier. He was not yet

fifty-five years of age.

The force which gradually assembled at Orange River was formidable

rather from its quality than from its numbers. It included a brigade

of Guards (the 1st Scots Guards, 3rd Grenadiers, and 1st and 2nd

Coldstreams), the 2nd Yorkshire Light Infantry, the 2nd Northamptons,

the 1st Northumberlands, and a wing of the North Lancashires whose

comrades were holding out at Kimberley, with a naval brigade of

seamen gunners and marines. For cavalry he had the 9th Lancers, with

detachments of mounted infantry, and for artillery the 75th and 18th

Batteries R.F.A.

Extreme mobility was aimed at in the column, and neither tents nor

comforts of any sort were permitted to officers or men--no light matter

in a climate where a tropical day is followed by an arctic night. At

daybreak on November 22nd the force, numbering about eight thousand men,

set off upon its eventful journey. The distance to Kimberley was not

more than sixty miles, and it is probable that there was not one man in

the force who imagined how long that march would take or how grim the

experiences would be which awaited them on the way. At the dawn of

Wednesday, November 22nd, Lord Methuen moved forward until he came into

touch with the Boer position at Belmont. It was surveyed that evening

by Colonel Willoughby Verner, and every disposition made to attack it in

the morning.

The force of the Boers was much inferior to our own, some two or three

thousand in all, but the natural strength of their position made it a

difficult one to carry, while it could not be left behind us as a menace

to our line of communications. A double row of steep hills lay across

the road to Kimberley, and it was along the ridges, snuggling closely

among the boulders, that our enemy was waiting for us. In their weeks

of preparation they had constructed elaborate shelter pits in which they

could lie in comparative safety while they swept all the level ground

around with their rifle fire. Mr. Ralph, the American correspondent,

whose letters were among the most vivid of the war, has described these

lairs, littered with straw and the debris of food, isolated from each

other, and each containing its grim and formidable occupant. 'The eyries

of birds of prey' is the phrase with which he brings them home to us.

In these, with nothing visible but their peering eyes and the barrels of

their rifles, the Boer marksmen crouched, and munched their biltong and

their mealies as the day broke upon the morning of the 23rd. With the

light their enemy was upon them.

It was a soldiers' battle in the good old primeval British style, an

Alma on a small scale and against deadlier weapons. The troops advanced

in grim silence against the savage-looking, rock-sprinkled, crag-topped

position which confronted them. They were in a fierce humour, for they

had not breakfasted, and military history from Agincourt to Talavera

shows that want of food wakens a dangerous spirit among British troops.

A Northumberland Fusilier exploded into words which expressed the

gruffness of his comrades. As a too energetic staff officer pranced

before their line he roared in his rough North-country tongue, 'Domn

thee! Get thee to hell, and let's fire!' In the golden light of the

rising sun the men set their teeth and dashed up the hills, scrambling,

falling, cheering, swearing, gallant men, gallantly led, their one

thought to close with that grim bristle of rifle-barrels which fringed

the rocks above them.

Lord Methuen's intention had been an attack from front and from flank,

but whether from the Grenadiers losing their bearings, or from the

mobility of the Boers, which made a flank attack an impossibility, it

is certain that all became frontal. The battle resolved itself into a

number of isolated actions in which the various kopjes were rushed by

different British regiments, always with success and always with loss.

The honours of the fight, as tested by the grim record of the casualty

returns, lay with the Grenadiers, the Coldstreams, the Northumberlands,

and the Scots Guards. The brave Guardsmen lay thickly on the slopes, but

their comrades crowned the heights. The Boers held on desperately and

fired their rifles in the very faces of the stormers. One young officer

had his jaw blown to pieces by a rifle which almost touched him.

Another, Blundell of the Guards, was shot dead by a wounded desperado

to whom he was offering his water-bottle. At one point a white flag was

waved by the defenders, on which the British left cover, only to be met

by a volley. It was there that Mr. E. F. Knight, of the 'Morning Post,'

became the victim of a double abuse of the usages of war, since his

wound, from which he lost his right arm, was from an explosive bullet.

The man who raised the flag was captured, and it says much for the

humanity of British soldiers that he was not bayoneted upon the spot.

Yet it is not fair to blame a whole people for the misdeeds of a few,

and it is probable that the men who descended to such devices, or who

deliberately fired upon our ambulances, were as much execrated by their

own comrades as by ourselves.

The victory was an expensive one, for fifty killed and two hundred

wounded lay upon the hillside, and, like so many of our skirmishes with

the Boers, it led to small material results. Their losses appear to have

been much about the same as ours, and we captured some fifty prisoners,

whom the soldiers regarded with the utmost interest. They were a sullen

slouching crowd rudely clad, and they represented probably the poorest

of the burghers, who now, as in the middle ages, suffer most in battle,

since a long purse means a good horse. Most of the enemy galloped very

comfortably away after the action, leaving a fringe of sharpshooters

among the kopjes to hold back our pursuing cavalry. The want of horsemen

and the want of horse artillery are the two reasons which Lord Methuen

gives why the defeat was not converted into a rout. As it was, the

feelings of the retreating Boers were exemplified by one of their

number, who turned in his saddle in order to place his outstretched

fingers to his nose in derision of the victors. He exposed himself to

the fire of half a battalion while doing so, but he probably was

aware that with our present musketry instruction the fire of a British

half-battalion against an individual is not a very serious matter.

The remainder of the 23rd was spent at Belmont Camp, and next morning

an advance was made to Enslin, some ten miles further on. Here lay the

plain of Enslin, bounded by a formidable line of kopjes as dangerous as

those of Belmont. Lancers and Rimington's Scouts, the feeble but very

capable cavalry of the Army, came in with the report that the hills were

strongly held. Some more hard slogging was in front of the relievers of

Kimberley.

The advance had been on the line of the Cape Town to Kimberley Railway,

and the damage done to it by the Boers had been repaired to the extent

of permitting an armoured train with a naval gun to accompany the

troops. It was six o' clock upon the morning of Saturday the 25th that

this gun came into action against the kopjes, closely followed by the

guns of the field artillery. One of the lessons of the war has been to

disillusion us as to the effect of shrapnel fire. Positions which had

been made theoretically untenable have again and again been found to

be most inconveniently tenanted. Among the troops actually engaged the

confidence in the effect of shrapnel fire has steadily declined with

their experience. Some other method of artillery fire than the curving

bullet from an exploding shrapnel shell must be devised for dealing with

men who lie close among boulders and behind cover.

These remarks upon shrapnel might be included in the account of half the

battles of the war, but they are particularly apposite to the action at

Enslin. Here a single large kopje formed the key to the position, and

a considerable time was expended upon preparing it for the British

assault, by directing upon it a fire which swept the face of it and

searched, as was hoped, every corner in which a rifleman might lurk. One

of the two batteries engaged fired no fewer than five hundred rounds.

Then the infantry advance was ordered, the Guards being held in

reserve on account of their exertions at Belmont. The Northumberlands,

Northamptons, North Lancashires, and Yorkshires worked round upon the

right, and, aided by the artillery fire, cleared the trenches in their

front. The honours of the assault, however, must be awarded to the

sailors and marines of the Naval Brigade, who underwent such an ordeal

as men have seldom faced and yet come out as victors. To them fell the

task of carrying that formidable hill which had been so scourged by our

artillery. With a grand rush they swept up the slope, but were met by

a horrible fire. Every rock spurted flame, and the front ranks withered

away before the storm of the Mauser. An eye-witness has recorded that

the brigade was hardly visible amid the sand knocked up by the bullets.

For an instant they fell back into cover, and then, having taken their

breath, up they went again, with a deep-chested sailor roar. There were

but four hundred in all, two hundred seamen and two hundred marines, and

the losses in that rapid rush were terrible. Yet they swarmed up, their

gallant officers, some of them little boy-middies, cheering them on.

Ethelston, the commander of the 'Powerful,' was struck down. Plumbe

and Senior of the Marines were killed. Captain Prothero of the 'Doris'

dropped while still yelling to his seamen to 'take that kopje and be

hanged to it!' Little Huddart, the middy, died a death which is worth

many inglorious years. Jones of the Marines fell wounded, but rose again

and rushed on with his men. It was on these gallant marines, the men who

are ready to fight anywhere and anyhow, moist or dry, that the heaviest

loss fell. When at last they made good their foothold upon the crest

of that murderous hill they had left behind them three officers and

eighty-eight men out of a total of 206--a loss within a few minutes of

nearly 50 per cent. The bluejackets, helped by the curve of the hill,

got off with a toll of eighteen of their number. Half the total British

losses of the action fell upon this little body of men, who upheld most

gloriously the honour and reputation of the service from which they were

drawn. With such men under the white ensign we leave our island homes in

safety behind us.

The battle of Enslin had cost us some two hundred of killed and wounded,

and beyond the mere fact that we had cleared our way by another stage

towards Kimberley it is difficult to say what advantage we had from it.

We won the kopjes, but we lost our men. The Boer killed and wounded were

probably less than half of our own, and the exhaustion and weakness of

our cavalry forbade us to pursue and prevented us from capturing their

guns. In three days the men had fought two exhausting actions in a

waterless country and under a tropical sun. Their exertions had been

great and yet were barren of result. Why this should be so was naturally

the subject of keen discussion both in the camp and among the public

at home. It always came back to Lord Methuen's own complaint about the

absence of cavalry and of horse artillery. Many very unjust charges have

been hurled against our War Office--a department which in some matters

has done extraordinarily and unexpectedly well--but in this question of

the delay in the despatch of our cavalry and artillery, knowing as we

did the extreme mobility of our enemy, there is certainly ground for an

inquiry.

The Boers who had fought these two actions had been drawn mainly from

the Jacobsdal and Fauresmith commandoes, with some of the burghers from

Boshof. The famous Cronje, however, had been descending from Mafeking

with his old guard of Transvaalers, and keen disappointment was

expressed by the prisoners at Belmont and at Enslin that he had not

arrived in time to take command of them. There were evidences, however,

at this latter action, that reinforcements for the enemy were coming up

and that the labours of the Kimberley relief force were by no means at

an end. In the height of the engagement the Lancer patrols thrown out

upon our right flank reported the approach of a considerable body of

Boer horsemen, who took up a position upon a hill on our right rear.

Their position there was distinctly menacing, and Colonel Willoughby

Verner was despatched by Lord Methuen to order up the brigade of Guards.

The gallant officer had the misfortune in his return to injure himself

seriously through a blunder of his horse. His mission, however,

succeeded in its effect, for the Guards moving across the plain

intervened in such a way that the reinforcements, without an open

attack, which would have been opposed to all Boer traditions, could not

help the defenders, and were compelled to witness their defeat. This

body of horsemen returned north next day and were no doubt among those

whom we encountered at the following action of the Modder River.

The march from Orange River had begun on the Wednesday. On Thursday was

fought the action of Belmont, on Saturday that of Enslin. There was no

protection against the sun by day nor against the cold at night. Water

was not plentiful, and the quality of it was occasionally vile. The

troops were in need of a rest, so on Saturday night and Sunday they

remained at Enslin. On the Monday morning (November 27th) the weary

march to Kimberley was resumed.

On Monday, November 27th, at early dawn, the little British army, a

dust-coloured column upon the dusty veld, moved forwards again towards

their objective. That night they halted at the pools of Klipfontein,

having for once made a whole day's march without coming in touch with

the enemy. Hopes rose that possibly the two successive defeats had taken

the heart out of them and that there would be no further resistance to

the advance. Some, however, who were aware of the presence of Cronje,

and of his formidable character, took a juster view of the situation.

And this perhaps is where a few words might be said about the celebrated

leader who played upon the western side of the seat of war the same part

which Joubert did upon the east.

Commandant Cronje was at the time of the war sixty-five years of age,

a hard, swarthy man, quiet of manner, fierce of soul, with a reputation

among a nation of resolute men for unsurpassed resolution. His dark face

was bearded and virile, but sedate and gentle in expression. He spoke

little, but what he said was to the point, and he had the gift of those

fire-words which brace and strengthen weaker men. In hunting expeditions

and in native wars he had first won the admiration of his countrymen by

his courage and his fertility of resource. In the war of 1880 he had led

the Boers who besieged Potchefstroom, and he had pushed the attack with

a relentless vigour which was not hampered by the chivalrous usages of

war. Eventually he compelled the surrender of the place by concealing

from the garrison that a general armistice had been signed, an act which

was afterwards disowned by his own government. In the succeeding years

he lived as an autocrat and a patriarch amid his farms and his

herds, respected by many and feared by all. For a time he was Native

Commissioner and left a reputation for hard dealing behind him. Called

into the field again by the Jameson raid, he grimly herded his enemies

into an impossible position and desired, as it is stated, that the

hardest measure should be dealt out to the captives. This was the man,

capable, crafty, iron-hard, magnetic, who lay with a reinforced and

formidable army across the path of Lord Methuen's tired soldiers. It was

a fair match. On the one side the hardy men, the trained shots, a

good artillery, and the defensive; on the other the historical British

infantry, duty, discipline, and a fiery courage. With a high heart the

dust-coloured column moved on over the dusty veld.

So entirely had hills and Boer fighting become associated in the minds

of our leaders, that when it was known that Modder River wound over a

plain, the idea of a resistance there appears to have passed away from

their minds. So great was the confidence or so lax the scouting that a

force equaling their own in numbers had assembled with many guns within

seven miles of them, and yet the advance appears to have been conducted

without any expectation of impending battle. The supposition, obvious

even to a civilian, that a river would be a likely place to meet with an

obstinate resistance, seems to have been ignored. It is perhaps not fair

to blame the General for a fact which must have vexed his spirit more

than ours--one's sympathies go out to the gentle and brave man, who

was heard calling out in his sleep that he 'should have had those two

guns'--but it is repugnant to common sense to suppose that no one,

neither the cavalry nor the Intelligence Department, is at fault for so

extraordinary a state of ignorance. [Footnote: Later information makes

it certain that the cavalry did report the presence of the enemy to Lord

Methuen.] On the morning of Tuesday, November 28th, the British troops

were told that they would march at once, and have their breakfast

when they reached the Modder River--a grim joke to those who lived to

appreciate it.

The army had been reinforced the night before by the welcome addition of

the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, which made up for the losses of

the week. It was a cloudless morning, and a dazzling sun rose in a deep

blue sky. The men, though hungry, marched cheerily, the reek of their

tobacco-pipes floating up from their ranks. It cheered them to see that

the murderous kopjes had, for the time, been left behind, and that the

great plain inclined slightly downwards to where a line of green showed

the course of the river. On the further bank were a few scattered

buildings, with one considerable hotel, used as a week-end resort by the

businessmen of Kimberley. It lay now calm and innocent, with its open

windows looking out upon a smiling garden; but death lurked at the

windows and death in the garden, and the little dark man who stood by

the door, peering through his glass at the approaching column, was the

minister of death, the dangerous Cronje. In consultation with him

was one who was to prove even more formidable, and for a longer time.

Semitic in face, high-nosed, bushy-bearded, and eagle-eyed, with skin

burned brown by a life of the veld--it was De la Rey, one of the trio

of fighting chiefs whose name will always be associated with the gallant

resistance of the Boers. He was there as adviser, but Cronje was in

supreme command.

His dispositions had been both masterly and original. Contrary to the

usual military practice in the defence of rivers, he had concealed

his men upon both banks, placing, as it is stated, those in whose

staunchness he had least confidence upon the British side of the river,

so that they could only retreat under the rifles of their inexorable

companions. The trenches had been so dug with such a regard for the

slopes of the ground that in some places a triple line of fire was

secured. His artillery, consisting of several heavy pieces and a

number of machine guns (including one of the diabolical 'pompoms'), was

cleverly placed upon the further side of the stream, and was not only

provided with shelter pits but had rows of reserve pits, so that the

guns could be readily shifted when their range was found. Rows of

trenches, a broadish river, fresh rows of trenches, fortified houses,

and a good artillery well worked and well placed, it was a serious

task which lay in front of the gallant little army. The whole position

covered between four and five miles.

An obvious question must here occur to the mind of every non-military

reader--Why should this position be attacked at all? Why should we not

cross higher up where there were no such formidable obstacles?' The

answer, so far as one can answer it, must be that so little was known

of the dispositions of our enemy that we were hopelessly involved in

the action before we knew of it, and that then it was more dangerous to

extricate the army than to push the attack. A retirement over that open

plain at a range of under a thousand yards would have been a dangerous

and disastrous movement. Having once got there, it was wisest and best

to see it through.

The dark Cronje still waited reflective in the hotel garden. Across the

veld streamed the lines of infantry, the poor fellows eager, after seven

miles of that upland air, for the breakfast which had been promised

them. It was a quarter to seven when our patrols of Lancers were fired

upon. There were Boers, then, between them and their meal! The artillery

was ordered up, the Guards were sent forward on the right, the 9th

Brigade under Pole-Carew on the left, including the newly arrived Argyll

and Sutherland Highlanders. They swept onwards into the fatal fire

zone--and then, and only then, there blazed out upon them four miles

of rifles, cannon, and machine guns, and they realised, from general to

private, that they had walked unwittingly into the fiercest battle yet

fought in the war.

Before the position was understood the Guards were within seven hundred

yards of the Boer trenches, and the other troops about nine hundred, on

the side of a very gentle slope which made it most difficult to find any

cover. In front of them lay a serene landscape, the river, the houses,

the hotel, no movement of men, no smoke--everything peaceful and

deserted save for an occasional quick flash and sparkle of flame. But

the noise was horrible and appalling. Men whose nerves had been steeled

to the crash of the big guns, or the monotonous roar of Maxims and

the rattle of Mauser fire, found a new terror in the malignant

'ploop-plooping' of the automatic quick-firer. The Maxim of the Scots

Guards was caught in the hell-blizzard from this thing--each shell no

bigger than a large walnut, but flying in strings of a score--and men

and gun were destroyed in an instant. As to the rifle bullets the air

was humming and throbbing with them, and the sand was mottled like a

pond in a shower. To advance was impossible, to retire was hateful. The

men fell upon their faces and huddled close to the earth, too happy if

some friendly ant-heap gave them a precarious shelter. And always, tier

above tier, the lines of rifle fire rippled and palpitated in front of

them. The infantry fired also, and fired, and fired--but what was there

to fire at? An occasional eye and hand over the edge of a trench

or behind a stone is no mark at seven hundred yards. It would be

instructive to know how many British bullets found a billet that day.

The cavalry was useless, the infantry was powerless--there only remained

the guns. When any arm is helpless and harried it always casts an

imploring eye upon the guns, and rarely indeed is it that the gallant

guns do not respond. Now the 75th and 18th Field Batteries came rattling

and dashing to the front, and unlimbered at one thousand yards. The

naval guns were working at four thousand, but the two combined were

insufficient to master the fire of the pieces of large calibre which

were opposed to them. Lord Methuen must have prayed for guns as

Wellington did for night, and never was a prayer answered more

dramatically. A strange battery came lurching up from the British rear,

unheralded, unknown, the weary gasping horses panting at the traces,

the men, caked with sweat and dirt, urging them on into a last spasmodic

trot. The bodies of horses which had died of pure fatigue marked their

course, the sergeants' horses tugged in the gun-teams, and the sergeants

staggered along by the limbers. It was the 62nd Field Battery, which had

marched thirty-two miles in eight hours, and now, hearing the crash

of battle in front of them, had with one last desperate effort thrown

itself into the firing line. Great credit is due to Major Granet and his

men. Not even those gallant German batteries who saved the infantry at

Spicheren could boast of a finer feat.

Now it was guns against guns, and let the best gunners win! We had

eighteen field-guns and the naval pieces against the concealed cannon of

the enemy. Back and forward flew the shells, howling past each other

in mid-air. The weary men of the 62nd Battery forgot their labours

and fatigues as they stooped and strained at their clay-coloured

15-pounders. Half of them were within rifle range, and the limber horses

were the centre of a hot fire, as they were destined to be at a shorter

range and with more disastrous effect at the Tugela. That the same

tactics should have been adopted at two widely sundered points shows

with what care the details of the war had been pre-arranged by the Boer

leaders. 'Before I got my horses out,' says an officer, 'they shot one

of my drivers and two horses and brought down my own horse. When we got

the gun round one of the gunners was shot through the brain and fell at

my feet. Another was shot while bringing up shell. Then we got a look

in.' The roar of the cannon was deafening, but gradually the British

were gaining the upper hand. Here and there the little knolls upon the

further side which had erupted into constant flame lay cold and silent.

One of the heavier guns was put out of action, and the other had been

withdrawn for five hundred yards. But the infantry fire still crackled

and rippled along the trenches, and the guns could come no nearer

with living men and horses. It was long past midday, and that unhappy

breakfast seemed further off than ever.

As the afternoon wore on, a curious condition of things was established.

The guns could not advance, and, indeed, it was found necessary to

withdraw them from a 1200 to a 2800-yard range, so heavy were the

losses. At the time of the change the 75th Battery had lost three

officers out of five, nineteen men, and twenty-two horses. The infantry

could not advance and would not retire. The Guards on the right were

prevented from opening out on the flank and getting round the enemy's

line, by the presence of the Riet River, which joins the Modder almost

at a right angle. All day they lay under a blistering sun, the sleet

of bullets whizzing over their heads. 'It came in solid streaks like

telegraph wires,' said a graphic correspondent. The men gossiped,

smoked, and many of them slept. They lay on the barrels of their rifles

to keep them cool enough for use. Now and again there came the dull thud

of a bullet which had found its mark, and a man gasped, or drummed with

his feet; but the casualties at this point were not numerous, for there

was some little cover, and the piping bullets passed for the most part

overhead.

But in the meantime there had been a development upon the left which was

to turn the action into a British victory. At this side there was ample

room to extend, and the 9th Brigade spread out, feeling its way down the

enemy's line, until it came to a point where the fire was less murderous

and the approach to the river more in favour of the attack. Here

the Yorkshires, a party of whom under Lieutenant Fox had stormed a

farmhouse, obtained the command of a drift, over which a mixed force of

Highlanders and Fusiliers forced their way, led by their Brigadier in

person. This body of infantry, which does not appear to have exceeded

five hundred in number, were assailed both by the Boer riflemen and by

the guns of both parties, our own gunners being unaware that the Modder

had been successfully crossed. A small hamlet called Rosmead formed,

however, a point d'appui, and to this the infantry clung tenaciously,

while reinforcements dribbled across to them from the farther side.

'Now, boys, who's for otter hunting?' cried Major Coleridge, of the

North Lancashires, as he sprang into the water. How gladly on that

baking, scorching day did the men jump into the river and splash over,

to climb the opposite bank with their wet khaki clinging to their

figures! Some blundered into holes and were rescued by grasping the

unwound putties of their comrades. And so between three and four o'clock

a strong party of the British had established their position upon the

right flank of the Boers, and were holding on like grim death with an

intelligent appreciation that the fortunes of the day depended upon

their retaining their grip.

'Hollo, here is a river!' cried Codrington when he led his forlorn hope

to the right and found that the Riet had to be crossed. 'I was given to

understand that the Modder was fordable everywhere,' says Lord Methuen

in his official despatch. One cannot read the account of the operations

without being struck by the casual, sketchy knowledge which cost us so

dearly. The soldiers slogged their way through, as they have slogged it

before; but the task might have been made much lighter for them had we

but clearly known what it was that we were trying to do. On the other

hand, it is but fair to Lord Methuen to say that his own personal

gallantry and unflinching resolution set the most stimulating example to

his troops. No General could have done more to put heart into his men.

And now, as the long weary scorching hungry day came to an end, the

Boers began at last to flinch from their trenches. The shrapnel was

finding them out and this force upon their flank filled them with vague

alarm and with fears for their precious guns. And so as night fell

they stole across the river, the cannon were withdrawn, the trenches

evacuated, and next morning, when the weary British and their anxious

General turned themselves to their grim task once more, they found a

deserted village, a line of empty houses, and a litter of empty Mauser

cartridge-cases to show where their tenacious enemy had stood.

Lord Methuen, in congratulating the troops upon their achievement, spoke

of 'the hardest-won victory in our annals of war,' and some such phrase

was used in his official despatch. It is hypercritical, no doubt, to

look too closely at a term used by a wounded man with the flush of

battle still upon him, but still a student of military history must

smile at such a comparison between this action and such others as

Albuera or Inkerman, where the numbers of British engaged were not

dissimilar. A fight in which five hundred men are killed and wounded

cannot be classed in the same category as those stern and desperate

encounters where more of the victors were carried than walked from the

field of battle. And yet there were some special features which will

differentiate the fight at Modder River from any of the hundred actions

which adorn the standards of our regiments. It was the third battle

which the troops had fought within the week, they were under fire for

ten or twelve hours, were waterless under a tropical sun, and weak from

want of food. For the first time they were called upon to face modern

rifle fire and modern machine guns in the open. The result tends to

prove that those who hold that it will from now onwards be impossible

ever to make such frontal attacks as those which the English made at

the Alma or the French at Waterloo, are justified in their belief. It

is beyond human hardihood to face the pitiless beat of bullet and shell

which comes from modern quick-firing weapons. Had our flank not made a

lodgment across the river, it is impossible that we could have carried

the position. Once more, too, it was demonstrated how powerless the best

artillery is to disperse resolute and well-placed riflemen. Of the minor

points of interest there will always remain the record of the forced

march of the 62nd Battery, and artillerymen will note the use of

gun-pits by the Boers, which ensured that the range of their positions

should never be permanently obtained.

The honours of the day upon the side of the British rested with the

Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the Yorkshire Light Infantry, the 2nd

Coldstreams, and the artillery. Out of a total casualty list of about

450, no fewer than 112 came from the gallant Argylls and 69 from the

Coldstreams. The loss of the Boers is exceedingly difficult to gauge, as

they throughout the war took the utmost pains to conceal it. The number

of desperate and long-drawn actions which have ended, according to the

official Pretorian account, in a loss of one wounded burgher may in some

way be better policy, but does not imply a higher standard of public

virtue, than those long lists which have saddened our hearts in the

halls of the War Office. What is certain is that the loss at Modder

River could not have been far inferior to our own, and that it arose

almost entirely from artillery fire, since at no time of the action

were any large number of their riflemen visible. So it ended, this long

pelting match, Cronje sullenly withdrawing under the cover of darkness

with his resolute heart filled with fierce determination for the future,

while the British soldiers threw themselves down on the ground which

they occupied and slept the sleep of exhaustion.

CHAPTER 9. BATTLE OF MAGERSFONTEIN.

Lord Methuen's force had now fought three actions in the space of a

single week, losing in killed and wounded about a thousand men, or

rather more than one-tenth of its total numbers. Had there been evidence

that the enemy were seriously demoralised, the General would no doubt

have pushed on at once to Kimberley, which was some twenty miles

distant. The information which reached him was, however, that the Boers

had fallen back upon the very strong position of Spytfontein, that they

were full of fight, and that they had been strongly reinforced by a

commando from Mafeking. Under these circumstances Lord Methuen had

no choice but to give his men a well-earned rest, and to await

reinforcements. There was no use in reaching Kimberley unless he had

completely defeated the investing force. With the history of the first

relief of Lucknow in his memory he was on his guard against a repetition

of such an experience.

It was the more necessary that Methuen should strengthen his position,

since with every mile which he advanced the more exposed did his line

of communications become to a raid from Fauresmith and the southern

districts of the Orange Free State. Any serious danger to the railway

behind them would leave the British Army in a very critical position,

and precautions were taken for the protection of the more vulnerable

portions of the line. It was well that this was so, for on the 8th of

December Commandant Prinsloo, of the Orange Free State, with a thousand

horsemen and two light seven-pounder guns, appeared suddenly at Enslin

and vigorously attacked the two companies of the Northampton Regiment

who held the station. At the same time they destroyed a couple of

culverts and tore up three hundred yards of the permanent way. For some

hours the Northamptons under Captain Godley were closely pressed, but a

telegram had been despatched to Modder Camp, and the 12th Lancers with

the ubiquitous 62nd Battery were sent to their assistance. The Boers

retired with their usual mobility, and in ten hours the line was

completely restored.

Reinforcements were now reaching the Modder River force, which made it

more formidable than when it had started. A very essential addition

was that of the 12th Lancers and of G battery of Horse Artillery, which

would increase the mobility of the force and make it possible for the

General to follow up a blow after he had struck it. The magnificent

regiments which formed the Highland Brigade--the 2nd Black Watch, the

1st Gordons, the 2nd Seaforths, and the 1st Highland Light Infantry

had arrived under the gallant and ill-fated Wauchope. Four five-inch

howitzers had also come to strengthen the artillery. At the same time

the Canadians, the Australians, and several line regiments were moved

up on the line from De Aar to Belmont. It appeared to the public at

home that there was the material for an overwhelming advance; but the

ordinary observer, and even perhaps the military critic, had not yet

appreciated how great is the advantage which is given by modern weapons

to the force which acts upon the defensive. With enormous pains Cronje

and De la Rey were entrenching a most formidable position in front of

our advance, with a confidence, which proved to be justified that it

would be on their own ground and under their own conditions that in

this, as in the three preceding actions, we should engage them.

On the morning of Saturday, December 9th, the British General made an

attempt to find out what lay in front of him amid that semicircle of

forbidding hills. To this end he sent out a reconnaissance in the early

morning, which included G Battery Horse Artillery, the 9th Lancers, and

the ponderous 4.7 naval gun, which, preceded by the majestic march

of thirty-two bullocks and attended by eighty seamen gunners, creaked

forwards over the plain. What was there to shoot at in those sunlit

boulder-strewn hills in front? They lay silent and untenanted in the

glare of the African day. In vain the great gun exploded its huge shell

with its fifty pounds of lyddite over the ridges, in vain the smaller

pieces searched every cleft and hollow with their shrapnel. No answer

came from the far-stretching hills. Not a flash or twinkle betrayed the

fierce bands who lurked among the boulders. The force returned to camp

no wiser than when it left.

There was one sight visible every night to all men which might well

nerve the rescuers in their enterprise. Over the northern horizon,

behind those hills of danger, there quivered up in the darkness one

long, flashing, quivering beam, which swung up and down, and up

again like a seraphic sword-blade. It was Kimberley praying for help,

Kimberley solicitous for news. Anxiously, distractedly, the great De

Beers searchlight dipped and rose. And back across the twenty miles

of darkness, over the hills where Cronje lurked, there came that other

southern column of light which answered, and promised, and soothed. 'Be

of good heart, Kimberley. We are here! The Empire is behind us. We have

not forgotten you. It may be days, or it may be weeks, but rest assured

that we are coming.'

About three in the afternoon of Sunday, December 10th, the force

which was intended to clear a path for the army through the lines of

Magersfontein moved out upon what proved to be its desperate enterprise.

The 3rd or Highland Brigade included the Black Watch, the Seaforths, the

Argyll and Sutherlands, and the Highland Light Infantry. The Gordons had

only arrived in camp that day, and did not advance until next morning.

Besides the infantry, the 9th Lancers, the mounted infantry, and all the

artillery moved to the front. It was raining hard, and the men with one

blanket between two soldiers bivouacked upon the cold damp ground, about

three miles from the enemy's position. At one o'clock, without food, and

drenched, they moved forwards through the drizzle and the darkness to

attack those terrible lines. Major Benson, R.A., with two of Rimington's

scouts, led them on their difficult way.

Clouds drifted low in the heavens, and the falling rain made the

darkness more impenetrable. The Highland Brigade was formed into a

column--the Black Watch in front, then the Seaforths, and the other

two behind. To prevent the men from straggling in the night the four

regiments were packed into a mass of quarter column as densely as was

possible, and the left guides held a rope in order to preserve the

formation. With many a trip and stumble the ill-fated detachment

wandered on, uncertain where they were going and what it was that

they were meant to do. Not only among the rank and file, but among

the principal officers also, there was the same absolute ignorance.

Brigadier Wauchope knew, no doubt, but his voice was soon to be stilled

in death. The others were aware, of course, that they were advancing

either to turn the enemy's trenches or to attack them, but they may well

have argued from their own formation that they could not be near the

riflemen yet. Why they should be still advancing in that dense clump we

do not now know, nor can we surmise what thoughts were passing through

the mind of the gallant and experienced chieftain who walked beside

them. There are some who claim on the night before to have seen upon his

strangely ascetic face that shadow of doom which is summed up in the one

word 'fey.' The hand of coming death may already have lain cold upon his

soul. Out there, close beside him, stretched the long trench, fringed

with its line of fierce, staring, eager faces, and its bristle of

gun-barrels. They knew he was coming. They were ready. They were

waiting. But still, with the dull murmur of many feet, the dense column,

nearly four thousand strong, wandered onwards through the rain and the

darkness, death and mutilation crouching upon their path.

It matters not what gave the signal, whether it was the flashing of a

lantern by a Boer scout, or the tripping of a soldier over wire, or the

firing of a gun in the ranks. It may have been any, or it may have been

none, of these things. As a matter of fact I have been assured by a Boer

who was present that it was the sound of the tins attached to the alarm

wires which disturbed them. However this may be, in an instant there

crashed out of the darkness into their faces and ears a roar of

point-blank fire, and the night was slashed across with the throbbing

flame of the rifles. At the moment before this outflame some doubt as

to their whereabouts seems to have flashed across the mind of their

leaders. The order to extend had just been given, but the men had not

had time to act upon it. The storm of lead burst upon the head and right

flank of the column, which broke to pieces under the murderous volley.

Wauchope was shot, struggled up, and fell once more for ever. Rumour

has placed words of reproach upon his dying lips, but his nature, both

gentle and soldierly, forbids the supposition. 'What a pity!' was the

only utterance which a brother Highlander ascribes to him. Men went

down in swathes, and a howl of rage and agony, heard afar over the veld,

swelled up from the frantic and struggling crowd. By the hundred they

dropped--some dead, some wounded, some knocked down by the rush and sway

of the broken ranks. It was a horrible business. At such a range and in

such a formation a single Mauser bullet may well pass through many men.

A few dashed forwards, and were found dead at the very edges of the

trench. The few survivors of companies A, B, and C of the Black Watch

appear to have never actually retired, but to have clung on to the

immediate front of the Boer trenches, while the remains of the other

five companies tried to turn the Boer flank. Of the former body only six

got away unhurt in the evening after lying all day within two hundred

yards of the enemy. The rest of the brigade broke and, disentangling

themselves with difficulty from the dead and the dying, fled back out of

that accursed place. Some, the most unfortunate of all, became caught in

the darkness in the wire defences, and were found in the morning hung up

'like crows,' as one spectator describes it, and riddled with bullets.

Who shall blame the Highlanders for retiring when they did? Viewed, not

by desperate and surprised men, but in all calmness and sanity, it may

well seem to have been the very best thing which they could do. Dashed

into chaos, separated from their officers, with no one who knew what

was to be done, the first necessity was to gain shelter from this deadly

fire, which had already stretched six hundred of their number upon the

ground. The danger was that men so shaken would be stricken with panic,

scatter in the darkness over the face of the country, and cease to exist

as a military unit. But the Highlanders were true to their character

and their traditions. There was shouting in the darkness, hoarse voices

calling for the Seaforths, for the Argylls, for Company C, for Company

H, and everywhere in the gloom there came the answer of the clansmen.

Within half an hour with the break of day the Highland regiments had

re-formed, and, shattered and weakened, but undaunted, prepared to renew

the contest. Some attempt at an advance was made upon the right, ebbing

and flowing, one little band even reaching the trenches and coming back

with prisoners and reddened bayonets. For the most part the men lay upon

their faces, and fired when they could at the enemy; but the cover which

the latter kept was so excellent that an officer who expended 120 rounds

has left it upon record that he never once had seen anything positive at

which to aim. Lieutenant Lindsay brought the Seaforths' Maxim into the

firing-line, and, though all her crew except two were hit, it continued

to do good service during the day. The Lancers' Maxim was equally

staunch, though it also was left finally with only the lieutenant in

charge and one trooper to work it.

Fortunately the guns were at hand, and, as usual, they were quick to

come to the aid of the distressed. The sun was hardly up before the

howitzers were throwing lyddite at 4000 yards, the three field batteries

(18th, 62nd, 75th) were working with shrapnel at a mile, and the troop

of Horse Artillery was up at the right front trying to enfilade the

trenches. The guns kept down the rifle-fire, and gave the wearied

Highlanders some respite from their troubles. The whole situation had

resolved itself now into another Battle of Modder River. The infantry,

under a fire at from six hundred to eight hundred paces, could not

advance and would not retire. The artillery only kept the battle going,

and the huge naval gun from behind was joining with its deep bark in the

deafening uproar. But the Boers had already learned--and it is one

of their most valuable military qualities that they assimilate their

experience so quickly--that shell fire is less dangerous in a trench

than among rocks. These trenches, very elaborate in character, had been

dug some hundreds of yards from the foot of the hills, so that there was

hardly any guide to our artillery fire. Yet it is to the artillery fire

that all the losses of the Boers that day were due. The cleverness of

Cronje's disposition of his trenches some hundred yards ahead of the

kopjes is accentuated by the fascination which any rising object has for

a gunner. Prince Kraft tells the story of how at Sadowa he unlimbered

his guns two hundred yards in front of the church of Chlum, and how the

Austrian reply fire almost invariably pitched upon the steeple. So our

own gunners, even at a two thousand-yard mark, found it difficult to

avoid overshooting the invisible line, and hitting the obvious mark

behind.

As the day wore on reinforcements of infantry came up from the force

which had been left to guard the camp. The Gordons arrived with the

first and second battalions of the Coldstream Guards, and all the

artillery was moved nearer to the enemy's position. At the same time,

as there were some indications of an attack upon our right flank, the

Grenadier Guards with five companies of the Yorkshire Light Infantry

were moved up in that direction, while the three remaining companies of

Barter's Yorkshiremen secured a drift over which the enemy might cross

the Modder. This threatening movement upon our right flank, which would

have put the Highlanders into an impossible position had it succeeded,

was most gallantly held back all morning, before the arrival of the

Guards and the Yorkshires, by the mounted infantry and the 12th Lancers,

skirmishing on foot. It was in this long and successful struggle to

cover the flank of the 3rd Brigade that Major Milton, Major Ray, and

many another brave man met his end. The Coldstreams and Grenadiers

relieved the pressure upon this side, and the Lancers retired to their

horses, having shown, not for the first time, that the cavalryman with

a modern carbine can at a pinch very quickly turn himself into a useful

infantry soldier. Lord Airlie deserves all praise for his unconventional

use of his men, and for the gallantry with which he threw both himself

and them into the most critical corner of the fight.

While the Coldstreams, the Grenadiers, and the Yorkshire Light Infantry

were holding back the Boer attack upon our right flank the indomitable

Gordons, the men of Dargai, furious with the desire to avenge their

comrades of the Highland Brigade, had advanced straight against the

trenches and succeeded without any very great loss in getting within

four hundred yards of them. But a single regiment could not carry the

position, and anything like a general advance upon it was out of the

question in broad daylight after the punishment which we had received.

Any plans of the sort which may have passed through Lord Methuen's

mind were driven away for ever by the sudden unordered retreat of the

stricken brigade. They had been very roughly handled in this, which was

to most of them their baptism of fire, and they had been without food

and water under a burning sun all day. They fell back rapidly for a

mile, and the guns were for a time left partially exposed. Fortunately

the lack of initiative on the part of the Boers which has stood our

friend so often came in to save us from disaster and humiliation. It is

due to the brave unshaken face which the Guards presented to the enemy

that our repulse did not deepen into something still more serious.

The Gordons and the Scots Guards were still in attendance upon the guns,

but they had been advanced very close to the enemy's trenches, and

there were no other troops in support. Under these circumstances it was

imperative that the Highlanders should rally, and Major Ewart with other

surviving officers rushed among the scattered ranks and strove hard

to gather and to stiffen them. The men were dazed by what they had

undergone, and Nature shrank back from that deadly zone where the

bullets fell so thickly. But the pipes blew, and the bugles sang, and

the poor tired fellows, the backs of their legs so flayed and blistered

by lying in the sun that they could hardly bend them, hobbled back to

their duty. They worked up to the guns once more, and the moment of

danger passed.

But as the evening wore on it became evident that no attack could

succeed, and that therefore there was no use in holding the men in front

of the enemy's position. The dark Cronje, lurking among his ditches and

his barbed wire, was not to be approached, far less defeated. There are

some who think that, had we held on there as we did at the Modder River,

the enemy would again have been accommodating enough to make way for

us during the night, and the morning would have found the road clear to

Kimberley. I know no grounds for such an opinion--but several against

it. At Modder Cronje abandoned his lines, knowing that he had other and

stronger ones behind him. At Magersfontein a level plain lay behind the

Boer position, and to abandon it was to give up the game altogether.

Besides, why should he abandon it? He knew that he had hit us hard. We

had made absolutely no impression upon his defences. Is it likely that

he would have tamely given up all his advantages and surrendered the

fruits of his victory without a struggle? It is enough to mourn a defeat

without the additional agony of thinking that a little more perseverance

might have turned it into a victory. The Boer position could only be

taken by outflanking it, and we were not numerous enough nor mobile

enough to outflank it. There lay the whole secret of our troubles, and

no conjectures as to what might under other circumstances have happened

can alter it.

About half-past five the Boer guns, which had for some unexplained

reason been silent all day, opened upon the cavalry. Their appearance

was a signal for the general falling back of the centre, and the

last attempt to retrieve the day was abandoned. The Highlanders were

dead-beat; the Coldstreams had had enough; the mounted infantry was

badly mauled. There remained the Grenadiers, the Scots Guards, and two

or three line regiments who were available for a new attack. There are

occasions, such as Sadowa, where a General must play his last card.

There are others where with reinforcements in his rear, he can do better

by saving his force and trying once again. General Grant had an axiom

that the best time for an advance was when you were utterly exhausted,

for that was the moment when your enemy was probably utterly exhausted

too, and of two such forces the attacker has the moral advantage. Lord

Methuen determined--and no doubt wisely--that it was no occasion for

counsels of desperation. His men were withdrawn--in some cases withdrew

themselves--outside the range of the Boer guns, and next morning saw the

whole force with bitter and humiliated hearts on their way back to their

camp at Modder River.

The repulse of Magersfontein cost the British nearly a thousand men,

killed, wounded, and missing, of which over seven hundred belonged to

the Highlanders. Fifty-seven officers had fallen in that brigade alone,

including their Brigadier and Colonel Downman of the Gordons. Colonel

Codrington of the Coldstreams was wounded early, fought through the

action, and came back in the evening on a Maxim gun. Lord Winchester

of the same battalion was killed, after injudiciously but heroically

exposing himself all day. The Black Watch alone had lost nineteen

officers and over three hundred men killed and wounded, a catastrophe

which can only be matched in all the bloody and glorious annals of that

splendid regiment by their slaughter at Ticonderoga in 1757, when

no fewer than five hundred fell before Montcalm's muskets. Never has

Scotland had a more grievous day than this of Magersfontein. She has

always given her best blood with lavish generosity for the Empire, but

it may be doubted if any single battle has ever put so many families of

high and low into mourning from the Tweed to the Caithness shore. There

is a legend that when sorrow comes upon Scotland the old Edinburgh

Castle is lit by ghostly lights and gleams white at every window in

the mirk of midnight. If ever the watcher could have seen so sinister

a sight, it should have been on this, the fatal night of December

11, 1899. As to the Boer loss it is impossible to determine it. Their

official returns stated it to be seventy killed and two hundred and

fifty wounded, but the reports of prisoners and deserters placed it at a

very much higher figure. One unit, the Scandinavian corps, was placed

in an advanced position at Spytfontein, and was overwhelmed by the

Seaforths, who killed, wounded, or took the eighty men of whom it was

composed. The stories of prisoners and of deserters all speak of losses

very much higher than those which have been officially acknowledged.

In his comments upon the battle next day Lord Methuen was said to have

given offence to the Highland Brigade, and the report was allowed to go

uncontradicted until it became generally accepted. It arose, however,

from a complete misunderstanding of the purport of Lord Methuen's

remarks, in which he praised them, as he well might, for their bravery,

and condoled with them over the wreck of their splendid regiments.

The way in which officers and men hung on under conditions to which no

troops have ever been exposed was worthy of the highest traditions of

the British army. From the death of Wauchope in the early morning, until

the assumption of the command of the brigade by Hughes-Hallett in the

late afternoon, no one seems to have taken the direction. 'My lieutenant

was wounded and my captain was killed,' says a private. 'The General was

dead, but we stayed where we were, for there was no order to retire.'

That was the story of the whole brigade, until the flanking movement of

the Boers compelled them to fall back.

The most striking lesson of the engagement is the extreme bloodiness

of modern warfare under some conditions, and its bloodlessness under

others. Here, out of a total of something under a thousand casualties

seven hundred were incurred in about five minutes, and the whole day of

shell, machine-gun, and rifle fire only furnished the odd three hundred.

So also at Ladysmith the British forces (White's column) were under

heavy fire from 5.30 to 11.30, and the loss again was something under

three hundred. With conservative generalship the losses of the battles

of the future will be much less than those of the past, and as a

consequence the battles themselves will last much longer, and it will be

the most enduring rather than the most fiery which will win. The supply

of food and water to the combatants will become of extreme importance to

keep them up during the prolonged trials of endurance, which will last

for weeks rather than days. On the other hand, when a General's force is

badly compromised, it will be so punished that a quick surrender will be

the only alternative to annihilation.

On the subject of the quarter-column formation which proved so fatal

to us, it must be remembered that any other form of advance is hardly

possible during a night attack, though at Tel-el-Kebir the exceptional

circumstance of the march being over an open desert allowed the troops

to move for the last mile or two in a more extended formation. A line

of battalion double-company columns is most difficult to preserve in the

darkness, and any confusion may lead to disaster. The whole mistake

lay in a miscalculation of a few hundred yards in the position of the

trenches. Had the regiments deployed five minutes earlier it is probable

(though by no means certain) that the position would have been carried.

The action was not without those examples of military virtue which

soften a disaster, and hold out a brighter promise for the future. The

Guards withdrew from the field as if on parade, with the Boer shells

bursting over their ranks. Fine, too, was the restraint of G Battery

of Horse Artillery on the morning after the battle. An armistice was

understood to exist, but the naval gun, in ignorance of it, opened

on our extreme left. The Boers at once opened fire upon the Horse

Artillery, who, recognising the mistake, remained motionless and

unlimbered in a line, with every horse, and gunner and driver in his

place, without taking any notice of the fire, which presently slackened

and stopped as the enemy came to understand the situation. It is worthy

of remark that in this battle the three field batteries engaged, as well

as G Battery, R.H.A., each fired over 1000 rounds and remained for 30

consecutive hours within 1500 yards of the Boer position.

But of all the corps who deserve praise, there was none more gallant

than the brave surgeons and ambulance bearers, who encounter all the

dangers and enjoy none of the thrills of warfare. All day under fire

these men worked and toiled among the wounded. Beevor, Ensor, Douglas,

Probyn--all were equally devoted. It is almost incredible, and yet it

is true, that by ten o'clock on the morning after the battle, before the

troops had returned to camp, no fewer than five hundred wounded were in

the train and on their way to Cape Town.

CHAPTER 10. THE BATTLE OF STORMBERG.

Some attempt has now been made to sketch the succession of events which

had ended in the investment of Ladysmith in northern Natal, and also to

show the fortunes of the force which on the western side of the seat

of war attempted to advance to the relief of Kimberley. The distance

between these forces may be expressed in terms familiar to the European

reader by saying that it was that which separates Paris from Frankfort,

or to the American by suggesting that Ladysmith was at Boston and that

Methuen was trying to relieve Philadelphia. Waterless deserts and rugged

mountain ranges divided the two scenes of action. In the case of the

British there could be no connection between the two movements, but the

Boers by a land journey of something over a hundred miles had a double

choice of a route by which Cronje and Joubert might join hands, either

by the Bloemfontein-Johannesburg-Laing's Nek Railway, or by the direct

line from Harrismith to Ladysmith. The possession of these internal

lines should have been of enormous benefit to the Boers, enabling them

to throw the weight of their forces unexpectedly from the one flank to

the other.

In a future chapter it will be recorded how the Army Corps arriving from

England was largely diverted into Natal in order in the first instance

to prevent the colony from being overrun, and in the second to rescue

the beleaguered garrison. In the meantime it is necessary to deal with

the military operations in the broad space between the eastern and

western armies.

After the declaration of war there was a period of some weeks during

which the position of the British over the whole of the northern part of

Cape Colony was full of danger. Immense supplies had been gathered at De

Aar which were at the mercy of a Free State raid, and the burghers, had

they possessed a cavalry leader with the dash of a Stuart or a Sheridan,

might have dealt a blow which would have cost us a million pounds' worth

of stores and dislocated the whole plan of campaign. However, the chance

was allowed to pass, and when, on November 1st, the burghers at last in

a leisurely fashion sauntered over the frontier, arrangements had been

made by reinforcement and by concentration to guard the vital points.

The objects of the British leaders, until the time for a general advance

should come, were to hold the Orange River Bridge (which opened the

way to Kimberley), to cover De Aar Junction, where the stores were, to

protect at all costs the line of railway which led from Cape Town to

Kimberley, and to hold on to as much as possible of those other two

lines of railway which led, the one through Colesberg and the other

through Stormberg, into the Free State. The two bodies of invaders who

entered the colony moved along the line of these two railways, the one

crossing the Orange River at Norval's Pont and the other at Bethulie.

They enlisted many recruits among the Cape Colony Dutch as they

advanced, and the scanty British forces fell back in front of them,

abandoning Colesberg on the one line and Stormberg on the other. We

have, then, to deal with the movements of two British detachments. The

one which operated on the Colesberg line--which was the more vital

of the two, as a rapid advance of the Boers upon that line would have

threatened the precious Cape Town to Kimberley connection--consisted

almost entirely of mounted troops, and was under the command of the

same General French who had won the battle of Elandslaagte. By an act of

foresight which was only too rare upon the British side in the earlier

stages of this war, French, who had in the recent large manoeuvres on

Salisbury Plain shown great ability as a cavalry leader, was sent out

of Ladysmith in the very last train which made its way through. His

operations, with his instructive use of cavalry and horse artillery, may

be treated separately.

The other British force which faced the Boers who were advancing through

Stormberg was commanded by General Gatacre, a man who bore a high

reputation for fearlessness and tireless energy, though he had been

criticised, notably during the Soudan campaign, for having called upon

his men for undue and unnecessary exertion. 'General Back-acher' they

called him, with rough soldierly chaff. A glance at his long thin

figure, his gaunt Don Quixote face, and his aggressive jaw would

show his personal energy, but might not satisfy the observer that he

possessed those intellectual gifts which qualify for high command. At

the action of the Atbara he, the brigadier in command, was the first to

reach and to tear down with his own hands the zareeba of the enemy--a

gallant exploit of the soldier, but a questionable position for the

General. The man's strength and his weakness lay in the incident.

General Gatacre was nominally in command of a division, but so cruelly

had his men been diverted from him, some to Buller in Natal and some to

Methuen, that he could not assemble more than a brigade. Falling

back before the Boer advance, he found himself early in December at

Sterkstroom, while the Boers occupied the very strong position of

Stormberg, some thirty miles to the north of him. With the enemy so near

him it was Gatacre's nature to attack, and the moment that he thought

himself strong enough he did so. No doubt he had private information

as to the dangerous hold which the Boers were getting upon the colonial

Dutch, and it is possible that while Buller and Methuen were attacking

east and west they urged Gatacre to do something to hold the enemy in

the centre. On the night of December 9th he advanced.

The fact that he was about to do so, and even the hour of the start,

appear to have been the common property of the camp some days before

the actual move. The 'Times' correspondent under the date December

7th details all that it is intended to do. It is to the credit of our

Generals as men, but to their detriment as soldiers, that they seem

throughout the campaign to have shown extraordinarily little power

of dissimulation. They did the obvious, and usually allowed it to be

obvious what they were about to do. One thinks of Napoleon striking at

Egypt; how he gave it abroad that the real object of the expedition was

Ireland, but breathed into the ears of one or two intimates that in very

truth it was bound for Genoa. The leading official at Toulon had no

more idea where the fleet and army of France had gone than the humblest

caulker in the yard. However, it is not fair to expect the subtlety

of the Corsican from the downright Saxon, but it remains strange and

deplorable that in a country filled with spies any one should have known

in advance that a so-called 'surprise' was about to be attempted.

The force with which General Gatacre advanced consisted of the 2nd

Northumberland Fusiliers, 960 strong, with one Maxim; the 2nd Irish

Rifles, 840 strong, with one Maxim, and 250 Mounted Infantry. There were

two batteries of Field Artillery, the 74th and 77th. The total force was

well under 3000 men. About three in the afternoon the men were entrained

in open trucks under a burning sun, and for some reason, at which the

impetuous spirit of the General must have chafed, were kept waiting

for three hours. At eight o'clock they detrained at Molteno, and thence

after a short rest and a meal they started upon the night march which

was intended to end at the break of day at the Boer trenches. One feels

as if one were describing the operations of Magersfontein once again and

the parallel continues to be painfully exact.

It was nine o'clock and pitch dark when the column moved out of Molteno

and struck across the black gloom of the veld, the wheels of the guns

being wrapped in hide to deaden the rattle. It was known that the

distance was not more than ten miles, and so when hour followed hour and

the guides were still unable to say that they had reached their point it

must have become perfectly evident that they had missed their way.

The men were dog-tired, a long day's work had been followed by a long

night's march, and they plodded along drowsily through the darkness.

The ground was broken and irregular. The weary soldiers stumbled as they

marched. Daylight came and revealed the column still looking for its

objective, the fiery General walking in front and leading his horse

behind him. It was evident that his plans had miscarried, but his

energetic and hardy temperament would not permit him to turn back

without a blow being struck. However one may commend his energy, one

cannot but stand aghast at his dispositions. The country was wild

and rocky, the very places for those tactics of the surprise and the

ambuscade in which the Boers excelled. And yet the column still plodded

aimlessly on in its dense formation, and if there were any attempt at

scouting ahead and on the flanks the result showed how ineffectively it

was carried out. It was at a quarter past four in the clear light of a

South African morning that a shot, and then another, and then a rolling

crash of musketry, told that we were to have one more rough lesson of

the result of neglecting the usual precautions of warfare. High up on

the face of a steep line of hill the Boer riflemen lay hid, and from

a short range their fire scourged our exposed flank. The men appear to

have been chiefly colonial rebels, and not Boers of the backveld, and to

that happy chance it may be that the comparative harmlessness of their

fire was due. Even now, in spite of the surprise, the situation might

have been saved had the bewildered troops and their harried officers

known exactly what to do. It is easy to be wise after the event, but it

appears now that the only course that could commend itself would be to

extricate the troops from their position, and then, if thought feasible,

to plan an attack. Instead of this a rush was made at the hillside, and

the infantry made their way some distance up it only to find that there

were positive ledges in front of them which could not be climbed. The

advance was at a dead stop, and the men lay down under the boulders

for cover from the hot fire which came from inaccessible marksmen above

them. Meanwhile the artillery had opened behind them, and their fire

(not for the first time in this campaign) was more deadly to their

friends than to their foes. At least one prominent officer fell among

his men, torn by British shrapnel bullets. Talana Hill and Modder River

have shown also, though perhaps in a less tragic degree, that what with

the long range of modern artillery fire, and what with the difficulty of

locating infantry who are using smokeless powder, it is necessary that

officers commanding batteries should be provided with the coolest

heads and the most powerful glasses of any men in the service, for a

responsibility which will become more and more terrific rests upon their

judgment.

The question now, since the assault had failed, was how to extricate

the men from their position. Many withdrew down the hill, running the

gauntlet of the enemy's fire as they emerged from the boulders on to

the open ground, while others clung to their positions, some from

a soldierly hope that victory might finally incline to them, others

because it was clearly safer to lie among the rocks than to cross the

bullet-swept spaces beyond. Those portions of the force who extricated

themselves do not appear to have realised how many of their comrades had

remained behind, and so as the gap gradually increased between the men

who were stationary and the men who fell back all hope of the two bodies

reuniting became impossible. All the infantry who remained upon the

hillside were captured. The rest rallied at a point fifteen hundred

yards from the scene of the surprise, and began an orderly retreat to

Molteno.

In the meanwhile three powerful Boer guns upon the ridge had opened

fire with great accuracy, but fortunately with defective shells. Had

the enemy's contractors been as trustworthy as their gunners in this

campaign, our losses would have been very much heavier, and it is

possible that here we catch a glimpse of some consequences of that

corruption which was one of the curses of the country. The guns were

moved with great smartness along the ridge, and opened fire again and

again, but never with great result. Our own batteries, the 74th and

77th, with our handful of mounted men, worked hard in covering the

retreat and holding back the enemy's pursuit.

It is a sad subject to discuss, but it is the one instance in a campaign

containing many reverses which amounts to demoralisation among the

troops engaged. The Guards marching with the steadiness of Hyde Park

off the field of Magersfontein, or the men of Nicholson's Nek chafing

because they were not led in a last hopeless charge, are, even in

defeat, object lessons of military virtue. But here fatigue and

sleeplessness had taken all fire and spirit out of the men. They dropped

asleep by the roadside and had to be prodded up by their exhausted

officers. Many were taken prisoners in their slumber by the enemy who

gleaned behind them. Units broke into small straggling bodies, and it

was a sorry and bedraggled force which about ten o'clock came wandering

into Molteno. The place of honour in the rear was kept throughout by

the Irish Rifles, who preserved some military formation to the end. Our

losses in killed and wounded were not severe--military honour would have

been less sore had they been more so. Twenty-six killed, sixty-eight

wounded--that is all. But between the men on the hillside and the

somnambulists of the column, six hundred, about equally divided between

the Irish Rifles and the Northumberland Fusiliers, had been left as

prisoners. Two guns, too, had been lost in the hurried retreat.

It is not for the historian--especially for a civilian historian--to say

a word unnecessarily to aggravate the pain of that brave man who, having

done all that personal courage could do, was seen afterwards sobbing on

the table of the waiting-room at Molteno, and bewailing his 'poor men.'

He had a disaster, but Nelson had one at Teneriffe and Napoleon at Acre,

and built their great reputations in spite of it. But the one good thing

of a disaster is that by examining it we may learn to do better in the

future, and so it would indeed be a perilous thing if we agreed that our

reverses were not a fit subject for open and frank discussion.

It is not to the detriment of an enterprise that it should be daring

and call for considerable physical effort on the part of those who are

engaged in it. On the contrary, the conception of such plans is one of

the signs of a great military mind. But in the arranging of the details

the same military mind should assiduously occupy itself in foreseeing

and preventing every unnecessary thing which may make the execution

of such a plan more difficult. The idea of a swift sudden attack upon

Stormberg was excellent--the details of the operation are continually

open to criticism.

How far the Boers suffered at Stormberg is unknown to us, but there

seems in this instance no reason to doubt their own statement that their

losses were very slight. At no time was any body of them exposed to

our fire, while we, as usual, fought in the open. Their numbers were

probably less than ours, and the quality of their shooting and want of

energy in pursuit make the defeat the more galling. On the other hand,

their guns were served with skill and audacity. They consisted of

commandos from Bethulie, Rouxville, and Smithfield, under the orders

of Olivier, with those colonials whom they had seduced from their

allegiance.

This defeat of General Gatacre's, occurring, as it did, in a disaffected

district and one of great strategic importance, might have produced the

worst consequences.

Fortunately no very evil result followed. No doubt the recruiting

of rebels was helped, but there was no forward movement and Molteno

remained in our hands. In the meanwhile Gatacre's force was reinforced

by a fresh battery, the 79th, and by a strong regiment, the Derbyshires,

so that with the 1st Royal Scots and the wing of the Berkshires he

was strong enough to hold his own until the time for a general advance

should come. So in the Stormberg district, as at the Modder River, the

same humiliating and absurd position of stalemate was established.

CHAPTER 11. BATTLE OF COLENSO.

Two serious defeats had within the week been inflicted upon the British

forces in South Africa. Cronje, lurking behind his trenches and his

barbed wire entanglements barred Methuen's road to Kimberley, while

in the northern part of Cape Colony Gatacre's wearied troops had been

defeated and driven by a force which consisted largely of British

subjects. But the public at home steeled their hearts and fixed their

eyes steadily upon Natal. There was their senior General and there the

main body of their troops. As brigade after brigade and battery after

battery touched at Cape Town, and were sent on instantly to Durban, it

was evident that it was in this quarter that the supreme effort was

to be made, and that there the light might at last break. In club, and

dining room, and railway car--wherever men met and talked--the same

words might be heard: 'Wait until Buller moves.' The hopes of a great

empire lay in the phrase.

It was upon October 30th that Sir George White had been thrust back into

Ladysmith. On November 2nd telegraphic communication with the town was

interrupted. On November 3rd the railway line was cut. On November 10th

the Boers held Colenso and the line of the Tugela. On the 14th was the

affair of the armoured train. On the 18th the enemy were near Estcourt.

On the 21st they had reached the Mooi River. On the 23rd Hildyard

attacked them at Willow Grange. All these actions will be treated

elsewhere. This last one marks the turn of the tide. From then onwards

Sir Redvers Buller was massing his troops at Chieveley in preparation

for a great effort to cross the river and to relieve Ladysmith, the guns

of which, calling from behind the line of northern hills, told their

constant tale of restless attack and stubborn defence.

But the task was as severe a one as the most fighting General could ask

for. On the southern side the banks formed a long slope which could be

shaved as with a razor by the rifle fire of the enemy. How to advance

across that broad open zone was indeed a problem. It was one of many

occasions in this war in which one wondered why, if a bullet-proof

shield capable of sheltering a lying man could be constructed, a trial

should not be given to it. Alternate rushes of companies with a safe

rest after each rush would save the troops from the continued tension of

that deadly never ending fire. However, it is idle to discuss what

might have been done to mitigate their trials. The open ground had to

be passed, and then they came to--not the enemy, but a broad and deep

river, with a single bridge, probably undermined, and a single ford,

which was found not to exist in practice. Beyond the river was tier

after tier of hills, crowned with stone walls and seamed with trenches,

defended by thousands of the best marksmen in the world, supported by

an admirable artillery. If, in spite of the advance over the open and

in spite of the passage of the river, a ridge could still be carried, it

was only to be commanded by the next; and so, one behind the other,

like the billows of the ocean, a series of hills and hollows rolled

northwards to Ladysmith. All attacks must be in the open. All defence

was from under cover. Add to this, that the young and energetic Louis

Botha was in command of the Boers. It was a desperate task, and yet

honour forbade that the garrison should be left to its fate. The venture

must be made.

The most obvious criticism upon the operation is that if the attack

must be made it should not be made under the enemy's conditions. We

seem almost to have gone out of our way to make every obstacle--the

glacislike approach, the river, the trenches--as difficult as possible.

Future operations were to prove that it was not so difficult to deceive

Boer vigilance and by rapid movements to cross the Tugela. A military

authority has stated, I know not with what truth, that there is no

instance in history of a determined army being stopped by the line of

a river, and from Wellington at the Douro to the Russians on the Danube

many examples of the ease with which they may be passed will occur to

the reader. But Buller had some exceptional difficulties with which to

contend. He was weak in mounted troops, and was opposed to an enemy of

exceptional mobility who might attack his flank and rear if he exposed

them. He had not that great preponderance of numbers which came to him

later, and which enabled him to attempt a wide turning movement. One

advantage he had, the possession of a more powerful artillery, but his

heaviest guns were naturally his least mobile, and the more direct his

advance the more effective would his guns be. For these or other reasons

he determined upon a frontal attack on the formidable Boer position, and

he moved out of Chieveley Camp for that purpose at daybreak on Friday,

December 15th.

The force which General Buller led into action was the finest which any

British general had handled since the battle of the Alma. Of infantry

he had four strong brigades: the 2nd (Hildyard's) consisting of the 2nd

Devons, the 2nd Queen's or West Surrey, the 2nd West Yorkshire, and

the 2nd East Surrey; the 4th Brigade (Lyttelton's) comprising the 2nd

Cameronians, the 3rd Rifles, the 1st Durhams, and the 1st Rifle Brigade;

the 5th Brigade (Hart's) with the 1st Inniskilling Fusiliers, the 1st

Connaught Rangers, 2nd Dublin Fusiliers, and the Border Regiment, this

last taking the place of the 2nd Irish Rifles, who were with Gatacre.

There remained the 6th Brigade (Barton's), which included the 2nd Royal

Fusiliers, the 2nd Scots Fusiliers, the 1st Welsh Fusiliers, and the 2nd

Irish Fusiliers--in all about 16,000 infantry. The mounted men, who were

commanded by Lord Dundonald, included the 13th Hussars, the 1st Royals,

Bethune's Mounted Infantry, Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry, three

squadrons of South African Horse, with a composite regiment formed from

the mounted infantry of the Rifles and of the Dublin Fusiliers with

squadrons of the Natal Carabineers and the Imperial Light Horse. These

irregular troops of horse might be criticised by martinets and pedants,

but they contained some of the finest fighting material in the army,

some urged on by personal hatred of the Boers and some by mere lust of

adventure. As an example of the latter one squadron of the South African

Horse was composed almost entirely of Texan muleteers, who, having come

over with their animals, had been drawn by their own gallant spirit into

the fighting line of their kinsmen.

Cavalry was General Buller's weakest arm, but his artillery was strong

both in its quality and its number of guns. There were five batteries

(30 guns) of the Field Artillery, the 7th, 14th, 63rd, 64th, and 66th.

Besides these there were no fewer than sixteen naval guns from H.M.S.

'Terrible'--fourteen of which were 12-pounders, and the other two of

the 4.7 type which had done such good service both at Ladysmith and with

Methuen. The whole force which moved out from Chieveley Camp numbered

about 21,000 men.

The work which was allotted to the army was simple in conception,

however terrible it might prove in execution. There were two points at

which the river might be crossed, one three miles off on the left, named

Bridle Drift, the other straight ahead at the Bridge of Colenso. The 5th

or Irish Brigade was to endeavour to cross at Bridle Drift, and then

to work down the river bank on the far side so as to support the 2nd or

English Brigade,--which was to cross at Colenso. The 4th Brigade was

to advance between these, so as to help either which should be in

difficulties. Meanwhile on the extreme right the mounted troops under

Dundonald were to cover the flank and to attack Hlangwane Hill, a

formidable position held strongly by the enemy upon the south bank of

the Tugela. The remaining Fusilier brigade of infantry was to support

this movement on the right. The guns were to cover the various attacks,

and if possible gain a position from which the trenches might be

enfiladed. This, simply stated, was the work which lay before the

British army. In the bright clear morning sunshine, under a cloudless

blue sky, they advanced with high hopes to the assault. Before them lay

the long level plain, then the curve of the river, and beyond, silent

and serene, like some peaceful dream landscape, stretched the lines and

lines of gently curving hills. It was just five o'clock in the morning

when the naval guns began to bay, and huge red dustclouds from the

distant foothills showed where the lyddite was bursting. No answer came

back, nor was there any movement upon the sunlit hills. It was

almost brutal, this furious violence to so gentle and unresponsive a

countryside. In no place could the keenest eye detect a sign of guns or

men, and yet death lurked in every hollow and crouched by every rock.

It is so difficult to make a modern battle intelligible when fought, as

this was, over a front of seven or eight miles, that it is best perhaps

to take the doings of each column in turn, beginning with the left

flank, where Hart's Irish Brigade had advanced to the assault of Bridle

Drift.

Under an unanswered and therefore an unaimed fire from the heavy guns

the Irish infantry moved forward upon the points which they had

been ordered to attack. The Dublins led, then the Connaughts, the

Inniskillings, and the Borderers. Incredible as it may appear after the

recent experiences of Magersfontein and of Stormberg, the men in the two

rear regiments appear to have been advanced in quarter column, and not

to have deployed until after the enemy's fire had opened. Had shrapnel

struck this close formation, as it was within an ace of doing, the loss

of life must have been as severe as it was unnecessary.

On approaching the Drift--the position or even the existence of which

does not seem to have been very clearly defined--it was found that the

troops had to advance into a loop formed by the river, so that they were

exposed to a very heavy cross-fire upon their right flank, while they

were rained on by shrapnel from in front. No sign of the enemy could be

seen, though the men were dropping fast. It is a weird and soul-shaking

experience to advance over a sunlit and apparently a lonely countryside,

with no slightest movement upon its broad face, while the path which

you take is marked behind you by sobbing, gasping, writhing men, who can

only guess by the position of their wounds whence the shots came which

struck them down. All round, like the hissing of fat in the pan, is the

monotonous crackle and rattle of the Mausers; but the air is full of

it, and no one can define exactly whence it comes. Far away on some

hill upon the skyline there hangs the least gauzy veil of thin smoke to

indicate whence the six men who have just all fallen together, as if it

were some grim drill, met their death. Into such a hell-storm as this

it was that the soldiers have again and again advanced in the course

of this war, but it may be questioned whether they will not prove to be

among the last of mortals to be asked to endure such an ordeal. Other

methods of attack must be found or attacks must be abandoned, for

smokeless powder, quick-firing guns, and modern rifles make it all odds

on the defence!

The gallant Irishmen pushed on, flushed with battle and careless for

their losses, the four regiments clubbed into one, with all military

organisation rapidly disappearing, and nothing left but their gallant

spirit and their furious desire to come to hand-grips with the enemy.

Rolling on in a broad wave of shouting angry men, they never winced

from the fire until they had swept up to the bank of the river. Northern

Inniskilling and Southern man of Connaught, orange and green, Protestant

and Catholic, Celt and Saxon, their only rivalry now was who could

shed his blood most freely for the common cause. How hateful seem those

provincial politics and narrow sectarian creeds which can hold such men

apart!

The bank of the river had been gained, but where was the ford? The

water swept broad and unruffled in front of them, with no indication

of shallows. A few dashing fellows sprang in, but their cartridges and

rifles dragged them to the bottom. One or two may even have struggled

through to the further side, but on this there is a conflict of

evidence. It may be, though it seems incredible, that the river had been

partly dammed to deepen the Drift, or, as is more probable, that in the

rapid advance and attack the position of the Drift was lost. However

this may be, the troops could find no ford, and they lay down, as had

been done in so many previous actions, unwilling to retreat and unable

to advance, with the same merciless pelting from front and flank. In

every fold and behind every anthill the Irishmen lay thick and

waited for better times. There are many instances of their cheery and

uncomplaining humour. Colonel Brooke, of the Connaughts, fell at the

head of his men. Private Livingstone helped to carry him into safety,

and then, his task done, he confessed to having 'a bit of a rap meself,'

and sank fainting with a bullet through his throat. Another sat with a

bullet through both legs. 'Bring me a tin whistle and I'll blow ye any

tune ye like,' he cried, mindful of the Dargai piper. Another with his

arm hanging by a tendon puffed morosely at his short black pipe. Every

now and then, in face of the impossible, the fiery Celtic valour flamed

furiously upwards. 'Fix bayonets, men, and let us make a name for

ourselves,' cried a colour sergeant, and he never spoke again. For five

hours, under the tropical sun, the grimy parched men held on to the

ground they had occupied. British shells pitched short and fell among

them. A regiment in support fired at them, not knowing that any of the

line were so far advanced. Shot at from the front, the flank, and the

rear, the 5th Brigade held grimly on.

But fortunately their orders to retire were at hand, and it is certain

that had they not reached them the regiments would have been uselessly

destroyed where they lay. It seems to have been Buller himself, who

showed extraordinary and ubiquitous personal energy during the day, that

ordered them to fall back. As they retreated there was an entire absence

of haste and panic, but officers and men were hopelessly jumbled up, and

General Hart--whose judgment may occasionally be questioned, but whose

cool courage was beyond praise--had hard work to reform the splendid

brigade which six hours before had tramped out of Chieveley Camp.

Between five and six hundred of them had fallen--a loss which

approximates to that of the Highland Brigade at Magersfontein. The

Dublins and the Connaughts were the heaviest sufferers.

So much for the mishap of the 5th Brigade. It is superfluous to point

out that the same old omissions were responsible for the same old

results. Why were the men in quarter column when advancing against an

unseen foe? Why had no scouts gone forward to be certain of the position

of the ford? Where were the clouds of skirmishers which should precede

such an advance? The recent examples in the field and the teachings of

the text-books were equally set at naught, as they had been, and were

to be, so often in this campaign. There may be a science of war in the

lecture-rooms at Camberley, but very little of it found its way to

the veld. The slogging valour of the private, the careless dash of the

regimental officer--these were our military assets--but seldom the care

and foresight of our commanders. It is a thankless task to make such

comments, but the one great lesson of the war has been that the army is

too vital a thing to fall into the hands of a caste, and that it is

a national duty for every man to speak fearlessly and freely what he

believes to be the truth.

Passing from the misadventure of the 5th Brigade we come as we move from

left to right upon the 4th, or Lyttelton's Brigade, which was instructed

not to attack itself but to support the attack on either side of it.

With the help of the naval guns it did what it could to extricate and

cover the retreat of the Irishmen, but it could play no very important

part in the action, and its losses were insignificant. On its right in

turn Hildyard's English Brigade had developed its attack upon Colenso

and the bridge. The regiments under Hildyard's lead were the 2nd West

Surrey, the 2nd Devons (whose first battalion was doing so well with the

Ladysmith force), the East Surreys, and the West Yorkshires. The enemy

had evidently anticipated the main attack on this position, and not only

were the trenches upon the other side exceptionally strong, but their

artillery converged upon the bridge, at least a dozen heavy pieces,

besides a number of quick-firers, bearing upon it. The Devons and the

Queens, in open order (an extended line of khaki dots, blending so

admirably with the plain that they were hardly visible when they

halted), led the attack, being supported by the East Surrey and the West

Yorkshires. Advancing under a very heavy fire the brigade experienced

much the same ordeal as their comrades of Hart's brigade, which was

mitigated by the fact that from the first they preserved their open

order in columns of half-companies extended to six paces, and that the

river in front of them did not permit that right flank fire which was so

fatal to the Irishmen. With a loss of some two hundred men the leading

regiments succeeded in reaching Colenso, and the West Surrey, advancing

by rushes of fifty yards at a time, had established itself in the

station, but a catastrophe had occurred at an earlier hour to the

artillery which was supporting it which rendered all further advance

impossible. For the reason of this we must follow the fortunes of the

next unit upon their right.

This consisted of the important body of artillery who had been told off

to support the main attack. It comprised two field batteries, the 14th

and the 66th, under the command of Colonel Long, and six naval guns (two

of 4.7, and four 12-pounders) under Lieutenant Ogilvy of the 'Terrible.'

Long has the record of being a most zealous and dashing officer, whose

handling of the Egyptian artillery at the battle of the Atbara had much

to do with the success of the action. Unfortunately, these barbarian

campaigns, in which liberties may be taken with impunity, leave an evil

tradition, as the French have found with their Algerians. Our own close

formations, our adherence to volley firing, and in this instance the

use of our artillery all seem to be legacies of our savage wars. Be the

cause what it may, at an early stage of the action Long's guns whirled

forwards, outstripped the infantry brigades upon their flanks, left the

slow-moving naval guns with their ox-teams behind them, and unlimbered

within a thousand yards of the enemy's trenches. From this position he

opened fire upon Fort Wylie, which was the centre of that portion of the

Boer position which faced him.

But his two unhappy batteries were destined not to turn the tide of

battle, as he had hoped, but rather to furnish the classic example

of the helplessness of artillery against modern rifle fire. Not even

Mercer's famous description of the effect of a flank fire upon his troop

of horse artillery at Waterloo could do justice to the blizzard of lead

which broke over the two doomed batteries. The teams fell in heaps, some

dead, some mutilated, and mutilating others in their frantic struggles.

One driver, crazed with horror, sprang on a leader, cut the traces and

tore madly off the field. But a perfect discipline reigned among the

vast majority of the gunners, and the words of command and the laying

and working of the guns were all as methodical as at Okehampton. Not

only was there a most deadly rifle fire, partly from the lines in front

and partly from the village of Colenso upon their left flank, but the

Boer automatic quick-firers found the range to a nicety, and the little

shells were crackling and banging continually over the batteries.

Already every gun had its litter of dead around it, but each was still

fringed by its own group of furious officers and sweating desperate

gunners. Poor Long was down, with a bullet through his arm and another

through his liver. 'Abandon be damned! We don't abandon guns!' was his

last cry as they dragged him into the shelter of a little donga hard by.

Captain Goldie dropped dead. So did Lieutenant Schreiber. Colonel Hunt

fell, shot in two places. Officers and men were falling fast. The guns

could not be worked, and yet they could not be removed, for every effort

to bring up teams from the shelter where the limbers lay ended in the

death of the horses. The survivors took refuge from the murderous fire

in that small hollow to which Long had been carried, a hundred yards

or so from the line of bullet-splashed cannon. One gun on the right was

still served by four men who refused to leave it. They seemed to bear

charmed lives, these four, as they strained and wrestled with their

beloved 15-pounder, amid the spurting sand and the blue wreaths of the

bursting shells. Then one gasped and fell against the trail, and his

comrade sank beside the wheel with his chin upon his breast. The

third threw up his hands and pitched forward upon his face; while the

survivor, a grim powder-stained figure, stood at attention looking death

in the eyes until he too was struck down. A useless sacrifice, you may

say; but while the men who saw them die can tell such a story round the

camp fire the example of such deaths as these does more than clang of

bugle or roll of drum to stir the warrior spirit of our race.

For two hours the little knot of heart-sick humiliated officers and

men lay in the precarious shelter of the donga and looked out at the

bullet-swept plain and the line of silent guns. Many of them were

wounded. Their chief lay among them, still calling out in his delirium

for his guns. They had been joined by the gallant Baptie, a brave

surgeon, who rode across to the donga amid a murderous fire, and did

what he could for the injured men. Now and then a rush was made into the

open, sometimes in the hope of firing another round, sometimes to bring

a wounded comrade in from the pitiless pelt of the bullets. How fearful

was that lead-storm may be gathered from the fact that one gunner was

found with sixty-four wounds in his body. Several men dropped in these

sorties, and the disheartened survivors settled down once more in the

donga.

The hope to which they clung was that their guns were not really lost,

but that the arrival of infantry would enable them to work them once

more. Infantry did at last arrive, but in such small numbers that it

made the situation more difficult instead of easing it. Colonel Bullock

had brought up two companies of the Devons to join the two companies (A

and B) of Scots Fusiliers who had been the original escort of the guns,

but such a handful could not turn the tide. They also took refuge in the

donga, and waited for better times.

In the meanwhile the attention of Generals Buller and Clery had been

called to the desperate position of the guns, and they had made their

way to that further nullah in the rear where the remaining limber horses

and drivers were. This was some distance behind that other donga in

which Long, Bullock, and their Devons and gunners were crouching. 'Will

any of you volunteer to save the guns?' cried Buller. Corporal Nurse,

Gunner Young, and a few others responded. The desperate venture was

led by three aides-de-camp of the Generals, Congreve, Schofield, and

Roberts, the only son of the famous soldier. Two gun teams were taken

down; the horses galloping frantically through an infernal fire,

and each team succeeded in getting back with a gun. But the loss was

fearful. Roberts was mortally wounded. Congreve has left an account

which shows what a modern rifle fire at a thousand yards is like. 'My

first bullet went through my left sleeve and made the joint of my elbow

bleed, next a clod of earth caught me smack on the right arm, then my

horse got one, then my right leg one, then my horse another, and

that settled us.' The gallant fellow managed to crawl to the group of

castaways in the donga. Roberts insisted on being left where he fell,

for fear he should hamper the others.

In the meanwhile Captain Reed, of the 7th Battery, had arrived with two

spare teams of horses, and another determined effort was made under his

leadership to save some of the guns. But the fire was too murderous.

Two-thirds of his horses and half his men, including himself, were

struck down, and General Buller commanded that all further attempts to

reach the abandoned batteries should be given up. Both he and General

Clery had been slightly wounded, and there were many operations over

the whole field of action to engage their attention. But making every

allowance for the pressure of many duties and for the confusion and

turmoil of a great action, it does seem one of the most inexplicable

incidents in British military history that the guns should ever have

been permitted to fall into the hands of the enemy. It is evident that

if our gunners could not live under the fire of the enemy it would be

equally impossible for the enemy to remove the guns under a fire from

a couple of battalions of our infantry. There were many regiments which

had hardly been engaged, and which could have been advanced for such a

purpose. The men of the Mounted Infantry actually volunteered for this

work, and none could have been more capable of carrying it out. There

was plenty of time also, for the guns were abandoned about eleven and

the Boers did not venture to seize them until four. Not only could

the guns have been saved, but they might, one would think, have been

transformed into an excellent bait for a trap to tempt the Boers out of

their trenches. It must have been with fear and trembling that Cherry

Emmett and his men first approached them, for how could they believe

that such incredible good fortune had come to them? However, the fact,

humiliating and inexplicable, is that the guns were so left, that the

whole force was withdrawn, and that not only the ten cannon, but also

the handful of Devons, with their Colonel, and the Fusiliers were taken

prisoners in the donga which had sheltered them all day.

We have now, working from left to right, considered the operations of

Hart's Brigade at Bridle Drift, of Lyttelton's Brigade in support, of

Hildyard's which attacked Colenso, and of the luckless batteries which

were to have helped him. There remain two bodies of troops upon the

right, the further consisting of Dundonald's mounted men who were to

attack Hlangwane Hill, a fortified Boer position upon the south of the

river, while Barton's Brigade was to support it and to connect this

attack with the central operations.

Dundonald's force was entirely too weak for such an operation as the

capture of the formidable entrenched hill, and it is probable that the

movement was meant rather as a reconnaissance than as an assault. He had

not more than a thousand men in all, mostly irregulars, and the position

which faced him was precipitous and entrenched, with barbed-wire

entanglements and automatic guns. But the gallant colonials were out

on their first action, and their fiery courage pushed the attack home.

Leaving their horses, they advanced a mile and a half on foot before

they came within easy range of the hidden riflemen, and learned the

lesson which had been taught to their comrades all along the line, that

given approximately equal numbers the attack in the open has no possible

chance against the concealed defence, and that the more bravely it is

pushed the more heavy is the repulse. The irregulars carried themselves

like old soldiers, they did all that mortal man could do, and they

retired coolly and slowly with the loss of 130 of the brave troopers.

The 7th Field Battery did all that was possible to support the advance

and cover the retirement. In no single place, on this day of disaster,

did one least gleam of success come to warm the hearts and reward the

exertions of our much-enduring men.

Of Barton's Brigade there is nothing to be recorded, for they appear

neither to have supported the attack upon Hlangwane Hill on the one side

nor to have helped to cover the ill-fated guns on the other. Barton

was applied to for help by Dundonald, but refused to detach any of his

troops. If General Buller's real idea was a reconnaissance in force in

order to determine the position and strength of the Boer lines, then

of course his brigadiers must have felt a reluctance to entangle their

brigades in a battle which was really the result of a misunderstanding.

On the other hand, if, as the orders of the day seem to show, a serious

engagement was always intended, it is strange that two brigades out of

four should have played so insignificant a part. To Barton's Brigade

was given the responsibility of seeing that no right flank attack was

carried out by the Boers, and this held it back until it was clear that

no such attack was contemplated. After that one would have thought that,

had the situation been appreciated, at least two battalions might have

been spared to cover the abandoned guns with their rifle fire. Two

companies of the Scots Fusiliers did share the fortunes of the guns.

Two others, and one of the Irish Fusiliers, acted in support, but the

brigade as a whole, together with the 1st Royals and the 13th Hussars,

might as well have been at Aldershot for any bearing which their work

had upon the fortunes of the day.

And so the first attempt at the relief of Ladysmith came to an end. At

twelve o'clock all the troops upon the ground were retreating for

the camp. There was nothing in the shape of rout or panic, and the

withdrawal was as orderly as the advance; but the fact remained that

we had just 1200 men in killed, wounded, and missing, and had gained

absolutely nothing. We had not even the satisfaction of knowing that

we had inflicted as well as endured punishment, for the enemy remained

throughout the day so cleverly concealed that it is doubtful whether

more than a hundred casualties occurred in their ranks. Once more it was

shown how weak an arm is artillery against an enemy who lies in shelter.

Our wounded fortunately bore a high proportion to our killed, as they

always will do when it is rifle fire rather than shell fire which is

effective. Roughly we had 150 killed and about 720 wounded. A more

humiliating item is the 250 or so who were missing. These men were the

gunners, the Devons, and the Scots Fusiliers, who were taken in the

donga together with small bodies from the Connaughts, the Dublins, and

other regiments who, having found some shelter, were unable to leave

it, and clung on until the retirement of their regiments left them in

a hopeless position. Some of these small knots of men were allowed to

retire in the evening by the Boers, who seemed by no means anxious

to increase the number of their prisoners. Colonel Thackeray, of

the Inniskilling Fusiliers, found himself with a handful of his men

surrounded by the enemy, but owing to their good humour and his own tact

he succeeded in withdrawing them in safety. The losses fell chiefly on

Hart's Brigade, Hildyard's Brigade, and the colonial irregulars, who

bore off the honours of the fight.

In his official report General Buller states that were it not for the

action of Colonel Long and the subsequent disaster to the artillery he

thought that the battle might have been a successful one. This is a hard

saying, and throws perhaps too much responsibility upon the gallant but

unfortunate gunner. There have been occasions in the war when greater

dash upon the part of our artillery might have changed the fate of the

day, and it is bad policy to be too severe upon the man who has taken

a risk and failed. The whole operation, with its advance over the open

against a concealed enemy with a river in his front, was so absolutely

desperate that Long may have seen that only desperate measures could

save the situation. To bring guns into action in front of the infantry

without having clearly defined the position of the opposing infantry

must always remain one of the most hazardous ventures of war. 'It would

certainly be mere folly,' says Prince Kraft, 'to advance artillery to

within 600 or 800 yards of a position held by infantry unless the latter

were under the fire of infantry from an even shorter range.' This 'mere

folly' is exactly what Colonel Long did, but it must be remembered in

extenuation that he shared with others the idea that the Boers were up

on the hills, and had no inkling that their front trenches were down at

the river. With the imperfect means at his disposal he did such scouting

as he could, and if his fiery and impetuous spirit led him into a

position which cost him so dearly it is certainly more easy for the

critic to extenuate his fault than that subsequent one which allowed

the abandoned guns to fall into the hands of the enemy. Nor is there any

evidence that the loss of these guns did seriously affect the fate of

the action, for at those other parts of the field where the infantry had

the full and unceasing support of the artillery the result was not more

favourable than at the centre.

So much for Colenso. A more unsatisfactory and in some ways inexplicable

action is not to be found in the range of British military history.

And the fuller the light which has been poured upon it, the more

extraordinary does the battle appear. There are a preface and a sequel

to the action which have put a severe strain upon the charity which

the British public has always shown that it is prepared to extend to

a defeated General. The preface is that General Buller sent word to

General White that he proposed to attack upon the 17th, while the

actual attack was delivered upon the 15th, so that the garrison was

not prepared to make that demonstration which might have prevented the

besiegers from sending important reinforcements to Botha, had he needed

them. The sequel is more serious. Losing all heart at his defeat,

General Buller, although he had been officially informed that White had

provisions for seventy days, sent a heliogram advising the surrender

of the garrison. White's first reply, which deserves to live with the

anecdote of Nelson's telescope at his blind eye, was to the effect that

he believed the enemy had been tampering with Buller's messages. To

this Buller despatched an amended message, which with Sir George White's

reply, is here appended:

Message of December 16th, as altered by that of December 17th, 1899.

'I tried Colenso yesterday, but failed; the enemy is too strong for my

force except with siege operations, and these will take one full month

to prepare. Can you last so long?

'How many days can you hold out? I suggest you firing away as much

ammunition as you can, and making best terms you can. I can remain here

if you have alternative suggestion, but unaided I cannot break in. I

find my infantry cannot fight more than ten miles from camp, and then

only if water can be got, and it is scarce here. Whatever happens,

recollect to burn your cipher, decipher, and code books, and all

deciphered messages.'

From Sir G. White to Sir R. Buller. December 16th, 1899.

'Yours of today received and understood. My suggestion is that you take

up strongest available position that will enable you to keep touch of

the enemy and harass him constantly with artillery fire, and in other

ways as much as possible. I can make food last for much longer than a

month, and will not think of making terms till I am forced to. You may

have hit enemy harder than you think. All our native spies report that

your artillery fire made considerable impression on enemy. Have your

losses been very heavy? If you lose touch of enemy, it will immensely

increase his opportunities of crushing me, and have worst effect

elsewhere. While you are in touch with him and in communication with

me, he has both of our forces to reckon with. Make every effort to get

reinforcements as early as possible, including India, and enlist every

man in both colonies who will serve and can ride. Things may look

brighter. The loss of 12,000 men here would be a heavy blow to England.

We must not yet think of it. I fear I could not cut my way to you.

Enteric fever is increasing alarmingly here. There are now 180 cases,

all within last month. Answer fully. I am keeping everything secret for

the present till I know your plans.'

Much allowance is to be made for a man who is staggering under the

mental shock of defeat and the physical exertions which Buller had

endured. That the Government made such allowance is clear from the fact

that he was not instantly recalled. And yet the cold facts are that we

have a British General, at the head of 25,000 men, recommending another

General, at the head of 12,000 men only twelve miles off, to lay down

his arms to an army which was certainly very inferior in numbers to

the total British force; and this because he had once been defeated,

although he knew that there was still time for the whole resources of

the Empire to be poured into Natal in order to prevent so shocking a

disaster. Such is a plain statement of the advice which Buller gave and

which White rejected. For the instant the fate not only of South Africa

but even, as I believe, of the Empire hung upon the decision of the old

soldier in Ladysmith, who had to resist the proposals of his own General

as sternly as the attacks of the enemy. He who sorely needed help

and encouragement became, as his message shows, the helper and the

encourager. It was a tremendous test, and Sir George White came through

it with a staunchness and a loyalty which saved us not only from

overwhelming present disaster, but from a hideous memory which must have

haunted British military annals for centuries to come.

CHAPTER 12. THE DARK HOUR.

The week which extended from December 10th to December 17th, 1899, was

the blackest one known during our generation, and the most disastrous

for British arms during the century. We had in the short space of seven

days lost, beyond all extenuation or excuse, three separate actions.

No single defeat was of vital importance in itself, but the cumulative

effect, occurring as they did to each of the main British forces in

South Africa, was very great. The total loss amounted to about three

thousand men and twelve guns, while the indirect effects in the way of

loss of prestige to ourselves and increased confidence and more numerous

recruits to our enemy were incalculable.

It is singular to glance at the extracts from the European press at that

time and to observe the delight and foolish exultation with which our

reverses were received. That this should occur in the French journals

is not unnatural, since our history has been largely a contest with that

Power, and we can regard with complacency an enmity which is the tribute

to our success. Russia, too, as the least progressive of European

States, has a natural antagonism of thought, if not of interests, to the

Power which stands most prominently for individual freedom and liberal

institutions. The same poor excuse may be made for the organs of the

Vatican. But what are we to say of the insensate railing of Germany,

a country whose ally we have been for centuries? In the days of

Marlborough, in the darkest hours of Frederick the Great, in the great

world struggle of Napoleon, we have been the brothers-in-arms of these

people. So with the Austrians also. If both these countries were

not finally swept from the map by Napoleon, it is largely to British

subsidies and British tenacity that they owe it. And yet these are the

folk who turned most bitterly against us at the only time in modern

history when we had a chance of distinguishing our friends from our

foes. Never again, I trust, on any pretext will a British guinea be

spent or a British soldier or sailor shed his blood for such allies. The

political lesson of this writer has been that we should make ourselves

strong within the empire, and let all outside it, save only our kinsmen

of America, go their own way and meet their own fate without let or

hindrance from us. It is amazing to find that even the Americans could

understand the stock from which they are themselves sprung so little

that such papers as the 'New York Herald' should imagine that our defeat

at Colenso was a good opportunity for us to terminate the war. The

other leading American journals, however, took a more sane view of the

situation, and realised that ten years of such defeats would not find

the end either of our resolution or of our resources.

In the British Islands and in the empire at large our misfortunes were

met by a sombre but unalterable determination to carry the war to a

successful conclusion and to spare no sacrifices which could lead to

that end. Amid the humiliation of our reverses there was a certain

undercurrent of satisfaction that the deeds of our foemen should at

least have made the contention that the strong was wantonly attacking

the weak an absurd one. Under the stimulus of defeat the opposition to

the war sensibly decreased. It had become too absurd even for the most

unreasonable platform orator to contend that a struggle had been forced

upon the Boers when every fresh detail showed how thoroughly they had

prepared for such a contingency and how much we had to make up. Many

who had opposed the war simply on that sporting instinct which backs

the smaller against the larger began to realise that what with the

geographical position of these people, what with the nature of their

country, and what with the mobility, number, and hardihood of their

forces, we had undertaken a task which would necessitate such a military

effort as we had never before been called upon to make. When Kipling at

the dawn of the war had sung of 'fifty thousand horse and foot going to

Table Bay,' the statement had seemed extreme. Now it was growing upon

the public mind that four times this number would not be an excessive

estimate. But the nation rose grandly to the effort. Their only fear,

often and loudly expressed, was that Parliament would deal too tamely

with the situation and fail to demand sufficient sacrifices. Such was

the wave of feeling over the country that it was impossible to hold

a peace meeting anywhere without a certainty of riot. The only London

daily which had opposed the war, though very ably edited, was overborne

by the general sentiment and compelled to change its line. In the

provinces also opposition was almost silent, and the great colonies were

even more unanimous than the mother country. Misfortune had solidified

us where success might have caused a sentimental opposition.

On the whole, the energetic mood of the nation was reflected by the

decided measures of the Government. Before the deep-sea cables had told

us the lists of our dead, steps had been taken to prove to the world

how great were our latent resources and how determined our spirit. On

December 18th, two days after Colenso, the following provisions were

made for carrying on the campaign.

1. That as General Buller's hands were full in Natal the supervision and

direction of the whole campaign should be placed in the hands of Lord

Roberts, with Lord Kitchener as his chief of staff. Thus the famous old

soldier and the famous young one were called together to the assistance

of the country.

2. That all the remaining army reserves should be called out.

3. That the 7th Division (10,000 men) should be despatched to Africa,

and that an 8th Division should be formed ready for service.

4. That considerable artillery reinforcements, including a howitzer

brigade, should go out.

5. That eleven Militia battalions be sent abroad.

6. That a strong contingent of Volunteers be sent out.

7. That a Yeomanry mounted force be despatched.

8. That mounted corps be raised at the discretion of the

Commander-in-Chief in South Africa.

9. That the patriotic offers of further contingents from the colonies be

gratefully accepted.

By these measures it was calculated that from seventy to a hundred

thousand men would be added to our South African armies, the numbers of

which were already not short of a hundred thousand.

It is one thing, however, to draw up paper reinforcements, and it is

another, in a free country where no compulsion would be tolerated, to

turn these plans into actual regiments and squadrons. But if there were

any who doubted that this ancient nation still glowed with the spirit

of its youth his fears must soon have passed away. For this far-distant

war, a war of the unseen foe and of the murderous ambuscade, there

were so many volunteers that the authorities were embarrassed by their

numbers and their pertinacity. It was a stimulating sight to see those

long queues of top-hatted, frock-coated young men who waited their turn

for the orderly room with as much desperate anxiety as if hard fare,

a veld bed, and Boer bullets were all that life had that was worth the

holding. Especially the Imperial Yeomanry, a corps of riders and shots,

appealed to the sporting instincts of our race. Many could ride and not

shoot, many could shoot and not ride, more candidates were rejected

than were accepted, and yet in a very short time eight thousand men from

every class were wearing the grey coats and bandoliers. This singular

and formidable force was drawn from every part of England and Scotland,

with a contingent of hard-riding Irish fox-hunters. Noblemen and

grooms rode knee to knee in the ranks, and the officers included many

well-known country gentlemen and masters of hounds. Well horsed and well

armed, a better force for the work in hand could not be imagined. So

high did the patriotism run that corps were formed in which the men

not only found their own equipment but contributed their pay to the war

fund. Many young men about town justified their existence for the first

time. In a single club, which is peculiarly consecrated to the jeunesse

doree, three hundred members rode to the wars.

Without waiting for these distant but necessary reinforcements, the

Generals in Africa had two divisions to look to, one of which was

actually arriving while the other was on the sea. These formed the 5th

Division under Sir Charles Warren, and the 6th Division under General

Kelly-Kenny. Until these forces should arrive it was obviously best that

the three armies should wait, for, unless there should be pressing need

of help on the part of the besieged garrisons or imminent prospects of

European complications, every week which passed was in our favour. There

was therefore a long lull in the war, during which Methuen strengthened

his position at Modder River, Gatacre held his own at Sterkstroom,

and Buller built up his strength for another attempt at the relief of

Ladysmith. The only connected series of operations during that time were

those of General French in the neighbourhood of Colesberg, an account of

which will be found in their entirety elsewhere. A short narrative may

be given here of the doings of each of these forces until the period of

inaction came to an end.

Methuen after the repulse at Magersfontein had fallen back upon the

lines of Modder River, and had fortified them in such a way that he felt

himself secure against assault. Cronje, on the other hand, had extended

his position both to the right and to the left, and had strengthened the

works which we had already found so formidable. In this way a condition

of inaction was established which was really very much to our advantage,

since Methuen retained his communications by rail, while all supplies

to Cronje had to come a hundred miles by road. The British troops, and

especially the Highland Brigade, were badly in need of a rest after the

very severe ordeal which they had undergone. General Hector Macdonald,

whose military record had earned the soldierly name of 'Fighting Mac,'

was sent for from India to take the place of the ill-fated Wauchope.

Pending his arrival and that of reinforcements, Methuen remained quiet,

and the Boers fortunately followed his example. From over the northern

horizon those silver flashes of light told that Kimberley was dauntless

in the present and hopeful of the future. On January 1st the British

post of Kuruman fell, by which twelve officers and 120 police were

captured. The town was isolated, and its capture could have no effect

upon the general operations, but it is remarkable as the only capture of

a fortified post up to this point made by the Boers.

The monotony of the long wait was broken by one dashing raid carried

out by a detachment from Methuen's line of communications. This force

consisted of 200 Queenslanders, 100 Canadians (Toronto Company), 40

mounted Munster Fusiliers, a New South Wales Ambulance, and 200 of the

Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry with one horse battery. This singular

force, so small in numbers and yet raked from the ends of the earth, was

under the command of Colonel Pilcher. Moving out suddenly and rapidly

from Belmont, it struck at the extreme right of the Boer line, which

consisted of a laager occupied by the colonial rebels of that part of

the country. Nothing could exceed the enthusiasm of the colonists at

the prospect of action. 'At last!' was the cry which went up from the

Canadians when they were ordered to advance. The result was an absolute

success. The rebels broke and fled, their camp was taken, and forty of

them fell into our hands. Our own loss was slight, three killed and a

few wounded. The flying column occupied the town of Douglas and hoisted

the British flag there; but it was decided that the time had not yet

come when it could be held, and the force fell back upon Belmont. The

rebel prisoners were sent down to Cape Town for trial. The movement was

covered by the advance of a force under Babington from Methuen's force.

This detachment, consisting of the 9th and 12th Lancers, with some

mounted infantry and G troop of Horse Artillery, prevented any

interference with Pilcher's force from the north. It is worthy of record

that though the two bodies of troops were operating at a distance of

thirty miles, they succeeded in preserving a telephonic connection,

seventeen minutes being the average time taken over question and reply.

Encouraged by this small success, Methuen's cavalry on January 9th made

another raid over the Free State border, which is remarkable for the

fact that, save in the case of Colonel Plumer's Rhodesian Force, it

was the first time that the enemy's frontier had been violated. The

expedition under Babington consisted of the same regiments and the

same battery which had covered Pilcher's advance. The line taken was a

south-easterly one, so as to get far round the left flank of the Boer

position. With the aid of a party of the Victorian Mounted Rifles

a considerable tract of country was overrun, and some farmhouses

destroyed. The latter extreme measure may have been taken as a warning

to the Boers that such depredations as they had carried out in parts of

Natal could not pass with impunity, but both the policy and the humanity

of such a course appear to be open to question, and there was some cause

for the remonstrance which President Kruger shortly after addressed to

us upon the subject. The expedition returned to Modder Camp at the end

of two days without having seen the enemy. Save for one or two similar

cavalry reconnaissances, an occasional interchange of long-range shells,

a little sniping, and one or two false alarms at night, which broke the

whole front of Magersfontein into yellow lines of angry light, nothing

happened to Methuen's force which is worthy of record up to the time of

that movement of General Hector Macdonald to Koodoosberg which may be

considered in connection with Lord Roberts's decisive operations, of

which it was really a part.

The doings of General Gatacre's force during the long interval which

passed between his disaster at Stormberg and the final general advance

may be rapidly chronicled. Although nominally in command of a division,

Gatacre's troops were continually drafted off to east and to west, so

that it was seldom that he had more than a brigade under his orders.

During the weeks of waiting, his force consisted of three field

batteries, the 74th, 77th, and 79th, some mounted police and irregular

horse, the remains of the Royal Irish Rifles and the 2nd Northumberland

Fusiliers, the 1st Royal Scots, the Derbyshire regiment, and the

Berkshires, the whole amounting to about 5500 men, who had to hold the

whole district from Sterkstroom to East London on the coast, with a

victorious enemy in front and a disaffected population around. Under

these circumstances he could not attempt to do more than to hold his

ground at Sterkstroom, and this he did unflinchingly until the line of

the Boer defence broke down. Scouting and raiding expeditions, chiefly

organised by Captain De Montmorency--whose early death cut short the

career of one who possessed every quality of a partisan leader--broke

the monotony of inaction. During the week which ended the year a

succession of small skirmishes, of which the town of Dordrecht was the

centre, exercised the troops in irregular warfare.

On January 3rd the Boer forces advanced and attacked the camp of the

Cape Mounted Police, which was some eight miles in advance of Gatacre's

main position. The movement, however, was a half-hearted one, and was

beaten off with small loss upon their part and less upon ours. From then

onwards no movement of importance took place in Gatacre's column until

the general advance along the whole line had cleared his difficulties

from in front of him.

In the meantime General Buller had also been playing a waiting game,

and, secure in the knowledge that Ladysmith could still hold out, he

had been building up his strength for a second attempt to relieve the

hard-pressed and much-enduring garrison. After the repulse at Colenso,

Hildyard's and Barton's brigades had remained at Chieveley with the

mounted infantry, the naval guns, and two field batteries. The rest of

the force retired to Frere, some miles in the rear. Emboldened by their

success, the Boers sent raiding parties over the Tugela on either flank,

which were only checked by our patrols being extended from Springfield

on the west to Weenen on the east. A few plundered farmhouses and a

small list of killed and wounded horsemen on either side were the sole

result of these spasmodic and half-hearted operations.

Time here as elsewhere was working for the British, for reinforcements

were steadily coming to Buller's army. By the new year Sir Charles

Warren's division (the 5th) was nearly complete at Estcourt, whence it

could reach the front at any moment. This division included the 10th

brigade, consisting of the Imperial Light Infantry, 2nd Somersets, the

2nd Dorsets, and the 2nd Middlesex; also the 11th, called the Lancashire

Brigade, formed by the 2nd Royal Lancaster, the 2nd Lancashire

Fusiliers, the 1st South Lancashire, and the York and Lancaster. The

division also included the 14th Hussars and the 19th, 20th, and 28th

batteries of Field Artillery. Other batteries of artillery, including

one howitzer battery, came to strengthen Buller's force, which amounted

now to more than 30,000 men. Immense transport preparations had to be

made, however, before the force could have the mobility necessary for a

flank march, and it was not until January 11th that General Buller's new

plans for advance could be set into action. Before describing what these

plans were and the disappointing fate which awaited them, we will

return to the story of the siege of Ladysmith, and show how narrowly the

relieving force escaped the humiliation--some would say the disgrace--of

seeing the town which looked to them for help fall beneath their very

eyes. That this did not occur is entirely due to the fierce tenacity and

savage endurance of the disease-ridden and half-starved men who held on

to the frail lines which covered it.

CHAPTER 13. THE SIEGE OF LADYSMITH.

Monday, October 30th, 1899, is not a date which can be looked back to

with satisfaction by any Briton. In a scrambling and ill-managed action

we had lost our detached left wing almost to a man, while our right had

been hustled with no great loss but with some ignominy into Ladysmith.

Our guns had been outshot, our infantry checked, and our cavalry

paralysed. Eight hundred prisoners may seem no great loss when compared

with a Sedan, or even with an Ulm; but such matters are comparative,

and the force which laid down its arms at Nicholson's Nek is the

largest British force which has surrendered since the days of our great

grandfathers, when the egregious Duke of York commanded in Flanders.

Sir George White was now confronted with the certainty of an investment,

an event for which apparently no preparation had been made, since with

an open railway behind him so many useless mouths had been permitted

to remain in the town. Ladysmith lies in a hollow and is dominated by

a ring of hills, some near and some distant. The near ones were in our

hands, but no attempt had been made in the early days of the war to

fortify and hold Bulwana, Lombard's Kop, and the other positions from

which the town might be shelled. Whether these might or might not have

been successfully held has been much disputed by military men,

the balance of opinion being that Bulwana, at least, which has a

water-supply of its own, might have been retained. This question,

however, was already academic, as the outer hills were in the hands

of the enemy. As it was, the inner line--Caesar's Camp, Wagon Hill,

Rifleman's Post, and round to Helpmakaar Hill--made a perimeter of

fourteen miles, and the difficulty of retaining so extensive a line goes

far to exonerate General White, not only for abandoning the outer hills,

but also for retaining his cavalry in the town.

After the battle of Ladysmith and the retreat of the British, the Boers

in their deliberate but effective fashion set about the investment of

the town, while the British commander accepted the same as inevitable,

content if he could stem and hold back from the colony the threatened

flood of invasion. On Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday the

commandoes gradually closed in upon the south and east, harassed by

some cavalry operations and reconnaissances upon our part, the effect of

which was much exaggerated by the press. On Thursday, November 2nd, the

last train escaped under a brisk fire, the passengers upon the wrong

side of the seats. At 2 P.M. on the same day the telegraph line was cut,

and the lonely town settled herself somberly down to the task of holding

off the exultant Boers until the day--supposed to be imminent--when the

relieving army should appear from among the labyrinth of mountains which

lay to the south of them. Some there were who, knowing both the enemy

and the mountains, felt a cold chill within their hearts as they asked

themselves how an army was to come through, but the greater number, from

General to private, trusted implicitly in the valour of their comrades

and in the luck of the British Army.

One example of that historical luck was ever before their eyes in the

shape of those invaluable naval guns which had arrived so dramatically

at the very crisis of the fight, in time to check the monster on

Pepworth Hill and to cover the retreat of the army. But for them the

besieged must have lain impotent under the muzzles of the huge Creusots.

But in spite of the naive claims put forward by the Boers to some

special Providence--a process which a friendly German critic described

as 'commandeering the Almighty'--it is certain that in a very peculiar

degree, in the early months of this war there came again and again a

happy chance, or a merciful interposition, which saved the British from

disaster. Now in this first week of November, when every hill, north

and south and east and west, flashed and smoked, and the great 96-pound

shells groaned and screamed over the town, it was to the long thin

4.7's and to the hearty bearded men who worked them, that soldiers and

townsfolk looked for help. These guns of Lambton's, supplemented by two

old-fashioned 6.3 howitzers manned by survivors from No. 10 Mountain

Battery, did all that was possible to keep down the fire of the heavy

Boer guns. If they could not save, they could at least hit back,

and punishment is not so bad to bear when one is giving as well as

receiving.

By the end of the first week of November the Boers had established their

circle of fire. On the east of the town, broken by the loops of the Klip

River, is a broad green plain, some miles in extent, which furnished

grazing ground for the horses and cattle of the besieged. Beyond it

rises into a long flat-topped hill the famous Bulwana, upon which lay

one great Creusot and several smaller guns. To the north, on Pepworth

Hill, was another Creusot, and between the two were the Boer batteries

upon Lombard's Kop. The British naval guns were placed upon this side,

for, as the open loop formed by the river lies at this end, it is the

part of the defences which is most liable to assault. From thence all

round the west down to Besters in the south was a continuous series of

hills, each crowned with Boer guns, which, if they could not harm the

distant town, were at least effective in holding the garrison to its

lines. So formidable were these positions that, amid much outspoken

criticism, it has never been suggested that White would have been

justified with a limited garrison in incurring the heavy loss of life

which must have followed an attempt to force them.

The first few days of the siege were clouded by the death of Lieutenant

Egerton of the 'Powerful,' one of the most promising officers in the

Navy. One leg and the other foot were carried off, as he lay upon the

sandbag parapet watching the effect of our fire. 'There's an end of my

cricket,' said the gallant sportsman, and he was carried to the rear

with a cigar between his clenched teeth.

On November 3rd a strong cavalry reconnaissance was pushed down

the Colenso road to ascertain the force which the enemy had in that

direction. Colonel Brocklehurst took with him the 18th and 19th Hussars,

the 5th Lancers and the 5th Dragoon Guards, with the Light Horse and the

Natal Volunteers. Some desultory fighting ensued which achieved no end,

and was chiefly remarkable for the excellent behaviour of the Colonials,

who showed that they were the equals of the Regulars in gallantry and

their superiors in the tactics which such a country requires. The death

of Major Taunton, Captain Knapp, and young Brabant, the son of the

General who did such good service at a later stage of the war, was a

heavy price to pay for the knowledge that the Boers were in considerable

strength to the south.

By the end of this week the town had already settled down to the routine

of the siege. General Joubert, with the chivalry which had always

distinguished him, had permitted the garrison to send out the

non-combatants to a place called Intombi Camp (promptly named

Funkersdorp by the facetious) where they were safe from the shells,

though the burden of their support still fell of course upon the

much-tried commissariat. The hale and male of the townsfolk refused for

the most part to avoid the common danger, and clung tenaciously to their

shot-torn village. Fortunately the river has worn down its banks until

it runs through a deep channel, in the sides of which it was found to be

possible to hollow out caves which were practically bomb-proof. Here

for some months the townsfolk led a troglodytic existence, returning

to their homes upon that much appreciated seventh day of rest which was

granted to them by their Sabbatarian besiegers.

The perimeter of the defence had been divided off so that each

corps might be responsible for its own section. To the south was

the Manchester Regiment upon the hill called Caesar's Camp. Between

Lombard's Kop and the town, on the north-east, were the Devons. To the

north, at what seemed the vulnerable point, were the Rifle Brigade, the

Rifles, and the remains of the 18th Hussars. To the west were the 5th

Lancers, 19th Hussars, and 5th Dragoon Guards. The rest of the force was

encamped round the outskirts of the town.

There appears to have been some idea in the Boer mind that the mere fact

that they held a dominant position over the town would soon necessitate

the surrender of the army. At the end of a week they had realised,

however, just as the British had, that a siege lay before both. Their

fire upon the town was heavy but not deadly, though it became more

effective as the weeks went on. Their practice at a range of five miles

was exceedingly accurate. At the same time their riflemen became more

venturesome, and on Tuesday, November 7th, they made a half-hearted

attack upon the Manchesters' position on the south, which was driven

back without difficulty. On the 9th, however, their attempt was of a

more serious and sustained character. It began with a heavy shell-fire

and with a demonstration of rifle-fire from every side, which had

for its object the prevention of reinforcements for the true point of

danger, which again was Caesar's Camp at the south. It is evident that

the Boers had from the beginning made up their minds that here lay the

key of the position, as the two serious attacks--that of November 9th

and that of January 6th--were directed upon this point.

The Manchesters at Caesar's Camp had been reinforced by the 1st

battalion 60th Rifles, who held the prolongation of the same ridge,

which is called Waggon Hill. With the dawn it was found that the Boer

riflemen were within eight hundred yards, and from then till evening a

constant fire was maintained upon the hill. The Boer, however, save when

the odds are all in his favour, is not, in spite of his considerable

personal bravery, at his best in attack. His racial traditions,

depending upon the necessity for economy of human life, are all opposed

to it. As a consequence two regiments well posted were able to hold them

off all day with a loss which did not exceed thirty killed and wounded,

while the enemy, exposed to the shrapnel of the 42nd battery, as well

as the rifle-fire of the infantry, must have suffered very much more

severely. The result of the action was a well-grounded belief that in

daylight there was very little chance of the Boers being able to carry

the lines. As the date was that of the Prince of Wales's birthday, a

salute of twenty-one shotted naval guns wound up a successful day.

The failure of the attempt upon Ladysmith seems to have convinced the

enemy that a waiting game, in which hunger, shell-fire, and disease were

their allies, would be surer and less expensive than an open assault.

From their distant hilltops they continued to plague the town, while

garrison and citizens sat grimly patient, and learned to endure if not

to enjoy the crash of the 96-pound shells, and the patter of shrapnel

upon their corrugated-iron roofs. The supplies were adequate, and the

besieged were fortunate in the presence of a first-class organiser,

Colonel Ward of Islington fame, who with the assistance of Colonel

Stoneman systematised the collection and issue of all the food, civil

and military, so as to stretch it to its utmost. With rain overhead and

mud underfoot, chafing at their own idleness and humiliated by their

own position, the soldiers waited through the weary weeks for the relief

which never came. On some days there was more shell-fire, on some less;

on some there was sniping, on some none; on some they sent a little

feeler of cavalry and guns out of the town, on most they lay still--such

were the ups and downs of life in Ladysmith. The inevitable siege

paper, 'The Ladysmith Lyre,' appeared, and did something to relieve the

monotony by the exasperation of its jokes. Night, morning, and noon the

shells rained upon the town until the most timid learned fatalism if not

bravery. The crash of the percussion, and the strange musical tang of

the shrapnel sounded ever in their ears. With their glasses the garrison

could see the gay frocks and parasols of the Boer ladies who had come

down by train to see the torture of the doomed town.

The Boers were sufficiently numerous, aided by their strong positions

and excellent artillery, to mask the Ladysmith force and to sweep on at

once to the conquest of Natal. Had they done so it is hard to see what

could have prevented them from riding their horses down to salt water.

A few odds and ends, half battalions and local volunteers, stood between

them and Durban. But here, as on the Orange River, a singular paralysis

seems to have struck them. When the road lay clear before them the first

transports of the army corps were hardly past St. Vincent, but before

they had made up their mind to take that road the harbour of Durban

was packed with our shipping and ten thousand men had thrown themselves

across their path.

For a moment we may leave the fortunes of Ladysmith to follow this

southerly movement of the Boers. Within two days of the investment of

the town they had swung round their left flank and attacked Colenso,

twelve miles south, shelling the Durban Light Infantry out of their post

with a long-range fire. The British fell back twenty-seven miles

and concentrated at Estcourt, leaving the all-important Colenso

railway-bridge in the hands of the enemy. From this onwards they held

the north of the Tugela, and many a widow wore crepe before we got our

grip upon it once more. Never was there a more critical week in the war,

but having got Colenso the Boers did little more. They formally annexed

the whole of Northern Natal to the Orange Free State--a dangerous

precedent when the tables should be turned. With amazing assurance the

burghers pegged out farms for themselves and sent for their people to

occupy these newly won estates.

On November 5th the Boers had remained so inert that the British

returned in small force to Colenso and removed some stores--which seems

to suggest that the original retirement was premature. Four days passed

in inactivity--four precious days for us--and on the evening of the

fourth, November 9th, the watchers on the signal station at Table

Mountain saw the smoke of a great steamer coming past Robben Island. It

was the 'Roslin Castle' with the first of the reinforcements. Within the

week the 'Moor,' 'Yorkshire,' 'Aurania,' 'Hawarden Castle,' 'Gascon,'

'Armenian,' 'Oriental,' and a fleet of others had passed for Durban with

15,000 men. Once again the command of the sea had saved the Empire.

But, now that it was too late, the Boers suddenly took the initiative,

and in dramatic fashion. North of Estcourt, where General Hildyard was

being daily reinforced from the sea, there are two small townlets, or at

least geographical (and railway) points. Frere is about ten miles north

of Estcourt, and Chieveley is five miles north of that and about as

far to the south of Colenso. On November 15th an armoured train was

despatched from Estcourt to see what was going on up the line. Already

one disaster had befallen us in this campaign on account of these clumsy

contrivances, and a heavier one was now to confirm the opinion that,

acting alone, they are totally inadmissible. As a means of carrying

artillery for a force operating upon either flank of them, with an

assured retreat behind, there may be a place for them in modern war, but

as a method of scouting they appear to be the most inefficient and also

the most expensive that has ever been invented. An intelligent horseman

would gather more information, be less visible, and retain some freedom

as to route. After our experience the armoured train may steam out of

military history.

The train contained ninety Dublin Fusiliers, eighty Durban Volunteers,

and ten sailors, with a naval 7-pounder gun. Captain Haldane of the

Gordons, Lieutenant Frankland (Dublin Fusiliers), and Winston Churchill,

the well-known correspondent, accompanied the expedition. What might

have been foreseen occurred. The train steamed into the advancing Boer

army, was fired upon, tried to escape, found the rails blocked behind

it, and upset. Dublins and Durbans were shot helplessly out of their

trucks, under a heavy fire. A railway accident is a nervous thing, and

so is an ambuscade, but the combination of the two must be appalling.

Yet there were brave hearts which rose to the occasion. Haldane and

Frankland rallied the troops, and Churchill the engine-driver. The

engine was disentangled and sent on with its cab full of wounded.

Churchill, who had escaped upon it, came gallantly back to share the

fate of his comrades. The dazed shaken soldiers continued a futile

resistance for some time, but there was neither help nor escape and

nothing for them but surrender. The most Spartan military critic cannot

blame them. A few slipped away besides those who escaped upon the

engine. Our losses were two killed, twenty wounded, and about eighty

taken. It is remarkable that of the three leaders both Haldane and

Churchill succeeded in escaping from Pretoria.

A double tide of armed men was now pouring into Southern Natal. From

below, trainload after trainload of British regulars were coming up to

the danger point, feted and cheered at every station. Lonely farmhouses

near the line hung out their Union Jacks, and the folk on the stoep

heard the roar of the choruses as the great trains swung upon their way.

From above the Boers were flooding down, as Churchill saw them, dour,

resolute, riding silently through the rain, or chanting hymns round

their camp fires--brave honest farmers, but standing unconsciously for

mediaevalism and corruption, even as our rough-tongued Tommies stood for

civilisation, progress, and equal rights for all men.

The invading force, the numbers of which could not have exceeded some

few thousands, formidable only for their mobility, lapped round the more

powerful but less active force at Estcourt, and struck behind it at

its communications. There was for a day or two some discussion as to a

further retreat, but Hildyard, strengthened by the advice and presence

of Colonel Long, determined to hold his ground. On November 21st the

raiding Boers were as far south as Nottingham Road, a point thirty miles

south of Estcourt and only forty miles north of the considerable city of

Pietermaritzburg. The situation was serious. Either the invaders must

be stopped, or the second largest town in the colony would be in

their hands. From all sides came tales of plundered farms and broken

households. Some at least of the raiders behaved with wanton brutality.

Smashed pianos, shattered pictures, slaughtered stock, and vile

inscriptions, all exhibit a predatory and violent side to the

paradoxical Boer character. [Footnote: More than once I have heard the

farmers in the Free State acknowledge that the ruin which had come upon

them was a just retribution for the excesses of Natal.]

The next British post behind Hildyard's at Estcourt was Barton's upon

the Mooi River, thirty miles to the south. Upon this the Boers made a

half-hearted attempt, but Joubert had begun to realise the strength of

the British reinforcements and the impossibility with the numbers at his

disposal of investing a succession of British posts. He ordered Botha to

withdraw from Mooi River and begin his northerly trek.

The turning-point of the Boer invasion of Natal was marked, though we

cannot claim that it was caused, by the action of Willow Grange. This

was fought by Hildyard and Walter Kitchener in command of the Estcourt

garrison, against about 2000 of the invaders under Louis Botha. The

troops engaged were the East and West Surreys (four companies of the

latter), the West Yorkshires, the Durban Light Infantry, No. 7 battery

R.F.A., two naval guns, and some hundreds of Colonial Horse.

The enemy being observed to have a gun upon a hill within striking

distance of Estcourt, this force set out on November 22nd to make a

night attack and to endeavour to capture it. The hill was taken without

difficulty, but it was found that the gun had been removed. A severe

counter-attack was made at daylight by the Boers, and the troops were

compelled with no great loss and less glory to return to the town.

The Surreys and the Yorkshires behaved very well, but were placed in a

difficult position and were badly supported by the artillery. Martyn's

Mounted Infantry covered the retirement with great gallantry, but the

skirmish ended in a British loss of fourteen killed and fifty wounded

or missing, which was certainly more than that of the Boers. From this

indecisive action of Willow Grange the Boer invasion receded until

General Buller, coming to the front on November 27th, found that the

enemy was once more occupying the line of the Tugela. He himself moved

up to Frere, where he devoted his time and energies to the collection of

that force with which he was destined, after three failures, to make his

way into Ladysmith.

One unexpected and little known result of the Boer expedition into

Southern Natal was that their leader, the chivalrous Joubert, injured

himself through his horse stumbling, and was physically incapacitated

for the remainder of the campaign. He returned almost immediately to

Pretoria, leaving the command of the Tugela in the hands of Louis Botha.

Leaving Buller to organise his army at Frere, and the Boer commanders

to draw their screen of formidable defences along the Tugela, we will

return once more to the fortunes of the unhappy town round which the

interest of the world, and possibly the destiny of the Empire, were

centering. It is very certain that had Ladysmith fallen, and twelve

thousand British soldiers with a million pounds' worth of stores fallen

into the hands of the invaders, we should have been faced with the

alternative of abandoning the struggle, or of reconquering South Africa

from Cape Town northwards. South Africa is the keystone of the Empire,

and for the instant Ladysmith was the keystone of South Africa. But

the courage of the troops who held the shell-torn townlet, and the

confidence of the public who watched them, never faltered for an

instant.

December 8th was marked by a gallant exploit on the part of the

beleaguered garrison. Not a whisper had transpired of the coming sortie,

and a quarter of an hour before the start officers engaged had no idea

of it. O si sic omnia! At ten o'clock a band of men slipped out of the

town. There were six hundred of them, all irregulars, drawn from the

Imperial Light Horse, the Natal Carabineers, and the Border Mounted

Rifles, under the command of Hunter, youngest and most dashing of

British Generals. Edwardes and Boyston were the subcommanders. The men

had no knowledge of where they were going or what they had to do, but

they crept silently along under a drifting sky, with peeps of a quarter

moon, over a mimosa-shadowed plain. At last in front of them there

loomed a dark mass--it was Gun Hill, from which one of the great

Creusots had plagued them. A strong support (four hundred men) was left

at the base of the hill, and the others, one hundred Imperials, one

hundred Borders and Carabineers, ten Sappers, crept upwards with Major

Henderson as guide. A Dutch outpost challenged, but was satisfied by a

Dutch-speaking Carabineer. Higher and higher the men crept, the silence

broken only by the occasional slip of a stone or the rustle of their own

breathing. Most of them had left their boots below. Even in the darkness

they kept some formation, and the right wing curved forward to outflank

the defence. Suddenly a Mauser crack and a spurt of flame--then another

and another! 'Come on, boys! Fix bayonets!' yelled Karri Davies. There

were no bayonets, but that was a detail. At the word the gunners were

off, and there in the darkness in front of the storming party loomed

the enormous gun, gigantic in that uncertain light. Out with the

huge breech-block! Wrap the long lean muzzle round with a collar of

gun-cotton! Keep the guard upon the run until the work is done!

Hunter stood by with a night light in his hand until the charge was in

position, and then, with a crash which brought both armies from their

tents, the huge tube reared up on its mountings and toppled backwards

into the pit. A howitzer lurked beside it, and this also was blown into

ruin. The attendant Maxim was dragged back by the exultant captors, who

reached the town amid shoutings and laughter with the first break of

day. One man wounded, the gallant Henderson, is the cheap price for the

best-planned and most dashing exploit of the war. Secrecy in conception,

vigour in execution--they are the root ideas of the soldier's craft. So

easily was the enterprise carried out, and so defective the Boer

watch, that it is probable that if all the guns had been simultaneously

attacked the Boers might have found themselves without a single piece of

ordnance in the morning. [Footnote: The destruction of the Creusot was

not as complete as was hoped. It was taken back to Pretoria, three feet

were sawn off the muzzle, and a new breech-block provided. The gun was

then sent to Kimberley, and it was the heavy cannon which arrived late

in the history of that siege and caused considerable consternation among

the inhabitants.]

On the same morning (December 9th) a cavalry reconnaissance was pushed

in the direction of Pepworth Hill. The object no doubt was to ascertain

whether the enemy were still present in force, and the terrific roll

of the Mausers answered it in the affirmative. Two killed and twenty

wounded was the price which we paid for the information. There had been

three such reconnaissances in the five weeks of the siege, and it

is difficult to see what advantage they gave or how they are to be

justified. Far be it for the civilian to dogmatise upon such matters,

but one can repeat, and to the best of one's judgment endorse, the

opinion of the vast majority of officers.

There were heart burnings among the Regulars that the colonial troops

should have gone in front of them, so their martial jealousy was allayed

three nights later by the same task being given to them. Four companies

of the 2nd Rifle Brigade were the troops chosen, with a few sappers and

gunners, the whole under the command of Colonel Metcalfe of the same

battalion. A single gun, the 4.7 howitzer upon Surprise Hill, was the

objective. Again there was the stealthy advance through the darkness,

again the support was left at the bottom of the hill, again the two

companies carefully ascended, again there was the challenge, the rush,

the flight, and the gun was in the hands of the stormers.

Here and only here the story varies. For some reason the fuse used

for the guncotton was defective, and half an hour elapsed before the

explosion destroyed the howitzer. When it came it came very thoroughly,

but it was a weary time in coming. Then our men descended the hill,

but the Boers were already crowding in upon them from either side. The

English cries of the soldiers were answered in English by the Boers, and

slouch hat or helmet dimly seen in the mirk was the only badge of friend

or foe. A singular letter is extant from young Reitz (the son of the

Transvaal secretary), who was present. According to his account there

were but eight Boers present, but assertion or contradiction equally

valueless in the darkness of such a night, and there are some obvious

discrepancies in his statement. 'We fired among them,' says Reitz.

'They stopped and all cried out "Rifle Brigade." Then one of them said

"Charge!" One officer, Captain Paley, advanced, though he had two bullet

wounds already. Joubert gave him another shot and he fell on the top of

us. Four Englishmen got hold of Jan Luttig and struck him on the head

with their rifles and stabbed him in the stomach with a bayonet. He

seized two of them by the throat and shouted "Help, boys!" His two

nearest comrades shot two of them, and the other two bolted. Then the

English came up in numbers, about eight hundred, along the footpath'

(there were two hundred on the hill, but the exaggeration is pardonable

in the darkness), 'and we lay as quiet as mice along the bank. Farther

on the English killed three of our men with bayonets and wounded two.

In the morning we found Captain Paley and twenty-two of them killed and

wounded.' It seems evident that Reitz means that his own little

party were eight men, and not that that represented the force which

intercepted the retiring riflemen. Within his own knowledge five of his

countrymen were killed in the scuffle, so the total loss was probably

considerable. Our own casualties were eleven dead, forty-three wounded,

and six prisoners, but the price was not excessive for the howitzer and

for the morale which arises from such exploits. Had it not been for that

unfortunate fuse, the second success might have been as bloodless as the

first. 'I am sorry,' said a sympathetic correspondent to the stricken

Paley. 'But we got the gun,' Paley whispered, and he spoke for the

Brigade.

Amid the shell-fire, the scanty rations, the enteric and the dysentery,

one ray of comfort had always brightened the garrison. Buller was only

twelve miles away--they could hear his guns--and when his advance came

in earnest their sufferings would be at an end. But now in an instant

this single light was shut off and the true nature of their situation

was revealed to them. Buller had indeed moved...but backwards. He had

been defeated at Colenso, and the siege was not ending but beginning.

With heavier hearts but undiminished resolution the army and the

townsfolk settled down to the long, dour struggle. The exultant enemy

replaced their shattered guns and drew their lines closer still round

the stricken town.

A record of the siege onwards until the break of the New Year centres

upon the sordid details of the sick returns and of the price of food.

Fifty on one day, seventy on the next, passed under the hands of the

overworked and devoted doctors. Fifteen hundred, and later two thousand,

of the garrison were down. The air was poisoned by foul sewage and dark

with obscene flies. They speckled the scanty food. Eggs were already a

shilling each, cigarettes sixpence, whisky five pounds a bottle: a city

more free from gluttony and drunkenness has never been seen.

Shell-fire has shown itself in this war to be an excellent ordeal for

those who desire martial excitement with a minimum of danger. But

now and again some black chance guides a bomb--one in five thousand

perhaps--to a most tragic issue. Such a deadly missile falling among

Boers near Kimberley is said to have slain nine and wounded seventeen.

In Ladysmith too there are days to be marked in red when the gunner shot

better than he knew. One shell on December 17th killed six men (Natal

Carabineers), wounded three, and destroyed fourteen horses. The grisly

fact has been recorded that five separate human legs lay upon the

ground. On December 22nd another tragic shot killed five and wounded

twelve of the Devons. On the same day four officers of the 5th Lancers

(including the Colonel) and one sergeant were wounded--a most disastrous

day. A little later it was again the turn of the Devons, who lost one

officer killed and ten wounded. Christmas set in amid misery, hunger,

and disease, the more piteous for the grim attempts to amuse the

children and live up to the joyous season, when the present of Santa

Claus was too often a 96-pound shell. On the top of all other troubles

it was now known that the heavy ammunition was running short and must

be husbanded for emergencies. There was no surcease, however, in the

constant hail which fell upon the town. Two or three hundred shells were

a not unusual daily allowance. The monotonous bombardment with which

the New Year had commenced was soon to be varied by a most gallant and

spirit-stirring clash of arms. On January 6th the Boers delivered their

great assault upon Ladysmith--an onfall so gallantly made and gallantly

met that it deserves to rank among the classic fights of British

military history. It is a tale which neither side need be ashamed to

tell. Honour to the sturdy infantry who held their grip so long,

and honour also to the rough men of the veld, who, led by untrained

civilians, stretched us to the utmost capacity of our endurance.

It may be that the Boers wished once for all to have done at all costs

with the constant menace to their rear, or it may be that the deliberate

preparations of Buller for his second advance had alarmed them, and that

they realised that they must act quickly if they were to act at all.

At any rate, early in the New Year a most determined attack was decided

upon. The storming party consisted of some hundreds of picked volunteers

from the Heidelberg (Transvaal) and Harrismith (Free State) contingents,

led by de Villiers. They were supported by several thousand riflemen,

who might secure their success or cover their retreat. Eighteen heavy

guns had been trained upon the long ridge, one end of which has been

called Caesar's Camp and the other Waggon Hill. This hill, three miles

long, lay to the south of the town, and the Boers had early recognised

it as being the most vulnerable point, for it was against it that their

attack of November 9th had been directed. Now, after two months, they

were about to renew the attempt with greater resolution against less

robust opponents. At twelve o'clock our scouts heard the sounds of the

chanting of hymns in the Boer camps. At two in the morning crowds

of barefooted men were clustering round the base of the ridge, and

threading their way, rifle in hand, among the mimosa-bushes and

scattered boulders which cover the slope of the hill. Some working

parties were moving guns into position, and the noise of their labour

helped to drown the sound of the Boer advance. Both at Caesar's Camp,

the east end of the ridge, and at Waggon Hill, the west end (the points

being, I repeat, three miles apart), the attack came as a complete

surprise. The outposts were shot or driven in, and the stormers were

on the ridge almost as soon as their presence was detected. The line of

rocks blazed with the flash of their guns.

Caesar's Camp was garrisoned by one sturdy regiment, the Manchesters,

aided by a Colt automatic gun. The defence had been arranged in the form

of small sangars, each held by from ten to twenty men. Some few of these

were rushed in the darkness, but the Lancashire men pulled themselves

together and held on strenuously to those which remained. The crash

of musketry woke the sleeping town, and the streets resounded with the

shouting of the officers and the rattling of arms as the men mustered in

the darkness and hurried to the points of danger.

Three companies of the Gordons had been left near Caesar's Camp, and

these, under Captain Carnegie, threw themselves into the struggle. Four

other companies of Gordons came up in support from the town, losing

upon the way their splendid colonel, Dick-Cunyngham, who was killed by a

chance shot at three thousand yards, on this his first appearance since

he had recovered from his wounds at Elandslaagte. Later four companies

of the Rifle Brigade were thrown into the firing line, and a total of

two and a half infantry battalions held that end of the position. It was

not a man too much. With the dawn of day it could be seen that the Boers

held the southern and we the northern slopes, while the narrow plateau

between formed a bloody debatable ground. Along a front of a quarter of

a mile fierce eyes glared and rifle barrels flashed from behind every

rock, and the long fight swayed a little back or a little forward with

each upward heave of the stormers or rally of the soldiers. For hours

the combatants were so near that a stone or a taunt could be thrown from

one to the other. Some scattered sangars still held their own, though

the Boers had passed them. One such, manned by fourteen privates of the

Manchester Regiment, remained untaken, but had only two defenders left

at the end of the bloody day.

With the coming of the light the 53rd Field Battery, the one which had

already done so admirably at Lombard's Kop, again deserved well of its

country. It was impossible to get behind the Boers and fire straight at

their position, so every shell fired had to skim over the heads of

our own men upon the ridge and so pitch upon the reverse slope. Yet so

accurate was the fire, carried on under an incessant rain of shells

from the big Dutch gun on Bulwana, that not one shot miscarried and that

Major Abdy and his men succeeded in sweeping the further slope without

loss to our own fighting line. Exactly the same feat was equally well

performed at the other end of the position by Major Blewitt's 21st

Battery, which was exposed to an even more searching fire than the 53rd.

Any one who has seen the iron endurance of British gunners and marvelled

at the answering shot which flashes out through the very dust of the

enemy's exploding shell, will understand how fine must have been the

spectacle of these two batteries working in the open, with the ground

round them sharded with splinters. Eye-witnesses have left it upon

record that the sight of Major Blewitt strolling up and down among his

guns, and turning over with his toe the last fallen section of iron, was

one of the most vivid and stirring impressions which they carried from

the fight. Here also it was that the gallant Sergeant Bosley, his arm

and his leg stricken off by a Boer shell, cried to his comrades to roll

his body off the trail and go on working the gun.

At the same time as--or rather earlier than--the onslaught upon Caesar's

Camp a similar attack had been made with secrecy and determination upon

the western end of the position called Waggon Hill. The barefooted Boers

burst suddenly with a roll of rifle-fire into the little garrison of

Imperial Light Horse and Sappers who held the position. Mathias of the

former, Digby-Jones and Dennis of the latter, showed that 'two in

the morning' courage which Napoleon rated as the highest of military

virtues. They and their men were surprised but not disconcerted, and

stood desperately to a slogging match at the closest quarters. Seventeen

Sappers were down out of thirty, and more than half the little body of

irregulars. This end of the position was feebly fortified, and it is

surprising that so experienced and sound a soldier as Ian Hamilton

should have left it so. The defence had no marked advantage as compared

with the attack, neither trench, sangar, nor wire entanglement, and in

numbers they were immensely inferior. Two companies of the 60th Rifles

and a small body of the ubiquitous Gordons happened to be upon the hill

and threw themselves into the fray, but they were unable to turn the

tide. Of thirty-three Gordons under Lieutenant MacNaughten thirty were

wounded. [Footnote: The Gordons and the Sappers were there that morning

to re-escort one of Lambton's 4.7 guns, which was to be mounted there.

Ten seamen were with the gun, and lost three of their number in the

defence.] As our men retired under the shelter of the northern slope

they were reinforced by another hundred and fifty Gordons under the

stalwart Miller-Wallnutt, a man cast in the mould of a Berserk Viking.

To their aid also came two hundred of the Imperial Light Horse, burning

to assist their comrades. Another half-battalion of Rifles came with

them. At each end of the long ridge the situation at the dawn of day

was almost identical. In each the stormers had seized one side, but were

brought to a stand by the defenders upon the other, while the British

guns fired over the heads of their own infantry to rake the further

slope.

It was on the Waggon Hill side, however, that the Boer exertions were

most continuous and strenuous and our own resistance most desperate.

There fought the gallant de Villiers, while Ian Hamilton rallied the

defenders and led them in repeated rushes against the enemy's line.

Continually reinforced from below, the Boers fought with extraordinary

resolution. Never will any one who witnessed that Homeric contest

question the valour of our foes. It was a murderous business on both

sides. Edwardes of the Light Horse was struck down. In a gun-emplacement

a strange encounter took place at point-blank range between a group of

Boers and of Britons. De Villiers of the Free State shot Miller-Wallnut

dead, Ian Hamilton fired at de Villiers with his revolver and missed

him. Young Albrecht of the Light Horse shot de Villiers. A Boer named de

Jaeger shot Albrecht. Digby-Jones of the Sappers shot de Jaeger. Only a

few minutes later the gallant lad, who had already won fame enough for

a veteran, was himself mortally wounded, and Dennis, his comrade in arms

and in glory, fell by his side.

There has been no better fighting in our time than that upon Waggon Hill

on that January morning, and no better fighters than the Imperial Light

Horsemen who formed the centre of the defence. Here, as at Elandslaagte,

they proved themselves worthy to stand in line with the crack regiments

of the British army.

Through the long day the fight maintained its equilibrium along the

summit of the ridge, swaying a little that way or this, but never

amounting to a repulse of the stormers or to a rout of the defenders. So

intermixed were the combatants that a wounded man more than once found

himself a rest for the rifles of his enemies. One unfortunate soldier in

this position received six more bullets from his own comrades in their

efforts to reach the deadly rifleman behind him. At four o'clock a huge

bank of clouds which had towered upwards unheeded by the struggling men

burst suddenly into a terrific thunderstorm with vivid lightnings and

lashing rain. It is curious that the British victory at Elandslaagte

was heralded by just such another storm. Up on the bullet-swept hill

the long fringes of fighting men took no more heed of the elements than

would two bulldogs who have each other by the throat. Up the greasy

hillside, foul with mud and with blood, came the Boer reserves, and

up the northern slope came our own reserve, the Devon Regiment, fit

representatives of that virile county. Admirably led by Park, their

gallant Colonel, the Devons swept the Boers before them, and the Rifles,

Gordons, and Light Horse joined in the wild charge which finally cleared

the ridge.

But the end was not yet. The Boer had taken a risk over this venture,

and now he had to pay the stakes. Down the hill he passed, crouching,

darting, but the spruits behind him were turned into swirling streams,

and as he hesitated for an instant upon the brink the relentless sleet

of bullets came from behind. Many were swept away down the gorges and

into the Klip River, never again to be accounted for in the lists of

their field-cornet. The majority splashed through, found their horses

in their shelter, and galloped off across the great Bulwana Plain, as

fairly beaten in as fair a fight as ever brave men were yet.

The cheers of victory as the Devons swept the ridge had heartened the

weary men upon Caesar's Camp to a similar effort. Manchesters, Gordons,

and Rifles, aided by the fire of two batteries, cleared the long-debated

position. Wet, cold, weary, and without food for twenty-six hours, the

bedraggled Tommies stood yelling and waving, amid the litter of dead and

of dying.

It was a near thing. Had the ridge fallen the town must have followed,

and history perhaps have been changed. In the old stiff-rank Majuba days

we should have been swept in an hour from the position. But the wily man

behind the rock was now to find an equally wily man in front of him.

The soldier had at last learned something of the craft of the hunter. He

clung to his shelter, he dwelled on his aim, he ignored his dressings,

he laid aside the eighteenth-century traditions of his pigtailed

ancestor, and he hit the Boers harder than they had been hit yet. No

return may ever come to us of their losses on that occasion; 80 dead

bodies were returned to them from the ridge alone, while the slopes,

the dongas, and the river each had its own separate tale. No possible

estimate can make it less than three hundred killed and wounded, while

many place it at a much higher figure. Our own casualties were very

serious and the proportion of dead to wounded unusually high, owing to

the fact that the greater part of the wounds were necessarily of the

head. In killed we lost 13 officers, 135 men. In wounded 28 officers,

244 men--a total of 420, Lord Ava, the honoured Son of an honoured

father, the fiery Dick-Cunyngham, stalwart Miller-Wallnutt, the brave

boy sappers Digby-Jones and Dennis, Adams and Packman of the Light

Horse, the chivalrous Lafone--we had to mourn quality as well as

numbers. The grim test of the casualty returns shows that it was to the

Imperial Light Horse (ten officers down, and the regiment commanded by

a junior captain), the Manchesters, the Gordons, the Devons, and the 2nd

Rifle Brigade that the honours of the day are due.

In the course of the day two attacks had been made upon other points

of the British position, the one on Observation Hill on the north, the

other on the Helpmakaar position on the east. Of these the latter was

never pushed home and was an obvious feint, but in the case of the other

it was not until Schutte, their commander, and forty or fifty men had

been killed and wounded, that the stormers abandoned their attempt. At

every point the assailants found the same scattered but impenetrable

fringe of riflemen, and the same energetic batteries waiting for them.

Throughout the Empire the course of this great struggle was watched with

the keenest solicitude and with all that painful emotion which springs

from impotent sympathy. By heliogram to Buller, and so to the farthest

ends of that great body whose nerves are the telegraphic wires, there

came the announcement of the attack. Then after an interval of hours

came 'everywhere repulsed, but fighting continues.' Then, 'Attack

continues. Enemy reinforced from the south.' Then 'Attack renewed. Very

hard pressed.' There the messages ended for the day, leaving the

Empire black with apprehension. The darkest forecasts and most dreary

anticipations were indulged by the most temperate and best-informed

London papers. For the first time the very suggestion that the campaign

might be above our strength was made to the public. And then at last

there came the official news of the repulse of the assault. Far away

at Ladysmith, the weary men and their sorely tried officers gathered to

return thanks to God for His manifold mercies, but in London also hearts

were stricken solemn by the greatness of the crisis, and lips long

unused to prayer joined in the devotions of the absent warriors.

CHAPTER 14. THE COLESBERG OPERATIONS.

Of the four British armies in the field I have attempted to tell the

story of the western one which advanced to help Kimberley, of the

eastern one which was repulsed at Colenso, and of the central one which

was checked at Stormberg. There remains one other central one, some

account of which must now be given.

It was, as has already been pointed out, a long three weeks after the

declaration of war before the forces of the Orange Free State began to

invade Cape Colony. But for this most providential delay it is probable

that the ultimate fighting would have been, not among the mountains

and kopjes of Stormberg and Colesberg, but amid those formidable passes

which lie in the Hex Valley, immediately to the north of Cape Town, and

that the armies of the invader would have been doubled by their kinsmen

of the Colony. The ultimate result of the war must have been the same,

but the sight of all South Africa in flames might have brought about

those Continental complications which have always been so grave a

menace.

The invasion of the Colony was at two points along the line of the two

railways which connect the countries, the one passing over the Orange

River at Norval's Pont and the other at Bethulie, about forty miles

to the eastward. There were no British troops available (a fact to

be considered by those, if any remain, who imagine that the British

entertained any design against the Republics), and the Boers jogged

slowly southward amid a Dutch population who hesitated between their

unity of race and speech and their knowledge of just and generous

treatment by the Empire. A large number were won over by the invaders,

and, like all apostates, distinguished themselves by their virulence and

harshness towards their loyal neighbours. Here and there in towns which

were off the railway line, in Barkly East or Ladygrey, the farmers met

together with rifle and bandolier, tied orange puggarees round their

hats, and rode off to join the enemy. Possibly these ignorant and

isolated men hardly recognised what it was that they were doing.

They have found out since. In some of the border districts the rebels

numbered ninety per cent of the Dutch population.

In the meanwhile, the British leaders had been strenuously endeavouring

to scrape together a few troops with which to make some stand against

the enemy. For this purpose two small forces were necessary--the one to

oppose the advance through Bethulie and Stormberg, the other to meet

the invaders, who, having passed the river at Norval's Pont, had now

occupied Colesberg. The former task was, as already shown, committed to

General Gatacre. The latter was allotted to General French, the victor

of Elandslaagte, who had escaped in the very last train from Ladysmith,

and had taken over this new and important duty. French's force assembled

at Arundel and Gatacre's at Sterkstroom. It is with the operations of

the former that we have now to deal.

General French, for whom South Africa has for once proved not the grave

but the cradle of a reputation, had before the war gained some name as

a smart and energetic cavalry officer. There were some who, watching

his handling of a considerable body of horse at the great Salisbury

manoeuvres in 1898, conceived the highest opinion of his capacity, and

it was due to the strong support of General Buller, who had commanded

in these peaceful operations, that French received his appointment for

South Africa. In person he is short and thick, with a pugnacious jaw. In

character he is a man of cold persistence and of fiery energy, cautious

and yet audacious, weighing his actions well, but carrying them out

with the dash which befits a mounted leader. He is remarkable for

the quickness of his decision--'can think at a gallop,' as an admirer

expressed it. Such was the man, alert, resourceful, and determined, to

whom was entrusted the holding back of the Colesberg Boers.

Although the main advance of the invaders was along the lines of the two

railways, they ventured, as they realised how weak the forces were

which opposed them, to break off both to the east and west, occupying

Dordrecht on one side and Steynsberg on the other. Nothing of importance

accrued from the possession of these points, and our attention may be

concentrated upon the main line of action.

French's original force was a mere handful of men, scraped together from

anywhere. Naauwpoort was his base, and thence he made a reconnaissance

by rail on November 23rd towards Arundel, the next hamlet along the

line, taking with him a company of the Black Watch, forty mounted

infantry, and a troop of the New South Wales Lancers. Nothing resulted

from the expedition save that the two forces came into touch with each

other, a touch which was sustained for months under many vicissitudes,

until the invaders were driven back once more over Norval's Pont.

Finding that Arundel was weakly held, French advanced up to it, and

established his camp there towards the end of December, within six

miles of the Boer lines at Rensburg, to the south of Colesberg. His

mission--with his present forces--was to prevent the further advance of

the enemy into the Colony, but he was not strong enough yet to make a

serious attempt to drive them out.

Before the move to Arundel on December 13th his detachment had increased

in size, and consisted largely of mounted men, so that it attained a

mobility very unusual for a British force. On December 13th there was

an attempt upon the part of the Boers to advance south, which was easily

held by the British Cavalry and Horse Artillery. The country over which

French was operating is dotted with those singular kopjes which the Boer

loves--kopjes which are often so grotesque in shape that one feels as

if they must be due to some error of refraction when one looks at them.

But, on the other hand, between these hills there lie wide stretches

of the green or russet savanna, the noblest field that a horseman or

a horse gunner could wish. The riflemen clung to the hills, French's

troopers circled warily upon the plain, gradually contracting the Boer

position by threatening to cut off this or that outlying kopje, and so

the enemy was slowly herded into Colesberg. The small but mobile British

force covered a very large area, and hardly a day passed that one

or other part of it did not come in contact with the enemy. With

one regiment of infantry (the Berkshires) to hold the centre, his

hard-riding Tasmanians, New Zealanders, and Australians, with the Scots

Greys, the Inniskillings, and the Carabineers, formed an elastic

but impenetrable screen to cover the Colony. They were aided by two

batteries, O and R, of Horse Artillery. Every day General French rode

out and made a close personal examination of the enemy's position, while

his scouts and outposts were instructed to maintain the closest possible

touch.

On December 30th the enemy abandoned Rensburg, which had been their

advanced post, and concentrated at Colesberg, upon which French moved

his force up and seized Rensburg. The very next day, December 31st,

he began a vigorous and long-continued series of operations. At five

o'clock on Sunday evening he moved out of Rensburg camp, with R and

half of O batteries R.H.A., the 10th Hussars, the Inniskillings, and the

Berkshires, to take up a position on the west of Colesberg. At the same

time Colonel Porter, with the half-battery of O, his own regiment (the

Carabineers), and the New Zealand Mounted Rifles, left camp at two on

the Monday morning and took a position on the enemy's left flank. The

Berkshires under Major McCracken seized the hill, driving a Boer picket

off it, and the Horse enfiladed the enemy's right flank, and after a

risky artillery duel succeeded in silencing his guns. Next morning,

however (January 2nd, 1900), it was found that the Boers, strongly

reinforced, were back near their old positions, and French had to be

content to hold them and to wait for more troops.

These were not long in coming, for the Suffolk Regiment had arrived,

followed by the Composite Regiment (chosen from the Household Cavalry)

and the 4th Battery R.F.A. The Boers, however, had also been reinforced,

and showed great energy in their effort to break the cordon which was

being drawn round them. Upon the 4th a determined effort was made by

about a thousand of them under General Schoeman to turn the left flank

of the British, and at dawn it was actually found that they had eluded

the vigilance of the outposts and had established themselves upon a hill

to the rear of the position. They were shelled off of it, however, by

the guns of O Battery, and in their retreat across the plain they were

pursued by the 10th Hussars and by one squadron of the Inniskillings,

who cut off some of the fugitives. At the same time, De Lisle with his

mounted infantry carried the position which they had originally held. In

this successful and well-managed action the Boer loss was ninety, and we

took in addition twenty-one prisoners. Our own casualties amounted

only to six killed, including Major Harvey of the 10th, and to fifteen

wounded.

Encouraged by this success an attempt was made by the Suffolk Regiment

to carry a hill which formed the key of the enemy's position. The town

of Colesberg lies in a basin surrounded by a ring of kopjes, and the

possession by us of any one of them would have made the place untenable.

The plan has been ascribed to Colonel Watson of the Suffolks, but it

is time that some protest should be raised against this devolution of

responsibility upon subordinates in the event of failure. When success

has crowned our arms we have been delighted to honour our general;

but when our efforts end in failure our attention is called to Colonel

Watson, Colonel Long, or Colonel Thorneycroft. It is fairer to state

that in this instance General French ordered Colonel Watson to make a

night attack upon the hill.

The result was disastrous. At midnight four companies in canvas shoes

or in their stocking feet set forth upon their venture, and just before

dawn they found themselves upon the slope of the hill. They were in a

formation of quarter column with files extended to two paces; H Company

was leading. When half-way up a warm fire was opened upon them in the

darkness. Colonel Watson gave the order to retire, intending, as it is

believed, that the men should get under the shelter of the dead ground

which they had just quitted, but his death immediately afterwards left

matters in a confused condition. The night was black, the ground broken,

a hail of bullets whizzing through the ranks. Companies got mixed in the

darkness and contradictory orders were issued. The leading company held

its ground, though each of the officers, Brett, Carey, and Butler, was

struck down. The other companies had retired, however, and the dawn

found this fringe of men, most of them wounded, lying under the very

rifles of the Boers. Even then they held out for some time, but they

could neither advance, retire, or stay where they were without losing

lives to no purpose, so the survivors were compelled to surrender. There

is better evidence here than at Magersfontein that the enemy were warned

and ready. Every one of the officers engaged, from the Colonel to the

boy subaltern, was killed, wounded, or taken. Eleven officers and

one hundred and fifty men were our losses in this unfortunate but not

discreditable affair, which proves once more how much accuracy and how

much secrecy is necessary for a successful night attack. Four companies

of the regiment were sent down to Port Elizabeth to re-officer, but the

arrival of the 1st Essex enabled French to fill the gap which had been

made in his force.

In spite of this annoying check, French continued to pursue his original

design of holding the enemy in front and working round him on the east.

On January 9th, Porter, of the Carabineers, with his own regiment, two

squadrons of Household Cavalry, the New Zealanders, the New South Wales

Lancers, and four guns, took another step forward and, after a skirmish,

occupied a position called Slingersfontein, still further to the north

and east, so as to menace the main road of retreat to Norval's Pont.

Some skirmishing followed, but the position was maintained. On the 15th

the Boers, thinking that this long extension must have weakened us, made

a spirited attack upon a position held by New Zealanders and a company

of the 1st Yorkshires, this regiment having been sent up to reinforce

French. The attempt was met by a volley and a bayonet charge. Captain

Orr, of the Yorkshires, was struck down; but Captain Madocks, of the

New Zealanders, who behaved with conspicuous gallantry at a critical

instant, took command, and the enemy was heavily repulsed. Madocks

engaged in a point-blank rifle duel with the frock-coated top-hatted

Boer leader, and had the good fortune to kill his formidable opponent.

Twenty-one Boer dead and many wounded left upon the field made a small

set-off to the disaster of the Suffolks.

The next day, however (January 16th), the scales of fortune, which swung

alternately one way and the other, were again tipped against us. It

is difficult to give an intelligible account of the details of these

operations, because they were carried out by thin fringes of men

covering on both sides a very large area, each kopje occupied as a fort,

and the intervening plains patrolled by cavalry.

As French extended to the east and north the Boers extended also to

prevent him from outflanking them, and so the little armies stretched

and stretched until they were two long mobile skirmishing lines. The

actions therefore resolve themselves into the encounters of small

bodies and the snapping up of exposed patrols--a game in which the Boer

aptitude for guerrilla tactics gave them some advantage, though our

own cavalry quickly adapted themselves to the new conditions. On this

occasion a patrol of sixteen men from the South Australian Horse and New

South Wales Lancers fell into an ambush, and eleven were captured. Of

the remainder, three made their way back to camp, while one was killed

and one was wounded.

The duel between French on the one side and Schoeman and Lambert on the

other was from this onwards one of maneuvering rather than of fighting.

The dangerously extended line of the British at this period, over thirty

miles long, was reinforced, as has been mentioned, by the 1st Yorkshire

and later by the 2nd Wiltshire and a section of the 37th Howitzer

Battery. There was probably no very great difference in numbers between

the two little armies, but the Boers now, as always, were working

upon internal lines. The monotony of the operations was broken by the

remarkable feat of the Essex Regiment, which succeeded by hawsers and

good-will in getting two 15-pounder guns of the 4th Field Battery on to

the top of Coleskop, a hill which rises several hundred feet from the

plain and is so precipitous that it is no small task for an unhampered

man to climb it. From the summit a fire, which for some days could not

be localised by the Boers, was opened upon their laagers, which had to

be shifted in consequence. This energetic action upon the part of our

gunners may be set off against those other examples where commanders

of batteries have shown that they had not yet appreciated what strong

tackle and stout arms can accomplish. The guns upon Coleskop not

only dominated all the smaller kopjes for a range of 9000 yards, but

completely commanded the town of Colesberg, which could not however, for

humanitarian and political reasons, be shelled.

By gradual reinforcements the force under French had by the end of

January attained the respectable figure of ten thousand men, strung over

a large extent of country. His infantry consisted of the 2nd Berkshires,

1st Royal Irish, 2nd Wiltshires, 2nd Worcesters, 1st Essex, and 1st

Yorkshires; his cavalry, of the 10th Hussars, the 6th Dragoon Guards,

the Inniskillings, the New Zealanders, the N.S. W. Lancers, some

Rimington Guides, and the composite Household Regiment; his artillery,

the R and O batteries of R.H.A., the 4th R.F.A., and a section of the

37th Howitzer Battery. At the risk of tedium I have repeated the units

of this force, because there are no operations during the war, with the

exception perhaps of those of the Rhodesian Column, concerning which it

is so difficult to get a clear impression. The fluctuating forces, the

vast range of country covered, and the petty farms which give their

names to positions, all tend to make the issue vague and the narrative

obscure. The British still lay in a semicircle extending from

Slingersfontein upon the right to Kloof Camp upon the left, and the

general scheme of operations continued to be an enveloping movement upon

the right. General Clements commanded this section of the forces, while

the energetic Porter carried out the successive advances. The lines had

gradually stretched until they were nearly fifty miles in length, and

something of the obscurity in which the operations have been left is due

to the impossibility of any single correspondent having a clear idea of

what was occurring over so extended a front.

On January 25th French sent Stephenson and Brabazon to push a

reconnaissance to the north of Colesberg, and found that the Boers were

making a fresh position at Rietfontein, nine miles nearer their own

border. A small action ensued, in which we lost ten or twelve of

the Wiltshire Regiment, and gained some knowledge of the enemy's

dispositions. For the remainder of the month the two forces remained

in a state of equilibrium, each keenly on its guard, and neither strong

enough to penetrate the lines of the other. General French descended to

Cape Town to aid General Roberts in the elaboration of that plan which

was soon to change the whole military situation in South Africa.

Reinforcements were still dribbling into the British force, Hoad's

Australian Regiment, which had been changed from infantry to cavalry,

and J battery R.H.A. from India, being the last arrivals. But very much

stronger reinforcements had arrived for the Boers--so strong that they

were able to take the offensive. De la Rey had left the Modder with

three thousand men, and their presence infused new life into the

defenders of Colesberg. At the moment, too, that the Modder Boers

were coming to Colesberg, the British had begun to send cavalry

reinforcements to the Modder in preparation for the march to Kimberley,

so that Clements's Force (as it had now become) was depleted at the very

instant when that of the enemy was largely increased. The result was

that it was all they could do not merely to hold their own, but to avoid

a very serious disaster.

The movements of De la Rey were directed towards turning the right of

the position. On February 9th and 10th the mounted patrols, principally

the Tasmanians, the Australians, and the Inniskillings, came in contact

with the Boers, and some skirmishing ensued, with no heavy loss upon

either side. A British patrol was surrounded and lost eleven prisoners,

Tasmanians and Guides. On the 12th the Boer turning movement developed

itself, and our position on the right at Slingersfontein was strongly

attacked.

The key of the British position at this point was a kopje held by three

companies of the 2nd Worcester Regiment. Upon this the Boers made a

fierce onslaught, but were as fiercely repelled. They came up in the

dark between the set of moon and rise of sun, as they had done at the

great assault of Ladysmith, and the first dim light saw them in the

advanced sangars. The Boer generals do not favour night attacks,

but they are exceedingly fond of using darkness for taking up a good

position and pushing onwards as soon as it is possible to see. This is

what they did upon this occasion, and the first intimation which the

outposts had of their presence was the rush of feet and loom of figures

in the cold misty light of dawn. The occupants of the sangars were

killed to a man, and the assailants rushed onwards. As the sun topped

the line of the veld half the kopje was in their possession. Shouting

and firing, they pressed onwards.

But the Worcester men were steady old soldiers, and the battalion

contained no less than four hundred and fifty marksmen in its ranks. Of

these the companies upon the hill had their due proportion, and their

fire was so accurate that the Boers found themselves unable to advance

any further. Through the long day a desperate duel was maintained

between the two lines of riflemen. Colonel Cuningham and Major Stubbs

were killed while endeavouring to recover the ground which had been

lost. Hovel and Bartholomew continued to encourage their men, and the

British fire became so deadly that that of the Boers was dominated.

Under the direction of Hacket Pain, who commanded the nearest post, guns

of J battery were brought out into the open and shelled the portion of

the kopje which was held by the Boers. The latter were reinforced, but

could make no advance against the accurate rifle fire with which they

were met. The Bisley champion of the battalion, with a bullet through

his thigh, expended a hundred rounds before sinking from loss of blood.

It was an excellent defence, and a pleasing exception to those too

frequent cases where an isolated force has lost heart in face of a

numerous and persistent foe. With the coming of darkness the Boers

withdrew with a loss of over two hundred killed and wounded. Orders had

come from Clements that the whole right wing should be drawn in, and in

obedience to them the remains of the victorious companies were called

in by Hacket Pain, who moved his force by night in the direction of

Rensburg. The British loss in the action was twenty-eight killed and

nearly a hundred wounded or missing, most of which was incurred when the

sangars were rushed in the early morning.

While this action was fought upon the extreme right of the British

position another as severe had occurred with much the same result upon

the extreme left, where the 2nd Wiltshire Regiment was stationed. Some

companies of this regiment were isolated upon a kopje and surrounded

by the Boer riflemen when the pressure upon them was relieved by a

desperate attack by about a hundred of the Victorian Rifles. The gallant

Australians lost Major Eddy and six officers out of seven, with a large

proportion of their men, but they proved once for all that amid all the

scattered nations who came from the same home there is not one with a

more fiery courage and a higher sense of martial duty than the men from

the great island continent. It is the misfortune of the historian when

dealing with these contingents that, as a rule, by their very nature

they were employed in detached parties in fulfilling the duties which

fall to the lot of scouts and light cavalry--duties which fill the

casualty lists but not the pages of the chronicler. Be it said, however,

once for all that throughout the whole African army there was nothing

but the utmost admiration for the dash and spirit of the hard-riding,

straight-shooting sons of Australia and New Zealand. In a host which

held many brave men there were none braver than they.

It was evident from this time onwards that the turning movement had

failed, and that the enemy had developed such strength that we were

ourselves in imminent danger of being turned. The situation was a most

serious one: for if Clements's force could be brushed aside there would

be nothing to keep the enemy from cutting the communications of the army

which Roberts had assembled for his march into the Free State. Clements

drew in his wings hurriedly and concentrated his whole force at

Rensburg. It was a difficult operation in the face of an aggressive

enemy, but the movements were well timed and admirably carried out.

There is always the possibility of a retreat degenerating into a panic,

and a panic at that moment would have been a most serious matter.

One misfortune occurred, through which two companies of the Wiltshire

regiment were left without definite orders, and were cut off and

captured after a resistance in which a third of their number was killed

and wounded. No man in that trying time worked harder than Colonel

Carter of the Wiltshires (the night of the retreat was the sixth which

he had spent without sleep), and the loss of the two companies is to be

set down to one of those accidents which may always occur in warfare.

Some of the Inniskilling Dragoons and Victorian Mounted Rifles were also

cut off in the retreat, but on the whole Clements was very fortunate in

being able to concentrate his scattered army with so few mishaps. The

withdrawal was heartbreaking to the soldiers who had worked so hard and

so long in extending the lines, but it might be regarded with equanimity

by the Generals, who understood that the greater strength the enemy

developed at Colesberg the less they would have to oppose the critical

movements which were about to be carried out in the west. Meanwhile

Coleskop had also been abandoned, the guns removed, and the whole force

on February 14th passed through Rensburg and fell back upon Arundel, the

spot from which six weeks earlier French had started upon this stirring

series of operations. It would not be fair, however, to suppose that

they had failed because they ended where they began. Their primary

object had been to prevent the further advance of the Freestaters into

the colony, and, during the most critical period of the war, this

had been accomplished with much success and little loss. At last the

pressure had become so severe that the enemy had to weaken the most

essential part of their general position in order to relieve it. The

object of the operations had really been attained when Clements found

himself back at Arundel once more. French, the stormy petrel of the war,

had flitted on from Cape Town to Modder River, where a larger prize

than Colesberg awaited him. Clements continued to cover Naauwport, the

important railway junction, until the advance of Roberts's army caused a

complete reversal of the whole military situation.

CHAPTER 15. SPION KOP.

Whilst Methuen and Gatacre were content to hold their own at the Modder

and at Sterkstroom, and whilst the mobile and energetic French was

herding the Boers into Colesberg, Sir Redvers Buller, the heavy,

obdurate, inexplicable man, was gathering and organising his forces for

another advance upon Ladysmith. Nearly a month had elapsed since the

evil day when his infantry had retired, and his ten guns had not,

from the frontal attack upon Colenso. Since then Sir Charles Warren's

division of infantry and a considerable reinforcement of artillery had

come to him. And yet in view of the terrible nature of the ground in

front of him, of the fighting power of the Boers, and of the fact that

they were always acting upon internal lines, his force even now was, in

the opinion of competent judges, too weak for the matter in hand.

There remained, however, several points in his favour. His excellent

infantry were full of zeal and of confidence in their chief. It cannot

be denied, however much we may criticise some incidents in his campaign,

that he possessed the gift of impressing and encouraging his followers,

and, in spite of Colenso, the sight of his square figure and heavy

impassive face conveyed an assurance of ultimate victory to those around

him. In artillery he was very much stronger than before, especially in

weight of metal. His cavalry was still weak in proportion to his other

arms. When at last he moved out on January 10th to attempt to outflank

the Boers, he took with him nineteen thousand infantry, three thousand

cavalry, and sixty guns, which included six howitzers capable of

throwing a 50-pound lyddite shell, and ten long-range naval pieces.

Barton's Brigade and other troops were left behind to hold the base and

line of communications.

An analysis of Buller's force shows that its details were as follows:--

Clery's Division.

Hildyard's Brigade.

2nd West Surrey.

2nd Devonshire.

2nd West Yorkshire.

2nd East Surrey.

Hart's Brigade.

1st Inniskilling Fusiliers.

1st Border Regiment.

1st Connaught Rangers.

2nd Dublin Fusiliers.

Field Artillery, three batteries, 19th, 28th, 63rd; one squadron

13th Hussars; Royal Engineers.

Warren's Division.

Lyttelton's Brigade.

2nd Cameronians.

3rd King's Royal Rifles.

1st Durham Light Infantry.

1st Rifle Brigade.

Woodgate's Brigade.

2nd Royal Lancaster.

2nd Lancashire Fusiliers.

1st South Lancashire.

York and Lancasters.

Field Artillery, three batteries, 7th, 78th, 73rd; one squadron

13th Hussars.

Corps Troops.

Coke's Brigade.

Imperial Light Infantry.

2nd Somersets.

2nd Dorsets.

2nd Middlesex.

61st Howitzer Battery; two 4.7 naval guns; eight naval 12-pounder guns;

one squadron 13th Hussars; Royal Engineers.

Cavalry.

1st Royal Dragoons.

14th Hussars.

Four squadrons South African Horse.

One squadron Imperial Light Horse.

Bethune's Mounted Infantry.

Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry.

One squadron Natal Carabineers.

One squadron Natal Police.

One company King's Royal Rifles Mounted Infantry.

Six machine guns.

This is the force whose operations I shall attempt to describe.

About sixteen miles to the westward of Colenso there is a ford over

the Tugela River which is called Potgieter's Drift. General Buller's

apparent plan was to seize this, together with the ferry which runs at

this point, and so to throw himself upon the right flank of the Colenso

Boers. Once over the river there is one formidable line of hills to

cross, but if this were passed there would be comparatively easy ground

until the Ladysmith hills were reached. With high hopes Buller and his

men sallied out upon their adventure.

Dundonald's cavalry force pushed rapidly forwards, crossed the Little

Tugela, a tributary of the main river, at Springfield, and established

themselves upon the hills which command the drift. Dundonald largely

exceeded his instructions in going so far, and while we applaud his

courage and judgment in doing so, we must remember and be charitable

to those less fortunate officers whose private enterprise has ended in

disaster and reproof. There can be no doubt that the enemy intended to

hold all this tract, and that it was only the quickness of our initial

movements which forestalled them. Early in the morning a small party of

the South African Horse, under Lieutenant Carlisle, swam the broad river

under fire and brought back the ferry boat, an enterprise which was

fortunately bloodless, but which was most coolly planned and gallantly

carried out. The way was now open to our advance, and could it have been

carried out as rapidly as it had begun the Boers might conceivably have

been scattered before they could concentrate. It was not the fault of

the infantry that it was not so. They were trudging, mud-spattered and

jovial, at the very heels of the horses, after a forced march which was

one of the most trying of the whole campaign. But an army of 20,000

men cannot be conveyed over a river twenty miles from any base without

elaborate preparations being made to feed them. The roads were in such a

state that the wagons could hardly move, heavy rain had just fallen,

and every stream was swollen into a river; bullocks might strain, and

traction engines pant, and horses die, but by no human means could the

stores be kept up if the advance guard were allowed to go at their own

pace. And so, having ensured an ultimate crossing of the river by the

seizure of Mount Alice, the high hill which commands the drift, the

forces waited day after day, watching in the distance the swarms of

strenuous dark figures who dug and hauled and worked upon the hillsides

opposite, barring the road which they would have to take. Far away on

the horizon a little shining point twinkled amid the purple haze, coming

and going from morning to night. It was the heliograph of Ladysmith,

explaining her troubles and calling for help, and from the heights of

Mount Alice an answering star of hope glimmered and shone, soothing,

encouraging, explaining, while the stern men of the veld dug furiously

at their trenches in between. 'We are coming! We are coming!' cried

Mount Alice. 'Over our bodies,' said the men with the spades and

mattocks.

On Thursday, January 12th, Dundonald seized the heights, on the 13th the

ferry was taken and Lyttelton's Brigade came up to secure that which the

cavalry had gained. On the 14th the heavy naval guns were brought up

to cover the crossing. On the 15th Coke's Brigade and other infantry

concentrated at the drift. On the 16th the four regiments of Lyttelton's

Brigade went across, and then, and only then, it began to be apparent

that Buller's plan was a more deeply laid one than had been thought, and

that all this business of Potgieter's Drift was really a demonstration

in order to cover the actual crossing which was to be effected at a

ford named Trichard's Drift, five miles to the westward. Thus,

while Lyttelton's and Coke's Brigades were ostentatiously attacking

Potgieter's from in front, three other brigades (Hart's, Woodgate's, and

Hildyard's) were marched rapidly on the night of the 16th to the real

place of crossing, to which Dundonald's cavalry had already ridden.

There, on the 17th, a pontoon bridge had been erected, and a strong

force was thrown over in such a way as to turn the right of the trenches

in front of Potgieter's. It was admirably planned and excellently

carried out, certainly the most strategic movement, if there could be

said to have been any strategic movement upon the British side, in the

campaign up to that date. On the 18th the infantry, the cavalry, and

most of the guns were safely across without loss of life. The Boers,

however, still retained their formidable internal lines, and the only

result of a change of position seemed to be to put them to the trouble

of building a new series of those terrible entrenchments at which they

had become such experts. After all the combinations the British were,

it is true, upon the right side of the river, but they were considerably

further from Ladysmith than when they started. There are times, however,

when twenty miles are less than fourteen, and it was hoped that this

might prove to be among them. But the first step was the most serious

one, for right across their front lay the Boer position upon the edge of

a lofty plateau, with the high peak of Spion Kop forming the left corner

of it. If once that main ridge could be captured or commanded, it would

carry them halfway to the goal. It was for that essential line of hills

that two of the most dogged races upon earth were about to contend. An

immediate advance might have secured the position at once, but, for some

reason which is inexplicable, an aimless march to the left was followed

by a retirement to the original position of Warren's division, and

so two invaluable days were wasted. We have the positive assurance of

Commandant Edwards, who was Chief of Staff to General Botha, that

a vigorous turning movement upon the left would at this time have

completely outflanked the Boer position and opened a way to Ladysmith.

A small success, the more welcome for its rarity, came to the British

arms on this first day. Dundonald's men had been thrown out to cover

the left of the infantry advance and to feel for the right of the Boer

position. A strong Boer patrol, caught napping for once, rode into an

ambuscade of the irregulars. Some escaped, some held out most gallantly

in a kopje, but the final result was a surrender of twenty-four

unwounded prisoners, and the finding of thirteen killed and wounded,

including de Mentz, the field-cornet of Heilbron. Two killed and two

wounded were the British losses in this well-managed affair. Dundonald's

force then took its position upon the extreme left of Warren's advance.

The British were now moving upon the Boers in two separate bodies, the

one which included Lyttelton's and Coke's Brigades from Potgieter's

Drift, making what was really a frontal attack, while the main body

under Warren, who had crossed at Trichard's Drift, was swinging round

upon the Boer right. Midway between the two movements the formidable

bastion of Spion Kop stood clearly outlined against the blue Natal

sky. The heavy naval guns on Mount Alice (two 4.7's and eight

twelve-pounders) were so placed as to support either advance, and the

howitzer battery was given to Lyttelton to help the frontal attack. For

two days the British pressed slowly but steadily on to the Boers under

the cover of an incessant rain of shells. Dour and long-suffering the

Boers made no reply, save with sporadic rifle-fire, and refused until

the crisis should come to expose their great guns to the chance of

injury.

On January 19th Warren's turning movement began to bring him into closer

touch with the enemy, his thirty-six field guns and the six howitzers

which had returned to him crushing down the opposition which faced him.

The ground in front of him was pleated into long folds, and his advance

meant the carrying of ridge after ridge. In the earlier stages of the

war this would have entailed a murderous loss; but we had learned our

lesson, and the infantry now, with intervals of ten paces, and every man

choosing his own cover, went up in proper Boer form, carrying position

after position, the enemy always retiring with dignity and decorum.

There was no victory on one side or rout on the other--only a steady

advance and an orderly retirement. That night the infantry slept in

their fighting line, going on again at three in the morning, and light

broke to find not only rifles, but the long-silent Boer guns all blazing

at the British advance. Again, as at Colenso, the brunt of the fighting

fell upon Hart's Irish Brigade, who upheld that immemorial tradition of

valour with which that name, either in or out of the British service,

has invariably been associated. Upon the Lancashire Fusiliers and the

York and Lancasters came also a large share of the losses and the glory.

Slowly but surely the inexorable line of the British lapped over the

ground which the enemy had held. A gallant colonial, Tobin of the South

African Horse, rode up one hill and signaled with his hat that it was

clear. His comrades followed closely at his heels, and occupied the

position with the loss of Childe, their Major. During this action

Lyttelton had held the Boers in their trenches opposite to him by

advancing to within 1500 yards of them, but the attack was not pushed

further. On the evening of this day, January 20th, the British had

gained some miles of ground, and the total losses had been about three

hundred killed and wounded. The troops were in good heart, and all

promised well for the future. Again the men lay where they had fought,

and again the dawn heard the crash of the great guns and the rattle of

the musketry.

The operations of this day began with a sustained cannonade from

the field batteries and 61st Howitzer Battery, which was as fiercely

answered by the enemy. About eleven the infantry began to go forward

with an advance which would have astonished the martinets of Aldershot,

an irregular fringe of crawlers, wrigglers, writhers, crouchers, all

cool and deliberate, giving away no points in this grim game of death.

Where now were the officers with their distinctive dresses and flashing

swords, where the valiant rushes over the open, where the men who

were too proud to lie down?--the tactics of three months ago seemed

as obsolete as those of the Middle Ages. All day the line undulated

forward, and by evening yet another strip of rock-strewn ground had been

gained, and yet another train of ambulances was bearing a hundred of

our wounded back to the base hospitals at Frere. It was on Hildyard's

Brigade on the left that the fighting and the losses of this day

principally fell. By the morning of January 22nd the regiments were

clustering thickly all round the edges of the Boer main position, and

the day was spent in resting the weary men, and in determining at

what point the final assault should be delivered. On the right front,

commanding the Boer lines on either side, towered the stark eminence of

Spion Kop, so called because from its summit the Boer voortrekkers had

first in 1835 gazed down upon the promised land of Natal. If that could

only be seized and held! Buller and Warren swept its bald summit with

their field-glasses. It was a venture. But all war is a venture; and the

brave man is he who ventures most. One fiery rush and the master-key of

all these locked doors might be in our keeping. That evening there

came a telegram to London which left the whole Empire in a hush of

anticipation. Spion Kop was to be attacked that night.

The troops which were selected for the task were eight companies of the

2nd Lancashire Fusiliers, six of the 2nd Royal Lancasters, two of the

1st South Lancashires, 180 of Thorneycroft's, and half a company of

Sappers. It was to be a North of England job.

Under the friendly cover of a starless night the men, in Indian file,

like a party of Iroquois braves upon the war trail, stole up the winding

and ill-defined path which led to the summit. Woodgate, the Lancashire

Brigadier, and Blomfield of the Fusiliers led the way. It was a severe

climb of 2000 feet, coming after arduous work over broken ground,

but the affair was well-timed, and it was at that blackest hour which

precedes the dawn that the last steep ascent was reached. The Fusiliers

crouched down among the rocks to recover their breath, and saw far down

in the plain beneath them the placid lights which showed where their

comrades were resting. A fine rain was falling, and rolling clouds hung

low over their heads. The men with unloaded rifles and fixed bayonets

stole on once more, their bodies bent, their eyes peering through the

mirk for the first sign of the enemy--that enemy whose first sign has

usually been a shattering volley. Thorneycroft's men with their gallant

leader had threaded their way up into the advance. Then the leading

files found that they were walking on the level. The crest had been

gained.

With slow steps and bated breath, the open line of skirmishers stole

across it. Was it possible that it had been entirely abandoned? Suddenly

a raucous shout of 'Wie da?' came out of the darkness, then a shot, then

a splutter of musketry and a yell, as the Fusiliers sprang onwards

with their bayonets. The Boer post of Vryheid burghers clattered and

scrambled away into the darkness, and a cheer that roused both the

sleeping armies told that the surprise had been complete and the

position won.

In the grey light of the breaking day the men advanced along the narrow

undulating ridge, the prominent end of which they had captured. Another

trench faced them, but it was weakly held and abandoned. Then the men,

uncertain what remained beyond, halted and waited for full light to see

where they were, and what the work was which lay before them--a fatal

halt, as the result proved, and yet one so natural that it is hard to

blame the officer who ordered it. Indeed, he might have seemed more

culpable had he pushed blindly on, and so lost the advantage which had

been already gained.

About eight o'clock, with the clearing of the mist, General Woodgate saw

how matters stood. The ridge, one end of which he held, extended away,

rising and falling for some miles. Had he the whole of the end plateau,

and had he guns, he might hope to command the rest of the position. But

he held only half the plateau, and at the further end of it the Boers

were strongly entrenched. The Spion Kop mountain was really the salient

or sharp angle of the Boer position, so that the British were exposed to

a cross fire both from the left and right. Beyond were other eminences

which sheltered strings of riflemen and several guns. The plateau which

the British held was very much narrower than was usually represented in

the press. In many places the possible front was not much more than a

hundred yards wide, and the troops were compelled to bunch together, as

there was not room for a single company to take an extended formation.

The cover upon this plateau was scanty, far too scanty for the force

upon it, and the shell fire--especially the fire of the pom-poms--soon

became very murderous. To mass the troops under the cover of the edge

of the plateau might naturally suggest itself, but with great tactical

skill the Boer advanced line from Commandant Prinsloo's Heidelberg and

Carolina commandos kept so aggressive an attitude that the British could

not weaken the lines opposed to them. Their skirmishers were creeping

round too in such a way that the fire was really coming from three

separate points, left, centre, and right, and every corner of the

position was searched by their bullets. Early in the action the gallant

Woodgate and many of his Lancashire men were shot down. The others

spread out and held on, firing occasionally at the whisk of a

rifle-barrel or the glimpse of a broad-brimmed hat.

From morning to midday, the shell, Maxim, and rifle fire swept across

the kop in a continual driving shower. The British guns in the plain

below failed to localise the position of the enemy's, and they were able

to vent their concentrated spite upon the exposed infantry. No blame

attaches to the gunners for this, as a hill intervened to screen the

Boer artillery, which consisted of five big guns and two pom-poms.

Upon the fall of Woodgate, Thorneycroft, who bore the reputation of a

determined fighter, was placed at the suggestion of Buller in charge

of the defence of the hill, and he was reinforced after noon by Coke's

brigade, the Middlesex, the Dorsets, and the Somersets, together with

the Imperial Light Infantry. The addition of this force to the defenders

of the plateau tended to increase the casualty returns rather than the

strength of the defence. Three thousand more rifles could do nothing to

check the fire of the invisible cannon, and it was this which was the

main source of the losses, while on the other hand the plateau had

become so cumbered with troops that a shell could hardly fail to do

damage. There was no cover to shelter them and no room for them to

extend. The pressure was most severe upon the shallow trenches in

the front, which had been abandoned by the Boers and were held by the

Lancashire Fusiliers. They were enfiladed by rifle and cannon, and the

dead and wounded outnumbered the hale. So close were the skirmishers

that on at least one occasion Boer and Briton found themselves on

each side of the same rock. Once a handful of men, tormented

beyond endurance, sprang up as a sign that they had had enough, but

Thorneycroft, a man of huge physique, rushed forward to the advancing

Boers. 'You may go to hell!' he yelled. 'I command here, and allow no

surrender. Go on with your firing.' Nothing could exceed the gallantry

of Louis Botha's men in pushing the attack. Again and again they made

their way up to the British firing line, exposing themselves with

a recklessness which, with the exception of the grand attack upon

Ladysmith, was unique in our experience of them. About two o'clock they

rushed one trench occupied by the Fusiliers and secured the survivors

of two companies as prisoners, but were subsequently driven out again. A

detached group of the South Lancashires was summoned to surrender. 'When

I surrender,' cried Colour-Sergeant Nolan, 'it will be my dead body!'

Hour after hour of the unintermitting crash of the shells among the

rocks and of the groans and screams of men torn and burst by the most

horrible of all wounds had shaken the troops badly. Spectators from

below who saw the shells pitching at the rate of seven a minute on to

the crowded plateau marvelled at the endurance which held the devoted

men to their post. Men were wounded and wounded and wounded yet again,

and still went on fighting. Never since Inkerman had we had so grim a

soldier's battle. The company officers were superb. Captain Muriel of

the Middlesex was shot through the check while giving a cigarette to a

wounded man, continued to lead his company, and was shot again through

the brain. Scott Moncrieff of the same regiment was only disabled by the

fourth bullet which hit him. Grenfell of Thorneycroft's was shot, and

exclaimed, 'That's all right. It's not much.' A second wound made him

remark, 'I can get on all right.' The third killed him. Ross of the

Lancasters, who had crawled from a sickbed, was found dead upon the

furthest crest. Young Murray of the Scottish Rifles, dripping from five

wounds, still staggered about among his men. And the men were worthy of

such officers. 'No retreat! No retreat!' they yelled when some of the

front line were driven in. In all regiments there are weaklings and

hang-backs, and many a man was wandering down the reverse slopes when he

should have been facing death upon the top, but as a body British troops

have never stood firm through a more fiery ordeal than on that fatal

hill...

The position was so bad that no efforts of officers or men could do

anything to mend it. They were in a murderous dilemma. If they fell back

for cover the Boer riflemen would rush the position. If they held their

ground this horrible shell fire must continue, which they had no means

of answering. Down at Gun Hill in front of the Boer position we had no

fewer than five batteries, the 78th, 7th, 73rd, 63rd, and 61st howitzer,

but a ridge intervened between them and the Boer guns which were

shelling Spion Kop, and this ridge was strongly entrenched. The naval

guns from distant Mount Alice did what they could, but the range was

very long, and the position of the Boer guns uncertain. The artillery,

situated as it was, could not save the infantry from the horrible

scourging which they were enduring.

There remains the debated question whether the British guns could have

been taken to the top. Mr. Winston Churchill, the soundness of whose

judgment has been frequently demonstrated during the war, asserts that

it might have been done. Without venturing to contradict one who was

personally present, I venture to think that there is strong evidence

to show that it could not have been done without blasting and other

measures, for which there was no possible time. Captain Hanwell of the

78th R.F.A., upon the day of the battle had the very utmost difficulty

with the help of four horses in getting a light Maxim on to the top, and

his opinion, with that of other artillery officers, is that the feat

was an impossible one until the path had been prepared. When night fell

Colonel Sim was despatched with a party of Sappers to clear the track

and to prepare two emplacements upon the top, but in his advance he met

the retiring infantry.

Throughout the day reinforcements had pushed up the hill, until two full

brigades had been drawn into the fight. From the other side of the ridge

Lyttelton sent up the Scottish Rifles, who reached the summit, and added

their share to the shambles upon the top. As the shades of night closed

in, and the glare of the bursting shells became more lurid, the men

lay extended upon the rocky ground, parched and exhausted. They were

hopelessly jumbled together, with the exception of the Dorsets, whose

cohesion may have been due to superior discipline, less exposure, or to

the fact that their khaki differed somewhat in colour from that of the

others. Twelve hours of so terrible an experience had had a strange

effect upon many of the men. Some were dazed and battle-struck,

incapable of clear understanding. Some were as incoherent as drunkards.

Some lay in an overpowering drowsiness. The most were doggedly patient

and long-suffering, with a mighty longing for water obliterating every

other emotion.

Before evening fell a most gallant and successful attempt had been

made by the third battalion of the King's Royal Rifles from Lyttelton's

Brigade to relieve the pressure upon their comrades on Spion Kop. In

order to draw part of the Boer fire away they ascended from the northern

side and carried the hills which formed a continuation of the same

ridge. The movement was meant to be no more than a strong demonstration,

but the riflemen pushed it until, breathless but victorious, they stood

upon the very crest of the position, leaving nearly a hundred dead or

dying to show the path which they had taken. Their advance being much

further than was desired, they were recalled, and it was at the moment

that Buchanan Riddell, their brave Colonel, stood up to read Lyttelton's

note that he fell with a Boer bullet through his brain, making one more

of those gallant leaders who died as they had lived, at the head of

their regiments. Chisholm, Dick-Cunyngham, Downman, Wilford, Gunning,

Sherston, Thackeray, Sitwell, MacCarthy O'Leary, Airlie--they have led

their men up to and through the gates of death. It was a fine exploit

of the 3rd Rifles. 'A finer bit of skirmishing, a finer bit of climbing,

and a finer bit of fighting, I have never seen,' said their Brigadier.

It is certain that if Lyttelton had not thrown his two regiments into

the fight the pressure upon the hill-top might have become unendurable;

and it seems also certain that if he had only held on to the position

which the Rifles had gained, the Boers would never have reoccupied Spion

Kop.

And now, under the shadow of night, but with the shells bursting thickly

over the plateau, the much-tried Thorneycroft had to make up his mind

whether he should hold on for another such day as he had endured, or

whether now, in the friendly darkness, he should remove his shattered

force. Could he have seen the discouragement of the Boers and the

preparations which they had made for retirement, he would have held his

ground. But this was hidden from him, while the horror of his own losses

was but too apparent. Forty per cent of his men were down. Thirteen

hundred dead and dying are a grim sight upon a wide-spread battle-field,

but when this number is heaped upon a confined space, where from a

single high rock the whole litter of broken and shattered bodies can be

seen, and the groans of the stricken rise in one long droning chorus to

the ear, then it is an iron mind indeed which can resist such evidence

of disaster. In a harder age Wellington was able to survey four thousand

bodies piled in the narrow compass of the breach of Badajos, but his

resolution was sustained by the knowledge that the military end for

which they fell had been accomplished. Had his task been unfinished it

is doubtful whether even his steadfast soul would not have flinched from

its completion. Thorneycroft saw the frightful havoc of one day, and he

shrank from the thought of such another. 'Better six battalions safely

down the hill than a mop up in the morning,' said he, and he gave the

word to retire. One who had met the troops as they staggered down

has told me how far they were from being routed. In mixed array, but

steadily and in order, the long thin line trudged through the darkness.

Their parched lips would not articulate, but they whispered 'Water!

Where is water?' as they toiled upon their way. At the bottom of the

hill they formed into regiments once more, and marched back to the camp.

In the morning the blood-spattered hill-top, with its piles of dead and

of wounded, were in the hands of Botha and his men, whose valour and

perseverance deserved the victory which they had won. There is no doubt

now that at 3 A.M. of that morning Botha, knowing that the Rifles had

carried Burger's position, regarded the affair as hopeless, and that

no one was more astonished than he when he found, on the report of two

scouts, that it was a victory and not a defeat which had come to him.

How shall we sum up such an action save that it was a gallant attempt,

gallantly carried out, and as gallantly met? On both sides the results

of artillery fire during the war have been disappointing, but at Spion

Kop beyond all question it was the Boer guns which won the action for

them. So keen was the disappointment at home that there was a tendency

to criticise the battle with some harshness, but it is difficult now,

with the evidence at our command, to say what was left undone which

could have altered the result. Had Thorneycroft known all that we know,

he would have kept his grip upon the hill. On the face of it one finds

it difficult to understand why so momentous a decision, upon which

the whole operations depended, should have been left entirely to the

judgment of one who in the morning had been a simple Lieutenant-Colonel.

'Where are the bosses?' cried a Fusilier, and the historian can only

repeat the question. General Warren was at the bottom of the hill. Had

he ascended and determined that the place should still be held, he might

have sent down the wearied troops, brought up smaller numbers of fresh

ones, ordered the Sappers to deepen the trenches, and tried to bring up

water and guns. It was for the divisional commander to lay his hand upon

the reins at so critical an instant, to relieve the weary man who had

struggled so hard all day.

The subsequent publication of the official despatches has served little

purpose, save to show that there was a want of harmony between Buller

and Warren, and that the former lost all confidence in his subordinate

during the course of the operations. In these papers General Buller

expresses the opinion that had Warren's operations been more dashing, he

would have found his turning movement upon the left a comparatively easy

matter. In this judgment he would probably have the concurrence of

most military critics. He adds, however, 'On the 19th, I ought to have

assumed command myself. I saw that things were not going well--indeed,

everyone saw that. I blame myself now for not having done so. I did not,

because, if I did, I should discredit General Warren in the estimation

of the troops, and, if I were shot, and he had to withdraw across the

Tugela, and they had lost confidence in him, the consequences might be

very serious. I must leave it to higher authority whether this argument

was a sound one.' It needs no higher authority than common-sense to say

that the argument is an absolutely unsound one. No consequences could

be more serious than that the operations should miscarry and Ladysmith

remain unrelieved, and such want of success must in any case discredit

Warren in the eyes of his troops. Besides, a subordinate is not

discredited because his chief steps in to conduct a critical operation.

However, these personal controversies may be suffered to remain in that

pigeon-hole from which they should never have been drawn.

On account of the crowding of four thousand troops into a space which

might have afforded tolerable cover for five hundred the losses in the

action were very heavy, not fewer than fifteen hundred being killed,

wounded, or missing, the proportion of killed being, on account of the

shell fire, abnormally high. The Lancashire Fusiliers were the heaviest

sufferers, and their Colonel Blomfield was wounded and fell into

the hands of the enemy. The Royal Lancasters also lost heavily.

Thorneycroft's had 80 men hit out of 180 engaged. The Imperial Light

Infantry, a raw corps of Rand refugees who were enduring their baptism

of fire, lost 130 men. In officers the losses were particularly heavy,

60 being killed or wounded. The Boer returns show some 50 killed and 150

wounded, which may not be far from the truth. Without the shell fire the

British losses might not have been much more.

General Buller had lost nearly two thousand men since he had crossed the

Tugela, and his purpose was still unfulfilled. Should he risk the loss

of a large part of his force in storming the ridges in front of him, or

should he recross the river and try for an easier route elsewhere? To

the surprise and disappointment both of the public and of the army,

he chose the latter course, and by January 27th he had fallen back,

unmolested by the Boers, to the other side of the Tugela. It must be

confessed that his retreat was admirably conducted, and that it was a

military feat to bring his men, his guns, and his stores in safety over

a broad river in the face of a victorious enemy. Stolid and unmoved, his

impenetrable demeanour restored serenity and confidence to the angry and

disappointed troops. There might well be heavy hearts among both them

and the public. After a fortnight's campaign, and the endurance of great

losses and hardships, both Ladysmith and her relievers found themselves

no better off than when they started. Buller still held the commanding

position of Mount Alice, and this was all that he had to show for such

sacrifices and such exertions. Once more there came a weary pause while

Ladysmith, sick with hope deferred, waited gloomily upon half-rations of

horse-flesh for the next movement from the South.

CHAPTER 16. VAALKRANZ.

Neither General Buller nor his troops appeared to be dismayed by the

failure of their plans, or by the heavy losses which were entailed by

the movement which culminated at Spion Kop. The soldiers grumbled, it

is true, at not being let go, and swore that even if it cost them

two-thirds of their number they could and would make their way through

this labyrinth of hills with its fringe of death. So doubtless they

might. But from first to last their General had shown a great--some

said an exaggerated--respect for human life, and he had no intention of

winning a path by mere slogging, if there were a chance of finding one

by less bloody means. On the morrow of his return he astonished both

his army and the Empire by announcing that he had found the key to the

position and that he hoped to be in Ladysmith in a week. Some rejoiced

in the assurance. Some shrugged their shoulders. Careless of friends or

foes, the stolid Buller proceeded to work out his new combination.

In the next few days reinforcements trickled in which more than made up

for the losses of the preceding week. A battery of horse artillery, two

heavy guns, two squadrons of the 14th Hussars, and infantry drafts to

the number of twelve or fourteen hundred men came to share the impending

glory or disaster. On the morning of February 5th the army sallied forth

once more to have another try to win a way to Ladysmith. It was known

that enteric was rife in the town, that shell and bullet and typhoid

germ had struck down a terrible proportion of the garrison, and that the

rations of starved horse and commissariat mule were running low. With

their comrades--in many cases their linked battalions--in such straits

within fifteen miles of them, Buller's soldiers had high motives to

brace them for a supreme effort.

The previous attempt had been upon the line immediately to the west of

Spion Kop. If, however, one were to follow to the east of Spion Kop,

one would come upon a high mountain called Doornkloof. Between these two

peaks, there lies a low ridge, called Brakfontein, and a small detached

hill named Vaalkranz. Buller's idea was that if he could seize this

small Vaalkranz, it would enable him to avoid the high ground altogether

and pass his troops through on to the plateau beyond. He still held the

Ford at Potgieter's and commanded the country beyond with heavy guns on

Mount Alice and at Swartz Kop, so that he could pass troops over at

his will. He would make a noisy demonstration against Brakfontein, then

suddenly seize Vaalkranz, and so, as he hoped, hold the outer door which

opened on to the passage to Ladysmith.

The getting of the guns up Swartz Kop was a preliminary which was as

necessary as it was difficult. A road was cut, sailors, engineers, and

gunners worked with a will under the general direction of Majors Findlay

and Apsley Smith. A mountain battery, two field guns, and six naval

12-pounders were slung up by steel hawsers, the sailors yeo-hoing on the

halliards. The ammunition was taken up by hand. At six o'clock on the

morning of the 5th the other guns opened a furious and probably harmless

fire upon Brakfontein, Spion Kop, and all the Boer positions opposite

to them. Shortly afterwards the feigned attack upon Brakfontein was

commenced and was sustained with much fuss and appearance of energy

until all was ready for the development of the true one. Wynne's

Brigade, which had been Woodgate's, recovered already from its Spion

Kop experience, carried out this part of the plan, supported by six

batteries of field artillery, one howitzer battery, and two 4.7 naval

guns. Three hours later a telegram was on its way to Pretoria to tell

how triumphantly the burghers had driven back an attack which was never

meant to go forward. The infantry retired first, then the artillery in

alternate batteries, preserving a beautiful order and decorum. The last

battery, the 78th, remained to receive the concentrated fire of the

Boer guns, and was so enveloped in the dust of the exploding shells

that spectators could only see a gun here or a limber there. Out of this

whirl of death it quietly walked, without a bucket out of its place,

the gunners drawing one wagon, the horses of which had perished, and so

effected a leisurely and contemptuous withdrawal. The gallantry of the

gunners has been one of the most striking features of the war, but it

has never been more conspicuous than in this feint at Brakfontein.

While the attention of the Boers was being concentrated upon the

Lancashire men, a pontoon bridge was suddenly thrown across the river

at a place called Munger's Drift, some miles to the eastward. Three

infantry brigades, those of Hart, Lyttelton, and Hildyard, had been

massed all ready to be let slip when the false attack was sufficiently

absorbing. The artillery fire (the Swartz Kop guns, and also the

batteries which had been withdrawn from the Brakfontein demonstration)

was then turned suddenly, with the crashing effect of seventy pieces,

upon the real object of attack, the isolated Vaalkranz. It is

doubtful whether any position has ever been subjected to so terrific a

bombardment, for the weight of metal thrown by single guns was greater

than that of a whole German battery in the days of their last great war.

The 4-pounders and 6-pounders of which Prince Kraft discourses would

have seemed toys beside these mighty howitzers and 4.7's. Yet though

the hillside was sharded off in great flakes, it is doubtful if this

terrific fire inflicted much injury upon the cunning and invisible

riflemen with whom we had to contend.

About midday the infantry began to stream across the bridge, which had

been most gallantly and efficiently constructed under a warm fire, by a

party of sappers, under the command of Major Irvine. The attack was led

by the Durham Light Infantry of Lyttelton's Brigade, followed by the 1st

Rifle Brigade, with the Scottish and 3rd Rifles in support. Never did

the old Light Division of Peninsular fame go up a Spanish hillside with

greater spirit and dash than these, their descendants, facing the slope

of Vaalkranz. In open order they moved across the plain, with a superb

disregard of the crash and patter of the shrapnel, and then up they

went, the flitting figures, springing from cover to cover, stooping,

darting, crouching, running, until with their glasses the spectators on

Swartz Kop could see the gleam of the bayonets and the strain of furious

rushing men upon the summit, as the last Boers were driven from their

trenches. The position was gained, but little else. Seven officers and

seventy men were lying killed and wounded among the boulders. A few

stricken Boers, five unwounded prisoners, and a string of Basuto ponies

were the poor fruits of victory--those and the arid hill from which so

much had been hoped, and so little was to be gained.

It was during this advance that an incident occurred of a more

picturesque character than is usual in modern warfare. The invisibility

of combatants and guns, and the absorption of the individual in the

mass, have robbed the battle-field of those episodes which adorned, if

they did not justify it. On this occasion, a Boer gun, cut off by the

British advance, flew out suddenly from behind its cover, like a hare

from its tussock, and raced for safety across the plain. Here and there

it wound, the horses stretched to their utmost, the drivers stooping and

lashing, the little gun bounding behind. To right to left, behind and

before, the British shells burst, lyddite and shrapnel, crashing and

riving. Over the lip of a hollow, the gallant gun vanished, and within

a few minutes was banging away once more at the British advance. With

cheers and shouts and laughter, the British infantrymen watched the race

for shelter, their sporting spirit rising high above all racial hatred,

and hailing with a 'gone to ground' whoop the final disappearance of the

gun.

The Durhams had cleared the path, but the other regiments of Lyttelton's

Brigade followed hard at their heels, and before night they had firmly

established themselves upon the hill. But the fatal slowness which had

marred General Buller's previous operations again prevented him from

completing his success. Twice at least in the course of these operations

there is evidence of sudden impulse to drop his tools in the midst of

his task and to do no more for the day. So it was at Colenso, where an

order was given at an early hour for the whole force to retire, and the

guns which might have been covered by infantry fire and withdrawn after

nightfall were abandoned. So it was also at a critical moment at this

action at Vaalkranz. In the original scheme of operations it had been

planned that an adjoining hill, called the Green Hill, which partly

commanded Vaalkranz, should be carried also. The two together made a

complete position, while singly each was a very bad neighbour to the

other. On the aide-de-camp riding up, however, to inquire from General

Buller whether the time had come for this advance, he replied, 'We have

done enough for the day,' and left out this essential portion of his

original scheme, with the result that all miscarried.

Speed was the most essential quality for carrying out his plan

successfully. So it must always be with the attack. The defence does

not know where the blow is coming, and has to distribute men and guns to

cover miles of ground. The attacker knows where he will hit, and behind

a screen of outposts he can mass his force and throw his whole strength

against a mere fraction of that of his enemy. But in order to do so he

must be quick. One tiger spring must tear the centre out of the line

before the flanks can come to its assistance. If time is given, if the

long line can concentrate, if the scattered guns can mass, if lines of

defence can be reduplicated behind, then the one great advantage which

the attack possesses is thrown away. Both at the second and at the third

attempts of Buller the British movements were so slow that had the enemy

been the slowest instead of the most mobile of armies, they could still

always have made any dispositions which they chose. Warren's dawdling

in the first days of the movement which ended at Spion Kop might with an

effort be condoned on account of possible difficulties of supply, but

it would strain the ingenuity of the most charitable critic to find a

sufficient reason for the lethargy of Vaalkranz. Though daylight comes

a little after four, the operations were not commenced before seven.

Lyttelton's Brigade had stormed the hill at two, and nothing more was

done during the long evening, while officers chafed and soldiers swore,

and the busy Boers worked furiously to bring up their guns and to bar

the path which we must take. General Buller remarked a day or two

later that the way was not quite so easy as it had been. One might have

deduced the fact without the aid of a balloon.

The brigade then occupied Vaalkranz and erected sangars and dug

trenches. On the morning of the 6th, the position of the British force

was not dissimilar to that of Spion Kop. Again they had some thousands

of men upon a hill-top, exposed to shell fire from several directions

and without any guns upon the hill to support them. In one or two points

the situation was modified in their favour, and hence their escape from

loss and disaster. A more extended position enabled the infantry to

avoid bunching, but in other respects the situation was parallel to that

in which they had found themselves a fortnight before.

The original plan was that the taking of Vaalkranz should be the first

step towards the outflanking of Brakfontein and the rolling up of the

whole Boer position. But after the first move the British attitude

became one of defence rather than of attack. Whatever the general and

ultimate effect of these operations may have been, it is beyond question

that their contemplation was annoying and bewildering in the extreme to

those who were present. The position on February 6th was this. Over the

river upon the hill was a single British brigade, exposed to the fire

of one enormous gun--a 96-pound Creusot, the longest of all Long

Toms--which was stationed upon Doornkloof, and of several smaller guns

and pom-poms which spat at them from nooks and crevices of the hills.

On our side were seventy-two guns, large and small, all very noisy and

impotent. It is not too much to say, as it appears to me, that the

Boers have in some ways revolutionised our ideas in regard to the use of

artillery, by bringing a fresh and healthy common-sense to bear upon

a subject which had been unduly fettered by pedantic rules. The Boer

system is the single stealthy gun crouching where none can see it. The

British system is the six brave guns coming into action in line of full

interval, and spreading out into accurate dressing visible to all men.

'Always remember,' says one of our artillery maxims, 'that one gun is

no gun.' Which is prettier on a field-day, is obvious, but which is

business--let the many duels between six Boer guns and sixty British

declare. With black powder it was useless to hide the gun, as its smoke

must betray it. With smokeless powder the guns are so invisible that

it was only by the detection with powerful glasses of the dust from the

trail on the recoil that the officers were ever able to localise the

guns against which they were fighting. But if the Boers had had six guns

in line, instead of one behind that kopje, and another between those

distant rocks, it would not have been so difficult to say where they

were. Again, British traditions are all in favour of planting guns close

together. At this very action of Vaalkranz the two largest guns were

so placed that a single shell bursting between them would have disabled

them both. The officer who placed them there, and so disregarded in a

vital matter the most obvious dictates of common-sense, would probably

have been shocked by any want of technical smartness, or irregularity in

the routine drill. An over-elaboration of trifles, and a want of grip

of common-sense, and of adaptation to new ideas, is the most serious

and damaging criticism which can be levelled against our army. That the

function of infantry is to shoot, and not to act like spearmen in the

Middle Ages; that the first duty of artillery is so far as is possible

to be invisible--these are two of the lessons which have been driven

home so often during the war, that even our hidebound conservatism can

hardly resist them.

Lyttelton's Brigade, then, held Vaalkranz; and from three parts of the

compass there came big shells and little shells, with a constant shower

of long-range rifle bullets. Behind them, and as useful as if it had

been on Woolwich Common, there was drawn up an imposing mass of men, two

infantry divisions, and two brigades of cavalry, all straining at the

leash, prepared to shed their blood until the spruits ran red with it,

if only they could win their way to where their half-starved comrades

waited for them. But nothing happened. Hours passed and nothing

happened. An occasional shell from the big gun plumped among them. One,

through some freak of gunnery, lobbed slowly through a division, and the

men whooped and threw their caps at it as it passed. The guns on Swartz

Kop, at a range of nearly five miles, tossed shells at the monster on

Doornkloof, and finally blew up his powder magazine amid the applause of

the infantry. For the army it was a picnic and a spectacle.

But it was otherwise with the men up on Vaalkranz. In spite of sangar

and trench, that cross fire was finding them out; and no feint or

demonstration on either side came to draw the concentrated fire from

their position. Once there was a sudden alarm at the western end of the

hill, and stooping bearded figures with slouch hats and bandoliers were

right up on the ridge before they could be stopped, so cleverly had

their advance been conducted. But a fiery rush of Durhams and Rifles

cleared the crest again, and it was proved once more how much stronger

is the defence than the attack. Nightfall found the position unchanged,

save that another pontoon bridge had been constructed during the day.

Over this Hildyard's Brigade marched to relieve Lyttelton's, who came

back for a rest under the cover of the Swartz Kop guns. Their losses in

the two days had been under two hundred and fifty, a trifle if any aim

were to be gained, but excessive for a mere demonstration.

That night Hildyard's men supplemented the defences made by Lyttelton,

and tightened their hold upon the hill. One futile night attack caused

them for an instant to change the spade for the rifle. When in the

morning it was found that the Boers had, as they naturally would,

brought up their outlying guns, the tired soldiers did not regret their

labours of the night. It was again demonstrated how innocuous a thing is

a severe shell fire, if the position be an extended one with chances of

cover. A total of forty killed and wounded out of a strong brigade

was the result of a long day under an incessant cannonade. And then at

nightfall came the conclusion that the guns were too many, that the

way was too hard, and down came all their high hopes with the order to

withdraw once more across that accursed river. Vaalkranz was abandoned,

and Hildyard's Brigade, seething with indignation, was ordered back once

more to its camp.

CHAPTER 17. BULLER'S FINAL ADVANCE.

The heroic moment of the siege of Ladysmith was that which witnessed the

repulse of the great attack. The epic should have ended at that dramatic

instant. But instead of doing so the story falls back to an anticlimax

of crowded hospitals, slaughtered horses, and sporadic shell fire.

For another six weeks of inactivity the brave garrison endured all the

sordid evils which had steadily grown from inconvenience to misfortune

and from misfortune to misery. Away in the south they heard the thunder

of Buller's guns, and from the hills round the town they watched with

pale faces and bated breath the tragedy of Spion Kop, preserving a firm

conviction that a very little more would have transformed it into their

salvation. Their hearts sank with the sinking of the cannonade, and rose

again with the roar of Vaalkranz. But Vaalkranz also failed them, and

they waited on in the majesty of their hunger and their weakness for the

help which was to come.

It has been already narrated how General Buller had made his three

attempts for the relief of the city. The General who was inclined to

despair was now stimulated by despatches from Lord Roberts, while his

army, who were by no means inclined to despair, were immensely cheered

by the good news from the Kimberley side. Both General and army prepared

for a last supreme effort. This time, at least, the soldiers hoped that

they would be permitted to burst their way to the help of their starving

comrades or leave their bones among the hills which had faced them so

long. All they asked was a fight to a finish, and now they were about to

have one. General Buller had tried the Boers' centre, he had tried their

extreme right, and now he was about to try their extreme left. There

were some obvious advantages on this side which make it surprising that

it was not the first to be attempted. In the first place, the enemy's

main position upon that flank was at Hlangwane mountain, which is to

the south of the Tugela, so that in case of defeat the river ran behind

them. In the second, Hlangwane mountain was the one point from which the

Boer position at Colenso could be certainly enfiladed, and therefore

the fruits of victory would be greater on that flank than on the other.

Finally, the operations could be conducted at no great distance from the

railhead, and the force would be exposed to little danger of having its

flank attacked or its communications cut, as was the case in the Spion

Kop advance. Against these potent considerations there is only to be put

the single fact that the turning of the Boer right would threaten the

Freestaters' line of retreat. On the whole, the balance of advantage lay

entirely with the new attempt, and the whole army advanced to it with a

premonition of success. Of all the examples which the war has given of

the enduring qualities of the British troops there is none more striking

than the absolute confidence and whole hearted delight with which, after

three bloody repulses, they set forth upon another venture.

On February 9th the movements were started which transferred the greater

part of the force from the extreme left to the centre and right. By the

11th Lyttelton's (formerly Clery's) second division and Warren's fifth

division had come eastward, leaving Burn Murdoch's cavalry brigade

to guard the Western side. On the 12th Lord Dundonald, with all the

colonial cavalry, two battalions of infantry, and a battery, made a

strong reconnaissance towards Hussar Hill, which is the nearest of

the several hills which would have to be occupied in order to turn the

position. The hill was taken, but was abandoned again by General Buller

after he had used it for some hours as an observatory. A long-range

action between the retiring cavalry and the Boers ended in a few losses

upon each side.

What Buller had seen during the hour or two which he had spent with his

telescope upon Hussar Hill had evidently confirmed him in his views, for

two days later (February 14th) the whole army set forth for this point.

By the morning of the 15th twenty thousand men were concentrated upon

the sides and spurs of this eminence. On the 16th the heavy guns were in

position, and all was ready for the advance.

Facing them now were the formidable Boer lines of Hlangwane Hill and

Green Hill, which would certainly cost several thousands of men if they

were to take them by direct storm. Beyond them, upon the Boer flank,

were the hills of Monte Christo and Cingolo, which appeared to be

the extreme outside of the Boer position. The plan was to engage the

attention of the trenches in front by a terrific artillery fire and

the threat of an assault, while at the same time sending the true flank

attack far round to carry the Cingolo ridge, which must be taken before

any other hill could be approached.

On the 17th, in the early morning, with the first tinge of violet in the

east, the irregular cavalry and the second division (Lyttelton's) with

Wynne's Brigade started upon their widely curving flanking march. The

country through which they passed was so broken that the troopers led

their horses in single file, and would have found themselves helpless in

face of any resistance. Fortunately, Cingolo Hill was very weakly held,

and by evening both our horsemen and our infantry had a firm grip upon

it, thus turning the extreme left flank of the Boer position. For once

their mountainous fortresses were against them, for a mounted Boer force

is so mobile that in an open position, such as faced Methuen, it is very

hard and requires great celerity of movement ever to find a flank at

all. On a succession of hills, however, it was evident that some one

hill must mark the extreme end of their line, and Buller had found it at

Cingolo. Their answer to this movement was to throw their flank back so

as to face the new position.

Even now, however, the Boer leaders had apparently not realised that

this was the main attack, or it is possible that the intervention of the

river made it difficult for them to send reinforcements. However that

may be, it is certain that the task which the British found awaiting

them on the 18th proved to be far easier than they had dared to hope.

The honours of the day rested with Hildyard's English Brigade (East

Surrey, West Surrey, West Yorkshires, and 2nd Devons). In open order

and with a rapid advance, taking every advantage of the cover--which was

better than is usual in South African warfare--they gained the edge

of the Monte Christo ridge, and then swiftly cleared the crest. One at

least of the regiments engaged, the Devons, was nerved by the thought

that their own first battalion was waiting for them at Ladysmith.

The capture of the hill made the line of trenches which faced Buller

untenable, and he was at once able to advance with Barton's Fusilier

Brigade and to take possession of the whole Boer position of Hlangwane

and Green Hill. It was not a great tactical victory, for they had no

trophies to show save the worthless debris of the Boer camps. But it was

a very great strategical victory, for it not only gave them the whole

south side of the Tugela, but also the means of commanding with their

guns a great deal of the north side, including those Colenso trenches

which had blocked the way so long. A hundred and seventy killed and

wounded (of whom only fourteen were killed) was a trivial price for such

a result. At last from the captured ridges the exultant troops could

see far away the haze which lay over the roofs of Ladysmith, and the

besieged, with hearts beating high with hope, turned their glasses upon

the distant mottled patches which told them that their comrades were

approaching.

By February 20th the British had firmly established themselves along the

whole south bank of the river, Hart's brigade had occupied Colenso,

and the heavy guns had been pushed up to more advanced positions. The

crossing of the river was the next operation, and the question arose

where it should be crossed. The wisdom which comes with experience shows

us now that it would have been infinitely better to have crossed on

their extreme left flank, as by an advance upon this line we should have

turned their strong Pieters position just as we had already turned their

Colenso one. With an absolutely master card in our hand we refused to

play it, and won the game by a more tedious and perilous process. The

assumption seems to have been made (on no other hypothesis can one

understand the facts) that the enemy were demoralised and that the

positions would not be strongly held. Our flanking advantage was

abandoned and a direct advance was ordered from Colenso, involving a

frontal attack upon the Pieters position.

On February 21st Buller threw his pontoon bridge over the river near

Colenso, and the same evening his army began to cross. It was at once

evident that the Boer resistance had by no means collapsed. Wynne's

Lancashire Brigade were the first across, and found themselves hotly

engaged before nightfall. The low kopjes in front of them were blazing

with musketry fire. The brigade held its own, but lost the Brigadier

(the second in a month) and 150 rank and file. Next morning the main

body of the infantry was passed across, and the army was absolutely

committed to the formidable and unnecessary enterprise of fighting its

way straight to Ladysmith.

The force in front had weakened, however, both in numbers and in morale.

Some thousands of the Freestaters had left in order to defend their own

country from the advance of Roberts, while the rest were depressed by as

much of the news as was allowed by their leaders to reach them. But

the Boer is a tenacious fighter, and many a brave man was still to

fall before Buller and White should shake hands in the High Street of

Ladysmith.

The first obstacle which faced the army, after crossing the river, was

a belt of low rolling ground, which was gradually cleared by the advance

of our infantry. As night closed in the advance lines of Boers and

British were so close to each other that incessant rifle fire was

maintained until morning, and at more than one point small bodies of

desperate riflemen charged right up to the bayonets of our infantry. The

morning found us still holding our positions all along the line, and

as more and more of our infantry came up and gun after gun roared into

action we began to push our stubborn enemy northwards. On the 21st the

Dorsets, Middlesex, and Somersets had borne the heat of the day. On the

22nd it was the Royal Lancasters, followed by the South Lancashires, who

took up the running. It would take the patience and also the space of

a Kinglake in this scrambling broken fight to trace the doings of those

groups of men who strove and struggled through the rifle fire. All day

a steady advance was maintained over the low kopjes, until by evening

we were faced by the more serious line of the Pieter's Hills. The

operations had been carried out with a monotony of gallantry. Always the

same extended advance, always the same rattle of Mausers and clatter of

pom-poms from a ridge, always the same victorious soldiers on the barren

crest, with a few crippled Boers before them and many crippled comrades

behind. They were expensive triumphs, and yet every one brought them

nearer to their goal. And now, like an advancing tide, they lapped along

the base of Pieter's Hill. Could they gather volume enough to carry

themselves over? The issue of the long-drawn battle and the fate of

Ladysmith hung upon the question.

Brigadier Fitzroy Hart, to whom the assault was entrusted, is in some

ways as singular and picturesque a type as has been evolved in the war.

A dandy soldier, always the picture of neatness from the top of his

helmet to the heels of his well-polished brown boots, he brings to

military matters the same precision which he affects in dress. Pedantic

in his accuracy, he actually at the battle of Colenso drilled the Irish

Brigade for half an hour before leading them into action, and threw

out markers under a deadly fire in order that his change from close to

extended formation might be academically correct. The heavy loss of the

Brigade at this action was to some extent ascribed to him and affected

his popularity; but as his men came to know him better, his romantic

bravery, his whimsical soldierly humour, their dislike changed into

admiration. His personal disregard for danger was notorious and

reprehensible. 'Where is General Hart?' asked some one in action. 'I

have not seen him, but I know where you will find him. Go ahead of the

skirmish line and you will see him standing on a rock,' was the answer.

He bore a charmed life. It was a danger to be near him. 'Whom are you

going to?' 'General Hart,' said the aide-de-camp. 'Then good-bye!'

cried his fellows. A grim humour ran through his nature. It is gravely

recorded and widely believed that he lined up a regiment on a hill-top

in order to teach them not to shrink from fire. Amid the laughter of his

Irishmen, he walked through the open files of his firing line holding a

laggard by the ear. This was the man who had put such a spirit into the

Irish Brigade that amid that army of valiant men there were none who

held such a record. 'Their rushes were the quickest, their rushes were

the longest, and they stayed the shortest time under cover,' said a

shrewd military observer. To Hart and his brigade was given the task of

clearing the way to Ladysmith.

The regiments which he took with him on his perilous enterprise were the

1st Inniskilling Fusiliers, the 2nd Dublin Fusiliers, the 1st Connaught

Rangers, and the Imperial Light Infantry, the whole forming the famous

5th Brigade. They were already in the extreme British advance, and now,

as they moved forwards, the Durham Light Infantry and the 1st Rifle

Brigade from Lyttelton's Brigade came up to take their place. The hill

to be taken lay on the right, and the soldiers were compelled to pass in

single file under a heavy fire for more than a mile until they reached

the spot which seemed best for their enterprise. There, short already

of sixty of their comrades, they assembled and began a cautious advance

upon the lines of trenches and sangars which seamed the brown slope

above them.

For a time they were able to keep some cover, and the casualties were

comparatively few. But now at last, as the evening sun threw a long

shadow from the hills, the leading regiment, the Inniskillings, found

themselves at the utmost fringe of boulders with a clear slope between

them and the main trench of the enemy. Up there where the shrapnel was

spurting and the great lyddite shells crashing they could dimly see a

line of bearded faces and the black dots of the slouch hats. With a yell

the Inniskillings sprang out, carried with a rush the first trench,

and charged desperately onwards for the second one. It was a supremely

dashing attack against a supremely steady resistance, for among all

their gallant deeds the Boers have never fought better than on that

February evening. Amid such a smashing shell fire as living mortals have

never yet endured they stood doggedly, these hardy men of the veld, and

fired fast and true into the fiery ranks of the Irishmen. The yell of

the stormers was answered by the remorseless roar of the Mausers and

the deep-chested shouts of the farmers. Up and up surged the infantry,

falling, rising, dashing bull-headed at the crackling line of the

trench. But still the bearded faces glared at them over the edge,

and still the sheet of lead pelted through their ranks. The regiment

staggered, came on, staggered again, was overtaken by supporting

companies of the Dublins and the Connaughts, came on, staggered once

more, and finally dissolved into shreds, who ran swiftly back for cover,

threading their way among their stricken comrades. Never on this

earth was there a retreat of which the survivors had less reason to be

ashamed. They had held on to the utmost capacity of human endurance.

Their Colonel, ten officers, and more than half the regiment were

lying on the fatal hill. Honour to them, and honour also to the gallant

Dutchmen who, rooted in the trenches, had faced the rush and fury

of such an onslaught! Today to them, tomorrow to us--but it is for a

soldier to thank the God of battles for worthy foes.

It is one thing, however, to repulse the British soldier and it is

another to rout him. Within a few hundred yards of their horrible ordeal

at Magersfontein the Highlanders reformed into a military body. So now

the Irishmen fell back no further than the nearest cover, and there

held grimly on to the ground which they had won. If you would know the

advantage which the defence has over the attack, then do you come and

assault this line of tenacious men, now in your hour of victory and

exultation, friend Boer! Friend Boer did attempt it, and skilfully too,

moving a flanking party to sweep the position with their fire. But the

brigade, though sorely hurt, held them off without difficulty, and was

found on the morning of the 24th to be still lying upon the ground which

they had won.

Our losses had been very heavy, Colonel Thackeray of the Inniskillings,

Colonel Sitwell of the Dublins, three majors, twenty officers, and a

total of about six hundred out of 1200 actually engaged. To take such

punishment and to remain undemoralised is the supreme test to which

troops can be put. Could the loss have been avoided? By following the

original line of advance from Monte Christo, perhaps, when we should

have turned the enemy's left. But otherwise no. The hill was in the way

and had to be taken. In the war game you cannot play without a stake.

You lose and you pay forfeit, and where the game is fair the best player

is he who pays with the best grace. The attack was well prepared, well

delivered, and only miscarried on account of the excellence of the

defence. We proved once more what we had proved so often before, that

all valour and all discipline will not avail in a frontal attack against

brave coolheaded men armed with quick-firing rifles.

While the Irish Brigade assaulted Railway Hill an attack had been made

upon the left, which was probably meant as a demonstration to keep the

Boers from reinforcing their comrades rather than as an actual attempt

upon their lines. Such as it was, however, it cost the life of at least

one brave soldier, for Colonel Thorold, of the Welsh Fusiliers, was

among the fallen. Thorold, Thackeray, and Sitwell in one evening. Who

can say that British colonels have not given their men a lead?

The army was now at a deadlock. Railway Hill barred the way, and if

Hart's men could not carry it by assault it was hard to say who could.

The 24th found the two armies facing each other at this critical point,

the Irishmen still clinging to the slopes of the hill and the Boers

lining the top. Fierce rifle firing broke out between them during the

day, but each side was well covered and lay low. The troops in support

suffered somewhat, however, from a random shell fire. Mr. Winston

Churchill has left it upon record that within his own observation three

of their shrapnel shells fired at a venture on to the reverse slope of

a hill accounted for nineteen men and four horses. The enemy can never

have known how hard those three shells had hit us, and so we may also

believe that our artillery fire has often been less futile than it

appeared.

General Buller had now realised that it was no mere rearguard action

which the Boers were fighting, but that their army was standing doggedly

at bay; so he reverted to that flanking movement which, as events

showed, should never have been abandoned. Hart's Irish Brigade was at

present almost the right of the army. His new plan--a masterly one--was

to keep Hart pinning the Boers at that point, and to move his centre and

left across the river, and then back to envelope the left wing of the

enemy. By this manoeuvre Hart became the extreme left instead of the

extreme right, and the Irish Brigade would be the hinge upon which the

whole army should turn. It was a large conception, finely carried out.

The 24th was a day of futile shell fire--and of plans for the future.

The heavy guns were got across once more to the Monte Christo ridge and

to Hlangwane, and preparations made to throw the army from the west to

the east. The enemy still snarled and occasionally snapped in front of

Hart's men, but with four companies of the 2nd Rifle Brigade to protect

their flanks their position remained secure.

In the meantime, through a contretemps between our outposts and the

Boers, no leave had been given to us to withdraw our wounded, and the

unfortunate fellows, some hundreds of them, had lain between the lines

in agonies of thirst for thirty-six hours--one of the most painful

incidents of the campaign. Now, upon the 25th, an armistice was

proclaimed, and the crying needs of the survivors were attended to. On

the same day the hearts of our soldiers sank within them as they saw the

stream of our wagons and guns crossing the river once more. What, were

they foiled again? Was the blood of these brave men to be shed in vain?

They ground their teeth at the thought. The higher strategy was not for

them, but back was back and forward was forward, and they knew which way

their proud hearts wished to go.

The 26th was occupied by the large movements of troops which so

complete a reversal of tactics necessitated. Under the screen of a

heavy artillery fire, the British right became the left and the left

the right. A second pontoon bridge was thrown across near the old Boer

bridge at Hlangwane, and over it was passed a large force of infantry,

Barton's Fusilier Brigade, Kitchener's (vice Wynne's, vice Woodgate's)

Lancashire Brigade, and two battalions of Norcott's (formerly

Lyttelton's) Brigade. Coke's Brigade was left at Colenso to prevent

a counter attack upon our left flank and communications. In this way,

while Hart with the Durhams and the 1st Rifle Brigade held the Boers

in front, the main body of the army was rapidly swung round on to their

left flank. By the morning of the 27th all were in place for the new

attack.

Opposite the point where the troops had been massed were three Boer

hills; one, the nearest, may for convenience sake be called Barton's

Hill. As the army had formerly been situated the assault upon this hill

would have been a matter of extreme difficulty; but now, with the heavy

guns restored to their commanding position, from which they could sweep

its sides and summits, it had recovered its initial advantage. In the

morning sunlight Barton's Fusiliers crossed the river, and advanced

to the attack under a screaming canopy of shells. Up they went and up,

darting and crouching, until their gleaming bayonets sparkled upon the

summit. The masterful artillery had done its work, and the first long

step taken in this last stage of the relief of Ladysmith. The loss had

been slight and the advantage enormous. After they had gained the summit

the Fusiliers were stung and stung again by clouds of skirmishers who

clung to the flanks of the hill, but their grip was firm and grew firmer

with every hour.

Of the three Boer hills which had to be taken the nearest (or eastern

one) was now in the hands of the British. The furthest (or western one)

was that on which the Irish Brigade was still crouching, ready at any

moment for a final spring which would take them over the few hundred

yards which separated them from the trenches. Between the two intervened

a central hill, as yet untouched. Could we carry this the whole position

would be ours. Now for the final effort! Turn every gun upon it, the

guns of Monte Christo, the guns of Hlangwane! Turn every rifle upon

it--the rifles of Barton's men, the rifles of Hart's men, the carbines

of the distant cavalry! Scalp its crown with the machine-gun fire! And

now up with you, Lancashire men, Norcott's men! The summit or a glorious

death, for beyond that hill your suffering comrades are awaiting you!

Put every bullet and every man and all of fire and spirit that you are

worth into this last hour; for if you fail now you have failed for ever,

and if you win, then when your hairs are white your blood will still run

warm when you think of that morning's work. The long drama had drawn to

an end, and one short day's work is to show what that end was to be.

But there was never a doubt of it. Hardly for one instant did the

advance waver at any point of its extended line. It was the supreme

instant of the Natal campaign, as, wave after wave, the long lines of

infantry went shimmering up the hill. On the left the Lancasters, the

Lancashire Fusiliers, the South Lancashires, the York and Lancasters,

with a burr of north country oaths, went racing for the summit. Spion

Kop and a thousand comrades were calling for vengeance. 'Remember, men,

the eyes of Lancashire are watching you,' cried the gallant MacCarthy

O'Leary. The old 40th swept on, but his dead body marked the way which

they had taken. On the right the East Surrey, the Cameronians, the 3rd

Rifles, the 1st Rifle Brigade, the Durhams, and the gallant Irishmen, so

sorely stricken and yet so eager, were all pressing upwards and onwards.

The Boer fire lulls, it ceases--they are running! Wild hat-waving men

upon the Hlangwane uplands see the silhouette of the active figures of

the stormers along the sky-line and know that the position is theirs.

Exultant soldiers dance and cheer upon the ridge. The sun is setting in

glory over the great Drakensberg mountains, and so also that night

set for ever the hopes of the Boer invaders of Natal. Out of doubt and

chaos, blood and labour, had come at last the judgment that the lower

should not swallow the higher, that the world is for the man of the

twentieth and not of the seventeenth century. After a fortnight of

fighting the weary troops threw themselves down that night with the

assurance that at last the door was ajar and the light breaking through.

One more effort and it would be open before them.

Behind the line of hills which had been taken there extended a great

plain as far as Bulwana--that evil neighbour who had wrought such harm

upon Ladysmith. More than half of the Pieters position had fallen into

Buller's hands on the 27th, and the remainder had become untenable.

The Boers had lost some five hundred in killed, wounded, and prisoners.

[Footnote: Accurate figures will probably never be obtained, but a

well-known Boer in Pretoria informed me that Pieters was the most

expensive fight to them of the whole war. ] It seemed to the British

General and his men that one more action would bring them safely into

Ladysmith.

But here they miscalculated, and so often have we miscalculated on the

optimistic side in this campaign that it is pleasing to find for

once that our hopes were less than the reality. The Boers had been

beaten--fairly beaten and disheartened. It will always be a subject for

conjecture whether they were so entirely on the strength of the Natal

campaign, or whether the news of the Cronje disaster from the western

side had warned them that they must draw in upon the east. For my own

part I believe that the honour lies with the gallant men of Natal,

and that, moving on these lines, they would, Cronje or no Cronje, have

forced their way in triumph to Ladysmith.

And now the long-drawn story draws to a swift close. Cautiously feeling

their way with a fringe of horse, the British pushed over the great

plain, delayed here and there by the crackle of musketry, but finding

always that the obstacle gave way and vanished as they approached it.

At last it seemed clear to Dundonald that there really was no barrier

between his horsemen and the beleaguered city. With a squadron of

Imperial Light Horse and a squadron of Natal Carabineers he rode on

until, in the gathering twilight, the Ladysmith picket challenged the

approaching cavalry, and the gallant town was saved.

It is hard to say which had shown the greater endurance, the rescued

or their rescuers. The town, indefensible, lurking in a hollow under

commanding hills, had held out for 118 days. They had endured two

assaults and an incessant bombardment, to which, towards the end,

owing to the failure of heavy ammunition, they were unable to make any

adequate reply. It was calculated that 16, 000 shells had fallen within

the town. In two successful sorties they had destroyed three of the

enemy's heavy guns. They had been pressed by hunger, horseflesh was

already running short, and they had been decimated by disease. More than

2000 cases of enteric and dysentery had been in hospital at one time,

and the total number of admissions had been nearly as great as the total

number of the garrison. One-tenth of the men had actually died of wounds

or disease. Ragged, bootless, and emaciated, there still lurked in the

gaunt soldiers the martial spirit of warriors. On the day after their

relief 2000 of them set forth to pursue the Boers. One who helped to

lead them has left it on record that the most piteous sight that he has

ever seen was these wasted men, stooping under their rifles and gasping

with the pressure of their accoutrements, as they staggered after

their retreating enemy. A Verestschagen might find a subject these 2000

indomitable men with their emaciated horses pursuing a formidable foe.

It is God's mercy they failed to overtake them.

If the record of the besieged force was great, that of the relieving

army was no less so. Through the blackest depths of despondency and

failure they had struggled to absolute success. At Colenso they had lost

1200 men, at Spion Kop 1700, at Vaalkranz 400, and now, in this last

long-drawn effort, 1600 more. Their total losses were over 5000 men,

more than 20 per cent of the whole army. Some particular regiments had

suffered horribly. The Dublin and Inniskilling Fusiliers headed the

roll of honour with only five officers and 40 per cent of the men left

standing. Next to them the Lancashire Fusiliers and the Royal Lancasters

had been the hardest hit. It speaks well for Buller's power of winning

and holding the confidence of his men that in the face of repulse after

repulse the soldiers still went into battle as steadily as ever under

his command.

On March 3rd Buller's force entered Ladysmith in state between the lines

of the defenders. For their heroism the Dublin Fusiliers were put in the

van of the procession, and it is told how, as the soldiers who lined

the streets saw the five officers and small clump of men, the remains of

what had been a strong battalion, realising, for the first time perhaps,

what their relief had cost, many sobbed like children. With cheer after

cheer the stream of brave men flowed for hours between banks formed by

men as brave. But for the purposes of war the garrison was useless. A

month of rest and food would be necessary before they could be ready to

take the field once more.

So the riddle of the Tugela had at last been solved. Even now, with all

the light which has been shed upon the matter, it is hard to apportion

praise and blame. To the cheerful optimism of Symons must be laid some

of the blame of the original entanglement; but man is mortal, and he

laid down his life for his mistake. White, who had been but a week

in the country, could not, if he would, alter the main facts of the

military situation. He did his best, committed one or two errors, did

brilliantly on one or two points, and finally conducted the defence

with a tenacity and a gallantry which are above all praise. It did not,

fortunately, develop into an absolutely desperate affair, like Massena's

defence of Genoa, but a few more weeks would have made it a military

tragedy. He was fortunate in the troops whom he commanded--half of

them old soldiers from India--[Footnote: An officer in high command in

Ladysmith has told me, as an illustration of the nerve and discipline of

the troops, that though false alarms in the Boer trenches were matters

of continual occurrence from the beginning to the end of the siege,

there was not one single occasion when the British outposts made a

mistake.]--and exceedingly fortunate in his officers, French (in the

operations before the siege), Archibald Hunter, Ian Hamilton, Hedworth

Lambton, Dick-Cunyngham, Knox, De Courcy Hamilton, and all the other

good men and true who stood (as long as they could stand) by his side.

Above all, he was fortunate in his commissariat officers, and it was in

the offices of Colonels Ward and Stoneman as much as in the trenches and

sangars of Caesar's Camp that the siege was won.

Buller, like White, had to take the situation as he found it. It is well

known that his own belief was that the line of the Tugela was the

true defence of Natal. When he reached Africa, Ladysmith was already

beleaguered, and he, with his troops, had to abandon the scheme of

direct invasion and to hurry to extricate White's division. Whether they

might not have been more rapidly extricated by keeping to the original

plan is a question which will long furnish an excellent subject for

military debate. Had Buller in November known that Ladysmith was capable

of holding out until March, is it conceivable that he, with his whole

army corps and as many more troops as he cared to summon from England,

would not have made such an advance in four months through the Free

State as would necessitate the abandonment of the sieges both of

Kimberley and of Ladysmith? If the Boers persisted in these sieges they

could not possibly place more than 20,000 men on the Orange River to

face 60, 000 whom Buller could have had there by the first week in

December. Methuen's force, French's force, Gatacre's force, and the

Natal force, with the exception of garrisons for Pietermaritzburg and

Durban, would have assembled, with a reserve of another sixty thousand

men in the colony or on the sea ready to fill the gaps in his advance.

Moving over a flat country with plenty of flanking room, it is probable

that he would have been in Bloemfontein by Christmas and at the Vaal

River late in January. What could the Boers do then? They might remain

before Ladysmith, and learn that their capital and their gold mines had

been taken in their absence. Or they might abandon the siege and trek

back to defend their own homes. This, as it appears to a civilian

critic, would have been the least expensive means of fighting them; but

after all the strain had to come somewhere, and the long struggle of

Ladysmith may have meant a more certain and complete collapse in the

future. At least, by the plan actually adopted we saved Natal from total

devastation, and that must count against a great deal.

Having taken his line, Buller set about his task in a slow, deliberate,

but pertinacious fashion. It cannot be denied, however, that the

pertinacity was largely due to the stiffening counsel of Roberts and the

soldierly firmness of White who refused to acquiesce in the suggestion

of surrender. Let it be acknowledged that Buller's was the hardest

problem of the war, and that he solved it. The mere acknowledgment

goes far to soften criticism. But the singular thing is that in his

proceedings he showed qualities which had not been generally attributed

to him, and was wanting in those very points which the public had

imagined to be characteristic of him. He had gone out with the

reputation of a downright John Bull fighter, who would take punishment

or give it, but slog his way through without wincing. There was no

reason for attributing any particular strategical ability to him. But

as a matter of fact, setting the Colenso attempt aside, the crossing for

the Spion Kop enterprise, the withdrawal of the compromised army, the

Vaalkranz crossing with the clever feint upon Brakfontein, the final

operations, and especially the complete change of front after the

third day of Pieters, were strategical movements largely conceived

and admirably carried out. On the other hand, a hesitation in pushing

onwards, and a disinclination to take a risk or to endure heavy

punishment, even in the case of temporary failure, were consistent

characteristics of his generalship. The Vaalkranz operations are

particularly difficult to defend from the charge of having been

needlessly slow and half-hearted. This 'saturnine fighter,' as he had

been called, proved to be exceedingly sensitive about the lives of his

men--an admirable quality in itself, but there are occasions when to

spare them to-day is to needlessly imperil them tomorrow. The victory

was his, and yet in the very moment of it he displayed the qualities

which marred him. With two cavalry brigades in hand he did not push

the pursuit of the routed Boers with their guns and endless streams of

wagons. It is true that he might have lost heavily, but it is true also

that a success might have ended the Boer invasion of Natal, and the

lives of our troopers would be well spent in such a venture. If cavalry

is not to be used in pursuing a retiring enemy encumbered with much

baggage, then its day is indeed past.

The relief of Ladysmith stirred the people of the Empire as nothing,

save perhaps the subsequent relief of Mafeking, has done during our

generation. Even sober unemotional London found its soul for once and

fluttered with joy. Men, women, and children, rich and poor, clubman and

cabman, joined in the universal delight. The thought of our garrison,

of their privations, of our impotence to relieve them, of the impending

humiliation to them and to us, had lain dark for many months across our

spirits. It had weighed upon us, until the subject, though ever present

in our thoughts, was too painful for general talk. And now, in an

instant, the shadow was lifted. The outburst of rejoicing was not

a triumph over the gallant Boers. But it was our own escape from

humiliation, the knowledge that the blood of our sons had not been shed

in vain, above all the conviction that the darkest hour had now passed

and that the light of peace was dimly breaking far away--that was why

London rang with joy bells that March morning, and why those bells

echoed back from every town and hamlet, in tropical sun and in Arctic

snow, over which the flag of Britain waved.

CHAPTER 18. THE SIEGE AND RELIEF OF KIMBERLEY.

It has already been narrated how, upon the arrival of the army corps

from England, the greater part was drafted to Natal, while some went

to the western side, and started under Lord Methuen upon the perilous

enterprise of the relief of Kimberley. It has also been shown how, after

three expensive victories, Lord Methuen's force met with a paralysing

reverse, and was compelled to remain inactive within twenty miles of the

town which they had come to succour. Before I describe how that succour

did eventually arrive, some attention must be paid to the incidents

which had occurred within the city.

'I am directed to assure you that there is no reason for apprehending

that Kimberley or any part of the colony either is, or in any

contemplated event will be, in danger of attack. Mr. Schreiner is of

opinion that your fears are groundless and your anticipations in the

matter entirely without foundation.' Such is the official reply to the

remonstrance of the inhabitants, when, with the shadow of war dark

upon them, they appealed for help. It is fortunate, however, that a

progressive British town has usually the capacity for doing things for

itself without the intervention of officials. Kimberley was particularly

lucky in being the centre of the wealthy and alert De Beers Company,

which had laid in sufficient ammunition and supplies to prevent the town

from being helpless in the presence of the enemy. But the cannon were

popguns, firing a 7-pound shell for a short range, and the garrison

contained only seven hundred regulars, while the remainder were

mostly untrained miners and artisans. Among them, however, there was a

sprinkling of dangerous men from the northern wars, and all were nerved

by a knowledge that the ground which they defended was essential to the

Empire. Ladysmith was no more than any other strategic position, but

Kimberley was unique, the centre of the richest tract of ground for its

size in the whole world. Its loss would have been a heavy blow to the

British cause, and an enormous encouragement to the Boers.

On October 12th, several hours after the expiration of Kruger's

ultimatum, Cecil Rhodes threw himself into Kimberley. This remarkable

man, who stood for the future of South Africa as clearly as the Dopper

Boer stood for its past, had, both in features and in character, some

traits which may, without extravagance, be called Napoleonic. The

restless energy, the fertility of resource, the attention to detail,

the wide sweep of mind, the power of terse comment--all these recall

the great emperor. So did the simplicity of private life in the midst of

excessive wealth. And so finally did a want of scruple where an ambition

was to be furthered, shown, for example, in that enormous donation to

the Irish party by which he made a bid for their parliamentary support,

and in the story of the Jameson raid. A certain cynicism of mind and a

grim humour complete the parallel. But Rhodes was a Napoleon of peace.

The consolidation of South Africa under the freest and most progressive

form of government was the large object on which he had expended his

energies and his fortune but the development of the country in every

conceivable respect, from the building of a railway to the importation

of a pedigree bull, engaged his unremitting attention.

It was on October 15th that the fifty thousand inhabitants of Kimberley

first heard the voice of war. It rose and fell in a succession of

horrible screams and groans which travelled far over the veld, and the

outlying farmers marvelled at the dreadful clamour from the sirens and

the hooters of the great mines. Those who have endured all--the rifle,

the cannon, and the hunger--have said that those wild whoops from the

sirens were what had tried their nerve the most.

The Boers in scattered bands of horsemen were thick around the town,

and had blocked the railroad. They raided cattle upon the outskirts,

but made no attempt to rush the defence. The garrison, who, civilian and

military, approached four thousand in number, lay close in rifle pit

and redoubt waiting for an attack which never came. The perimeter to be

defended was about eight miles, but the heaps of tailings made admirable

fortifications, and the town had none of those inconvenient heights

around it which had been such bad neighbours to Ladysmith. Picturesque

surroundings are not favourable to defence.

On October 24th the garrison, finding that no attack was made,

determined upon a reconnaissance. The mounted force, upon which most of

the work and of the loss fell, consisted of the Diamond Fields Horse, a

small number of Cape Police, a company of Mounted Infantry, and a

body called the Kimberley Light Horse. With two hundred and seventy

volunteers from this force Major Scott-Turner, a redoubtable fighter,

felt his way to the north until he came in touch with the Boers. The

latter, who were much superior in numbers, manoeuvred to cut him off,

but the arrival of two companies of the North Lancashire Regiment turned

the scale in our favour. We lost three killed and twenty-one wounded in

the skirmish. The Boer loss is unknown, but their commander Botha was

slain.

On November 4th Commandant Wessels formally summoned the town, and it is

asserted that he gave Colonel Kekewich leave to send out the women and

children. That officer has been blamed for not taking advantage of

the permission--or at the least for not communicating it to the

civil authorities. As a matter of fact the charge rests upon a

misapprehension. In Wessels' letter a distinction is made between

Africander and English women, the former being offered an asylum in his

camp. This offer was made known, and half a dozen persons took advantage

of it. The suggestion, however, in the case of the English carried

with it no promise that they would be conveyed to Orange River, and a

compliance with it would have put them as helpless hostages into the

hands of the enemy. As to not publishing the message it is not usual to

publish such official documents, but the offer was shown to Mr. Rhodes,

who concurred in the impossibility of accepting it.

It is difficult to allude to this subject without touching upon

the painful but notorious fact that there existed during the siege

considerable friction between the military authorities and a section of

the civilians, of whom Mr. Rhodes was chief. Among other characteristics

Rhodes bore any form of restraint very badly, and chafed mightily when

unable to do a thing in the exact way which he considered best. He

may have been a Napoleon of peace, but his warmest friends could never

describe him as a Napoleon of war, for his military forecasts have been

erroneous, and the management of the Jameson fiasco certainly inspired

no confidence in the judgment of any one concerned. That his intentions

were of the best, and that he had the good of the Empire at heart,

may be freely granted; but that these motives should lead him to cabal

against, and even to threaten, the military governor, or that he should

attempt to force Lord Roberts's hand in a military operation, was most

deplorable. Every credit may be given to him for all his aid to the

military--he gave with a good grace what the garrison would otherwise

have had to commandeer--but it is a fact that the town would have been

more united, and therefore stronger, without his presence. Colonel

Kekewich and his chief staff officer, Major O'Meara, were as much

plagued by intrigue within as by the Boers without.

On November 7th the bombardment of the town commenced from nine

9-pounder guns to which the artillery of the garrison could give no

adequate reply. The result, however, of a fortnight's fire, during

which seven hundred shells were discharged, was the loss of two

non-combatants. The question of food was recognised as being of more

importance than the enemy's fire. An early relief appeared probable,

however, as the advance of Methuen's force was already known. One pound

of bread, two ounces of sugar, and half a pound of meat were allowed per

head. It was only on the small children that the scarcity of milk told

with tragic effect. At Ladysmith, at Mafeking, and at Kimberley hundreds

of these innocents were sacrificed.

November 25th was a red-letter day with the garrison, who made a sortie

under the impression that Methuen was not far off, and that they were

assisting his operations. The attack was made upon one of the Boer

positions by a force consisting of a detachment of the Light Horse

and of the Cape Police, and their work was brilliantly successful. The

actual storming of the redoubt was carried out by some forty men, of

whom but four were killed. They brought back thirty-three prisoners as a

proof of their victory, but the Boer gun, as usual, escaped us. In this

brilliant affair Scott-Turner was wounded, which did not prevent

him, only three days later, from leading another sortie, which was as

disastrous as the first had been successful. Save under very exceptional

circumstances it is in modern warfare long odds always upon the defence,

and the garrison would probably have been better advised had they

refrained from attacking the fortifications of their enemy--a truth

which Baden-Powell learned also at Game Tree Hill. As it was, after a

temporary success the British were blown back by the fierce Mauser fire,

and lost the indomitable Scott-Turner, with twenty-one of his brave

companions killed and twenty-eight wounded, all belonging to the

colonial corps. The Empire may reflect with pride that the people in

whose cause mainly they fought showed themselves by their gallantry and

their devotion worthy of any sacrifice which has been made.

Again the siege settled down to a monotonous record of decreasing

rations and of expectation. On December 10 there came a sign of hope

from the outside world. Far on the southern horizon a little golden

speck shimmered against the blue African sky. It was Methuen's balloon

gleaming in the sunshine. Next morning the low grumble of distant cannon

was the sweetest of music to the listening citizens. But days passed

without further news, and it was not for more than a week that they

learned of the bloody repulse of Magersfontein, and that help was once

more indefinitely postponed. Heliographic communication had been opened

with the relieving army, and it is on record that the first message

flashed through from the south was a question about the number of a

horse. With inconceivable stupidity this has been cited as an example of

military levity and incapacity. Of course the object of the question

was a test as to whether they were really in communication with the

garrison. It must be confessed that the town seems to have contained

some very querulous and unreasonable people.

The New Year found the beleaguered city reduced to a quarter of a pound

of meat per head, while the health of the inhabitants began to break

down under their confinement. Their interest, however, was keenly

aroused by the attempt made in the De Beers workshops to build a gun

which might reach their opponents. This remarkable piece of ordnance,

constructed by an American named Labram by the help of tools

manufactured for the purpose and of books found in the town, took the

shape eventually of a 28 lb. rifled gun, which proved to be a most

efficient piece of artillery. With grim humour, Mr. Rhodes's compliments

had been inscribed upon the shells--a fair retort in view of the openly

expressed threat of the enemy that in case of his capture they would

carry him in a cage to Pretoria.

The Boers, though held off for a time by this unexpected piece of

ordnance, prepared a terrible answer to it. On February 7th an enormous

gun, throwing a 96 lb. shell, opened from Kamfersdam, which is four

miles from the centre of the town. The shells, following the evil

precedent of the Germans in 1870, were fired not at the forts, but into

the thickly populated city. Day and night these huge missiles exploded,

shattering the houses and occasionally killing or maiming the occupants.

Some thousands of the women and children were conveyed down the mines,

where, in the electric-lighted tunnels, they lay in comfort and safety.

One surprising revenge the Boers had, for by an extraordinary chance

one of the few men killed by their gun was the ingenious Labram who had

constructed the 28-pounder. By an even more singular chance, Leon, who

was responsible for bringing the big Boer gun, was struck immediately

afterwards by a long-range rifle-shot from the garrison.

The historian must be content to give a tame account of the siege of

Kimberley, for the thing itself was tame. Indeed 'siege' is a misnomer,

for it was rather an investment or a blockade. Such as it was, however,

the inhabitants became very restless under it, and though there were

never any prospects of surrender the utmost impatience began to be

manifested at the protracted delay on the part of the relief force. It

was not till later that it was understood how cunningly Kimberley had

been used as a bait to hold the enemy until final preparations had been

made for his destruction.

And at last the great day came. It is on record how dramatic was the

meeting between the mounted outposts of the defenders and the advance

guard of the relievers, whose advent seems to have been equally

unexpected by friend and foe. A skirmish was in progress on February

15th between a party of the Kimberley Light Horse and of the Boers, when

a new body of horsemen, unrecognised by either side, appeared upon the

plain and opened fire upon the enemy. One of the strangers rode up to

the patrol. 'What the dickens does K.L. H. mean on your shoulder-strap?'

he asked. 'It means Kimberley Light Horse. Who are you?' 'I am one of

the New Zealanders.' Macaulay in his wildest dream of the future of the

much-quoted New Zealander never pictured him as heading a rescue force

for the relief of a British town in the heart of Africa.

The population had assembled to watch the mighty cloud of dust which

rolled along the south-eastern horizon. What was it which swept

westwards within its reddish heart? Hopeful and yet fearful they saw the

huge bank draw nearer and nearer. An assault from the whole of Cronje's

army was the thought which passed through many a mind. And then the

dust-cloud thinned, a mighty host of horsemen spurred out from it, and

in the extended far-flung ranks the glint of spearheads and the gleam of

scabbards told of the Hussars and Lancers, while denser banks on either

flank marked the position of the whirling guns. Wearied and spent with

a hundred miles' ride the dusty riders and the panting, dripping horses

took fresh heart as they saw the broad city before them, and swept with

martial rattle and jingle towards the cheering crowds. Amid shouts and

tears French rode into Kimberley while his troopers encamped outside the

town.

To know how this bolt was prepared and how launched, the narrative must

go back to the beginning of the month. At that period Methuen and his

men were still faced by Cronje and his entrenched forces, who, in spite

of occasional bombardments, held their position between Kimberley

and the relieving army. French, having handed over the operations at

Colesberg to Clements, had gone down to Cape Town to confer with Roberts

and Kitchener. Thence they all three made their way to the Modder River,

which was evidently about to be the base of a more largely conceived

series of operations than any which had yet been undertaken.

In order to draw the Boer attention away from the thunderbolt which was

about to fall upon their left flank, a strong demonstration ending in

a brisk action was made early in February upon the extreme right of

Cronje's position. The force, consisting of the Highland Brigade, two

squadrons of the 9th Lancers, No. 7 Co. Royal Engineers, and the 62nd

Battery, was under the command of the famous Hector Macdonald. 'Fighting

Mac' as he was called by his men, had joined his regiment as a private,

and had worked through the grades of corporal, sergeant, captain, major,

and colonel, until now, still in the prime of his manhood, he found

himself riding at the head of a brigade. A bony, craggy Scotsman, with

a square fighting head and a bulldog jaw, he had conquered the

exclusiveness and routine of the British service by the same dogged

qualities which made him formidable to Dervish and to Boer. With a

cool brain, a steady nerve, and a proud heart, he is an ideal leader of

infantry, and those who saw him manoeuvre his brigade in the crisis of

the battle of Omdurman speak of it as the one great memory which they

carried back from the engagement. On the field of battle he turns to the

speech of his childhood, the jagged, rasping, homely words which brace

the nerves of the northern soldier. This was the man who had come from

India to take the place of poor Wauchope, and to put fresh heart into

the gallant but sorely stricken brigade.

The four regiments which composed the infantry of the force--the Black

Watch, the Argyll and Sutherlands, the Seaforths, and the Highland Light

Infantry--left Lord Methuen's camp on Saturday, February 3rd, and halted

at Fraser's Drift, passing on next day to Koodoosberg. The day was very

hot, and the going very heavy, and many men fell out, some never to

return. The drift (or ford) was found, however, to be undefended, and

was seized by Macdonald, who, after pitching camp on the south side

of the river, sent out strong parties across the drift to seize and

entrench the Koodoosberg and some adjacent kopjes which, lying some

three-quarters of a mile to the north-west of the drift formed the key

of the position. A few Boer scouts were seen hurrying with the news of

his coming to the head laager.

The effect of these messages was evident by Tuesday (February 6th),

when the Boers were seen to be assembling upon the north bank. By next

morning they were there in considerable numbers, and began an attack

upon a crest held by the Seaforths. Macdonald threw two companies of the

Black Watch and two of the Highland Light Infantry into the fight. The

Boers made excellent practice with a 7-pounder mountain gun, and their

rifle fire, considering the good cover which our men had, was very

deadly. Poor Tait, of the Black Watch, good sportsman and gallant

soldier, with one wound hardly healed upon his person, was hit again.

'They've got me this time,' were his dying words. Blair, of the

Seaforths, had his carotid cut by a shrapnel bullet, and lay for hours

while the men of his company took turns to squeeze the artery. But our

artillery silenced the Boer gun, and our infantry easily held their

riflemen. Babington with the cavalry brigade arrived from the camp about

1.30, moving along the north bank of the river. In spite of the fact

that men and horses were weary from a tiring march, it was hoped by

Macdonald's force that they would work round the Boers and make an

attempt to capture either them or their gun. But the horsemen seem not

to have realised the position of the parties, or that possibility

of bringing off a considerable coup, so the action came to a tame

conclusion, the Boers retiring unpursued from their attack. On Thursday,

February 8th, they were found to have withdrawn, and on the same evening

our own force was recalled, to the surprise and disappointment of the

public at home, who had not realised that in directing their attention

to their right flank the column had already produced the effect upon

the enemy for which they had been sent. They could not be left there, as

they were needed for those great operations which were pending. It

was on the 9th that the brigade returned; on the 10th they were

congratulated by Lord Roberts in person; and on the 11th those

new dispositions were made which were destined not only to relieve

Kimberley, but to inflict a blow upon the Boer cause from which it was

never able to recover.

Small, brown, and wrinkled, with puckered eyes and alert manner, Lord

Roberts in spite of his sixty-seven years preserves the figure and

energy of youth. The active open-air life of India keeps men fit for the

saddle when in England they would only sit their club armchairs, and

it is hard for any one who sees the wiry figure and brisk step of Lord

Roberts to realise that he has spent forty-one years of soldiering in

what used to be regarded as an unhealthy climate. He had carried into

late life the habit of martial exercise, and a Russian traveller has

left it on record that the sight which surprised him most in India was

to see the veteran commander of the army ride forth with his spear and

carry off the peg with the skill of a practised trooper. In his early

youth he had shown in the Mutiny that he possessed the fighting energy

of the soldier to a remarkable degree, but it was only in the Afghan War

of 1880 that he had an opportunity of proving that he had rarer and more

valuable gifts, the power of swift resolution and determined execution.

At the crisis of the war he and his army disappeared entirely from

the public ken only to emerge dramatically as victors at a point three

hundred miles distant from where they had vanished.

It is not only as a soldier, but as a man, that Lord Roberts possesses

some remarkable characteristics. He has in a supreme degree that

magnetic quality which draws not merely the respect but the love of

those who know him. In Chaucer's phrase, he is a very perfect gentle

knight. Soldiers and regimental officers have for him a feeling of

personal affection such as the unemotional British Army has never had

for any leader in the course of our history. His chivalrous courtesy,

his unerring tact, his kindly nature, his unselfish and untiring

devotion to their interests have all endeared him to those rough loyal

natures, who would follow him with as much confidence and devotion as

the grognards of the Guard had in the case of the Great Emperor. There

were some who feared that in Roberts's case, as in so many more, the

donga and kopje of South Africa might form the grave and headstone of a

military reputation, but far from this being so he consistently showed a

wide sweep of strategy and a power of conceiving the effect of scattered

movements over a great extent of country which have surprised his

warmest admirers. In the second week of February his dispositions were

ready, and there followed the swift series of blows which brought

the Boers upon their knees. Of these we shall only describe here the

exploits of the fine force of cavalry which, after a ride of a hundred

miles, broke out of the heart of that reddish dustcloud and swept the

Boer besiegers away from hard-pressed Kimberley.

In order to strike unexpectedly, Lord Roberts had not only made a strong

demonstration at Koodoosdrift, at the other end of the Boer line, but he

had withdrawn his main force some forty miles south, taking them down

by rail to Belmont and Enslin with such secrecy that even commanding

officers had no idea whither the troops were going. The cavalry which

had come from French's command at Colesberg had already reached the

rendezvous, travelling by road to Naauwpoort, and thence by train.

This force consisted of the Carabineers, New South Wales Lancers,

Inniskillings, composite regiment of Household Cavalry, 10th Hussars,

with some mounted infantry and two batteries of Horse Artillery, making

a force of nearly three thousand sabres. To this were added the 9th and

12th Lancers from Modder River, the 16th Lancers from India, the Scots

Greys, which had been patrolling Orange River from the beginning of

the war, Rimington's Scouts, and two brigades of mounted infantry under

Colonels Ridley and Hannay. The force under this latter officer had a

severe skirmish on its way to the rendezvous and lost fifty or sixty in

killed, wounded, and missing. Five other batteries of Horse Artillery

were added to the force, making seven in all, with a pontoon section of

Royal Engineers. The total number of men was about five thousand. By the

night of Sunday, February 11th, this formidable force had concentrated

at Ramdam, twenty miles north-east of Belmont, and was ready to advance.

At two in the morning of Monday, February 12th, the start was made, and

the long sinuous line of night-riders moved off over the shadowy veld,

the beat of twenty thousand hoofs, the clank of steel, and the rumble of

gunwheels and tumbrils swelling into a deep low roar like the surge upon

the shingle.

Two rivers, the Riet and the Modder, intervened between French and

Kimberley. By daylight on the 12th the head of his force had reached

Waterval Drift, which was found to be defended by a body of Boers with a

gun. Leaving a small detachment to hold them, French passed his men over

Dekiel's Drift, higher up the stream, and swept the enemy out of his

position. This considerable force of Boers had come from Jacobsdal, and

were just too late to get into position to resist the crossing. Had we

been ten minutes later, the matter would have been much more serious. At

the cost of a very small loss he held both sides of the ford, but it was

not until midnight that the whole long column was brought across, and

bivouacked upon the northern bank. In the morning the strength of the

force was enormously increased by the arrival of one more horseman. It

was Roberts himself, who had ridden over to give the men a send-off, and

the sight of his wiry erect figure and mahogany face sent them full of

fire and confidence upon their way.

But the march of this second day (February 13th) was a military

operation of some difficulty. Thirty long waterless miles had to be done

before they could reach the Modder, and it was possible that even then

they might have to fight an action before winning the drift. The

weather was very hot, and through the long day the sun beat down from an

unclouded sky, while the soldiers were only shaded by the dust-bank

in which they rode. A broad arid plain, swelling into stony hills,

surrounded them on every side. Here and there in the extreme distance,

mounted figures moved over the vast expanse--Boer scouts who marked

in amazement the advance of this great array. Once or twice these men

gathered together, and a sputter of rifle fire broke out upon our left

flank, but the great tide swept on and carried them with it. Often in

this desolate land the herds of mottled springbok and of grey rekbok

could be seen sweeping over the plain, or stopping with that curiosity

upon which the hunter trades, to stare at the unwonted spectacle.

So all day they rode, hussars, dragoons, and lancers, over the withered

veld, until men and horses drooped with the heat and the exertion. A

front of nearly two miles was kept, the regiments moving two abreast in

open order; and the sight of this magnificent cloud of horsemen sweeping

over the great barren plain was a glorious one. The veld had caught

fire upon the right, and a black cloud of smoke with a lurid heart to

it covered the flank. The beat of the sun from above and the swelter

of dust from below were overpowering. Gun horses fell in the traces

and died of pure exhaustion. The men, parched and silent, but cheerful,

strained their eyes to pierce the continual mirage which played over the

horizon, and to catch the first glimpse of the Modder. At last, as the

sun began to slope down to the west, a thin line of green was discerned,

the bushes which skirt the banks of that ill-favoured stream. With

renewed heart the cavalry pushed on and made for the drift, while

Major Rimington, to whom the onerous duty of guiding the force had been

entrusted, gave a sigh of relief as he saw that he had indeed struck the

very point at which he had aimed.

The essential thing in the movements had been speed--to reach each point

before the enemy could concentrate to oppose them. Upon this it depended

whether they would find five hundred or five thousand waiting on the

further bank. It must have been with anxious eyes that French watched

his first regiment ride down to Klip Drift. If the Boers should have had

notice of his coming and have transferred some of their 40-pounders, he

might lose heavily before he forced the stream. But this time, at last,

he had completely outmanoeuvred them. He came with the news of his

coming, and Broadwood with the 12th Lancers rushed the drift. The small

Boer force saved itself by flight, and the camp, the wagons, and the

supplies remained with the victors. On the night of the 13th he had

secured the passage of the Modder, and up to the early morning the

horses and the guns were splashing through its coffee-coloured waters.

French's force had now come level to the main position of the Boers, but

had struck it upon the extreme left wing. The extreme right wing, thanks

to the Koodoosdrift demonstration, was fifty miles off, and this line

was naturally very thinly held, save only at the central position of

Magersfontein. Cronje could not denude this central position, for he

saw Methuen still waiting in front of him, and in any case Klip Drift

is twenty-five miles from Magersfontein. But the Boer left wing, though

scattered, gathered into some sort of cohesion on Wednesday (February

14th), and made an effort to check the victorious progress of the

cavalry. It was necessary on this day to rest at Klip Drift, until

Kelly-Kenny should come up with the infantry to hold what had been

gained. All day the small bodies of Boers came riding in and taking up

positions between the column and its objective.

Next morning the advance was resumed, the column being still forty miles

from Kimberley with the enemy in unknown force between. Some four miles

out French came upon their position, two hills with a long low nek

between, from which came a brisk rifle fire supported by artillery. But

French was not only not to be stopped, but could not even be retarded.

Disregarding the Boer fire completely the cavalry swept in wave after

wave over the low nek, and so round the base of the hills. The Boer

riflemen upon the kopjes must have seen a magnificent military spectacle

as regiment after regiment, the 9th Lancers leading, all in very open

order, swept across the plain at a gallop, and so passed over the nek.

A few score horses and half as many men were left behind them, but forty

or fifty Boers were cut down in the pursuit. It appears to have been

one of the very few occasions during the campaign when that obsolete and

absurd weapon the sword was anything but a dead weight to its bearer.

And now the force had a straight run in before it, for it had outpaced

any further force of Boers which may have been advancing from the

direction of Magersfontein. The horses, which had come a hundred miles

in four days with insufficient food and water, were so done that it was

no uncommon sight to see the trooper not only walking to ease his horse,

but carrying part of his monstrous weight of saddle gear. But in spite

of fatigue the force pressed on until in the afternoon a distant view

was seen, across the reddish plain, of the brick houses and corrugated

roofs of Kimberley. The Boer besiegers cleared off in front of it, and

that night (February 15th) the relieving column camped on the plain two

miles away, while French and his staff rode in to the rescued city.

The war was a cruel one for the cavalry, who were handicapped throughout

by the nature of the country and by the tactics of the enemy. They are

certainly the branch of the service which had least opportunity for

distinction. The work of scouting and patrolling is the most dangerous

which a soldier can undertake, and yet from its very nature it can find

no chronicler. The war correspondent, like Providence, is always with

the big battalions, and there never was a campaign in which there was

more unrecorded heroism, the heroism of the picket and of the vedette

which finds its way into no newspaper paragraph. But in the larger

operations of the war it is difficult to say that cavalry, as cavalry,

have justified their existence. In the opinion of many the tendency of

the future will be to convert the whole force into mounted infantry. How

little is required to turn our troopers into excellent foot soldiers

was shown at Magersfontein, where the 12th Lancers, dismounted by the

command of their colonel, Lord Airlie, held back the threatened flank

attack all the morning. A little training in taking cover, leggings

instead of boots, and a rifle instead of a carbine would give us a

formidable force of twenty thousand men who could do all that our

cavalry does, and a great deal more besides. It is undoubtedly possible

on many occasions in this war, at Colesberg, at Diamond Hill, to say

'Here our cavalry did well.' They are brave men on good horses, and they

may be expected to do well. But the champion of the cavalry cause must

point out the occasions where the cavalry did something which could

not have been done by the same number of equally brave and equally

well-mounted infantry. Only then will the existence of the cavalry be

justified. The lesson both of the South African and of the American

civil war is that the light horseman who is trained to fight on foot is

the type of the future.

A few more words as a sequel to this short sketch of the siege and

relief of Kimberley. Considerable surprise has been expressed that the

great gun at Kamfersdam, a piece which must have weighed many tons and

could not have been moved by bullock teams at a rate of more than two

or three miles an hour, should have eluded our cavalry. It is indeed a

surprising circumstance, and yet it was due to no inertia on the part of

our leaders, but rather to one of the finest examples of Boer tenacity

in the whole course of the war. The instant that Kekewich was sure of

relief he mustered every available man and sent him out to endeavour to

get the gun. It had already been removed, and its retreat was covered by

the strong position of Dronfield, which was held both by riflemen and

by light artillery. Finding himself unable to force it, Murray, the

commander of the detachment, remained in front of it. Next morning

(Friday) at three o'clock the weary men and horses of two of French's

brigades were afoot with the same object. But still the Boers were

obstinately holding on to Dronfield, and still their position was too

strong to force, and too extended to get round with exhausted horses. It

was not until the night after that the Boers abandoned their excellent

rearguard action, leaving one light gun in the hands of the Cape Police,

but having gained such a start for their heavy one that French, who had

other and more important objects in view, could not attempt to follow

it.

CHAPTER 19. PAARDEBERG.

Lord Roberts's operations, prepared with admirable secrecy and carried

out with extreme energy, aimed at two different results, each of which

he was fortunate enough to attain. The first was that an overpowering

force of cavalry should ride round the Boer position and raise the siege

of Kimberley: the fate of this expedition has already been described.

The second was that the infantry, following hard on the heels of the

cavalry, and holding all that they had gained, should establish itself

upon Cronje's left flank and cut his connection with Bloemfontein. It is

this portion of the operations which has now to be described.

The infantry force which General Roberts had assembled was a very

formidable one. The Guards he had left under Methuen in front of the

lines of Magersfontein to contain the Boer force. With them he had

also left those regiments which had fought in the 9th Brigade in

all Methuen's actions. These, as will be remembered, were the 1st

Northumberland Fusiliers, the 2nd Yorkshire Light Infantry, the 2nd

Northamptons, and one wing of the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment. These

stayed to hold Cronje in his position.

There remained three divisions of infantry, one of which, the ninth, was

made up on the spot. These were constituted in this way:

Sixth Division (Kelly-Kenny).

12th Brigade (Knox).

Oxford Light Infantry.

Gloucesters (2nd).

West Riding.

Buffs.

18th Brigade (Stephenson).

Essex.

Welsh.

Warwicks.

Yorks Seventh Division (Tucker).

14th Brigade (Chermside).

Scots Borderers.

Lincolns.

Hampshires.

Norfolks.

15th Brigade (Wavell).

North Staffords.

Cheshires.

S. Wales Borderers.

East Lancashires Ninth Division (Colvile).

Highland Brigade (Macdonald).

Black Watch.

Argyll and Sutherlands.

Seaforths.

Highland Light Infantry.

19th Brigade (Smith-Dorrien).

Gordons.

Canadians.

Shropshire Light Infantry.

Cornwall Light Infantry.

With these were two brigade divisions of artillery under General

Marshall, the first containing the 18th, 62nd, and 75th batteries

(Colonel Hall), the other the 76th, 81st, and 82nd (Colonel McDonnell).

Besides these there were a howitzer battery, a naval contingent of four

4.7 guns and four 12-pounders under Captain Bearcroft of the 'Philomel.'

The force was soon increased by the transfer of the Guards and the

arrival of more artillery; but the numbers which started on Monday,

February 12th, amounted roughly to twenty-five thousand foot and eight

thousand horse with 98 guns--a considerable army to handle in a foodless

and almost waterless country. Seven hundred wagons drawn by eleven

thousand mules and oxen, all collected by the genius for preparation

and organisation which characterises Lord Kitchener, groaned and creaked

behind the columns.

Both arms had concentrated at Ramdam, the cavalry going down by road,

and the infantry by rail as far as Belmont or Enslin. On Monday,

February 12th, the cavalry had started, and on Tuesday the infantry were

pressing hard after them. The first thing was to secure a position

upon Cronje's flank, and for that purpose the 6th Division and the 9th

(Kelly-Kenny's and Colvile's) pushed swiftly on and arrived on Thursday,

February 15th, at Klip Drift on the Modder, which had only been left

by the cavalry that same morning. It was obviously impossible to leave

Jacobsdal in the hands of the enemy on our left flank, so the 7th

Division (Tucker's) turned aside to attack the town. Wavell's brigade

carried the place after a sharp skirmish, chiefly remarkable for the

fact that the City Imperial Volunteers found themselves under fire

for the first time and bore themselves with the gallantry of the old

train-bands whose descendants they are. Our loss was two killed and

twenty wounded, and we found ourselves for the first time firmly

established in one of the enemy's towns. In the excellent German

hospital were thirty or forty of our wounded.

On the afternoon of Thursday, February 15th, our cavalry, having left

Klip Drift in the morning, were pushing hard for Kimberley. At Klip

Drift was Kelly-Kenny's 6th Division. South of Klip Drift at Wegdraai

was Colvile's 9th Division, while the 7th Division was approaching

Jacobsdal. Altogether the British forces were extended over a line of

forty miles. The same evening saw the relief of Kimberley and the taking

of Jacobsdal, but it also saw the capture of one of our convoys by the

Boers, a dashing exploit which struck us upon what was undoubtedly our

vulnerable point.

It has never been cleared up whence the force of Boers came which

appeared upon our rear on that occasion. It seems to have been the same

body which had already had a skirmish with Hannay's Mounted Infantry

as they went up from Orange River to join the rendezvous at Ramdam.

The balance of evidence is that they had not come from Colesberg or any

distant point, but that they were a force under the command of Piet De

Wet, the younger of two famous brothers. Descending to Waterval Drift,

the ford over the Riet, they occupied a line of kopjes, which ought, one

would have imagined, to have been carefully guarded by us, and opened

a brisk fire from rifles and guns upon the convoy as it ascended the

northern bank of the river. Numbers of bullocks were soon shot down,

and the removal of the hundred and eighty wagons made impossible. The

convoy, which contained forage and provisions, had no guard of its own,

but the drift was held by Colonel Ridley with one company of Gordons

and one hundred and fifty mounted infantry without artillery, which

certainly seems an inadequate force to secure the most vital and

vulnerable spot in the line of communications of an army of forty

thousand men. The Boers numbered at the first some five or six hundred

men, but their position was such that they could not be attacked. On the

other hand they were not strong enough to leave their shelter in order

to drive in the British guard, who, lying in extended order between the

wagons and the assailants, were keeping up a steady and effective fire.

Captain Head, of the East Lancashire Regiment, a fine natural soldier,

commanded the British firing line, and neither he nor any of his men

doubted that they could hold off the enemy for an indefinite time. In

the course of the afternoon reinforcements arrived for the Boers, but

Kitchener's Horse and a field battery came back and restored the balance

of power. In the evening the latter swayed altogether in favour of the

British, as Tucker appeared upon the scene with the whole of the 14th

Brigade; but as the question of an assault was being debated a positive

order arrived from Lord Roberts that the convoy should be abandoned and

the force return.

If Lord Roberts needed justification for this decision, the future

course of events will furnish it. One of Napoleon's maxims in war was to

concentrate all one's energies upon one thing at one time. Roberts's aim

was to outflank and possibly to capture Cronje's army. If he allowed

a brigade to be involved in a rearguard action, his whole swift-moving

plan of campaign might be dislocated. It was very annoying to lose a

hundred and eighty wagons, but it only meant a temporary inconvenience.

The plan of campaign was the essential thing. Therefore he sacrificed

his convoy and hurried his troops upon their original mission. It was

with heavy hearts and bitter words that those who had fought so long

abandoned their charge, but now at least there are probably few of them

who do not agree in the wisdom of the sacrifice. Our loss in this affair

was between fifty and sixty killed and wounded. The Boers were unable

to get rid of the stores, and they were eventually distributed among the

local farmers and recovered again as the British forces flowed over the

country. Another small disaster occurred to us on the preceding day in

the loss of fifty men of E company of Kitchener's Horse, which had been

left as a guard to a well in the desert.

But great events were coming to obscure those small checks which are

incidental to a war carried out over immense distances against a mobile

and enterprising enemy. Cronje had suddenly become aware of the net

which was closing round him. To the dark fierce man who had striven so

hard to make his line of kopjes impregnable it must have been a bitter

thing to abandon his trenches and his rifle pits. But he was crafty

as well as tenacious, and he had the Boer horror of being cut off--an

hereditary instinct from fathers who had fought on horseback against

enemies on foot. If at any time during the last ten weeks Methuen had

contained him in front with a thin line of riflemen with machine guns,

and had thrown the rest of his force on Jacobsdal and the east, he would

probably have attained the same result. Now at the rumour of English

upon his flank Cronje instantly abandoned his position and his plans,

in order to restore those communications with Bloemfontein upon which he

depended for his supplies. With furious speed he drew in his right wing,

and then, one huge mass of horsemen, guns, and wagons, he swept through

the gap between the rear of the British cavalry bound for Kimberley and

the head of the British infantry at Klip Drift. There was just room

to pass, and at it he dashed with the furious energy of a wild beast

rushing from a trap. A portion of his force with his heavy guns had gone

north round Kimberley to Warrenton; many of the Freestaters also had

slipped away and returned to their farms. The remainder, numbering about

six thousand men, the majority of whom were Transvaalers, swept through

between the British forces.

This movement was carried out on the night of February 15th, and had it

been a little quicker it might have been concluded before we were aware

of it. But the lumbering wagons impeded it, and on the Friday morning,

February 16th, a huge rolling cloud of dust on the northern veld, moving

from west to east, told our outposts at Klip Drift that Cronje's army

had almost slipped through our fingers. Lord Kitchener, who was in

command at Klip Drift at the moment, instantly unleashed his mounted

infantry in direct pursuit, while Knox's brigade sped along the northern

bank of the river to cling on to the right haunch of the retreating

column. Cronje's men had made a night march of thirty miles from

Magersfontein, and the wagon bullocks were exhausted. It was impossible,

without an absolute abandonment of his guns and stores, for him to get

away from his pursuers.

This was no deer which they were chasing, however, but rather a grim

old Transvaal wolf, with his teeth flashing ever over his shoulder.

The sight of those distant white-tilted wagons fired the blood of every

mounted infantryman, and sent the Oxfords, the Buffs, the West Ridings,

and the Gloucesters racing along the river bank in the glorious virile

air of an African morning. But there were kopjes ahead, sown with fierce

Dopper Boers, and those tempting wagons were only to be reached over

their bodies. The broad plain across which the English were hurrying was

suddenly swept with a storm of bullets. The long infantry line extended

yet further and lapped round the flank of the Boer position, and once

more the terrible duet of the Mauser and the Lee-Metford was sung while

the 81st field battery hurried up in time to add its deep roar to their

higher chorus. With fine judgment Cronje held on to the last moment of

safety, and then with a swift movement to the rear seized a further line

two miles off, and again snapped back at his eager pursuers. All day the

grim and weary rearguard stalled off the fiery advance of the infantry,

and at nightfall the wagons were still untaken. The pursuing force to

the north of the river was, it must be remembered, numerically inferior

to the pursued, so that in simply retarding the advance of the enemy and

in giving other British troops time to come up, Knox's brigade was doing

splendid work. Had Cronje been well advised or well informed, he would

have left his guns and wagons in the hope that by a swift dash over the

Modder he might still bring his army away in safety. He seems to have

underrated both the British numbers and the British activity.

On the night then of Friday, February 16th, Cronje lay upon the northern

bank of the Modder, with his stores and guns still intact, and no enemy

in front of him, though Knox's brigade and Hannay's Mounted Infantry

were behind. It was necessary for Cronje to cross the river in order to

be on the line for Bloemfontein. As the river tended to the north

the sooner he could cross the better. On the south side of the river,

however, were considerable British forces, and the obvious strategy was

to hurry them forward and to block every drift at which he could get

over. The river runs between very deep banks, so steep that one might

almost describe them as small cliffs, and there was no chance of a

horseman, far less a wagon, crossing at any point save those where the

convenience of traffic and the use of years had worn sloping paths down

to the shallows. The British knew exactly therefore what the places

were which had to be blocked. On the use made of the next few hours the

success or failure of the whole operation must depend.

The nearest drift to Cronje was only a mile or two distant, Klipkraal

the name; next to that the Paardeberg Drift; next to that the

Wolveskraal Drift, each about seven miles from the other. Had Cronje

pushed on instantly after the action, he might have got across at

Klipkraal. But men, horses, and bullocks were equally exhausted after

a long twenty-four hours' marching and fighting. He gave his weary

soldiers some hours' rest, and then, abandoning seventy-eight of his

wagons, he pushed on before daylight for the farthest off of the three

fords (Wolveskraal Drift). Could he reach and cross it before his

enemies, he was safe. The Klipkraal Drift had in the meanwhile been

secured by the Buffs, the West Ridings, and the Oxfordshire Light

Infantry after a spirited little action which, in the rapid rush of

events, attracted less attention than it deserved. The brunt of the

fighting fell upon the Oxfords, who lost ten killed and thirty-nine

wounded. It was not a waste of life, however, for the action, though

small and hardly recorded, was really a very essential one in the

campaign.

But Lord Roberts's energy had infused itself into his divisional

commanders, his brigadiers, his colonels, and so down to the humblest

Tommy who tramped and stumbled through the darkness with a devout faith

that 'Bobs' was going to catch 'old Cronje' this time. The mounted

infantry had galloped round from the north to the south of the river,

crossing at Klip Drift and securing the southern end of Klipkraal.

Thither also came Stephenson's brigade from Kelly-Kenny's Division,

while Knox, finding in the morning that Cronje was gone, marched along

the northern bank to the same spot. As Klipkraal was safe, the

mounted infantry pushed on at once and secured the southern end of

the Paardeberg Drift, whither they were followed the same evening by

Stephenson and Knox. There remained only the Wolveskraal Drift to block,

and this had already been done by as smart a piece of work as any in the

war. Wherever French has gone he has done well, but his crowning glory

was the movement from Kimberley to head off Cronje's retreat.

The exertions which the mounted men had made in the relief of Kimberley

have been already recorded. They arrived there on Thursday with their

horses dead beat. They were afoot at three o'clock on Friday morning,

and two brigades out of three were hard at work all day in an endeavour

to capture the Dronfield position. Yet when on the same evening an

order came that French should start again instantly from Kimberley and

endeavour to head Cronje's army off, he did not plead inability, as many

a commander might, but taking every man whose horse was still fit to

carry him (something under two thousand out of a column which had been

at least five thousand strong), he started within a few hours and pushed

on through the whole night. Horses died under their riders, but still

the column marched over the shadowy veld under the brilliant stars. By

happy chance or splendid calculation they were heading straight for

the one drift which was still open to Cronje. It was a close thing. At

midday on Saturday the Boer advance guard was already near to the kopjes

which command it. But French's men, still full of fight after their

march of thirty miles, threw themselves in front and seized the position

before their very eyes. The last of the drifts was closed. If Cronje

was to get across now, he must crawl out of his trench and fight under

Roberts's conditions, or he might remain under his own conditions until

Roberts's forces closed round him. With him lay the alternative. In the

meantime, still ignorant of the forces about him, but finding himself

headed off by French, he made his way down to the river and occupied

a long stretch of it between Paardeberg Drift and Wolveskraal Drift,

hoping to force his way across. This was the situation on the night of

Saturday, February 17th.

In the course of that night the British brigades, staggering with

fatigue but indomitably resolute to crush their evasive enemy, were

converging upon Paardeberg. The Highland Brigade, exhausted by a heavy

march over soft sand from Jacobsdal to Klip Drift, were nerved to fresh

exertions by the word 'Magersfontein,' which flew from lip to lip along

the ranks, and pushed on for another twelve miles to Paardeberg.

Close at their heels came Smith-Dorrien's 19th Brigade, comprising the

Shropshires, the Cornwalls, the Gordons, and the Canadians, probably the

very finest brigade in the whole army. They pushed across the river and

took up their position upon the north bank. The old wolf was now fairly

surrounded. On the west the Highlanders were south of the river, and

Smith-Dorrien on the north. On the east Kelly-Kenny's Division was to

the south of the river, and French with his cavalry and mounted infantry

were to the north of it. Never was a general in a more hopeless plight.

Do what he would, there was no possible loophole for escape.

There was only one thing which apparently should not have been done, and

that was to attack him. His position was a formidable one. Not only were

the banks of the river fringed with his riflemen under excellent cover,

but from these banks there extended on each side a number of dongas,

which made admirable natural trenches. The only possible attack from

either side must be across a level plain at least a thousand or fifteen

hundred yards in width, where our numbers would only swell our losses.

It must be a bold soldier and a far bolder civilian, who would venture

to question an operation carried out under the immediate personal

direction of Lord Kitchener; but the general consensus of opinion among

critics may justify that which might be temerity in the individual. Had

Cronje not been tightly surrounded, the action with its heavy losses

might have been justified as an attempt to hold him until his investment

should be complete. There seems, however, to be no doubt that he was

already entirely surrounded, and that, as experience proved, we had

only to sit round him to insure his surrender. It is not given to the

greatest man to have every soldierly gift equally developed, and it may

be said without offence that Lord Kitchener's cool judgment upon the

actual field of battle has not yet been proved as conclusively as his

longheaded power of organisation and his iron determination.

Putting aside the question of responsibility, what happened on the

morning of Sunday, February 18th, was that from every quarter an assault

was urged across the level plains, to the north and to the south, upon

the lines of desperate and invisible men who lay in the dongas and

behind the banks of the river. Everywhere there was a terrible monotony

about the experiences of the various regiments which learned once again

the grim lessons of Colenso and Modder River. We surely did not need to

prove once more what had already been so amply proved, that bravery can

be of no avail against concealed riflemen well entrenched, and that the

more hardy is the attack the heavier must be the repulse. Over the long

circle of our attack Knox's brigade, Stephenson's brigade, the Highland

brigade, Smith-Dorrien's brigade all fared alike. In each case there was

the advance until they were within the thousand-yard fire zone, then the

resistless sleet of bullets which compelled them to get down and to

keep down. Had they even then recognised that they were attempting

the impossible, no great harm might have been done, but with generous

emulation the men of the various regiments made little rushes, company

by company, towards the river bed, and found themselves ever exposed to

a more withering fire. On the northern bank Smith-Dorrien's brigade,

and especially the Canadian regiment, distinguished themselves by the

magnificent tenacity with which they persevered in their attack. The

Cornwalls of the same brigade swept up almost to the river bank in a

charge which was the admiration of all who saw it. If the miners of

Johannesburg had given the impression that the Cornishman is not a

fighter, the record of the county regiment in the war has for ever

exploded the calumny. Men who were not fighters could have found no

place in Smith-Dorrien's brigade or in the charge of Paardeberg.

While the infantry had been severely handled by the Boer riflemen, our

guns, the 76th, 81st, and 82nd field batteries, with the 65th howitzer

battery, had been shelling the river bed, though our artillery fire

proved as usual to have little effect against scattered and hidden

riflemen. At least, however, it distracted their attention, and made

their fire upon the exposed infantry in front of them less deadly.

Now, as in Napoleon's time, the effect of the guns is moral rather than

material. About midday French's horse-artillery guns came into action

from the north. Smoke and flames from the dongas told that some of our

shells had fallen among the wagons and their combustible stores.

The Boer line had proved itself to be unshakable on each face, but at

its ends the result of the action was to push them up, and to shorten

the stretch of the river which was held by them. On the north bank

Smith-Dorrien's brigade gained a considerable amount of ground. At the

other end of the position the Welsh, Yorkshire, and Essex regiments of

Stephenson's brigade did some splendid work, and pushed the Boers for

some distance down the river bank. A most gallant but impossible charge

was made by Colonel Hannay and a number of mounted infantry against the

northern bank. He was shot with the majority of his followers. General

Knox of the 12th Brigade and General Macdonald of the Highlanders were

among the wounded. Colonel Aldworth of the Cornwalls died at the head of

his men. A bullet struck him dead as he whooped his West Countrymen on

to the charge. Eleven hundred killed and wounded testified to the fire

of our attack and the grimness of the Boer resistance. The distribution

of the losses among the various battalions--eighty among the Canadians,

ninety in the West Riding Regiment, one hundred and twenty in the

Seaforths, ninety in the Yorkshires, seventy-six in the Argyll

and Sutherlands, ninety-six in the Black Watch, thirty-one in

the Oxfordshires, fifty-six in the Cornwalls, forty-six in the

Shropshires--shows how universal was the gallantry, and especially how

well the Highland Brigade carried itself. It is to be feared that they

had to face, not only the fire of the enemy, but also that of their own

comrades on the further side of the river. A great military authority

has stated that it takes many years for a regiment to recover its spirit

and steadiness if it has been heavily punished, and yet within two

months of Magersfontein we find the indomitable Highlanders taking

without flinching the very bloodiest share of this bloody day--and this

after a march of thirty miles with no pause before going into action.

A repulse it may have been, but they hear no name of which they may be

more proud upon the victory scroll of their colours.

What had we got in return for our eleven hundred casualties? We had

contracted the Boer position from about three miles to less than two.

So much was to the good, as the closer they lay the more effective our

artillery fire might be expected to be. But it is probable that our

shrapnel alone, without any loss of life, might have effected the same

thing. It is easy to be wise after the event, but it does certainly

appear that with our present knowledge the action at Paardeberg was as

unnecessary as it was expensive. The sun descended on Sunday, February

18th, upon a bloody field and crowded field hospitals, but also upon an

unbroken circle of British troops still hemming in the desperate men who

lurked among the willows and mimosas which drape the brown steep banks

of the Modder.

There was evidence during the action of the presence of an active

Boer force to the south of us, probably the same well-handled and

enterprising body which had captured our convoy at Waterval. A small

party of Kitchener's Horse was surprised by this body, and thirty men

with four officers were taken prisoners. Much has been said of the

superiority of South African scouting to that of the British regulars,

but it must be confessed that a good many instances might be quoted

in which the colonials, though second to none in gallantry, have been

defective in that very quality in which they were expected to excel.

This surprise of our cavalry post had more serious consequences than can

be measured by the loss of men, for by it the Boers obtained possession

of a strong kopje called Kitchener's Hill, lying about two miles distant

on the south-east of our position. The movement was an admirable one

strategically upon their part, for it gave their beleaguered comrades

a first station on the line of their retreat. Could they only win their

way to that kopje, a rearguard action might be fought from there which

would cover the escape of at least a portion of the force. De Wet, if

he was indeed responsible for the manoeuvres of these Southern Boers,

certainly handled his small force with a discreet audacity which marks

him as the born leader which he afterwards proved himself to be.

If the position of the Boers was desperate on Sunday, it was hopeless on

Monday, for in the course of the morning Lord Roberts came up, closely

followed by the whole of Tucker's Division (7th) from Jacobsdal. Our

artillery also was strongly reinforced. The 18th, 62nd, and 75th field

batteries came up with three naval 4.7 guns and two naval 12-pounders.

Thirty-five thousand men with sixty guns were gathered round the little

Boer army. It is a poor spirit which will not applaud the supreme

resolution with which the gallant farmers held out, and award to Cronje

the title of one of the most grimly resolute leaders of whom we have any

record in modern history.

For a moment it seemed as if his courage was giving way. On Monday

morning a message was transmitted by him to Lord Kitchener asking for a

twenty-four hours' armistice. The answer was of course a curt refusal.

To this he replied that if we were so inhuman as to prevent him from

burying his dead there was nothing for him save surrender. An answer was

given that a messenger with power to treat should be sent out, but in

the interval Cronje had changed his mind, and disappeared with a

snarl of contempt into his burrows. It had become known that women and

children were in the laager, and a message was sent offering them a

place of safety, but even to this a refusal was given. The reasons for

this last decision are inconceivable.

Lord Roberts's dispositions were simple, efficacious, and above all

bloodless. Smith-Dorrien's brigade, who were winning in the Western army

something of the reputation which Hart's Irishmen had won in Natal, were

placed astride of the river to the west, with orders to push gradually

up, as occasion served, using trenches for their approach. Chermside's

brigade occupied the same position on the east. Two other divisions

and the cavalry stood round, alert and eager, like terriers round a

rat-hole, while all day the pitiless guns crashed their common shell,

their shrapnel, and their lyddite into the river-bed. Already down

there, amid slaughtered oxen and dead horses under a burning sun, a

horrible pest-hole had been formed which sent its mephitic vapours over

the countryside. Occasionally the sentries down the river saw amid the

brown eddies of the rushing water the floating body of a Boer which

had been washed away from the Golgotha above. Dark Cronje, betrayer of

Potchefstroom, iron-handed ruler of natives, reviler of the British,

stern victor of Magersfontein, at last there has come a day of reckoning

for you!

On Wednesday, the 21st, the British, being now sure of their grip of

Cronje, turned upon the Boer force which had occupied the hill to the

south-east of the drift. It was clear that this force, unless driven

away, would be the vanguard of the relieving army which might be

expected to assemble from Ladysmith, Bloemfontein, Colesberg, or

wherever else the Boers could detach men. Already it was known that

reinforcements who had left Natal whenever they heard that the Free

State was invaded were drawing near. It was necessary to crush the

force upon the hill before it became too powerful. For this purpose the

cavalry set forth, Broadwood with the 10th Hussars, 12th Lancers, and

two batteries going round on one side, while French with the 9th and

16th Lancers, the Household Cavalry, and two other batteries skirted the

other. A force of Boers was met and defeated, while the defenders of the

hill were driven off with considerable loss. In this well-managed affair

the enemy lost at least a hundred, of whom fifty were prisoners. On

Friday, February 23rd, another attempt at rescue was made from the

south, but again it ended disastrously for the Boers. A party attacked

a kopje held by the Yorkshire regiment and were blown back by a volley,

upon which they made for a second kopje, where the Buffs gave them

an even rougher reception. Eighty prisoners were marched in. Meantime

hardly a night passed that some of the Boers did not escape from their

laager and give themselves up to our pickets. At the end of the week we

had taken six hundred in all.

In the meantime the cordon was being drawn ever tighter, and the fire

became heavier and more deadly, while the conditions of life in that

fearful place were such that the stench alone might have compelled

surrender. Amid the crash of tropical thunderstorms, the glare of

lightning, and the furious thrashing of rain there was no relaxation of

British vigilance. A balloon floating overhead directed the fire, which

from day to day became more furious, culminating on the 26th with the

arrival of four 5-inch howitzers. But still there came no sign from the

fierce Boer and his gallant followers. Buried deep within burrows in the

river bank the greater part of them lay safe from the shells, but

the rattle of their musketry when the outposts moved showed that the

trenches were as alert as ever. The thing could only have one end,

however, and Lord Roberts, with admirable judgment and patience, refused

to hurry it at the expense of the lives of his soldiers.

The two brigades at either end of the Boer lines had lost no chance of

pushing in, and now they had come within striking distance. On the night

of February 26th it was determined that Smith-Dorrien's men should try

their luck. The front trenches of the British were at that time seven

hundred yards from the Boer lines. They were held by the Gordons and

by the Canadians, the latter being the nearer to the river. It is worth

while entering into details as to the arrangement of the attack, as the

success of the campaign was at least accelerated by it. The orders were

that the Canadians were to advance, the Gordons to support, and the

Shropshires to take such a position on the left as would outflank any

counter attack upon the part of the Boers. The Canadians advanced in

the darkness of the early morning before the rise of the moon. The front

rank held their rifles in the left hand and each extended right hand

grasped the sleeve of the man next it. The rear rank had their rifles

slung and carried spades. Nearest the river bank were two companies (G

and H.) who were followed by the 7th company of Royal Engineers

carrying picks and empty sand bags. The long line stole through a pitchy

darkness, knowing that at any instant a blaze of fire such as flamed

before the Highlanders at Magersfontein might crash out in front of

them. A hundred, two, three, four, five hundred paces were taken. They

knew that they must be close upon the trenches. If they could only creep

silently enough, they might spring upon the defenders unannounced. On

and on they stole, step by step, praying for silence. Would the gentle

shuffle of feet be heard by the men who lay within stone-throw of them?

Their hopes had begun to rise when there broke upon the silence of the

night a resonant metallic rattle, the thud of a falling man, an empty

clatter! They had walked into a line of meat-cans slung upon a wire. By

measurement it was only ninety yards from the trench. At that instant a

single rifle sounded, and the Canadians hurled themselves down upon the

ground. Their bodies had hardly touched it when from a line six hundred

yards long there came one furious glare of rifle fire, with a hiss like

water on a red-hot plate, of speeding bullets. In that terrible red

light the men as they lay and scraped desperately for cover could see

the heads of the Boers pop up and down, and the fringe of rifle barrels

quiver and gleam. How the regiment, lying helpless under this fire,

escaped destruction is extraordinary. To rush the trench in the face of

such a continuous blast of lead seemed impossible, and it was equally

impossible to remain where they were. In a short time the moon would be

up, and they would be picked off to a man. The outer companies upon the

plain were ordered to retire. Breaking up into loose order, they made

their way back with surprisingly little loss; but a strange contretemps

occurred, for, leaping suddenly into a trench held by the Gordons, they

transfixed themselves upon the bayonets of the men. A subaltern and

twelve men received bayonet thrusts--none of them fortunately of a very

serious nature.

While these events had been taking place upon the left of the line,

the right was hardly in better plight. All firing had ceased for the

moment--the Boers being evidently under the impression that the whole

attack had recoiled. Uncertain whether the front of the small party on

the right of the second line (now consisting of some sixty-five Sappers

and Canadians lying in one mingled line) was clear for firing should

the Boers leave their trenches, Captain Boileau, of the Sappers, crawled

forward along the bank of the river, and discovered Captain Stairs

and ten men of the Canadians, the survivors of the firing line, firmly

ensconced in a crevice of the river bank overlooking the laager, quite

happy on being reassured as to the proximity of support. This brought

the total number of the daring band up to seventy-five rifles.

Meanwhile, the Gordons, somewhat perplexed by the flying phantoms who

had been flitting into and over their trenches for the past few minutes,

sent a messenger along the river bank to ascertain, in their turn, if

their own front was clear to fire, and if not, what state the survivors

were in. To this message Colonel Kincaid, R.E., now in command of the

remains of the assaulting party, replied that his men would be well

entrenched by daylight. The little party had been distributed for

digging as well as the darkness and their ignorance of their exact

position to the Boers would permit. Twice the sound of the picks brought

angry volleys from the darkness, but the work was never stopped, and

in the early dawn the workers found not only that they were secure

themselves, but that they were in a position to enfilade over half a

mile of Boer trenches. Before daybreak the British crouched low in their

shelter, so that with the morning light the Boers did not realise the

change which the night had wrought. It was only when a burgher was shot

as he filled his pannikin at the river that they understood how their

position was overlooked. For half an hour a brisk fire was maintained,

at the end of which time a white flag went up from the trench. Kincaid

stood up on his parapet, and a single haggard figure emerged from the

Boer warren. 'The burghers have had enough; what are they to do?' said

he. As he spoke his comrades scrambled out behind him and came walking

and running over to the British lines. It was not a moment likely to

be forgotten by the parched and grimy warriors who stood up and cheered

until the cry came crashing back to them again from the distant British

camps. No doubt Cronje had already realised that the extreme limit

of his resistance was come, but it was to that handful of Sappers and

Canadians that the credit is immediately due for that white flag which

fluttered on the morning of Majuba Day over the lines of Paardeberg.

It was six o'clock in the morning when General Pretyman rode up to Lord

Roberts's headquarters. Behind him upon a white horse was a dark-bearded

man, with the quick, restless eyes of a hunter, middle-sized, thickly

built, with grizzled hair flowing from under a tall brown felt hat. He

wore the black broadcloth of the burgher with a green summer overcoat,

and carried a small whip in his hands. His appearance was that of a

respectable London vestryman rather than of a most redoubtable soldier

with a particularly sinister career behind him.

The Generals shook hands, and it was briefly intimated to Cronje that

his surrender must be unconditional, to which, after a short silence,

he agreed. His only stipulations were personal, that his wife, his

grandson, his secretary, his adjutant, and his servant might accompany

him. The same evening he was despatched to Cape Town, receiving those

honourable attentions which were due to his valour rather than to his

character. His men, a pallid ragged crew, emerged from their holes and

burrows, and delivered up their rifles. It is pleasant to add that, with

much in their memories to exasperate them, the British privates treated

their enemies with as large-hearted a courtesy as Lord Roberts had shown

to their leader. Our total capture numbered some three thousand of the

Transvaal and eleven hundred of the Free State. That the latter were not

far more numerous was due to the fact that many had already shredded

off to their farms. Besides Cronje, Wolverans of the Transvaal, and the

German artillerist Albrecht, with forty-four other field-cornets and

commandants, fell into our hands. Six small guns were also secured. The

same afternoon saw the long column of the prisoners on its way to Modder

River, there to be entrained for Cape Town, the most singular lot of

people to be seen at that moment upon earth--ragged, patched, grotesque,

some with goloshes, some with umbrellas, coffee-pots, and Bibles, their

favourite baggage. So they passed out of their ten days of glorious

history.

A visit to the laager showed that the horrible smells which had been

carried across to the British lines, and the swollen carcasses which

had swirled down the muddy river were true portents of its condition.

Strong-nerved men came back white and sick from a contemplation of the

place in which women and children had for ten days been living. From end

to end it was a festering mass of corruption, overshadowed by incredible

swarms of flies. Yet the engineer who could face evil sights and

nauseous smells was repaid by an inspection of the deep narrow trenches

in which a rifleman could crouch with the minimum danger from shells,

and the caves in which the non-combatants remained in absolute safety.

Of their dead we have no accurate knowledge, but two hundred wounded in

a donga represented their losses, not only during a bombardment of ten

days, but also in that Paardeberg engagement which had cost us eleven

hundred casualties. No more convincing example could be adduced both of

the advantage of the defence over the attack, and of the harmlessness

of the fiercest shell fire if those who are exposed to it have space and

time to make preparations.

A fortnight had elapsed since Lord Roberts had launched his forces from

Ramdam, and that fortnight had wrought a complete revolution in the

campaign. It is hard to recall any instance in the history of war where

a single movement has created such a change over so many different

operations. On February 14th Kimberley was in danger of capture, a

victorious Boer army was facing Methuen, the lines of Magersfontein

appeared impregnable, Clements was being pressed at Colesberg, Gatacre

was stopped at Stormberg, Buller could not pass the Tugela, and

Ladysmith was in a perilous condition. On the 28th Kimberley had

been relieved, the Boer army was scattered or taken, the lines of

Magersfontein were in our possession, Clements found his assailants

retiring before him, Gatacre was able to advance at Stormberg, Buller

had a weakening army in front of him, and Ladysmith was on the eve of

relief. And all this had been done at the cost of a very moderate loss

of life, for most of which Lord Roberts was in no sense answerable. Here

at last was a reputation so well founded that even South African warfare

could only confirm and increase it. A single master hand had in an

instant turned England's night to day, and had brought us out of that

nightmare of miscalculation and disaster which had weighed so long upon

our spirits. His was the master hand, but there were others at his

side without whom that hand might have been paralysed: Kitchener the

organiser, French the cavalry leader--to these two men, second only to

their chief, are the results of the operations due. Henderson, the most

capable head of Intelligence, and Richardson, who under all difficulties

fed the army, may each claim his share in the success.

CHAPTER 20. ROBERTS'S ADVANCE ON BLOEMFONTEIN.

The surrender of Cronje had taken place on February 27th, obliterating

for ever the triumphant memories which the Boers had for twenty years

associated with that date. A halt was necessary to provide food for the

hungry troops, and above all to enable the cavalry horses to pick up.

The supply of forage had been most inadequate, and the beasts had not

yet learned to find a living from the dry withered herbage of the veld.

[Footnote: A battery which turned out its horses to graze found that

the puzzled creatures simply galloped about the plain, and could only be

reassembled by blowing the call which they associated with feeding, when

they rushed back and waited in lines for their nosebags to be put on.]

In addition to this, they had been worked most desperately during the

fortnight which had elapsed. Lord Roberts waited therefore at Osfontein,

which is a farmhouse close to Paardeberg, until his cavalry were fit for

an advance. On March 6th he began his march for Bloemfontein.

The force which had been hovering to the south and east of him during

the Paardeberg operations had meanwhile been reinforced from Colesberg

and from Ladysmith until it had attained considerable proportions. This

army, under the leadership of De Wet, had taken up a strong position a

few miles to the east, covering a considerable range of kopjes. On March

3rd a reconnaissance was made of it, in which some of our guns were

engaged; but it was not until three days later that the army

advanced with the intention of turning or forcing it. In the meantime

reinforcements had been arriving in the British camp, derived partly

from the regiments which had been employed at other points during these

operations, and partly from newcomers from the outer Empire. The Guards

came up from Klip Drift, the City Imperial Volunteers, the Australian

Mounted Infantry, the Burmese Mounted Infantry and a detachment of light

horse from Ceylon helped to form this strange invading army which was

drawn from five continents and yet had no alien in its ranks.

The position which the enemy had taken up at Poplars Grove (so called

from a group of poplars round a farmhouse in the centre of their

position) extended across the Modder River and was buttressed on either

side by well-marked hills, with intermittent kopjes between. With guns,

trenches, rifle pits, and barbed wire a bull-headed general might have

found it another Magersfontein. But it is only just to Lord Roberts's

predecessors in command to say that it is easy to do things with three

cavalry brigades which it is difficult to do with two regiments. The

ultimate blame does not rest with the man who failed with the two

regiments, but with those who gave him inadequate means for the

work which he had to do. And in this estimate of means our military

authorities, our politicians, and our public were all in the first

instance equally mistaken.

Lord Roberts's plan was absolutely simple, and yet, had it been carried

out as conceived, absolutely effective. It was not his intention to

go near any of that entanglement of ditch and wire which had been so

carefully erected for his undoing. The weaker party, if it be wise,

atones for its weakness by entrenchments. The stronger party, if it be

wise, leaves the entrenchments alone and uses its strength to go round

them. Lord Roberts meant to go round. With his immense preponderance

of men and guns the capture or dispersal of the enemy's army might be

reduced to a certainty. Once surrounded, they must either come out into

the open or they must surrender.

On March 6th the cavalry were brought across the river, and in the early

morning of March 7th they were sent off in the darkness to sweep round

the left wing of the Boers and to establish themselves on the line of

their retreat. Kelly-Kenny's Division (6th) had orders to follow and

support this movement. Meanwhile Tucker was to push straight along the

southern bank of the river, though we may surmise that his instructions

were, in case of resistance, not to push his attack home. Colvile's 9th

Division, with part of the naval brigade, were north of the river, the

latter to shell the drifts in case the Boers tried to cross, and the

infantry to execute a turning movement which would correspond with that

of the cavalry on the other flank.

The plan of action was based, however, upon one supposition which proved

to be fallacious. It was that after having prepared so elaborate a

position the enemy would stop at least a little time to defend it.

Nothing of the sort occurred, however, and on the instant that they

realised that the cavalry was on their flank they made off. The infantry

did not fire a shot.

The result of this very decisive flight was to derange all calculations

entirely. The cavalry was not yet in its place when the Boer army

streamed off between the kopjes. One would have thought, however, that

they would have had a dash for the wagons and the guns, even if they

were past them. It is unfair to criticise a movement until one is

certain as to the positive orders which the leader may have received;

but on the face of it it is clear that the sweep of our cavalry was not

wide enough, and that they erred by edging to the left instead of to the

right, so leaving the flying enemies always to the outside of them.

As it was, however, there seemed every possibility of their getting the

guns, but De Wet very cleverly covered them by his skirmishers. Taking

possession of a farmhouse on the right flank they kept up a spirited

fire upon the 16th Lancers and upon P battery R.H.A. When at last the

latter drove them out of their shelter, they again formed upon a low

kopje and poured so galling a fire upon the right wing that the whole

movement was interrupted until we had driven this little body of fifty

men from their position. When, after a delay of an hour, the cavalry at

last succeeded in dislodging them--or possibly it may be fairer to say

when, having accomplished their purpose, they retired--the guns

and wagons were out of reach, and, what is more important, the

two Presidents, both Steyn and Kruger, who had come to stiffen the

resistance of the burghers, had escaped.

Making every allowance for the weary state of the horses, it is

impossible to say that our cavalry were handled with energy or judgment

on this occasion. That such a force of men and guns should be held off

from an object of such importance by so small a resistance reflects

no credit upon us. It would have been better to repeat the Kimberley

tactics and to sweep the regiments in extended order past the obstacle

if we could not pass over it. At the other side of that little

ill-defended kopje lay a possible termination of the war, and our crack

cavalry regiments manoeuvred for hours and let it pass out of their

reach. However, as Lord Roberts good-humouredly remarked at the end

of the action, 'In war you can't expect everything to come out right.'

General French can afford to shed one leaf from his laurel wreath. On

the other hand, no words can be too high for the gallant little band of

Boers who had the courage to face that overwhelming mass of horsemen,

and to bluff them into regarding this handful as a force fighting a

serious rearguard action. When the stories of the war are told round the

fires in the lonely veld farmhouses, as they will be for a century to

come, this one deserves an honoured place.

The victory, if such a word can apply to such an action, had cost some

fifty or sixty of the cavalry killed and wounded, while it is doubtful

if the Boers lost as many. The finest military display on the British

side had been the magnificent marching of Kelly-Kenny's 6th Division,

who had gone for ten hours with hardly a halt. One 9-pound Krupp gun was

the only trophy. On the other hand, Roberts had turned them out of

their strong position, had gained twelve or fifteen miles on he road to

Bloemfontein, and for the first time shown how helpless a Boer army was

in country which gave our numbers a chance. From now onwards it was only

in surprise and ambuscade that they could hope for a success. We had

learned and they had learned that they could not stand in the open

field.

The action of Poplars Grove was fought on March 7th. On the 9th the army

was again on its way, and on the 10th it attacked the new position which

the Boers had occupied at a place called Driefontein, or Abram's Kraal.

They covered a front of some seven miles in such a formation that their

wings were protected, the northern by the river and the southern by

flanking bastions of hill extending for some distance to the rear. If

the position had been defended as well as it had been chosen, the task

would have been a severe one.

Since the Modder covered the enemy's right the turning movement could

only be developed on their left, and Tucker's Division was thrown

out very wide on that side for the purpose. But in the meanwhile a

contretemps had occurred which threw out and seriously hampered the

whole British line of battle. General French was in command of the left

wing, which included Kelly-Kenny's Division, the first cavalry brigade,

and Alderson's Mounted Infantry. His orders had been to keep in touch

with the centre, and to avoid pushing his attack home. In endeavouring

to carry out these instructions French moved his men more and more to

the right, until he had really squeezed in between the Boers and Lord

Roberts's central column, and so masked the latter. The essence of the

whole operation was that the frontal attack should not be delivered

until Tucker had worked round to the rear of the position. It is for

military critics to decide whether it was that the flankers were too

slow or the frontal assailants were too fast, but it is certain that

Kelly-Kenny's Division attacked before the cavalry and the 7th Division

were in their place. Kelly-Kenny was informed that the position in front

of him had been abandoned, and four regiments, the Buffs, the Essex, the

Welsh, and the Yorkshires, were advanced against it. They were passing

over the open when the crash of the Mauser fire burst out in front of

them, and the bullets hissed and thudded among the ranks. The ordeal was

a very severe one. The Yorkshires were swung round wide upon the right,

but the rest of the brigade, the Welsh Regiment leading, made a frontal

attack upon the ridge. It was done coolly and deliberately, the men

taking advantage of every possible cover. Boers could be seen leaving

their position in small bodies as the crackling, swaying line of the

British surged ever higher upon the hillside. At last, with a cheer, the

Welshmen with their Kent and Essex comrades swept over the crest into

the ranks of that cosmopolitan crew of sturdy adventurers who are known

as the Johannesburg Police. For once the loss of the defence was greater

than that of the attack. These mercenaries had not the instinct which

teaches the Boer the right instant for flight, and they held their

position too long to get away. The British had left four hundred men on

the track of that gallant advance, but the vast majority of them were

wounded--too often by those explosive or expansive missiles which make

war more hideous. Of the Boers we actually buried over a hundred on the

ridge, and their total casualties must have been considerably in excess

of ours.

The action was strategically well conceived; all that Lord Roberts could

do for complete success had been done; but tactically it was a poor

affair, considering his enormous preponderance in men and guns. There

was no glory in it, save for the four regiments who set their faces

against that sleet of lead. The artillery did not do well, and were

browbeaten by guns which they should have smothered under their fire.

The cavalry cannot be said to have done well either. And yet, when all

is said, the action is an important one, for the enemy were badly shaken

by the result. The Johannesburg Police, who had been among their corps

d'elite, had been badly mauled, and the burghers were impressed by one

more example of the impossibility of standing in anything approaching

to open country against disciplined troops, Roberts had not captured the

guns, but the road had been cleared for him to Bloemfontein and, what

is more singular, to Pretoria; for though hundreds of miles intervene

between the field of Driefontein and the Transvaal capital, he never

again met a force which was willing to look his infantry in the eyes

in a pitched battle. Surprises and skirmishes were many, but it was the

last time, save only at Doornkop, that a chosen position was ever held

for an effective rifle fire--to say nothing of the push of bayonet.

And now the army flowed swiftly onwards to the capital. The

indefatigable 6th Division, which had done march after march, one more

brilliant than another, since they had crossed the Riet River, reached

Asvogel Kop on the evening of Sunday, March 11th, the day after the

battle. On Monday the army was still pressing onwards, disregarding all

else and striking straight for the heart as Blucher struck at Paris in

1814. At midday they halted at the farm of Gregorowski, he who had tried

the Reform prisoners after the Raid. The cavalry pushed on down Kaal

Spruit, and in the evening crossed the Southern railway line which

connects Bloemfontein with the colony, cutting it at a point some five

miles from the town. In spite of some not very strenuous opposition from

a Boer force a hill was seized by a squadron of Greys with some mounted

infantry and Rimington's Guides, aided by U battery R.H.A., and was held

by them all that night.

On the same evening Major Hunter-Weston, an officer who had already

performed at least one brilliant feat in the war, was sent with

Lieutenant Charles and a handful of Mounted Sappers and Hussars to cut

the line to the north. After a difficult journey on a very dark night

he reached his object and succeeded in finding and blowing up a culvert.

There is a Victoria Cross gallantry which leads to nothing save

personal decoration, and there is another and far higher gallantry of

calculation, which springs from a cool brain as well as a hot heart,

and it is from the men who possess this rare quality that great warriors

arise. Such feats as the cutting of this railway or the subsequent

saving of the Bethulie Bridge by Grant and Popham are of more service to

the country than any degree of mere valour untempered by judgment.

Among other results the cutting of the line secured for us twenty-eight

locomotives, two hundred and fifty trucks, and one thousand tons of

coal, all of which were standing ready to leave Bloemfontein station.

The gallant little band were nearly cut off on their return, but fought

their way through with the loss of two horses, and so got back in

triumph.

The action of Driefontein was fought on the 10th. The advance began on

the morning of the 11th. On the morning of the 13th the British were

practically masters of Bloemfontein. The distance is forty miles. No one

can say that Lord Roberts cannot follow a victory up as well as win it.

Some trenches had been dug and sangars erected to the north-west of

the town; but Lord Roberts, with his usual perverseness, took the wrong

turning and appeared upon the broad open plain to the south, where

resistance would have been absurd. Already Steyn and the irreconcilables

had fled from the town, and the General was met by a deputation of the

Mayor, the Landdrost, and Mr. Fraser to tender the submission of the

capital. Fraser, a sturdy clear-headed Highlander, had been the one

politician in the Free State who combined a perfect loyalty to his

adopted country with a just appreciation of what a quarrel A l'outrance

with the British Empire would mean. Had Fraser's views prevailed, the

Orange Free State would still exist as a happy and independent State. As

it is, he may help her to happiness and prosperity as the prime minister

of the Orange River Colony.

It was at half-past one on Tuesday, March 13th, that General Roberts and

his troops entered Bloemfontein, amid the acclamations of many of the

inhabitants, who, either to propitiate the victor, or as a sign of their

real sympathies, had hoisted union jacks upon their houses. Spectators

have left it upon record how from all that interminable column of

yellow-clad weary men, worn with half rations and whole-day marches,

there came never one jeer, never one taunting or exultant word, as they

tramped into the capital of their enemies. The bearing of the troops was

chivalrous in its gentleness, and not the least astonishing sight to the

inhabitants was the passing of the Guards, the dandy troops of

England, the body-servants of the great Queen. Black with sun and dust,

staggering after a march of thirty-eight miles, gaunt and haggard, with

their clothes in such a state that decency demanded that some of the men

should be discreetly packed away in the heart of the dense column, they

still swung into the town with the aspect of Kentish hop-pickers and the

bearing of heroes. She, the venerable mother, could remember the bearded

ranks who marched past her when they came with sadly thinned files back

from the Crimean winter; even those gallant men could not have endured

more sturdily, nor have served her more loyally, than these their worthy

descendants.

It was just a month after the start from Ramdam that Lord Roberts and

his army rode into the enemy's capital. Up to that period we had in

Africa Generals who were hampered for want of troops, and troops who

were hampered for want of Generals. Only when the Commander-in-Chief

took over the main army had we soldiers enough, and a man who knew

how to handle them. The result was one which has not only solved the

question of the future of South Africa, but has given an illustration of

strategy which will become classical to the military student. How brisk

was the course of events, how incessant the marching and fighting,

may be shown by a brief recapitulation. On February 13th cavalry and

infantry were marching to the utmost capacity of men and horses. On the

14th the cavalry were halted, but the infantry were marching hard. On

the 15th the cavalry covered forty miles, fought an action, and relieved

Kimberley. On the 16th the cavalry were in pursuit of the Boer guns all

day, and were off on a thirty-mile march to the Modder at night, while

the infantry were fighting Cronje's rearguard action, and closing up all

day. On the 17th the infantry were marching hard. On the 18th was the

battle of Paardeberg. From the 19th to the 27th was incessant fighting

with Cronje inside the laager and with De Wet outside. From the 28th to

March 6th was rest. On March 7th was the action of Poplars Grove with

heavy marching; on March 10th the battle of Driefontein. On the 11th

and 12th the infantry covered forty miles, and on the 13th were in

Bloemfontein. All this was accomplished by men on half-rations, with

horses which could hardly be urged beyond a walk, in a land where water

is scarce and the sun semi-tropical, each infantryman carrying a weight

of nearly forty pounds. There are few more brilliant achievements in the

history of British arms. The tactics were occasionally faulty, and the

battle of Paardeberg was a blot upon the operations; but the strategy of

the General and the spirit of the soldier were alike admirable.

CHAPTER 21. STRATEGIC EFFECTS OF LORD ROBERTS'S MARCH.

From the moment that Lord Roberts with his army advanced from Ramdam

all the other British forces in South Africa, the Colesberg force, the

Stormberg force, Brabant's force, and the Natal force, had the pressure

relieved in front of them, a tendency which increased with every fresh

success of the main body. A short chapter must be devoted to following

rapidly the fortunes of these various armies, and tracing the effect of

Lord Roberts's strategy upon their movements. They may be taken in turn

from west to east.

The force under General Clements (formerly French's) had, as has already

been told, been denuded of nearly all its cavalry and horse artillery,

and so left in the presence of a very superior body of the enemy. Under

these circumstances Clements had to withdraw his immensely extended

line, and to concentrate at Arundel, closely followed by the elated

enemy. The situation was a more critical one than has been appreciated

by the public, for if the force had been defeated the Boers would have

been in a position to cut Lord Roberts's line of communications, and the

main army would have been in the air. Much credit is due, not only to

General Clements, but to Carter of the Wiltshires, Hacket Pain of the

Worcesters, Butcher of the 4th R.F.A., the admirable Australians, and

all the other good men and true who did their best to hold the gap for

the Empire.

The Boer idea of a strong attack upon this point was strategically

admirable, but tactically there was not sufficient energy in pushing

home the advance. The British wings succeeded in withdrawing, and the

concentrated force at Arundel was too strong for attack Yet there was

a time of suspense, a time when every man had become of such importance

that even fifty Indian syces were for the first and last time in the

war, to their own supreme gratification, permitted for twenty-four hours

to play their natural part as soldiers. [Footnote: There was something

piteous in the chagrin of these fine Sikhs at being held back from their

natural work as soldiers. A deputation of them waited upon Lord Roberts

at Bloemfontein to ask, with many salaams, whether 'his children were

not to see one little fight before they returned.'] But then with the

rapid strokes in front the hour of danger passed, and the Boer advance

became first a halt and then a retreat.

On February 27th, Major Butcher, supported by the Inniskillings and

Australians, attacked Rensburg and shelled the enemy out of it. Next

morning Clements's whole force had advanced from Arundel and took up

its old position. The same afternoon it was clear that the Boers were

retiring, and the British, following them up, marched into Colesberg,

around which they had manoeuvred so long. A telegram from Steyn to De

Wet found in the town told the whole story of the retirement: 'As long

as you are able to hold the positions you are in with the men you have,

do so. If not, come here as quickly as circumstances will allow, as

matters here are taking a serious turn.' The whole force passed over

the Orange River unimpeded, and blew up the Norval's Pont railway bridge

behind it. Clements's brigade followed on March 4th, and succeeded in

the course of a week in throwing a pontoon bridge over the river and

crossing into the Orange Free State. Roberts having in the meanwhile

seized Bloemfontein, communication was restored by railway between the

forces, and Clements was despatched to Phillipolis, Fauresmith, and

the other towns in the south-west to receive the submission of the

inhabitants and to enforce their disarmament. In the meantime the

Engineers worked furiously at the restoration of the railway bridge over

the Orange River, which was not, however, accomplished until some weeks

later.

During the long period which had elapsed since the repulse at Stormberg,

General Gatacre had held his own at Sterkstroom, under orders not to

attack the enemy, repulsing them easily upon the only occasion when

they ventured to attack him. Now it was his turn also to profit by the

success which Lord Roberts had won. On February 23rd he re-occupied

Molteno, and on the same day sent out a force to reconnoitre the enemy's

position at Stormberg. The incident is memorable as having been the

cause of the death of Captain de Montmorency [Footnote: De Montmorency

had established a remarkable influence over his rough followers. To the

end of the war they could not speak of him without tears in their eyes.

When I asked Sergeant Howe why his captain went almost alone up the

hill, his answer was, 'Because the captain knew no fear.' Byrne, his

soldier servant (an Omdurman V.C. like his master), galloped madly off

next morning with a saddled horse to bring back his captain alive or

dead, and had to be forcibly seized and restrained by our cavalry. ],

one of the most promising of the younger officers of the British army.

He had formed a corps of scouts, consisting originally of four men,

but soon expanding to seventy or eighty. At the head of these men he

confirmed the reputation for desperate valour which he had won in the

Soudan, and added to it proofs of the enterprise and judgment which go

to make a leader of light cavalry. In the course of the reconnaissance

he ascended a small kopje accompanied by three companions, Colonel

Hoskier, a London Volunteer soldier, Vice, a civilian, and Sergeant

Howe. 'They are right on the top of us,' he cried to his comrades, as he

reached the summit, and dropped next instant with a bullet through his

heart. Hoskier was shot in five places, and Vice was mortally wounded,

only Howe escaping. The rest of the scouts, being farther back, were

able to get cover and to keep up a fight until they were extricated by

the remainder of the force. Altogether our loss was formidable rather in

quality than in quantity, for not more than a dozen were hit, while the

Boers suffered considerably from the fire of our guns.

On March 5th General Gatacre found that the Boers were retreating in

front of him--in response, no doubt, to messages similar to those which

had already been received at Colesberg. Moving forward he occupied the

position which had confronted him so long. Thence, having spent some

days in drawing in his scattered detachments and in mending the railway,

he pushed forward on March 12th to Burghersdorp, and thence on the 13th

to Olive Siding, to the south of the Bethulie Bridge.

There are two bridges which span the broad muddy Orange River, thick

with the washings of the Basutoland mountains. One of these is

the magnificent high railway bridge, already blown to ruins by the

retreating Boers. Dead men or shattered horses do not give a more vivid

impression of the unrelenting brutality of war than the sight of a

structure, so graceful and so essential, blown into a huge heap of

twisted girders and broken piers. Half a mile to the west is the road

bridge, broad and old-fashioned. The only hope of preserving some mode

of crossing the difficult river lay in the chance that the troops might

anticipate the Boers who were about to destroy this bridge.

In this they were singularly favoured by fortune. On the arrival of a

small party of scouts and of the Cape Police under Major Nolan-Neylan at

the end of the bridge it was found that all was ready to blow it up, the

mine sunk, the detonator fixed, and the wire laid. Only the connection

between the wire and the charge had not been made. To make sure, the

Boers had also laid several boxes of dynamite under the last span,

in case the mine should fail in its effect. The advance guard of the

Police, only six in number, with Nolan-Neylan at their head, threw

themselves into a building which commanded the approaches of the bridge,

and this handful of men opened so spirited and well-aimed a fire that

the Boers were unable to approach it. As fresh scouts and policemen came

up they were thrown into the firing line, and for a whole long day they

kept the destroyers from the bridge. Had the enemy known how weak they

were and how far from supports, they could have easily destroyed them,

but the game of bluff was admirably played, and a fire kept up which

held the enemy to their rifle pits.

The Boers were in a trench commanding the bridge, and their brisk fire

made it impossible to cross. On the other hand, our rifle fire commanded

the mine and prevented any one from exploding it. But at the approach of

darkness it was certain that this would be done. The situation was saved

by the gallantry of young Popham of the Derbyshires, who crept across

with two men and removed the detonators. There still remained the

dynamite under the further span, and this also they removed, carrying it

off across the bridge under a heavy fire. The work was made absolutely

complete a little later by the exploit of Captain Grant of the Sappers,

who drew the charges from the holes in which they had been sunk, and

dropped them into the river, thus avoiding the chance that they might be

exploded next morning by shell fire. The feat of Popham and of Grant was

not only most gallant but of extraordinary service to the country; but

the highest credit belongs to Nolan-Neylan, of the Police, for the great

promptitude and galantry of his attack, and to McNeill for his support.

On that road bridge and on the pontoon bridge at Norval's Pont Lord

Roberts's army was for a whole month dependent for their supplies.

On March 15th Gatacre's force passed over into the Orange Free State,

took possession of Bethulie, and sent on the cavalry to Springfontein,

which is the junction where the railways from Cape Town and from East

London meet. Here they came in contact with two battalions of Guards

under Pole-Carew, who had been sent down by train from Lord Roberts's

force in the north. With Roberts at Bloemfontein, Gatacre at

Springfontein, Clements in the south-west, and Brabant at Aliwal, the

pacification of the southern portion of the Free State appeared to be

complete. Warlike operations seemed for the moment to be at an end, and

scattered parties traversed the country, 'bill-sticking,' as the troops

called it--that is, carrying Lord Roberts's proclamation to the lonely

farmhouses and outlying villages.

In the meantime the colonial division of that fine old African fighter,

General Brabant, had begun to play its part in the campaign. Among the

many judicious arrangements which Lord Roberts made immediately after

his arrival at the Cape was the assembling of the greater part of

the scattered colonial bands into one division, and placing over it a

General of their own, a man who had defended the cause of the Empire

both in the legislative assembly and the field. To this force was

entrusted the defence of the country lying to the east of Gatacre's

position, and on February 15th they advanced from Penhoek upon

Dordrecht. Their Imperial troops consisted of the Royal Scots and

a section of the 79th R.F.A., the Colonial of Brabant's Horse, the

Kaffrarian Mounted Rifles, the Cape Mounted Rifles and Cape Police, with

Queenstown and East London Volunteers. The force moved upon Dordrecht,

and on February 18th occupied the town after a spirited action, in which

Brabant's Horse played a distinguished part. On March 4th the division

advanced once more with the object of attacking the Boer position at

Labuschagne's Nek, some miles to the north.

Aided by the accurate fire of the 79th R.F.A., the colonials succeeded,

after a long day of desultory fighting, in driving the enemy from

his position. Leaving a garrison in Dordrecht Brabant followed up his

victory and pushed forward with two thousand men and eight guns (six

of them light 7-pounders) to occupy Jamestown, which was done without

resistance. On March 10th the colonial force approached Aliwal, the

frontier town, and so rapid was the advance of Major Henderson with

Brabant's Horse that the bridge at Aliwal was seized before the enemy

could blow it up. At the other side of the bridge there was a strong

stand made by the enemy, who had several Krupp guns in position; but

the light horse, in spite of a loss of some twenty-five men killed and

wounded, held on to the heights which command the river. A week or ten

days were spent in pacifying the large north-eastern portion of Cape

Colony, to which Aliwal acts as a centre. Barkly East, Herschel, Lady

Grey, and other villages were visited by small detachments of the

colonial horsemen, who pushed forward also into the south-eastern

portion of the Free State, passing through Rouxville, and so along the

Basutoland border as far as Wepener. The rebellion in the Colony was

now absolutely dead in the north-east, while in the north-west in the

Prieska and Carnarvon districts it was only kept alive by the fact that

the distances were so great and the rebel forces so scattered that it

was very difficult for our flying columns to reach them. Lord Kitchener

had returned from Paardeberg to attend to this danger upon our line of

communications, and by his exertions all chance of its becoming serious

soon passed. With a considerable force of Yeomanry and Cavalry he passed

swiftly over the country, stamping out the smouldering embers.

So much for the movements into the Free State of Clements, of Gatacre,

and of Brabant. It only remains to trace the not very eventful history

of the Natal campaign after the relief of Ladysmith.

General Buller made no attempt to harass the retreat of the Boers,

although in two days no fewer than two thousand wagons were counted upon

the roads to Newcastle and Dundee. The guns had been removed by train,

the railway being afterwards destroyed. Across the north of Natal lies

the chain of the Biggarsberg mountains, and to this the Transvaal Boers

had retired, while the Freestaters had hurried through the passes of the

Drakensberg in time to make the fruitless opposition to Roberts's

march upon their capital. No accurate information had come in as to the

strength of the Transvaalers, the estimates ranging from five to ten

thousand, but it was known that their position was formidable and their

guns mounted in such a way as to command the Dundee and Newcastle roads.

General Lyttelton's Division had camped as far out as Elandslaagte with

Burn Murdoch's cavalry, while Dundonald's brigade covered the space

between Burn Murdoch's western outposts and the Drakensberg passes.

Few Boers were seen, but it was known that the passes were held in some

strength. Meanwhile the line was being restored in the rear, and on

March 9th the gallant White was enabled to take train for Durban, though

it was not until ten days later that the Colenso bridge was restored.

The Ladysmith garrison had been sent down to Colenso to recruit their

health. There they were formed into a new division, the 4th, the

brigades being given to Howard and Knox, and the command to Lyttelton,

who had returned his former division, the second, to Clery. The 5th and

6th brigades were also formed into one division, the 10th, which was

placed under the capable command of Hunter, who had confirmed in the

south the reputation which he had won in the north of Africa. In the

first week of April Hunter's Division was sent down to Durban and

transferred to the western side, where they were moved up to Kimberley,

whence they advanced northwards. The man on the horse has had in this

war an immense advantage over the man on foot, but there have been times

when the man on the ship has restored the balance. Captain Mahan might

find some fresh texts in the transference of Hunter's Division, or in

the subsequent expedition to Beira.

On April 10th the Boers descended from their mountains and woke up our

sleepy army corps by a brisk artillery fire. Our own guns silenced

it, and the troops instantly relapsed into their slumber. There was no

movement for a fortnight afterwards upon either side, save that of Sir

Charles Warren, who left the army in order to take up the governorship

of British Bechuanaland, a district which was still in a disturbed

state, and in which his presence had a peculiar significance, since he

had rescued portions of it from Boer domination in the early days of the

Transvaal Republic. Hildyard took over the command of the 5th Division.

In this state of inertia the Natal force remained until Lord Roberts,

after a six weeks' halt in Bloemfontein, necessitated by the insecurity

of his railway communication and his want of every sort of military

supply, more especially horses for his cavalry and boots for his

infantry, was at last able on May 2nd to start upon his famous march

to Pretoria. Before accompanying him, however, upon this victorious

progress, it is necessary to devote a chapter to the series of incidents

and operations which had taken place to the east and south-east of

Bloemfontein during this period of compulsory inactivity.

One incident must be recorded in this place, though it was political

rather than military. This was the interchange of notes concerning peace

between Paul Kruger and Lord Salisbury. There is an old English jingle

about 'the fault of the Dutch, giving too little and asking too much,'

but surely there was never a more singular example of it than this.

The united Presidents prepare for war for years, spring an insulting

ultimatum upon us, invade our unfortunate Colonies, solemnly annex all

the portions invaded, and then, when at last driven back, propose a

peace which shall secure for them the whole point originally at issue.

It is difficult to believe that the proposals could have been seriously

meant, but more probable that the plan may have been to strengthen the

hands of the Peace deputation who were being sent to endeavour to secure

European intervention. Could they point to a proposal from the Transvaal

and a refusal from England, it might, if not too curiously examined,

excite the sympathy of those who follow emotions rather than facts.

The documents were as follow:--

'The Presidents of the Orange Free State and of the South African

Republic to the Marquess of Salisbury. Bloemfontein March 5th, 1900.

'The blood and the tears of the thousands who have suffered by this war,

and the prospect of all the moral and economic ruin with which South

Africa is now threatened, make it necessary for both belligerents to

ask themselves dispassionately and as in the sight of the Triune God for

what they are fighting and whether the aim of each justifies all this

appalling misery and devastation.

'With this object, and in view of the assertions of various British

statesmen to the effect that this war was begun and is carried on with

the set purpose of undermining Her Majesty's authority in South Africa,

and of setting up an administration over all South Africa independent

of Her Majesty's Government, we consider it our duty to solemnly declare

that this war was undertaken solely as a defensive measure to safeguard

the threatened independence of the South African Republic, and is

only continued in order to secure and safeguard the incontestable

independence of both Republics as sovereign international States, and to

obtain the assurance that those of Her Majesty's subjects who have taken

part with us in this war shall suffer no harm whatsoever in person or

property.

'On these conditions, but on these conditions alone, are we now as in

the past desirous of seeing peace re-established in South Africa, and

of putting an end to the evils now reigning over South Africa; while,

if Her Majesty's Government is determined to destroy the independence

of the Republics, there is nothing left to us and to our people but

to persevere to the end in the course already begun, in spite of the

overwhelming pre-eminence of the British Empire, conscious that that

God who lighted the inextinguishable fire of the love of freedom in our

hearts and those of our fathers will not forsake us, but will accomplish

His work in us and in our descendants.

'We hesitated to make this declaration earlier to your Excellency as

we feared that, as long as the advantage was always on our side, and

as long as our forces held defensive positions far in Her Majesty's

Colonies, such a declaration might hurt the feelings of honour of the

British people. But now that the prestige of the British Empire may be

considered to be assured by the capture of one of our forces, and that

we are thereby forced to evacuate other positions which we had occupied,

that difficulty is over and we can no longer hesitate to inform your

Government and people in the sight of the whole civilised world why we

are fighting and on what conditions we are ready to restore peace.'

Such was the message, deep in its simplicity and cunning in its candour,

which was sent by the old President, for it is Kruger's style which we

read in every line of it. One has to get back to facts after reading

it, to the enormous war preparations of the Republics, to the unprepared

state of the British Colonies, to the ultimatum, to the annexations, to

the stirring up of rebellion, to the silence about peace in the days of

success, to the fact that by 'inextinguishable love of freedom' is meant

inextinguishable determination to hold other white men as helots--only

then can we form a just opinion of the worth of his message. One must

remember also, behind the homely and pious phraseology, that one is

dealing with a man who has been too cunning for us again and again--a

man who is as wily as the savages with whom he has treated and fought.

This Paul Kruger with the simple words of peace is the same Paul Kruger

who with gentle sayings insured the disarmament of Johannesburg, and

then instantly arrested his enemies--the man whose name was a by-word

for 'slimness' [craftiness] throughout South Africa. With such a man the

best weapon is absolute naked truth with which Lord Salisbury confronted

him in his reply:--

Foreign Office: March 11th.

'I have the honour to acknowledge your Honours' telegram dated March 5th

from Bloemfontein, of which the purport was principally to demand

that Her Majesty's Government shall recognise the "incontestable

independence" of the South African Republic and Orange Free State as

"sovereign international States," and to offer on those terms to bring

the war to a conclusion.

'In the beginning of October last peace existed between Her Majesty and

the two Republics under the conventions which then were in existence.

A discussion had been proceeding for some months between Her Majesty's

Government and the South African Republic, of which the object was to

obtain redress for certain very serious grievances under which British

residents in the Republic were suffering. In the course of those

negotiations the Republic had, to the knowledge of Her Majesty's

Government, made considerable armaments, and the latter had consequently

taken steps to provide corresponding reinforcements to the British

garrisons of Cape Town and Natal. No infringement of the rights

guaranteed by the conventions had up to that time taken place on the

British side. Suddenly, at two days' notice, the South African Republic,

after issuing an insulting ultimatum, declared war, and the Orange Free

State with whom there had not even been any discussion, took a similar

step. Her Majesty's dominions were immediately invaded by the two

Republics, siege was laid to three towns within the British frontier, a

large portion of the two Colonies was overrun with great destruction to

property and life, and the Republics claimed to treat the inhabitants

as if those dominions had been annexed to one or other of them. In

anticipation of these operations the South African Republic had been

accumulating for many years past military stores upon an enormous scale,

which by their character could only have been intended for use against

Great Britain.

'Your Honours make some observations of a negative character upon

the object with which these preparations were made. I do not think it

necessary to discuss the questions which you have raised. But the result

of these preparations, carried on with great secrecy, has been that

the British Empire has been compelled to confront an invasion which has

entailed a costly war and the loss of thousands of precious lives. This

great calamity has been the penalty which Great Britain has suffered for

having in recent years acquiesced in the existence of the two Republics.

'In view of the use to which the two Republics have put the position

which was given to them, and the calamities which their unprovoked

attack has inflicted upon Her Majesty's dominions, Her Majesty's

Government can only answer your Honours' telegram by saying that they

are not prepared to assent to the independence either of the South

African Republic or of the Orange Free State.'

With this frank and uncompromising reply the Empire, with the exception

of a small party of dupes and doctrinaires, heartily agreed. The pens

were dropped, and the Mauser and the Lee-Metford once more took up the

debate.

CHAPTER 22. THE HALT AT BLOEMFONTEIN.

On March 13th Lord Roberts occupied the capital of the Orange Free

State. On May 1st, more than six weeks later, the advance was resumed.

This long delay was absolutely necessary in order to supply the place of

the ten thousand horses and mules which are said to have been used up in

the severe work of the preceding month. It was not merely that a large

number of the cavalry chargers had died or been abandoned, but it was

that of those which remained the majority were in a state which made

them useless for immediate service. How far this might have been

avoided is open to question, for it is notorious that General French's

reputation as a horsemaster does not stand so high as his fame as a

cavalry leader. But besides the horses there was urgent need of every

sort of supply, from boots to hospitals, and the only way by which

they could come was by two single-line railways which unite into one

single-line railway, with the alternative of passing over a precarious

pontoon bridge at Norval's Pont, or truck by truck over the road bridge

at Bethulie. To support an army of fifty thousand men under these

circumstances, eight hundred miles from a base, is no light matter, and

a premature advance which could not be thrust home would be the greatest

of misfortunes. The public at home and the army in Africa became

restless under the inaction, but it was one more example of the absolute

soundness of Lord Roberts's judgment and the quiet resolution with which

he adheres to it. He issued a proclamation to the inhabitants of the

Free State promising protection to all who should bring in their arms

and settle down upon their farms. The most stringent orders were issued

against looting or personal violence, but nothing could exceed the

gentleness and good humour of the troops. Indeed there seemed more need

for an order which should protect them against the extortion of their

conquered enemies. It is strange to think that we are separated by only

ninety years from the savage soldiery of Badajoz and San Sebastian.

The streets of the little Dutch town formed during this interval a

curious object-lesson in the resources of the Empire. All the scattered

Anglo-Celtic races had sent their best blood to fight for the common

cause. Peace is the great solvent, as war is the powerful unifier.

For the British as for the German Empire much virtue had come from

the stress and strain of battle. To stand in the market square of

Bloemfontein and to see the warrior types around you was to be assured

of the future of the race. The middle-sized, square-set, weather-tanned,

straw-bearded British regulars crowded the footpaths. There also

one might see the hard-faced Canadians, the loose-limbed dashing

Australians, fireblooded and keen, the dark New Zealanders, with a Maori

touch here and there in their features, the gallant men of Tasmania, the

gentlemen troopers of India and Ceylon, and everywhere the wild South

African irregulars with their bandoliers and unkempt wiry horses,

Rimington's men with the racoon bands, Roberts's Horse with the black

plumes, some with pink puggarees, some with birdseye, but all of the

same type, hard, rugged, and alert. The man who could look at these

splendid soldiers, and, remembering the sacrifices of time, money,

and comfort which most of them had made before they found themselves

fighting in the heart of Africa, doubt that the spirit of the race

burned now as brightly as ever, must be devoid of judgment and sympathy.

The real glories of the British race lie in the future, not in the past.

The Empire walks, and may still walk, with an uncertain step, but with

every year its tread will be firmer, for its weakness is that of waxing

youth and not of waning age.

The greatest misfortune of the campaign, one which it was obviously

impolitic to insist upon at the time, began with the occupation of

Bloemfontein. This was the great outbreak of enteric among the troops.

For more than two months the hospitals were choked with sick. One

general hospital with five hundred beds held seventeen hundred sick,

nearly all enterics. A half field hospital with fifty beds held three

hundred and seventy cases. The total number of cases could not have

been less than six or seven thousand--and this not of an evanescent and

easily treated complaint, but of the most persistent and debilitating

of continued fevers, the one too which requires the most assiduous

attention and careful nursing. How great was the strain only those who

had to meet it can tell. The exertions of the military hospitals and

of those others which were fitted out by private benevolence sufficed,

after a long struggle, to meet the crisis. At Bloemfontein alone, as

many as fifty men died in one day, and more than 1000 new graves in the

cemetery testify to the severity of the epidemic. No men in the campaign

served their country more truly than the officers and men of the medical

service, nor can any one who went through the epidemic forget the

bravery and unselfishness of those admirable nursing sisters who set the

men around them a higher standard of devotion to duty.

Enteric fever is always endemic in the country, and especially at

Bloemfontein, but there can be no doubt that this severe outbreak had

its origin in the Paardeberg water. All through the campaign, while the

machinery for curing disease was excellent, that for preventing it was

elementary or absent. If bad water can cost us more than all the bullets

of the enemy, then surely it is worth our while to make the drinking

of unboiled water a stringent military offence, and to attach to every

company and squadron the most rapid and efficient means for boiling

it--for filtering alone is useless. An incessant trouble it would be,

but it would have saved a division for the army. It is heartrending

for the medical man who has emerged from a hospital full of water-born

pestilence to see a regimental watercart being filled, without protest,

at some polluted wayside pool. With precautions and with inoculation all

those lives might have been saved. The fever died down with the advance

of the troops and the coming of the colder weather.

To return to the military operations: these, although they were

stagnant so far as the main army was concerned, were exceedingly and

inconveniently active in other quarters. Three small actions, two of

which were disastrous to our arms, and one successful defence marked the

period of the pause at Bloemfontein.

To the north of the town, some twelve miles distant lies the ubiquitous

Modder River, which is crossed by a railway bridge at a place named

Glen. The saving of the bridge was of considerable importance, and might

by the universal testimony of the farmers of that district have been

effected any time within the first few days of our occupation. We

appear, however, to have imperfectly appreciated how great was the

demoralisation of the Boers. In a week or so they took heart, returned,

and blew up the bridge. Roving parties of the enemy, composed mainly of

the redoubtable Johannesburg police, reappeared even to the south of the

river. Young Lygon was killed, and Colonels Crabbe and Codrington with

Captain Trotter, all of the Guards, were severely wounded by such a

body, whom they gallantly but injudiciously attempted to arrest when

armed only with revolvers.

These wandering patrols who kept the country unsettled, and harassed

the farmers who had taken advantage of Lord Roberts's proclamation, were

found to have their centre at a point some six miles to the north of

Glen, named Karee. At Karee a formidable line of hills cut the British

advance, and these had been occupied by a strong body of the enemy

with guns. Lord Roberts determined to drive them off, and on March 28th

Tucker's 7th Division, consisting of Chermside's brigade (Lincolns,

Norfolks, Hampshires, and Scottish Borderers), and Wavell's brigade

(Cheshires, East Lancashires, North Staffords, and South Wales

Borderers), were assembled at Glen. The artillery consisted of the

veteran 18th, 62nd, and 75th R.F.A. Three attenuated cavalry brigades

with some mounted infantry completed the force.

The movement was to be upon the old model, and in result it proved to

be only too truly so. French's cavalry were to get round one flank, Le

Gallais's mounted infantry round the other, and Tucker's Division to

attack in front. Nothing could be more perfect in theory and nothing

apparently more defective in practice. Since on this as on other

occasions the mere fact that the cavalry were demonstrating in the rear

caused the complete abandonment of the position, it is difficult to

see what the object of the infantry attack could be. The ground was

irregular and unexplored, and it was late before the horsemen on their

weary steeds found themselves behind the flank of the enemy. Some of

them, Le Gallais's mounted infantry and Davidson's guns, had come from

Bloemfontein during the night, and the horses were exhausted by the long

march, and by the absurd weight which the British troop-horse is asked

to carry. Tucker advanced his infantry exactly as Kelly-Kenny had done

at Driefontein, and with a precisely similar result. The eight regiments

going forward in echelon of battalions imagined from the silence of the

enemy that the position had been abandoned. They were undeceived by a

cruel fire which beat upon two companies of the Scottish Borderers from

a range of two hundred yards. They were driven back, but reformed in

a donga. About half-past two a Boer gun burst shrapnel over the

Lincolnshires and Scottish Borderers with some effect, for a single

shell killed five of the latter regiment. Chermside's brigade was now

all involved in the fight, and Wavell's came up in support, but the

ground was too open and the position too strong to push the attack home.

Fortunately, about four o'clock, the horse batteries with French began

to make their presence felt from behind, and the Boers instantly quitted

their position and made off through the broad gap which still remained

between French and Le Gallais. The Brandfort plain appears to be ideal

ground for cavalry, but in spite of that the enemy with his guns got

safely away. The loss of the infantry amounted to one hundred and sixty

killed and wounded, the larger share of the casualties and of the honour

falling to the Scottish Borderers and the East Lancashires. The

infantry was not well handled, the cavalry was slow, and the guns were

inefficient--altogether an inglorious day. Yet strategically it was of

importance, for the ridge captured was the last before one came to the

great plain which stretched, with a few intermissions, to the north.

From March 29th until May 2nd Karee remained the advanced post.

In the meanwhile there had been a series of operations in the east which

had ended in a serious disaster. Immediately after the occupation of

Bloemfontein (on March 18th) Lord Roberts despatched to the east a

small column consisting of the 10th Hussars, the composite regiment,

two batteries (Q and U) of the Horse Artillery, some mounted infantry,

Roberts's Horse, and Rimington's Guides. On the eastern horizon forty

miles from the capital, but in that clear atmosphere looking only half

the distance, there stands the impressive mountain named Thabanchu (the

black mountain). To all Boers it is an historical spot, for it was at

its base that the wagons of the Voortrekkers, coming by devious ways

from various parts, assembled. On the further side of Thabanchu, to the

north and east of it, lies the richest grain-growing portion of the Free

State, the centre of which is Ladybrand. The forty miles which intervene

between Bloemfontein and Thabanchu are intersected midway by the Modder

River. At this point are the waterworks, erected recently with modern

machinery, to take the place of the insanitary wells on which the town

had been dependent. The force met with no resistance, and the small town

of Thabanchu was occupied.

Colonel Pilcher, the leader of the Douglas raid, was inclined to explore

a little further, and with three squadrons of mounted men he rode on

to the eastward. Two commandos, supposed to be Grobler's and Olivier's,

were seen by them, moving on a line which suggested that they were going

to join Steyn, who was known to be rallying his forces at Kroonstad,

his new seat of government in the north of the Free State. Pilcher, with

great daring, pushed onwards until with his little band on their tired

horses he found himself in Ladybrand, thirty miles from his

nearest supports. Entering the town he seized the landdrost and the

field-cornet, but found that strong bodies of the enemy were moving upon

him and that it was impossible for him to hold the place. He retired,

therefore, holding grimly on to his prisoners, and got back with small

loss to the place from which he started. It was a dashing piece of

bluff, and, when taken with the Douglas exploit, leads one to hope that

Pilcher may have a chance of showing what he can do with larger means

at his disposal. Finding that the enemy was following him in force, he

pushed on the same night for Thabanchu. His horsemen must have covered

between fifty and sixty miles in the twenty-four hours.

Apparently the effect of Pilcher's exploit was to halt the march of

those commandos which had been seen trekking to the north-west, and to

cause them to swing round upon Thabanchu. Broadwood, a young cavalry

commander who had won a name in Egypt, considered that his position was

unnecessarily exposed and fell back upon Bloemfontein. He halted on the

first night near the waterworks, halfway upon his journey.

The Boers are great masters in the ambuscade. Never has any race shown

such aptitude for this form of warfare--a legacy from a long succession

of contests with cunning savages. But never also have they done anything

so clever and so audacious as De Wet's dispositions in this action. One

cannot go over the ground without being amazed at the ingenuity of their

attack, and also at the luck which favoured them, for the trap which

they had laid for others might easily have proved an absolutely fatal

one for themselves.

The position beside the Modder at which the British camped had numerous

broken hills to the north and east of it. A force of Boers, supposed

to number about two thousand men, came down in the night, bringing with

them several heavy guns, and with the early morning opened a brisk fire

upon the camp. The surprise was complete. But the refinement of the Boer

tactics lay in the fact that they had a surprise within a surprise--and

it was the second which was the more deadly.

The force which Broadwood had with him consisted of the 10th Hussars

and the composite regiment, Rimington's Scouts, Roberts's Horse, the

New Zealand and Burmah Mounted Infantry, with Q and U batteries of Horse

Artillery. With such a force, consisting entirely of mounted men, he

could not storm the hills upon which the Boer guns were placed, and his

twelve-pounders were unable to reach the heavier cannon of the enemy.

His best game was obviously to continue his march to Bloemfontein. He

sent on the considerable convoy of wagons and the guns, while he with

the cavalry covered the rear, upon which the long-range pieces of the

enemy kept up the usual well-directed but harmless fire.

Broadwood's retreating column now found itself on a huge plain which

stretches all the way to Bloemfontein, broken only by two hills, both

of which were known to be in our possession. The plain was one which was

continually traversed from end to end by our troops and convoys, so that

once out upon its surface all danger seemed at an end. Broadwood had

additional reasons for feeling secure, for he knew that, in answer

to his own wise request, Colvile's Division had been sent out before

daybreak that morning from Bloemfontein to meet him. In a very few miles

their vanguard and his must come together. There were obviously no Boers

upon the plain, but if there were they would find themselves between two

fires. He gave no thought to his front therefore, but rode behind, where

the Boer guns were roaring, and whence the Boer riflemen might ride.

But in spite of the obvious there WERE Boers upon the plain, so placed

that they must either bring off a remarkable surprise or be themselves

cut off to a man. Across the veld, some miles from the waterworks, there

runs a deep donga or watercourse--one of many, but the largest. It cuts

the rough road at right angles. Its depth and breadth are such that a

wagon would dip down the incline, and disappear for about two minutes

before it would become visible again at the crown of the other side.

In appearance it was a huge curving ditch with a stagnant stream at the

bottom. The sloping sides of the ditch were fringed with Boers, who had

ridden thither before dawn and were now waiting for the unsuspecting

column. There were not more than three hundred of them, and four times

their number were approaching; but no odds can represent the difference

between the concealed man with the magazine rifle and the man upon the

plain.

There were two dangers, however, which the Boers ran, and, skilful as

their dispositions were, their luck was equally great, for the risks

were enormous. One was that a force coming the other way (Colvile's

was only a few miles off) would arrive, and that they would be ground

between the upper and the lower millstone. The other was that for once

the British scouts might give the alarm and that Broadwood's mounted men

would wheel swiftly to right and left and secure the ends of the long

donga. Should that happen, not a man of them could possibly escape. But

they took their chances like brave men, and fortune was their friend.

The wagons came on without any scouts. Behind them was U battery, then

Q, with Roberts's Horse abreast of them and the rest of the cavalry

behind.

As the wagons, occupied for the most part only by unarmed sick soldiers

and black transport drivers, came down into the drift, the Boers quickly

but quietly took possession of them, and drove them on up the further

slope. Thus the troops behind saw their wagons dip down, reappear,

and continue on their course. The idea of an ambush could not suggest

itself. Only one thing could avert an absolute catastrophe, and that was

the appearance of a hero who would accept certain death in order to warn

his comrades. Such a man rode by the wagons--though, unhappily, in the

stress and rush of the moment there is no certainty as to his name or

rank. We only know that one was found brave enough to fire his revolver

in the face of certain death. The outburst of firing which answered his

shot was the sequel which saved the column. Not often is it given to a

man to die so choice a death as that of this nameless soldier.

But the detachment was already so placed that nothing could save it from

heavy loss. The wagons had all passed but nine, and the leading battery

of artillery was at the very edge of the donga. Nothing is so helpless

as a limbered-up battery. In an instant the teams were shot down and the

gunners were made prisoners. A terrific fire burst at the same instant

upon Roberts's Horse, who were abreast of the guns. 'Files a bout!

gallop!' yelled Colonel Dawson, and by his exertions and those of Major

Pack-Beresford the corps was extricated and reformed some hundreds

of yards further off. But the loss of horses and men was heavy. Major

Pack-Beresford and other officers were shot down, and every unhorsed

man remained necessarily as a prisoner under the very muzzles of the

riflemen in the donga.

As Roberts's Horse turned and galloped for dear life across the flat,

four out of the six guns [Footnote: Of the other two one overturned and

could not be righted, the other had the wheelers shot and could not be

extricated from the tumult. It was officially stated that the guns of

Q battery were halted a thousand yards off the donga, but my impression

was, from examining the ground, that it was not more than six hundred.]

of Q battery and one gun (the rearmost) of U battery swung round and

dashed frantically for a place of safety. At the same instant every Boer

along the line of the donga sprang up and emptied his magazine into

the mass of rushing, shouting soldiers, plunging horses, and screaming

Kaffirs. It was for a few moments a sauve-qui-peut. Serjeant-Major

Martin of U, with a single driver on a wheeler, got away the last gun

of his battery. The four guns which were extricated of Q, under Major

Phipps-Hornby, whirled across the plain, pulled up, unlimbered, and

opened a brisk fire of shrapnel from about a thousand yards upon the

donga. Had the battery gone on for double the distance, its action would

have been more effective, for it would have been under a less deadly

rifle fire, but in any case its sudden change from flight to discipline

and order steadied the whole force. Roberts's men sprang from their

horses, and with the Burmese and New Zealanders flung themselves down

in a skirmish line. The cavalry moved to the left to find some drift by

which the donga could be passed, and out of chaos there came in a few

minutes calm and a settled purpose.

It was for Q battery to cover the retreat of the force, and most nobly

it did it. A fortnight later a pile of horses, visible many hundreds of

yards off across the plain, showed where the guns had stood. It was the

Colenso of the horse gunners. In a devilish sleet of lead they stood to

their work, loading and firing while a man was left. Some of the guns

were left with two men to work them, one was loaded and fired by a

single officer. When at last the order for retirement came, only ten

men, several of them wounded, were left upon their feet. With scratch

teams from the limbers, driven by single gunners, the twelve-pounders

staggered out of action, and the skirmish line of mounted infantry

sprang to their feet amid the hail of bullets to cheer them as they

passed.

It was no slight task to extricate that sorely stricken force from the

close contact of an exultant enemy, and to lead it across that terrible

donga. Yet, thanks to the coolness of Broadwood and the steadiness of

his rearguard, the thing was done. A practicable passage had been found

two miles to the south by Captain Chester-Master of Rimington's. This

corps, with Roberts's, the New Zealanders, and the 3rd Mounted Infantry,

covered the withdrawal in turn. It was one of those actions in which the

horseman who is trained to fight upon foot did very much better than the

regular cavalry. In two hours' time the drift had been passed and the

survivors of the force found themselves in safety.

The losses in this disastrous but not dishonourable engagement were

severe. About thirty officers and five hundred men were killed, wounded,

or missing. The prisoners came to more than three hundred. They lost

a hundred wagons, a considerable quantity of stores, and seven

twelve-pounder guns--five from U battery and two from Q. Of U battery

only Major Taylor and Sergeant-Major Martin seem to have escaped, the

rest being captured en bloc. Of Q battery nearly every man was killed or

wounded. Roberts's Horse, the New Zealanders, and the mounted infantry

were the other corps which suffered most heavily. Among many brave men

who died, none was a greater loss to the service than Major Booth of

the Northumberland Fusiliers, serving in the mounted infantry. With four

comrades he held a position to cover the retreat, and refused to leave

it. Such men are inspired by the traditions of the past, and pass on the

story of their own deaths to inspire fresh heroes in the future.

Broadwood, the instant that he had disentangled himself, faced about,

and brought his guns into action. He was not strong enough, however,

nor were his men in a condition, to seriously attack the enemy. Martyr's

mounted infantry had come up, led by the Queenslanders, and at the cost

of some loss to themselves helped to extricate the disordered force.

Colvile's Division was behind Bushman's Kop, only a few miles off, and

there were hopes that it might push on and prevent the guns and wagons

from being removed. Colvile did make an advance, but slowly and in a

flanking direction instead of dashing swiftly forward to retrieve the

situation. It must be acknowledged, however, that the problem which

faced this General was one of great difficulty. It was almost certain

that before he could throw his men into the action the captured guns

would be beyond his reach, and it was possible that he might swell the

disaster. With all charity, however, one cannot but feel that his

return next morning, after a reinforcement during the night, without

any attempt to force the Boer position, was lacking in enterprise.

[Footnote: It may be urged in General Colvile's defence that his

division had already done a long march from Bloemfontein. A division,

however, which contains two such brigades as Macdonald's and

Smith-Dorrien's may safely be called upon for any exertions. The

gunner officers in Colvile's division heard their comrades' guns in

'section--fire' and knew it to be the sign of a desperate situation.]

The victory left the Boers in possession of the waterworks, and

Bloemfontein had to fall back upon her wells--a change which reacted

most disastrously upon the enteric which was already decimating the

troops.

The effect of the Sanna's Post defeat was increased by the fact that

only four days later (on April 4th) a second even more deplorable

disaster befell our troops. This was the surrender of five companies

of infantry, two of them mounted, at Reddersberg. So many surrenders of

small bodies of troops had occurred during the course of the war that

the public, remembering how seldom the word 'surrender' had ever been

heard in our endless succession of European wars, had become very

restive upon the subject, and were sometimes inclined to question

whether this new and humiliating fact did not imply some deterioration

of our spirit. The fear was natural, and yet nothing could be more

unjust to this the most splendid army which has ever marched under the

red-crossed flag. The fact was new because the conditions were new, and

it was inherent in those conditions. In that country of huge distances

small bodies must be detached, for the amount of space covered by

the large bodies was not sufficient for all military purposes. In

reconnoitring, in distributing proclamations, in collecting arms, in

overawing outlying districts, weak columns must be used. Very often

these columns must contain infantry soldiers, as the demands upon the

cavalry were excessive. Such bodies, moving through a hilly country with

which they were unfamiliar, were always liable to be surrounded by a

mobile enemy. Once surrounded the length of their resistance was limited

by three things: their cartridges, their water, and their food. When

they had all three, as at Wepener or Mafeking, they could hold out

indefinitely. When one or other was wanting, as at Reddersberg or

Nicholson's Nek, their position was impossible. They could not break

away, for how can men on foot break away from horsemen? Hence those

repeated humiliations, which did little or nothing to impede the

course of the war, and which were really to be accepted as one of the

inevitable prices which we had to pay for the conditions under which

the war was fought. Numbers, discipline, and resources were with us.

Mobility, distances, nature of the country, insecurity of supplies, were

with them. We need not take it to heart therefore if it happened, with

all these forces acting against them, that our soldiers found themselves

sometimes in a position whence neither wisdom nor valour could rescue

them. To travel through that country, fashioned above all others for

defensive warfare, with trench and fort of superhuman size and strength,

barring every path, one marvels how it was that such incidents were not

more frequent and more serious. It is deplorable that the white flag

should ever have waved over a company of British troops, but the man who

is censorious upon the subject has never travelled in South Africa.

In the disaster at Reddersberg three of the companies were of the

Irish Rifles, and two of the 2nd Northumberland Fusiliers--the same

unfortunate regiments which had already been cut up at Stormberg. They

had been detached from Gatacre's 3rd Division, the headquarters of which

was at Springfontein. On the abandonment of Thabanchu and the disaster

of Sanna's Post, it was obvious that we should draw in our detached

parties to the east; so the five companies were ordered to leave

Dewetsdorp, which they were garrisoning, and to get back to the railway

line. Either the order was issued too late, or they were too slow in

obeying it, for they were only halfway upon their journey, near the

town of Reddersberg, when the enemy came down upon them with five guns.

Without artillery they were powerless, but, having seized a kopje, they

took such shelter as they could find, and waited in the hope of succour.

Their assailants seem to have been detached from De Wet's force in the

north, and contained among them many of the victors of Sanna's Post. The

attack began at 11 A.M. of April 3rd, and all day the men lay among the

stones, subjected to the pelt of shell and bullet. The cover was good,

however, and the casualties were not heavy. The total losses were under

fifty killed and wounded. More serious than the enemy's fire was the

absence of water, save a very limited supply in a cart. A message was

passed through of the dire straits in which they found themselves, and

by the late afternoon the news had reached headquarters. Lord Roberts

instantly despatched the Camerons, just arrived from Egypt, to Bethany,

which is the nearest point upon the line, and telegraphed to Gatacre at

Springfontein to take measures to save his compromised detachment. The

telegram should have reached Gatacre early on the evening of the 3rd,

and he had collected a force of fifteen hundred men, entrained

it, journeyed forty miles up the line, detrained it, and reached

Reddersberg, which is ten or twelve miles from the line, by 10.30 next

morning. Already, however, it was too late, and the besieged force,

unable to face a second day without water under that burning sun, had

laid down their arms. No doubt the stress of thirst was dreadful,

and yet one cannot say that the defence rose to the highest point of

resolution. Knowing that help could not be far off, the garrison should

have held on while they could lift a rifle. If the ammunition was

running low, it was bad management which caused it to be shot away too

fast. Captain McWhinnie, who was in command, behaved with the utmost

personal gallantry. Not only the troops but General Gatacre also was

involved in the disaster. Blame may have attached to him for leaving

a detachment at Dewetsdorp, and not having a supporting body at

Reddersberg upon which it might fall back; but it must be remembered

that his total force was small and that he had to cover a long stretch

of the lines of communication. As to General Gatacre's energy and

gallantry it is a by-word in the army; but coming after the Stormberg

disaster this fresh mishap to his force made the continuance of his

command impossible. Much sympathy was felt with him in the army, where

he was universally liked and respected by officers and men. He returned

to England, and his division was taken over by General Chermside.

In a single week, at a time when the back of the war had seemed to be

broken, we had lost nearly twelve hundred men with seven guns. The men

of the Free State--for the fighting was mainly done by commandos from

the Ladybrand, Winburg, Bethlehem, and Harrismith districts--deserve

great credit for this fine effort, and their leader De Wet confirmed the

reputation which he had already gained as a dashing and indefatigable

leader. His force was so weak that when Lord Roberts was able to really

direct his own against it, he brushed it away before him; but the manner

in which De Wet took advantage of Roberts's enforced immobility, and

dared to get behind so mighty an enemy, was a fine exhibition of courage

and enterprise. The public at home chafed at this sudden and unexpected

turn of affairs; but the General, constant to his own fixed purpose,

did not permit his strength to be wasted, and his cavalry to be again

disorganised, by flying excursions, but waited grimly until he should be

strong enough to strike straight at Pretoria.

In this short period of depression there came one gleam of light from

the west. This was the capture of a commando of sixty Boers, or rather

of sixty foreigners fighting for the Boers, and the death of the gallant

Frenchman, De Villebois-Mareuil, who appears to have had the ambition of

playing Lafayette in South Africa to Kruger's Washington. From the time

that Kimberley had been reoccupied the British had been accumulating

their force there so as to make a strong movement which should coincide

with that of Roberts from Bloemfontein. Hunter's Division from Natal

was being moved round to Kimberley, and Methuen already commanded

a considerable body of troops, which included a number of the newly

arrived Imperial Yeomanry. With these Methuen pacified the surrounding

country, and extended his outposts to Barkly West on the one side, to

Boshof on the other, and to Warrenton upon the Vaal River in the centre.

On April 4th news reached Boshof that a Boer commando had been seen some

ten miles to the east of the town, and a force, consisting of Yeomanry,

Kimberley Light Horse, and half of Butcher's veteran 4th battery, was

sent to attack them. They were found to have taken up their position

upon a kopje which, contrary to all Boer custom, had no other kopjes

to support it. French generalship was certainly not so astute as Boer

cunning. The kopje was instantly surrounded, and the small force upon

the summit being without artillery in the face of our guns found itself

in exactly the same position which our men had been in twenty-four hours

before at Reddersberg. Again was shown the advantage which the mounted

rifleman has over the cavalry, for the Yeomanry and Light Horsemen left

their horses and ascended the hill with the bayonet. In three hours all

was over and the Boers had laid down their arms. Villebois was shot

with seven of his companions, and there were nearly sixty prisoners.

It speaks well for the skirmishing of the Yeomanry and the way in which

they were handled by Lord Chesham that though they worked their way up

the hill under fire they only lost four killed and a few wounded. The

affair was a small one, but it was complete, and it came at a time when

a success was very welcome. One bustling week had seen the expensive

victory of Karee, the disasters of Sanna's Post and Reddersberg, and the

successful skirmish of Boshof. Another chapter must be devoted to the

movement towards the south of the Boer forces and the dispositions which

Lord Roberts made to meet it.

CHAPTER 23. THE CLEARING OF THE SOUTH-EAST.

Lord Roberts never showed his self-command and fixed purpose more

clearly than during his six weeks' halt at Bloemfontein. De Wet, the

most enterprising and aggressive of the Boer commanders, was attacking

his eastern posts and menacing his line of communications. A fussy or

nervous general would have harassed his men and worn out his horses by

endeavouring to pursue a number of will-of-the-wisp commandos. Roberts

contented himself by building up his strength at the capital, and

by spreading nearly twenty thousand men along his line of rail from

Bloemfontein to Bethulie. When the time came he would strike, but until

then he rested. His army was not only being rehorsed and reshod, but

in some respects was being reorganised. One powerful weapon which was

forged during those weeks was the collection of the mounted infantry of

the central army into one division, which was placed under the command

of Ian Hamilton, with Hutton and Ridley as brigadiers. Hutton's

brigade contained the Canadians, New South Wales men, West Australians,

Queenslanders, New Zealanders, Victorians, South Australians, and

Tasmanians, with four battalions of Imperial Mounted Infantry, and

several light batteries. Ridley's brigade contained the South African

irregular regiments of cavalry, with some imperial troops. The strength

of the whole division came to over ten thousand rifles, and in its ranks

there rode the hardiest and best from every corner of the earth over

which the old flag is flying.

A word as to the general distribution of the troops at this instant

while Roberts was gathering himself for his spring. Eleven divisions of

infantry were in the field. Of these the 1st (Methuen's) and half

the 10th (Hunter's) were at Kimberley, forming really the

hundred-mile-distant left wing of Lord Roberts's army. On that side also

was a considerable force of Yeomanry, as General Villebois discovered.

In the centre with Roberts was the 6th division (Kelly-Kenny's) at

Bloemfontein, the 7th (Tucker's) at Karee, twenty miles north, the 9th

(Colvile's) and the 11th (Pole-Carew's) near Bloemfontein. French's

cavalry division was also in the centre. As one descended the line

towards the Cape one came on the 3rd division (Chermside's, late

Gatacre's), which had now moved up to Reddersberg, and then, further

south, the 8th (Rundle's), near Rouxville. To the south and east was the

other half of Hunter's division (Hart's brigade), and Brabant's Colonial

division, half of which was shut up in Wepener and the rest at Aliwal.

These were the troops operating in the Free State, with the addition of

the division of mounted infantry in process of formation.

There remained the three divisions in Natal, the 2nd (Clery's), the 4th

(Lyttelton's), and the 5th (Hildyard's, late Warren's), with the cavalry

brigades of Burn-Murdoch, Dundonald, and Brocklehurst. These,

with numerous militia and unbrigaded regiments along the lines of

communication, formed the British army in South Africa. At Mafeking some

900 irregulars stood at bay, with another force about as large under

Plumer a little to the north, endeavouring to relieve them. At Beira, a

Portuguese port through which we have treaty rights by which we may pass

troops, a curious mixed force of Australians, New Zealanders and others

was being disembarked and pushed through to Rhodesia, so as to cut off

any trek which the Boers might make in that direction. Carrington, a

fierce old soldier with a large experience of South African warfare, was

in command of this picturesque force, which moved amid tropical forests

over crocodile-haunted streams, while their comrades were shivering in

the cold southerly winds of a Cape winter. Neither our Government, our

people, nor the world understood at the beginning of this campaign how

grave was the task which we had undertaken, but, having once realised

it, it must be acknowledged that it was carried through in no

half-hearted way. So vast was the scene of operations that the

Canadian might almost find his native climate at one end of it and the

Queenslander at the other.

To follow in close detail the movements of the Boers and the counter

movements of the British in the southeast portion of the Free State

during this period would tax the industry of the historian and the

patience of the reader. Let it be told with as much general truth and

as little geographical detail as possible. The narrative which is

interrupted by an eternal reference to the map is a narrative spoiled.

The main force of the Freestaters had assembled in the north-eastern

corner of their State, and from this they made their sally southwards,

attacking or avoiding at their pleasure the eastern line of British

outposts. Their first engagement, that of Sanna's Post, was a great and

deserved success. Three days later they secured the five companies at

Reddersberg. Warned in time, the other small British bodies closed in

upon their supports, and the railway line, that nourishing artery which

was necessary for the very existence of the army, was held too strongly

for attack. The Bethulie Bridge was a particularly important point; but

though the Boers approached it, and even went the length of announcing

officially that they had destroyed it, it was not actually attacked.

At Wepener, however, on the Basutoland border, they found an isolated

force, and proceeded at once, according to their custom, to hem it in

and to bombard it, until one of their three great allies, want of food,

want of water, or want of cartridges, should compel a surrender.

On this occasion, however, the Boers had undertaken a task which was

beyond their strength. The troops at Wepener were one thousand seven

hundred in number, and formidable in quality. The place had been

occupied by part of Brabant's Colonial division, consisting of hardy

irregulars, men of the stuff of the defenders of Mafeking. Such men are

too shrewd to be herded into an untenable position and too valiant to

surrender a tenable one. The force was commanded by a dashing soldier,

Colonel Dalgety, of the Cape Mounted Rifles, as tough a fighter as his

famous namesake. There were with him nearly a thousand men of Brabant's

Horse, four hundred of the Cape Mounted Rifles, four hundred Kaffrarian

Horse, with some scouts, and one hundred regulars, including twenty

invaluable Sappers. They were strong in guns--two seven-pounders, two

naval twelve-pounders, two fifteen-pounders and several machine guns.

The position which they had taken up, Jammersberg, three miles north of

Wepener, was a very strong one, and it would have taken a larger force

than De Wet had at his disposal to turn them out of it. The defence had

been arranged by Major Cedric Maxwell, of the Sappers; and though the

huge perimeter, nearly eight miles, made its defence by so small a force

a most difficult matter, the result proved how good his dispositions

were.

At the same time, the Boers came on with every confidence of victory,

for they had a superiority in guns and an immense superiority in men.

But after a day or two of fierce struggle their attack dwindled down

into a mere blockade. On April 9th they attacked furiously, both by day

and by night, and on the 10th the pressure was equally severe. In these

two days occurred the vast majority of the casualties. But the defenders

took cover in a way to which British regulars have not yet attained, and

they outshot their opponents both with their rifles and their cannon.

Captain Lukin's management of the artillery was particularly skilful.

The weather was vile and the hastily dug trenches turned into ditches

half full of water, but neither discomfort nor danger shook the courage

of the gallant colonials. Assault after assault was repulsed, and

the scourging of the cannon was met with stolid endurance. The Boers

excelled all their previous feats in the handling of artillery by

dragging two guns up to the summit of the lofty Jammersberg, whence they

fired down upon the camp. Nearly all the horses were killed and three

hundred of the troopers were hit, a number which is double that of the

official return, for the simple reason that the spirit of the force

was so high that only those who were very severely wounded reported

themselves as wounded at all. None but the serious cases ever reached

the hands of Dr. Faskally, who did admirable work with very slender

resources. How many the enemy lost can never be certainly known, but as

they pushed home several attacks it is impossible to imagine that their

losses were less than those of the victorious defenders. At the end of

seventeen days of mud and blood the brave irregulars saw an empty laager

and abandoned trenches. Their own resistance and the advance of Brabant

to their rescue had caused a hasty retreat of the enemy. Wepener,

Mafeking, Kimberley, the taking of the first guns at Ladysmith,

the deeds of the Imperial Light Horse--it cannot be denied that our

irregular South African forces have a brilliant record for the war. They

are associated with many successes and with few disasters. Their fine

record cannot, I think, be fairly ascribed to any greater hardihood

which one portion of our race has when compared with another, for a

South African must admit that in the best colonial corps at least

half the men were Britons of Britain. In the Imperial Light Horse the

proportion was very much higher. But what may fairly be argued is that

their exploits have proved, what the American war proved long ago, that

the German conception of discipline is an obsolete fetish, and that the

spirit of free men, whose individualism has been encouraged rather

than crushed, is equal to any feat of arms. The clerks and miners and

engineers who went up Elandslaagte Hill without bayonets, shoulder to

shoulder with the Gordons, and who, according to Sir George White, saved

Ladysmith on January 6th, have shown for ever that with men of our race

it is the spirit within, and not the drill or the discipline, that makes

a formidable soldier. An intelligent appreciation of the fact might in

the course of the next few years save us as much money as would go far

to pay for the war.

It may well be asked how for so long a period as seventeen days the

British could tolerate a force to the rear of them when with their great

superiority of numbers they could have readily sent an army to drive

it away. The answer must be that Lord Roberts had despatched his trusty

lieutenant, Kitchener, to Aliwal, whence he had been in heliographic

communication with Wepener, that he was sure that the place could hold

out, and that he was using it, as he did Kimberley, to hold the enemy

while he was making his plans for their destruction. This was the bait

to tempt them to their ruin. Had the trap not been a little slow in

closing, the war in the Free State might have ended then and there.

From the 9th to the 25th the Boers were held in front of Wepener. Let us

trace the movements of the other British detachments during that time.

Brabant's force, with Hart's brigade, which had been diverted on its way

to Kimberley, where it was to form part of Hunter's division, was moving

on the south towards Wepener, advancing through Rouxville, but going

slowly for fear of scaring the Boers away before they were sufficiently

compromised. Chermside's 3rd division approached from the north-west,

moving out from the railway at Bethany, and passing through Reddersberg

towards Dewetsdorp, from which it would directly threaten the Boer

line of retreat. The movement was made with reassuring slowness and

gentleness, as when the curved hand approaches the unconscious fly. And

then suddenly, on April 21st, Lord Roberts let everything go. Had the

action of the agents been as swift and as energetic as the mind of the

planner, De Wet could not have escaped us.

What held Lord Roberts's hand for some few days after he was ready to

strike was the abominable weather. Rain was falling in sheets, and

those who know South African roads, South African mud, and South African

drifts will understand how impossible swift military movements are under

those circumstances. But with the first clearing of the clouds the

hills to the south and east of Bloemfontein were dotted with our scouts.

Rundle with his 8th division was brought swiftly up from the south,

united with Chermside to the east of Reddersberg, and the whole force,

numbering 13,000 rifles with thirty guns, advanced upon Dewetsdorp,

Rundle, as senior officer, being in command. As they marched the blue

hills of Wepener lined the sky some twenty miles to the south, eloquent

to every man of the aim and object of their march.

On April 20th, Rundle as he advanced found a force with artillery across

his path to Dewetsdorp. It is always difficult to calculate the number

of hidden men and lurking guns which go to make up a Boer army, but with

some knowledge of their total at Wepener it was certain that the force

opposed to him must be very inferior to his own. At Constantia Farm,

where he found them in position, it is difficult to imagine that there

were more than three thousand men. Their left flank was their weak

point, as a movement on that side would cut them off from Wepener

and drive them up towards our main force in the north. One would have

thought that a containing force of three thousand men, and a flanking

movement from eight thousand, would have turned them out, as it has

turned them out so often before and since. Yet a long-range action began

on Friday, April 20th, and lasted the whole of the 21st, the 22nd, and

the 23rd, in which we sustained few losses, but made no impression upon

the enemy. Thirty of the 1st Worcesters wandered at night into the wrong

line, and were made prisoners, but with this exception the four days

of noisy fighting does not appear to have cost either side fifty

casualties. It is probable that the deliberation with which the

operations were conducted was due to Rundle's instructions to wait until

the other forces were in position. His subsequent movements showed that

he was not a General who feared to strike.

On Sunday night (April 22nd) Pole-Carew sallied out from Bloemfontein on

a line which would take him round the right flank of the Boers who were

facing Rundle. The Boers had, however, occupied a strong position at

Leeuw Kop, which barred his path, so that the Dewetsdorp Boers were

covering the Wepener Boers, and being in turn covered by the Boers of

Leeuw Kop. Before anything could be done, they must be swept out of the

way. Pole-Carew is one of those finds which help to compensate us for

the war. Handsome, dashing, debonnaire, he approaches a field of battle

as a light-hearted schoolboy approaches a football field. On this

occasion he acted with energy and discretion. His cavalry threatened the

flanks of the enemy, and Stephenson's brigade carried the position in

front at a small cost. On the same evening General French arrived and

took over the force, which consisted now of Stephenson's and the Guards

brigades (making up the 11th division), with two brigades of cavalry and

one corps of mounted infantry. The next day, the 23rd, the advance was

resumed, the cavalry bearing the brunt of the fighting. That gallant

corps, Roberts's Horse, whose behaviour at Sanna's Post had been

admirable, again distinguished itself, losing among others its Colonel,

Brazier Creagh. On the 24th again it was to the horsemen that the honour

and the casualties fell. The 9th Lancers, the regular cavalry regiment

which bears away the honours of the war, lost several men and officers,

and the 8th Hussars also suffered, but the Boers were driven from their

position, and lost more heavily in this skirmish than in some of the

larger battles of the campaign. The 'pom-poms,' which had been supplied

to us by the belated energy of the Ordnance Department, were used with

some effect in this engagement, and the Boers learned for the first

time how unnerving are those noisy but not particularly deadly fireworks

which they had so often crackled round the ears of our gunners.

On the Wednesday morning Rundle, with the addition of Pole-Carew's

division, was strong enough for any attack, while French was in a

position upon the flank. Every requisite for a great victory was there

except the presence of an enemy. The Wepener siege had been raised and

the force in front of Rundle had disappeared as only Boer armies can

disappear. The combined movement was an admirable piece of work on

the part of the enemy. Finding no force in front of them, the combined

troops of French, Rundle, and Chermside occupied Dewetsdorp, where the

latter remained, while the others pushed on to Thabanchu, the storm

centre from which all our troubles had begun nearly a month before. All

the way they knew that De Wet's retreating army was just in front

of them, and they knew also that a force had been sent out from

Bloemfontein to Thabanchu to head off the Boers. Lord Roberts might

naturally suppose, when he had formed two cordons through which De Wet

must pass, that one or other must hold him. But with extraordinary

skill and mobility De Wet, aided by the fact that every inhabitant was

a member of his intelligence department, slipped through the double net

which had been laid for him. The first net was not in its place in time,

and the second was too small to hold him.

While Rundle and French had advanced on Dewetsdorp as described, the

other force which was intended to head off De Wet had gone direct to

Thabanchu. The advance began by a movement of Ian Hamilton on April 22nd

with eight hundred mounted infantry upon the waterworks. The enemy, who

held the hills beyond, allowed Hamilton's force to come right down to

the Modder before they opened fire from three guns. The mounted infantry

fell back, and encamped for the night out of range. [Footnote: This was

a remarkable exhibition of the harmlessness of shell-fire against troops

in open formation. I myself saw at least forty shells, all of which

burst, fall among the ranks of the mounted infantry, who retired at a

contemptuous walk. There were no casualties.] Before morning they

were reinforced by Smith-Dorrien's brigade (Gordons, Canadians, and

Shropshires--the Cornwalls had been left behind) and some more mounted

Infantry. With daylight a fine advance was begun, the brigade moving up

in very extended order and the mounted men turning the right flank of

the defence. By evening we had regained the waterworks, a most important

point for Bloemfontein, and we held all the line of hills which command

it. This strong position would not have been gained so easily if it had

not been for Pole-Carew's and French's actions two days before, on their

way to join Rundle, which enabled them to turn it from the south.

Ian Hamilton, who had already done good service in the war, having

commanded the infantry at Elandslaagte, and been one of the most

prominent leaders in the defence of Ladysmith, takes from this time

onwards a more important and a more independent position. A thin,

aquiline man, of soft voice and gentle manners, he had already proved

more than once during his adventurous career that he not only possessed

in a high degree the courage of the soldier, but also the equanimity and

decision of the born leader. A languid elegance in his bearing covered

a shrewd brain and a soul of fire. A distorted and half-paralysed hand

reminded the observer that Hamilton, as a young lieutenant, had known

at Majuba what it was to face the Boer rifles. Now, in his forty-seventh

year, he had returned, matured and formidable, to reverse the results

of that first deplorable campaign. This was the man to whom Lord Roberts

had entrusted the command of that powerful flanking column which was

eventually to form the right wing of his main advance. Being reinforced

upon the morning after the capture of the Waterworks by the Highland

Brigade, the Cornwalls, and two heavy naval guns, his whole force

amounted to not less than seven thousand men. From these he detached a

garrison for the Waterworks, and with the rest he continued his march

over the hilly country which lies between them and Thabanchu.

One position, Israel's Poort, a nek between two hills, was held against

them on April 25th, but was gained without much trouble, the Canadians

losing one killed and two wounded. Colonel Otter, their gallant leader,

was one of the latter, while Marshall's Horse, a colonial corps raised

in Grahamstown, had no fewer than seven of their officers and several

men killed or wounded. Next morning the town of Thabanchu was seized,

and Hamilton found himself upon the direct line of the Boer retreat.

He seized the pass which commands the road, and all next day he waited

eagerly, and the hearts of his men beat high when at last they saw a

long trail of dust winding up to them from the south. At last the wily

De Wet had been headed off! Deep and earnest were the curses when out of

the dust there emerged a khaki column of horsemen, and it was realised

that this was French's pursuing force, closely followed by Rundle's

infantry from Dewetsdorp. The Boers had slipped round and were already

to the north of us.

It is impossible to withhold our admiration for the way in which the

Boer force was manoeuvred throughout this portion of the campaign. The

mixture of circumspection and audacity, the way in which French and

Rundle were hindered until the Wepener force had disengaged itself, the

manner in which these covering forces were then withdrawn, and finally

the clever way in which they all slipped past Hamilton, make a brilliant

bit of strategy. Louis Botha, the generalissimo, held all the strings in

his hand, and the way in which he pulled them showed that his countrymen

had chosen the right man for that high office, and that his was a master

spirit even among those fine natural warriors who led the separate

commandos.

Having got to the north of the British forces Botha made no effort to

get away, and refused to be hustled by a reconnaissance developing into

an attack, which French made upon April 27th. In a skirmish the night

before Kitchener's Horse had lost fourteen men, and the action of the

27th cost us about as many casualties. It served to show that the

Boer force was a compact body some six or seven thousand strong, which

withdrew in a leisurely fashion, and took up a defensive position at

Houtnek, some miles further on. French remained at Thabanchu, from which

he afterwards joined Lord Roberts' advance, while Hamilton now assumed

complete command of the flanking column, with which he proceeded to

march north upon Winburg.

The Houtnek position is dominated upon the left of the advancing British

force by Thoba Mountain, and it was this point which was the centre of

Hamilton's attack. It was most gallantly seized by Kitchener's Horse,

who were quickly supported by Smith-Dorrien's men. The mountain became

the scene of a brisk action, and night fell before the crest was

cleared. At dawn upon May 1st the fighting was resumed, and the position

was carried by a determined advance of the Shropshires, the Canadians,

and the Gordons: the Boers escaping down the reverse slope of the hill

came under a heavy fire of our infantry, and fifty of them were wounded

or taken. It was in this action, during the fighting on the hill, that

Captain Towse, of the Gordons, though shot through the eyes and totally

blind, encouraged his men to charge through a group of the enemy who had

gathered round them. After this victory Hamilton's men, who had fought

for seven days out of ten, halted for a rest at Jacobsrust, where

they were joined by Broadwood's cavalry and Bruce Hamilton's infantry

brigade. Ian Hamilton's column now contained two infantry brigades

(Smith-Dorrien's and Bruce Hamilton's), Ridley's Mounted Infantry,

Broadwood's Cavalry Brigade, five batteries of artillery, two heavy

guns, altogether 13,000 men. With this force in constant touch with

Botha's rearguard, Ian Hamilton pushed on once more on May 4th. On May

5th he fought a brisk cavalry skirmish, in which Kitchener's Horse and

the 12th Lancers distinguished themselves, and on the same day he took

possession of Winburg, thus covering the right of Lord Roberts's great

advance.

The distribution of the troops on the eastern side of the Free State

was, at the time of this the final advance of the main army, as

follows--Ian Hamilton with his mounted infantry, Smith-Dorrien's

brigade, Macdonald's brigade, Bruce Hamilton's brigade, and Broadwood's

cavalry were at Winburg. Rundle was at Thabanchu, and Brabant's colonial

division was moving up to the same point. Chermside was at Dewetsdorp,

and had detached a force under Lord Castletown to garrison Wepener.

Hart occupied Smithfield, whence he and his brigade were shortly to be

transferred to the Kimberley force. Altogether there could not have been

fewer than thirty thousand men engaged in clearing and holding down

this part of the country. French's cavalry and Pole-Carew's division had

returned to take part in the central advance.

Before entering upon a description of that great and decisive movement,

one small action calls for comment. This was the cutting off of twenty

men of Lumsden's Horse in a reconnaissance at Karee. The small post

under Lieutenant Crane found themselves by some misunderstanding

isolated in the midst of the enemy. Refusing to hoist the flag of shame,

they fought their way out, losing half their number, while of the other

half it is said that there was not one who could not show bullet

marks upon his clothes or person. The men of this corps, volunteer

Anglo-Indians, had abandoned the ease and even luxury of Eastern life

for the hard fare and rough fighting of this most trying campaign. In

coming they had set the whole empire an object-lesson in spirit, and now

on their first field they set the army an example of military virtue.

The proud traditions of Outram's Volunteers have been upheld by the men

of Lumsden's Horse. Another minor action which cannot be ignored is

the defence of a convoy on April 29th by the Derbyshire Yeomanry (Major

Dugdale) and a company of the Scots Guards. The wagons were on their

way to Rundle when they were attacked at a point about ten miles west of

Thabanchu. The small guard beat off their assailants in the most

gallant fashion, and held their own until relieved by Brabazon upon the

following morning.

This phase of the war was marked by a certain change in the temper of

the British. Nothing could have been milder than the original intentions

and proclamations of Lord Roberts, and he was most ably seconded in his

attempts at conciliation by General Pretyman, who had been made civil

administrator of the State. There was evidence, however, that this

kindness had been construed as weakness by some of the burghers,

and during the Boer incursion to Wepener many who had surrendered a

worthless firearm reappeared with the Mauser which had been concealed

in some crafty hiding-place. Troops were fired at from farmhouses which

flew the white flag, and the good housewife remained behind to charge

the 'rooinek' extortionate prices for milk and fodder while her husband

shot at him from the hills. It was felt that the burghers might have

peace or might have war, but could not have both simultaneously. Some

examples were made therefore of offending farmhouses, and stock was

confiscated where there was evidence of double dealing upon the part

of the owner. In a country where property is a more serious thing than

life, these measures, together with more stringent rules about the

possession of horses and arms, did much to stamp out the chances of an

insurrection in our rear. The worst sort of peace is an enforced peace,

but if that can be established time and justice may do the rest.

The operations which have been here described may be finally summed up

in one short paragraph. A Boer army came south of the British line and

besieged a British garrison. Three British forces, those of French,

Rundle, and Ian Hamilton, were despatched to cut it off. It successfully

threaded its way among them and escaped. It was followed to the

northward as far as the town of Winburg, which remained in the British

possession. Lord Roberts had failed in his plan of cutting off De Wet's

army, but, at the expense of many marches and skirmishes, the south-east

of the State was cleared of the enemy.

CHAPTER 24. THE SIEGE OF MAFEKING.

This small place, which sprang in the course of a few weeks from

obscurity to fame, is situated upon the long line of railway which

connects Kimberley in the south with Rhodesia in the north. In character

it resembles one of those western American townlets which possess small

present assets but immense aspirations. In its litter of corrugated-iron

roofs, and in the church and the racecourse, which are the first-fruits

everywhere of Anglo-Celtic civilisation, one sees the seeds of the great

city of the future. It is the obvious depot for the western Transvaal

upon one side, and the starting-point for all attempts upon the Kalahari

Desert upon the other. The Transvaal border runs within a few miles.

It is not clear why the imperial authorities should desire to hold this

place, since it has no natural advantages to help the defence, but lies

exposed in a widespread plain. A glance at the map must show that the

railway line would surely be cut both to the north and south of the

town, and the garrison isolated at a point some two hundred and fifty

miles from any reinforcements. Considering that the Boers could throw

any strength of men or guns against the place, it seemed certain that if

they seriously desired to take possession of it they could do so. Under

ordinary circumstances any force shut up there was doomed to capture.

But what may have seemed short-sighted policy became the highest wisdom,

owing to the extraordinary tenacity and resource of Baden-Powell, the

officer in command. Through his exertions the town acted as a bait to

the Boers, and occupied a considerable force in a useless siege at

a time when their presence at other seats of war might have proved

disastrous to the British cause.

Colonel Baden-Powell is a soldier of a type which is exceedingly popular

with the British public. A skilled hunter and an expert at many games,

there was always something of the sportsman in his keen appreciation of

war. In the Matabele campaign he had out-scouted the savage scouts and

found his pleasure in tracking them among their native mountains, often

alone and at night, trusting to his skill in springing from rock to rock

in his rubber-soled shoes to save him from their pursuit. There was a

brain quality in his bravery which is rare among our officers. Full

of veld craft and resource, it was as difficult to outwit as it was to

outfight him. But there was another curious side to his complex nature.

The French have said of one of their heroes, 'Il avait cette graine de

folie dans sa bravoure que les Francais aiment,' and the words might

have been written of Powell. An impish humour broke out in him, and the

mischievous schoolboy alternated with the warrior and the administrator.

He met the Boer commandos with chaff and jokes which were as

disconcerting as his wire entanglements and his rifle-pits. The amazing

variety of his personal accomplishments was one of his most

striking characteristics. From drawing caricatures with both hands

simultaneously, or skirt dancing to leading a forlorn hope, nothing

came amiss to him; and he had that magnetic quality by which the leader

imparts something of his virtues to his men. Such was the man who held

Mafeking for the Queen.

In a very early stage, before the formal declaration of war, the enemy

had massed several commandos upon the western border, the men being

drawn from Zeerust, Rustenburg, and Lichtenburg. Baden-Powell, with

the aid of an excellent group of special officers, who included Colonel

Gould Adams, Lord Edward Cecil, the soldier son of England's Premier,

and Colonel Hore, had done all that was possible to put the place into a

state of defence. In this he had immense assistance from Benjamin Weil,

a well known South African contractor, who had shown great energy in

provisioning the town. On the other hand, the South African Government

displayed the same stupidity or treason which had been exhibited in the

case of Kimberley, and had met all demands for guns and reinforcements

with foolish doubts as to the need of such precautions. In the endeavour

to supply these pressing wants the first small disaster of the campaign

was encountered. On October 12th, the day after the declaration of war,

an armoured train conveying two 7-pounders for the Mafeking defences was

derailed and captured by a Boer raiding party at Kraaipan, a place forty

miles south of their destination. The enemy shelled the shattered train

until after five hours Captain Nesbitt, who was in command, and his

men, some twenty in number, surrendered. It was a small affair, but

it derived importance from being the first blood shed and the first

tactical success of the war.

The garrison of the town, whose fame will certainly live in the history

of South Africa, contained no regular soldiers at all with the exception

of the small group of excellent officers. They consisted of irregular

troops, three hundred and forty of the Protectorate Regiment, one

hundred and seventy Police, and two hundred volunteers, made up of that

singular mixture of adventurers, younger sons, broken gentlemen, and

irresponsible sportsmen who have always been the voortrekkers of

the British Empire. These men were of the same stamp as those other

admirable bodies of natural fighters who did so well in Rhodesia, in

Natal, and in the Cape. With them there was associated in the defence

the Town Guard, who included the able-bodied shopkeepers, businessmen,

and residents, the whole amounting to about nine hundred men. Their

artillery was feeble in the extreme, two 7-pounder toy guns and six

machine guns, but the spirit of the men and the resource of their

leaders made up for every disadvantage. Colonel Vyvyan and Major Panzera

planned the defences, and the little trading town soon began to take on

the appearance of a fortress.

On October 13th the Boers appeared before Mafeking. On the same day

Colonel Baden-Powell sent two truckloads of dynamite out of the

place. They were fired into by the invaders, with the result that they

exploded. On October 14th the pickets around the town were driven in by

the Boers. On this the armoured train and a squadron of the Protectorate

Regiment went out to support the pickets and drove the Boers before

them. A body of the latter doubled back and interposed between the

British and Mafeking, but two fresh troops with a 7-pounder throwing

shrapnel drove them off. In this spirited little action the garrison

lost two killed and fourteen wounded, but they inflicted considerable

damage on the enemy. To Captain Williams, Captain FitzClarence, and Lord

Charles Bentinck great credit is due for the way in which they handled

their men; but the whole affair was ill advised, for if a disaster had

occurred Mafeking must have fallen, being left without a garrison. No

possible results which could come from such a sortie could justify the

risk which was run.

On October 16th the siege began in earnest. On that date the Boers

brought up two 12-pounder guns, and the first of that interminable

flight of shells fell into the town. The enemy got possession of the

water supply, but the garrison had already dug wells. Before October

20th five thousand Boers, under the formidable Cronje, had gathered

round the town. 'Surrender to avoid bloodshed' was his message. 'When

is the bloodshed going to begin?' asked Powell. When the Boers had been

shelling the town for some weeks the lighthearted Colonel sent out to

say that if they went on any longer he should be compelled to regard

it as equivalent to a declaration of war. It is to be hoped that Cronje

also possessed some sense of humour, or else he must have been as sorely

puzzled by his eccentric opponent as the Spanish generals were by the

vagaries of Lord Peterborough.

Among the many difficulties which had to be met by the defenders of the

town the most serious was the fact that the position had a circumference

of five or six miles to be held by about one thousand men against a

force who at their own time and their own place could at any moment

attempt to gain a footing. An ingenious system of small forts was

devised to meet the situation. Each of these held from ten to forty

riflemen, and was furnished with bomb-proofs and covered ways. The

central bomb-proof was connected by telephone with all the outlying

ones, so as to save the use of orderlies. A system of bells was arranged

by which each quarter of the town was warned when a shell was coming in

time to enable the inhabitants to scuttle off to shelter. Every detail

showed the ingenuity of the controlling mind. The armoured train,

painted green and tied round with scrub, stood unperceived among the

clumps of bushes which surrounded the town.

On October 24th a savage bombardment commenced, which lasted with

intermissions for seven months. The Boers had brought an enormous gun

across from Pretoria, throwing a 96-pound shell, and this, with many

smaller pieces, played upon the town. The result was as futile as our

own artillery fire has so often been when directed against the Boers.

As the Mafeking guns were too weak to answer the enemy's fire, the only

possible reply lay in a sortie, and upon this Colonel Powell decided.

It was carried out with great gallantry on the evening of October 27th,

when about a hundred men under Captain FitzClarence moved out against

the Boer trenches with instructions to use the bayonet only. The

position was carried with a rush, and many of the Boers bayoneted before

they could disengage themselves from the tarpaulins which covered them.

The trenches behind fired wildly in the darkness, and it is probable

that as many of their own men as of ours were hit by their rifle fire.

The total loss in this gallant affair was six killed, eleven wounded,

and two prisoners. The loss of the enemy, though shrouded as usual in

darkness, was certainly very much higher.

On October 31st the Boers ventured upon an attack on Cannon Kopje, which

is a small fort and eminence to the south of the town. It was

defended by Colonel Walford, of the British South African Police, with

fifty-seven of his men and three small guns. The attack was repelled

with heavy loss to the Boers. The British casualties were six killed and

five wounded.

Their experience in this attack seems to have determined the Boers to

make no further expensive attempts to rush the town, and for some weeks

the siege degenerated into a blockade. Cronje had been recalled for more

important work, and Commandant Snyman had taken over the uncompleted

task. From time to time the great gun tossed its huge shells into the

town, but boardwood walls and corrugated-iron roofs minimise the dangers

of a bombardment. On November 3rd the garrison rushed the Brickfields,

which had been held by the enemy's sharpshooters, and on the 7th another

small sally kept the game going. On the 18th Powell sent a message to

Snyman that he could not take the town by sitting and looking at it.

At the same time he despatched a message to the Boer forces generally,

advising them to return to their homes and their families. Some of the

commandos had gone south to assist Cronje in his stand against Methuen,

and the siege languished more and more, until it was woken up by a

desperate sortie on December 26th, which caused the greatest loss which

the garrison had sustained. Once more the lesson was to be enforced that

with modern weapons and equality of forces it is always long odds on the

defence.

On this date a vigorous attack was made upon one of the Boer forts

on the north. There seems to be little doubt that the enemy had

some inkling of our intention, as the fort was found to have been so

strengthened as to be impregnable without scaling ladders. The attacking

force consisted of two squadrons of the Protectorate Regiment and one of

the Bechuanaland Rifles, backed up by three guns. So desperate was the

onslaught that of the actual attacking party--a forlorn hope, if ever

there was one--fifty-three out of eighty were killed and wounded,

twenty-five of the former and twenty-eight of the latter. Several of

that gallant band of officers who had been the soul of the defence were

among the injured. Captain FitzClarence was wounded, Vernon, Sandford,

and Paton were killed, all at the very muzzles of the enemy's guns. It

must have been one of the bitterest moments of Baden-Powell's life when

he shut his field-glass and said, 'Let the ambulance go out!'

Even this heavy blow did not damp the spirits nor diminish the energies

of the defence, though it must have warned Baden-Powell that he could

not afford to drain his small force by any more expensive attempts at

the offensive, and that from then onwards he must content himself by

holding grimly on until Plumer from the north or Methuen from the south

should at last be able to stretch out to him a helping hand. Vigilant

and indomitable, throwing away no possible point in the game which

he was playing, the new year found him and his hardy garrison sternly

determined to keep the flag flying.

January and February offer in their records that monotony of excitement

which is the fate of every besieged town. On one day the shelling was

a little more, on another a little less. Sometimes they escaped

scatheless, sometimes the garrison found itself the poorer by the loss

of Captain Girdwood or Trooper Webb or some other gallant soldier.

Occasionally they had their little triumph when a too curious Dutchman,

peering for an instant from his cover to see the effect of his shot,

was carried back in the ambulance to the laager. On Sunday a truce was

usually observed, and the snipers who had exchanged rifle-shots all the

week met occasionally on that day with good-humoured chaff. Snyman,

the Boer General, showed none of that chivalry at Mafeking which

distinguished the gallant old Joubert at Ladysmith. Not only was

there no neutral camp for women or sick, but it is beyond all doubt or

question that the Boer guns were deliberately turned upon the

women's quarters inside Mafeking in order to bring pressure upon the

inhabitants. Many women and children were sacrificed to this brutal

policy, which must in fairness be set to the account of the savage

leader, and not of the rough but kindly folk with whom we were fighting.

In every race there are individual ruffians, and it would be a political

mistake to allow our action to be influenced or our feelings permanently

embittered by their crimes. It is from the man himself, and not from his

country, that an account should be exacted.

The garrison, in the face of increasing losses and decreasing food,

lost none of the high spirits which it reflected from its commander. The

programme of a single day of jubilee--Heaven only knows what they had to

hold jubilee over--shows a cricket match in the morning, sports in the

afternoon, a concert in the evening, and a dance, given by the bachelor

officers, to wind up. Baden-Powell himself seems to have descended from

the eyrie from which, like a captain on the bridge, he rang bells and

telephoned orders, to bring the house down with a comic song and a

humorous recitation. The ball went admirably, save that there was an

interval to repel an attack which disarranged the programme. Sports

were zealously cultivated, and the grimy inhabitants of casemates

and trenches were pitted against each other at cricket or football.

[Footnote: Sunday cricket so shocked Snyman that he threatened to fire

upon it if it were continued.] The monotony was broken by the occasional

visits of a postman, who appeared or vanished from the vast barren

lands to the west of the town, which could not all be guarded by the

besiegers. Sometimes a few words from home came to cheer the hearts of

the exiles, and could be returned by the same uncertain and expensive

means. The documents which found their way up were not always of an

essential or even of a welcome character. At least one man received an

unpaid bill from an angry tailor.

In one particular Mafeking had, with much smaller resources, rivalled

Kimberley. An ordnance factory had been started, formed in the railway

workshops, and conducted by Connely and Cloughlan, of the Locomotive

Department. Daniels, of the police, supplemented their efforts by making

both powder and fuses. The factory turned out shells, and eventually

constructed a 5.5-inch smooth-bore gun, which threw a round shell with

great accuracy to a considerable range. April found the garrison, in

spite of all losses, as efficient and as resolute as it had been in

October. So close were the advanced trenches upon either side that both

parties had recourse to the old-fashioned hand grenades, thrown by the

Boers, and cast on a fishing-line by ingenious Sergeant Page, of the

Protectorate Regiment. Sometimes the besiegers and the number of guns

diminished, forces being detached to prevent the advance of Plumer's

relieving column from the north; but as those who remained held their

forts, which it was beyond the power of the British to storm, the

garrison was now much the better for the alleviation. Putting Mafeking

for Ladysmith and Plumer for Buller, the situation was not unlike that

which had existed in Natal.

At this point some account might be given of the doings of that

northern force whose situation was so remote that even the ubiquitous

correspondent hardly appears to have reached it. No doubt the book will

eventually make up for the neglect of the journal, but some short facts

may be given here of the Rhodesian column. Their action did not affect

the course of the war, but they clung like bulldogs to a most difficult

task, and eventually, when strengthened by the relieving column, made

their way to Mafeking.

The force was originally raised for the purpose of defending Rhodesia,

and it consisted of fine material pioneers, farmers, and miners from the

great new land which had been added through the energy of Mr. Rhodes to

the British Empire. Many of the men were veterans of the native wars,

and all were imbued with a hardy and adventurous spirit. On the other

hand, the men of the northern and western Transvaal, whom they were

called upon to face the burghers of Watersberg and Zoutpansberg, were

tough frontiersmen living in a land where a dinner was shot, not

bought. Shaggy, hairy, half-savage men, handling a rifle as a mediaeval

Englishman handled a bow, and skilled in every wile of veld craft, they

were as formidable opponents as the world could show.

On the war breaking out the first thought of the leaders in Rhodesia was

to save as much of the line which was their connection through Mafeking

with the south as was possible. For this purpose an armoured train was

despatched only three days after the expiration of the ultimatum to the

point four hundred miles south of Bulawayo, where the frontiers of the

Transvaal and of Bechuanaland join. Colonel Holdsworth commanded

the small British force. The Boers, a thousand or so in number, had

descended upon the railway, and an action followed in which the

train appears to have had better luck than has usually attended these

ill-fated contrivances. The Boer commando was driven back and a number

were killed. It was probably news of this affair, and not anything

which had occurred at Mafeking, which caused those rumours of gloom

at Pretoria very shortly after the outbreak of hostilities. An agency

telegraphed that women were weeping in the streets of the Boer capital.

We had not then realised how soon and how often we should see the same

sight in Pall Mall.

The adventurous armoured train pressed on as far as Lobatsi, where it

found the bridges destroyed; so it returned to its original position,

having another brush with the Boer commandos, and again, in some

marvellous way, escaping its obvious fate. From then until the new year

the line was kept open by an admirable system of patrolling to within

a hundred miles or so of Mafeking. An aggressive spirit and a power of

dashing initiative were shown in the British operations at this side

of the scene of war such as have too often been absent elsewhere.

At Sekwani, on November 24th, a considerable success was gained by a

surprise planned and carried out by Colonel Holdsworth. The Boer laager

was approached and attacked in the early morning by a force of one

hundred and twenty frontiersmen, and so effective was their fire that

the Boers estimated their numbers at several thousand. Thirty Boers were

killed or wounded, and the rest scattered.

While the railway line was held in this way there had been some

skirmishing also on the northern frontier of the Transvaal. Shortly

after the outbreak of the war the gallant Blackburn, scouting with six

comrades in thick bush, found himself in the presence of a considerable

commando. The British concealed themselves by the path, but Blackburn's

foot was seen by a keen-eyed Kaffir, who pointed it out to his masters.

A sudden volley riddled Blackburn with bullets; but his men stayed by

him and drove off the enemy. Blackburn dictated an official report of

the action, and then died.

In the same region a small force under Captain Hare was cut off by a

body of Boers. Of the twenty men most got away, but the chaplain J.W.

Leary, Lieutenant Haserick (who behaved with admirable gallantry), and

six men were taken. [Footnote: Mr. Leary was wounded in the foot by a

shell. The German artillerist entered the hut in which he lay. 'Here's

a bit of your work!' said Leary good-humouredly. 'I wish it had been

worse,' said the amiable German gunner.] The commando which attacked

this party, and on the same day Colonel Spreckley's force, was a

powerful one, with several guns. No doubt it was organised because there

were fears among the Boers that they would be invaded from the north.

When it was understood that the British intended no large aggressive

movement in that quarter, these burghers joined other commandos. Sarel

Eloff, who was one of the leaders of this northern force, was afterwards

taken at Mafeking.

Colonel Plumer had taken command of the small army which was now

operating from the north along the railway line with Mafeking for its

objective. Plumer is an officer of considerable experience in African

warfare, a small, quiet, resolute man, with a knack of gently enforcing

discipline upon the very rough material with which he had to deal. With

his weak force--which never exceeded a thousand men, and was usually

from six to seven hundred--he had to keep the long line behind him open,

build up the ruined railway in front of him, and gradually creep

onwards in face of a formidable and enterprising enemy. For a long

time Gaberones, which is eighty miles north of Mafeking, remained his

headquarters, and thence he kept up precarious communications with the

besieged garrison. In the middle of March he advanced as far south as

Lobatsi, which is less than fifty miles from Mafeking; but the enemy

proved to be too strong, and Plumer had to drop back again with some

loss to his original position at Gaberones. Sticking doggedly to his

task, Plumer again came south, and this time made his way as far

as Ramathlabama, within a day's march of Mafeking. He had with him,

however, only three hundred and fifty men, and had he pushed through the

effect might have been an addition of hungry men to the garrison. The

relieving force was fiercely attacked, however, by the Boers and driven

back on to their camp with a loss of twelve killed, twenty-six wounded,

and fourteen missing. Some of the British were dismounted men, and

it says much for Plumer's conduct of the fight that he was able to

extricate these safely from the midst of an aggressive mounted enemy.

Personally he set an admirable example, sending away his own horse,

and walking with his rearmost soldiers. Captain Crewe Robertson and

Lieutenant Milligan, the famous Yorkshire cricketer, were killed, and

Rolt, Jarvis, Maclaren, and Plumer himself were wounded. The Rhodesian

force withdrew again to near Lobatsi, and collected itself for yet

another effort.

In the meantime Mafeking--abandoned, as it seemed, to its fate--was

still as formidable as a wounded lion. Far from weakening in its defence

it became more aggressive, and so persistent and skilful were its

riflemen that the big Boer gun had again and again to be moved further

from the town. Six months of trenches and rifle-pits had turned

every inhabitant into a veteran. Now and then words of praise and

encouragement came to them from without. Once it was a special message

from the Queen, once a promise of relief from Lord Roberts. But the

rails which led to England were overgrown with grass, and their brave

hearts yearned for the sight of their countrymen and for the sound of

their voices. 'How long, O Lord, how long?' was the cry which was wrung

from them in their solitude. But the flag was still held high.

April was a trying month for the defence. They knew that Methuen, who

had advanced as far as Fourteen Streams upon the Vaal River, had retired

again upon Kimberley. They knew also that Plumer's force had been

weakened by the repulse at Ramathlabama, and that many of his men

were down with fever. Six weary months had this village withstood the

pitiless pelt of rifle bullet and shell. Help seemed as far away from

them as ever. But if troubles may be allayed by sympathy, then theirs

should have lain lightly. The attention of the whole empire had centred

upon them, and even the advance of Roberts's army became secondary to

the fate of this gallant struggling handful of men who had upheld the

flag so long. On the Continent also their resistance attracted

the utmost interest, and the numerous journals there who find the

imaginative writer cheaper than the war correspondent announced their

capture periodically as they had once done that of Ladysmith. From a

mere tin-roofed village Mafeking had become a prize of victory, a stake

which should be the visible sign of the predominating manhood of one

or other of the great white races of South Africa. Unconscious of

the keenness of the emotions which they had aroused, the garrison

manufactured brawn from horsehide, and captured locusts as a relish for

their luncheons, while in the shot-torn billiard-room of the club an

open tournament was started to fill in their hours off duty. But their

vigilance, and that of the hawk-eyed man up in the Conning Tower, never

relaxed. The besiegers had increased in number, and their guns were

more numerous than before. A less acute man than Baden-Powell might have

reasoned that at least one desperate effort would be made by them to

carry the town before relief could come.

On Saturday, May 12th, the attack was made at the favourite hour of the

Boer--the first grey of the morning. It was gallantly delivered by about

three hundred volunteers under the command of Eloff, who had crept

round to the west of the town--the side furthest from the lines of the

besiegers. At the first rush they penetrated into the native quarter,

which was at once set on fire by them. The first building of any size

upon that side is the barracks of the Protectorate Regiment, which was

held by Colonel Hore and about twenty of his officers and men. This was

carried by the enemy, who sent an exultant message along the telephone

to Baden-Powell to tell him that they had got it. Two other positions

within the lines, one a stone kraal and the other a hill, were held by

the Boers, but their supports were slow in coming on, and the movements

of the defenders were so prompt and energetic that all three found

themselves isolated and cut off from their own lines. They had

penetrated the town, but they were as far as ever from having taken it.

All day the British forces drew their cordon closer and closer round the

Boer positions, making no attempt to rush them, but ringing them round

in such a way that there could be no escape for them. A few burghers

slipped away in twos and threes, but the main body found that they had

rushed into a prison from which the only egress was swept with rifle

fire. At seven o'clock in the evening they recognised that their

position was hopeless, and Eloff with 117 men laid down their arms.

Their losses had been ten killed and nineteen wounded. For some reason,

either of lethargy, cowardice, or treachery, Snyman had not brought up

the supports which might conceivably have altered the result. It was a

gallant attack gallantly met, and for once the greater wiliness in fight

was shown by the British. The end was characteristic. 'Good evening,

Commandant,' said Powell to Eloff; 'won't you come in and have

some dinner?' The prisoners--burghers, Hollanders, Germans, and

Frenchmen--were treated to as good a supper as the destitute larders of

the town could furnish.

So in a small blaze of glory ended the historic siege of Mafeking, for

Eloff's attack was the last, though by no means the worst of the trials

which the garrison had to face. Six killed and ten wounded were the

British losses in this admirably managed affair. On May 17th, five

days after the fight, the relieving force arrived, the besiegers were

scattered, and the long-imprisoned garrison were free men once more.

Many who had looked at their maps and saw this post isolated in the

very heart of Africa had despaired of ever reaching their heroic

fellow-countrymen, and now one universal outbreak of joybells and

bonfires from Toronto to Melbourne proclaimed that there is no spot so

inaccessible that the long arm of the empire cannot reach it when her

children are in peril.

Colonel Mahon, a young Irish officer who had made his reputation as a

cavalry leader in Egypt, had started early in May from Kimberley with a

small but mobile force consisting of the Imperial Light Horse (brought

round from Natal for the purpose), the Kimberley Mounted Corps, the

Diamond Fields Horse, some Imperial Yeomanry, a detachment of the Cape

Police, and 100 volunteers from the Fusilier brigade, with M battery

R.H.A. and pom-poms, twelve hundred men in all. Whilst Hunter was

fighting his action at Rooidam on May 4th, Mahon with his men

struck round the western flank of the Boers and moved rapidly to the

northwards. On May 11th they had left Vryburg, the halfway house, behind

them, having done one hundred and twenty miles in five days. They pushed

on, encountering no opposition save that of nature, though they knew

that they were being closely watched by the enemy. At Koodoosrand it was

found that a Boer force was in position in front, but Mahon avoided them

by turning somewhat to the westward. His detour took him, however, into

a bushy country, and here the enemy headed him off, opening fire at

short range upon the ubiquitous Imperial Light Horse, who led the

column. A short engagement ensued, in which the casualties amounted to

thirty killed and wounded, but which ended in the defeat and dispersal

of the Boers, whose force was certainly very much weaker than the

British. On May 15th the relieving column arrived without further

opposition at Masibi Stadt, twenty miles to the west of Mafeking.

In the meantime Plumer's force upon the north had been strengthened

by the addition of C battery of four 12-pounder guns of the Canadian

Artillery under Major Eudon and a body of Queenslanders. These forces

had been part of the small army which had come with General Carrington

through Beira, and after a detour of thousands of miles, through their

own wonderful energy they had arrived in time to form portion of the

relieving column. Foreign military critics, whose experience of warfare

is to move troops across a frontier, should think of what the Empire

has to do before her men go into battle. These contingents had been

assembled by long railway journeys, conveyed across thousands of miles

of ocean to Cape Town, brought round another two thousand or so to

Beira, transferred by a narrow-gauge railway to Bamboo Creek, changed to

a broader gauge to Marandellas, sent on in coaches for hundreds of miles

to Bulawayo, transferred to trains for another four or five hundred

miles to Ootsi, and had finally a forced march of a hundred miles, which

brought them up a few hours before their presence was urgently needed

upon the field. Their advance, which averaged twenty-five miles a day

on foot for four consecutive days over deplorable roads, was one of the

finest performances of the war. With these high-spirited reinforcements

and with his own hardy Rhodesians Plumer pushed on, and the two columns

reached the hamlet of Masibi Stadt within an hour of each other. Their

united strength was far superior to anything which Snyman's force could

place against them.

But the gallant and tenacious Boers would not abandon their prey without

a last effort. As the little army advanced upon Mafeking they found the

enemy waiting in a strong position. For some hours the Boers gallantly

held their ground, and their artillery fire was, as usual, most

accurate. But our own guns were more numerous and equally well served,

and the position was soon made untenable. The Boers retired past

Mafeking and took refuge in the trenches upon the eastern side, but

Baden-Powell with his war-hardened garrison sallied out, and, supported

by the artillery fire of the relieving column, drove them from their

shelter. With their usual admirable tactics their larger guns had

been removed, but one small cannon was secured as a souvenir by the

townsfolk, together with a number of wagons and a considerable quantity

of supplies. A long rolling trail of dust upon the eastern horizon told

that the famous siege of Mafeking had at last come to an end.

So ended a singular incident, the defence of an open town which

contained no regular soldiers and a most inadequate artillery against a

numerous and enterprising enemy with very heavy guns. All honour to

the towns folk who bore their trial so long and so bravely--and to the

indomitable men who lined the trenches for seven weary months. Their

constancy was of enormous value to the empire. In the all-important

early month at least four or five thousand Boers were detained by them

when their presence elsewhere would have been fatal. During all the rest

of the war, two thousand men and eight guns (including one of the

four big Creusots) had been held there. It prevented the invasion of

Rhodesia, and it gave a rallying-point for loyal whites and natives in

the huge stretch of country from Kimberley to Bulawayo. All this had, at

a cost of two hundred lives, been done by this one devoted band of

men, who killed, wounded, or took no fewer than one thousand of their

opponents. Critics may say that the enthusiasm in the empire was

excessive, but at least it was expended over worthy men and a fine deed

of arms.

CHAPTER 25. THE MARCH ON PRETORIA.

In the early days of May, when the season of the rains was past and the

veld was green, Lord Roberts's six weeks of enforced inaction came to

an end. He had gathered himself once more for one of those tiger springs

which should be as sure and as irresistible as that which had brought

him from Belmont to Bloemfontein, or that other in olden days which

had carried him from Cabul to Candahar. His army had been decimated

by sickness, and eight thousand men had passed into the hospitals; but

those who were with the colours were of high heart, longing eagerly for

action. Any change which would carry them away from the pest-ridden,

evil-smelling capital which had revenged itself so terribly upon the

invader must be a change for the better. Therefore it was with glad

faces and brisk feet that the centre column left Bloemfontein on May

1st, and streamed, with bands playing, along the northern road.

On May 3rd the main force was assembled at Karee, twenty miles upon

their way. Two hundred and twenty separated them from Pretoria, but in

little more than a month from the day of starting, in spite of broken

railway, a succession of rivers, and the opposition of the enemy, this

army was marching into the main street of the Transvaal capital. Had

there been no enemy there at all, it would still have been a fine

performance, the more so when one remembers that the army was moving

upon a front of twenty miles or more, each part of which had to be

co-ordinated to the rest. It is with the story of this great march that

the present chapter deals.

Roberts had prepared the way by clearing out the south-eastern corner

of the State, and at the moment of his advance his forces covered a

semicircular front of about forty miles, the right under Ian Hamilton

near Thabanchu, and the left at Karee. This was the broad net which

was to be swept from south to north across the Free State, gradually

narrowing as it went. The conception was admirable, and appears to have

been an adoption of the Boers' own strategy, which had in turn been

borrowed from the Zulus. The solid centre could hold any force which

faced it, while the mobile flanks, Hutton upon the left and Hamilton

upon the right, could lap round and pin it, as Cronje was pinned at

Paardeberg. It seems admirably simple when done upon a small scale. But

when the scale is one of forty miles, since your front must be broad

enough to envelop the front which is opposed to it, and when the

scattered wings have to be fed with no railway line to help, it takes

such a master of administrative detail as Lord Kitchener to bring the

operations to complete success.

On May 3rd, the day of the advance from our most northern post, Karee,

the disposition of Lord Roberts's army was briefly as follows. On his

left was Hutton, with his mixed force of mounted infantry drawn from

every quarter of the empire. This formidable and mobile body, with some

batteries of horse artillery and of pom-poms, kept a line a few miles to

the west of the railroad, moving northwards parallel with it. Roberts's

main column kept on the railroad, which was mended with extraordinary

speed by the Railway Pioneer regiment and the Engineers, under Girouard

and the ill-fated Seymour. It was amazing to note the shattered culverts

as one passed, and yet to be overtaken by trains within a day. This

main column consisted of Pole-Carew's 11th Division, which contained

the Guards, and Stephenson's Brigade (Warwicks, Essex, Welsh, and

Yorkshires). With them were the 83rd, 84th, and 85th R.F.A., with the

heavy guns, and a small force of mounted infantry. Passing along the

widespread British line one would then, after an interval of seven or

eight miles, come upon Tucker's Division (the 7th), which consisted

of Maxwell's Brigade (formerly Chermside's--the Norfolks, Lincolns,

Hampshires, and Scottish Borderers) and Wavell's Brigade (North

Staffords, Cheshires, East Lancashires, South Wales Borderers). To the

right of these was Ridley's mounted infantry. Beyond them, extending

over very many miles of country and with considerable spaces between,

there came Broadwood's cavalry, Bruce Hamilton's Brigade (Derbyshires,

Sussex, Camerons, and C.I.V.), and finally on the extreme right of

all Ian Hamilton's force of Highlanders, Canadians, Shropshires, and

Cornwalls, with cavalry and mounted infantry, starting forty miles from

Lord Roberts, but edging westwards all the way, to merge with the troops

next to it, and to occupy Winburg in the way already described. This

was the army, between forty and fifty thousand strong, with which Lord

Roberts advanced upon the Transvaal.

In the meantime he had anticipated that his mobile and enterprising

opponents would work round and strike at our rear. Ample means had been

provided for dealing with any attempt of the kind. Rundle with the 8th

Division and Brabant's Colonial Division remained in rear of the right

flank to confront any force which might turn it. At Bloemfontein were

Kelly-Kenny's Division (the 6th) and Chermside's (the 3rd), with a force

of cavalry and guns. Methuen, working from Kimberley towards Boshof,

formed the extreme left wing of the main advance, though distant a

hundred miles from it. With excellent judgment Lord Roberts saw that

it was on our right flank that danger was to be feared, and here it was

that every precaution had been taken to meet it.

The objective of the first day's march was the little town of Brandfort,

ten miles north of Karee. The head of the main column faced it, while

the left arm swept round and drove the Boer force from their position.

Tucker's Division upon the right encountered some opposition, but

overbore it with artillery. May 4th was a day of rest for the infantry,

but on the 5th they advanced, in the same order as before, for twenty

miles, and found themselves to the south of the Vet River, where the

enemy had prepared for an energetic resistance. A vigorous artillery

duel ensued, the British guns in the open as usual against an invisible

enemy. After three hours of a very hot fire the mounted infantry got

across the river upon the left and turned the Boer flank, on which

they hastily withdrew. The first lodgment was effected by two bodies

of Canadians and New Zealanders, who were energetically supported

by Captain Anley's 3rd Mounted Infantry. The rushing of a kopje by

twenty-three West Australians was another gallant incident which marked

this engagement, in which our losses were insignificant. A maxim and

twenty or thirty prisoners were taken by Hutton's men. The next day (May

6th) the army moved across the difficult drift of the Vet River, and

halted that night at Smaldeel, some five miles to the north of it. At

the same time Ian Hamilton had been able to advance to Winburg, so that

the army had contracted its front by about half, but had preserved its

relative positions. Hamilton, after his junction with his reinforcements

at Jacobsrust, had under him so powerful a force that he overbore all

resistance. His actions between Thabanchu and Winburg had cost the Boers

heavy loss, and in one action the German legion had been overthrown.

The informal warfare which was made upon us by citizens of many nations

without rebuke from their own Governments is a matter of which pride,

and possibly policy, have forbidden us to complain, but it will be

surprising if it does not prove that their laxity has established a very

dangerous precedent, and they will find it difficult to object when, in

the next little war in which either France or Germany is engaged, they

find a few hundred British adventurers carrying a rifle against them.

The record of the army's advance is now rather geographical than

military, for it rolled northwards with never a check save that which

was caused by the construction of the railway diversions which atoned

for the destruction of the larger bridges. The infantry now, as always

in the campaign, marched excellently; for though twenty miles in the day

may seem a moderate allowance to a healthy man upon an English road,

it is a considerable performance under an African sun with a weight of

between thirty and forty pounds to be carried. The good humour of the

men was admirable, and they eagerly longed to close with the elusive

enemy who flitted ever in front of them. Huge clouds of smoke veiled

the northern sky, for the Boers had set fire to the dry grass, partly

to cover their own retreat, and partly to show up our khaki upon the

blackened surface. Far on the flanks the twinkling heliographs revealed

the position of the wide-spread wings.

On May 10th Lord Roberts's force, which had halted for three days at

Smaldeel, moved onwards to Welgelegen. French's cavalry had come up by

road, and quickly strengthened the centre and left wing of the army. On

the morning of the 10th the invaders found themselves confronted by a

formidable position which the Boers had taken up on the northern bank

of the Sand River. Their army extended over twenty miles of country, the

two Bothas were in command, and everything pointed to a pitched battle.

Had the position been rushed from the front, there was every material

for a second Colenso, but the British had learned that it was by brains

rather than by blood that such battles may be won. French's cavalry

turned the Boers on one side, and Bruce Hamilton's infantry on the

other. Theoretically we never passed the Boer flanks, but practically

their line was so over-extended that we were able to pierce it at any

point. There was never any severe fighting, but rather a steady advance

upon the British side and a steady retirement upon that of the Boers. On

the left the Sussex regiment distinguished itself by the dash with which

it stormed an important kopje. The losses were slight, save among a

detached body of cavalry which found itself suddenly cut off by a strong

force of the enemy and lost Captain Elworthy killed, and Haig of

the Inniskillings, Wilkinson of the Australian Horse, and twenty men

prisoners. We also secured forty or fifty prisoners, and the enemy's

casualties amounted to about as many more. The whole straggling action

fought over a front as broad as from London to Woking cost the British

at the most a couple of hundred casualties, and carried their army over

the most formidable defensive position which they were to encounter.

The war in its later phases certainly has the pleasing characteristic of

being the most bloodless, considering the number of men engaged and the

amount of powder burned, that has been known in history. It was at the

expense of their boots and not of their lives that the infantry won

their way.

On May 11th Lord Roberts's army advanced twenty miles to Geneva Siding,

and every preparation was made for a battle next day, as it was thought

certain that the Boers would defend their new capital, Kroonstad. It

proved, however, that even here they would not make a stand, and on May

12th, at one o'clock, Lord Roberts rode into the town. Steyn, Botha,

and De Wet escaped, and it was announced that the village of Lindley had

become the new seat of government. The British had now accomplished half

their journey to Pretoria, and it was obvious that on the south side

of the Vaal no serious resistance awaited them. Burghers were freely

surrendering themselves with their arms, and returning to their farms.

In the south-east Rundle and Brabant were slowly advancing, while the

Boers who faced them fell back towards Lindley. On the west, Hunter had

crossed the Vaal at Windsorton, and Barton's Fusilier Brigade had fought

a sharp action at Rooidam, while Mahon's Mafeking relief column had

slipped past their flank, escaping the observation of the British

public, but certainly not that of the Boers. The casualties in the

Rooidam action were nine killed and thirty wounded, but the advance of

the Fusiliers was irresistible, and for once the Boer loss, as they were

hustled from kopje to kopje, appears to have been greater than that of

the British. The Yeomanry had an opportunity of showing once more that

there are few more high-mettled troops in South Africa than these good

sportsmen of the shires, who only showed a trace of their origin in

their irresistible inclination to burst into a 'tally-ho!' when ordered

to attack. The Boer forces fell back after the action along the line of

the Vaal, making for Christiana and Bloemhof. Hunter entered into the

Transvaal in pursuit of them, being the first to cross the border, with

the exception of raiding Rhodesians early in the war. Methuen, in the

meanwhile, was following a course parallel to Hunter but south of him,

Hoopstad being his immediate objective. The little union jacks which

were stuck in the war maps in so many British households were now moving

swiftly upwards.

Buller's force was also sweeping northwards, and the time had come when

the Ladysmith garrison, restored at last to health and strength, should

have a chance of striking back at those who had tormented them so long.

Many of the best troops had been drafted away to other portions of the

seat of war. Hart's Brigade and Barton's Fusilier Brigade had gone

with Hunter to form the 10th Division upon the Kimberley side, and the

Imperial Light Horse had been brought over for the relief of Mafeking.

There remained, however, a formidable force, the regiments in which had

been strengthened by the addition of drafts and volunteers from home.

Not less than twenty thousand sabres and bayonets were ready and eager

for the passage of the Biggarsberg mountains.

This line of rugged hills is pierced by only three passes, each of which

was held in strength by the enemy. Considerable losses must have ensued

from any direct attempt to force them. Buller, however, with excellent

judgment, demonstrated in front of them with Hildyard's men, while the

rest of the army, marching round, outflanked the line of resistance, and

on May 15th pounced upon Dundee. Much had happened since that October

day when Penn Symons led his three gallant regiments up Talana Hill, but

now at last, after seven weary months, the ground was reoccupied which

he had gained. His old soldiers visited his grave, and the national flag

was raised over the remains of as gallant a man as ever died for the

sake of it.

The Boers, whose force did not exceed a few thousands, were now rolled

swiftly back through Northern Natal into their own country. The long

strain at Ladysmith had told upon them, and the men whom we had to meet

were very different from the warriors of Spion Kop and Nicholson's Nek.

They had done magnificently, but there is a limit to human endurance,

and no longer would these peasants face the bursting lyddite and the

bayonets of angry soldiers. There is little enough for us to boast of in

this. Some pride might be taken in the campaign when at a disadvantage

we were facing superior numbers, but now we could but deplore the

situation in which these poor valiant burghers found themselves, the

victims of a rotten government and of their own delusions. Hofer's

Tyrolese, Charette's Vendeans, or Bruce's Scotchmen never fought a finer

fight than these children of the veld, but in each case they combated a

real and not an imaginary tyrant. It is heart-sickening to think of the

butchery, the misery, the irreparable losses, the blood of men, and

the bitter tears of women, all of which might have been spared had one

obstinate and ignorant man been persuaded to allow the State which he

ruled to conform to the customs of every other civilised State upon the

earth.

Buller was now moving with a rapidity and decision which contrast

pleasantly with some of his earlier operations. Although Dundee was only

occupied on May 15th, on May 18th his vanguard was in Newcastle, fifty

miles to the north. In nine days he had covered 138 miles. On the 19th

the army lay under the loom of that Majuba which had cast its sinister

shadow for so long over South African politics. In front was the

historical Laing's Nek, the pass which leads from Natal into the

Transvaal, while through it runs the famous railway tunnel. Here the

Boers had taken up that position which had proved nineteen years before

to be too strong for British troops. The Rooineks had come back after

many days to try again. A halt was called, for the ten days' supplies

which had been taken with the troops were exhausted, and it was

necessary to wait until the railway should be repaired. This gave time

for Hildyard's 5th Division and Lyttelton's 4th Division to close up

on Clery's 2nd Division, which with Dundonald's cavalry had formed our

vanguard throughout. The only losses of any consequence during this fine

march fell upon a single squadron of Bethune's mounted infantry, which

being thrown out in the direction of Vryheid, in order to make sure that

our flank was clear, fell into an ambuscade and was almost annihilated

by a close-range fire. Sixty-six casualties, of which nearly half were

killed, were the result of this action, which seems to have depended,

like most of our reverses, upon defective scouting. Buller, having

called up his two remaining divisions and having mended the railway

behind him, proceeded now to manoeuvre the Boers out of Laing's Nek

exactly as he had manoeuvred them out of the Biggarsberg. At the end of

May Hildyard and Lyttelton were despatched in an eastern direction, as

if there were an intention of turning the pass from Utrecht.

It was on May 12th that Lord Roberts occupied Kroonstad, and he halted

there for eight days before he resumed his advance. At the end of that

time his railway had been repaired, and enough supplies brought up to

enable him to advance again without anxiety. The country through which

he passed swarmed with herds and flocks, but, with as scrupulous a

regard for the rights of property as Wellington showed in the south of

France, no hungry soldier was allowed to take so much as a chicken as he

passed. The punishment for looting was prompt and stern. It is true that

farms were burned occasionally and the stock confiscated, but this was

as a punishment for some particular offence and not part of a system.

The limping Tommy looked askance at the fat geese which covered the dam

by the roadside, but it was as much as his life was worth to allow his

fingers to close round those tempting white necks. On foul water and

bully beef he tramped through a land of plenty.

Lord Roberts's eight days' halt was spent in consolidating the general

military situation. We have already shown how Buller had crept upwards

to the Natal Border. On the west Methuen reached Hoopstad and Hunter

Christiana, settling the country and collecting arms as they went.

Rundle in the south-east took possession of the rich grain lands, and

on May 21st entered Ladybrand. In front of him lay that difficult hilly

country about Senekal, Ficksburg, and Bethlehem which was to delay him

so long. Ian Hamilton was feeling his way northwards to the right of the

railway line, and for the moment cleared the district between Lindley

and Heilbron, passing through both towns and causing Steyn to again

change his capital, which became Vrede, in the extreme north-east of the

State. During these operations Hamilton had the two formidable De Wet

brothers in front of him, and suffered nearly a hundred casualties in

the continual skirmishing which accompanied his advance. His right flank

and rear were continually attacked, and these signs of forces outside

our direct line of advance were full of menace for the future.

On May 22nd the main army resumed its advance, moving forward fifteen

miles to Honing's Spruit. On the 23rd another march of twenty miles over

a fine rolling prairie brought them to Rhenoster River. The enemy had

made some preparations for a stand, but Hamilton was near Heilbron upon

their left and French was upon their right flank. The river was crossed

without opposition. On the 24th the army was at Vredefort Road, and on

the 26th the vanguard crossed the Vaal River at Viljoen's Drift, the

whole army following on the 27th. Hamilton's force had been cleverly

swung across from the right to the left flank of the British, so that

the Boers were massed on the wrong side.

Preparations for resistance had been made on the line of the railway,

but the wide turning movements on the flanks by the indefatigable French

and Hamilton rendered all opposition of no avail. The British columns

flowed over and onwards without a pause, tramping steadily northwards

to their destination. The bulk of the Free State forces refused to leave

their own country, and moved away to the eastern and northern portion

of the State, where the British Generals thought--incorrectly, as the

future was to prove--that no further harm would come from them. The

State which they were in arms to defend had really ceased to exist, for

already it had been publicly proclaimed at Bloemfontein in the Queen's

name that the country had been annexed to the Empire, and that its style

henceforth was that of 'The Orange River Colony.' Those who think this

measure unduly harsh must remember that every mile of land which the

Freestaters had conquered in the early part of the war had been solemnly

annexed by them. At the same time, those Englishmen who knew the history

of this State, which had once been the model of all that a State should

be, were saddened by the thought that it should have deliberately

committed suicide for the sake of one of the most corrupt governments

which have ever been known. Had the Transvaal been governed as the

Orange Free State was, such an event as the second Boer war could never

have occurred.

Lord Roberts's tremendous march was now drawing to a close. On May

28th the troops advanced twenty miles, and passed Klip River without

fighting. It was observed with surprise that the Transvaalers were very

much more careful of their own property than they had been of that

of their allies, and that the railway was not damaged at all by the

retreating forces. The country had become more populous, and far away

upon the low curves of the hills were seen high chimneys and gaunt

iron pumps which struck the north of England soldier with a pang of

homesickness. This long distant hill was the famous Rand, and under its

faded grasses lay such riches as Solomon never took from Ophir. It was

the prize of victory; and yet the prize is not to the victor, for the

dust-grimed officers and men looked with little personal interest at

this treasure-house of the world. Not one penny the richer would they be

for the fact that their blood and their energy had brought justice

and freedom to the gold fields. They had opened up an industry for the

world, men of all nations would be the better for their labours, the

miner and the financier or the trader would equally profit by them, but

the men in khaki would tramp on, unrewarded and uncomplaining, to India,

to China, to any spot where the needs of their worldwide empire called

them.

The infantry, streaming up from the Vaal River to the famous ridge of

gold, had met with no resistance upon the way, but great mist banks

of cloud by day and huge twinkling areas of flame by night showed the

handiwork of the enemy. Hamilton and French, moving upon the left flank,

found Boers thick upon the hills, but cleared them off in a well-managed

skirmish which cost us a dozen casualties. On May 29th, pushing swiftly

along, French found the enemy posted very strongly with several guns at

Doornkop, a point west of Klip River Berg. The cavalry leader had with

him at this stage three horse batteries, four pom-poms, and 3000 mounted

men. The position being too strong for him to force, Hamilton's infantry

(19th and 21st Brigades) were called up, and the Boers were driven out.

That splendid corps, the Gordons, lost nearly a hundred men in their

advance over the open, and the C.I.V.s on the other flank fought like

a regiment of veterans. There had been an inclination to smile at these

citizen soldiers when they first came out, but no one smiled now save

the General who felt that he had them at his back. Hamilton's attack

was assisted by the menace rather than the pressure of French's turning

movement on the Boer right, but the actual advance was as purely frontal

as any of those which had been carried through at the beginning of the

war. The open formation of the troops, the powerful artillery behind

them, and perhaps also the lowered morale of the enemy combined to

make such a movement less dangerous than of old. In any case it was

inevitable, as the state of Hamilton's commisariat rendered it necessary

that at all hazards he should force his way through.

Whilst this action of Doornkop was fought by the British left flank,

Henry's mounted infantry in the centre moved straight upon the important

junction of Germiston, which lies amid the huge white heaps of tailings

from the mines. At this point, or near it, the lines from Johannesburg

and from Natal join the line to Pretoria. Colonel Henry's advance was

an extremely daring one, for the infantry were some distance behind; but

after an irregular scrambling skirmish, in which the Boer snipers had to

be driven off the mine heaps and from among the houses, the 8th mounted

infantry got their grip of the railway and held it. The exploit was a

very fine one, and stands out the more brilliantly as the conduct of the

campaign cannot be said to afford many examples of that well-considered

audacity which deliberately runs the risk of the minor loss for the sake

of the greater gain. Henry was much assisted by J battery R.H.A., which

was handled with energy and judgment.

French was now on the west of the town, Henry had cut the railway on the

east, and Roberts was coming up from the south. His infantry had covered

130 miles in seven days, but the thought that every step brought them

nearer to Pretoria was as exhilarating as their fifes and drums. On May

30th the victorious troops camped outside the city while Botha retired

with his army, abandoning without a battle the treasure-house of his

country. Inside the town were chaos and confusion. The richest mines in

the world lay for a day or more at the mercy of a lawless rabble drawn

from all nations. The Boer officials were themselves divided in opinion,

Krause standing for law and order while Judge Koch advocated violence.

A spark would have set the town blazing, and the worst was feared when

a crowd of mercenaries assembled in front of the Robinson mine with

threats of violence. By the firmness and tact of Mr. Tucker, the

manager, and by the strong attitude of Commissioner Krause, the

situation was saved and the danger passed. Upon May 31st, without

violence to life or destruction to property, that great town which

British hands have done so much to build found itself at last under the

British flag. May it wave there so long as it covers just laws, honest

officials, and clean-handed administrators--so long and no longer!

And now the last stage of the great journey had been reached. Two days

were spent at Johannesburg while supplies were brought up, and then a

move was made upon Pretoria thirty miles to the north. Here was the Boer

capital, the seat of government, the home of Kruger, the centre of

all that was anti-British, crouching amid its hills, with costly forts

guarding every face of it. Surely at last the place had been found where

that great battle should be fought which should decide for all time

whether it was with the Briton or with the Dutchman that the future of

South Africa lay.

On the last day of May two hundred Lancers under the command of Major

Hunter Weston, with Charles of the Sappers and Burnham the scout, a man

who has played the part of a hero throughout the campaign, struck off

from the main army and endeavoured to descend upon the Pretoria to

Delagoa railway line with the intention of blowing up a bridge and

cutting the Boer line of retreat. It was a most dashing attempt; but the

small party had the misfortune to come into contact with a strong Boer

commando, who headed them off. After a skirmish they were compelled to

make their way back with a loss of five killed and fourteen wounded.

The cavalry under French had waited for the issue of this enterprise

at a point nine miles north of Johannesburg. On June 2nd it began its

advance with orders to make a wide sweep round to the westward, and so

skirt the capital, cutting the Pietersburg railway to the north of

it. The country in the direct line between Johannesburg and Pretoria

consists of a series of rolling downs which are admirably adapted for

cavalry work, but the detour which French had to make carried him into

the wild and broken district which lies to the north of the Little

Crocodile River. Here he was fiercely attacked on ground where his

troops could not deploy, but with extreme coolness and judgment beat off

the enemy. To cover thirty-two miles in a day and fight a way out of an

ambuscade in the evening is an ordeal for any leader and for any troops.

Two killed and seven wounded were our trivial losses in a situation

which might have been a serious one. The Boers appear to have been the

escort of a strong convoy which had passed along the road some miles

in front. Next morning both convoy and opposition had disappeared. The

cavalry rode on amid a country of orange groves, the troopers standing

up in their stirrups to pluck the golden fruit. There was no further

fighting, and on June 4th French had established himself upon the north

of the town, where he learned that all resistance had ceased.

Whilst the cavalry had performed this enveloping movement the main army

had moved swiftly upon its objective, leaving one brigade behind to

secure Johannesburg. Ian Hamilton advanced upon the left, while Lord

Roberts's column kept the line of the railway, Colonel Henry's mounted

infantry scouting in front. As the army topped the low curves of the

veld they saw in front of them two well-marked hills, each crowned by

a low squat building. They were the famous southern forts of Pretoria.

Between the hills was a narrow neck, and beyond the Boer capital.

For a time it appeared that the entry was to be an absolutely bloodless

one, but the booming of cannon and the crash of Mauser fire soon showed

that the enemy was in force upon the ridge. Botha had left a strong

rearguard to hold off the British while his own stores and valuables

were being withdrawn from the town. The silence of the forts showed that

the guns had been removed and that no prolonged resistance was intended;

but in the meanwhile fringes of determined riflemen, supported by

cannon, held the approaches, and must be driven off before an entry

could be effected. Each fresh corps as it came up reinforced the firing

line. Henry's mounted infantrymen supported by the horse-guns of J

battery and the guns of Tucker's division began the action. So hot was

the answer, both from cannon and from rifle, that it seemed for a

time as if a real battle were at last about to take place. The Guards'

Brigade, Stephenson's Brigade, and Maxwell's Brigade streamed up and

waited until Hamilton, who was on the enemy's right flank, should be

able to make his presence felt. The heavy guns had also arrived, and a

huge cloud of debris rising from the Pretorian forts told the accuracy

of their fire.

But either the burghers were half-hearted or there was no real intention

to make a stand. About half-past two their fire slackened and Pole-Carew

was directed to push on. That debonnaire soldier with his two veteran

brigades obeyed the order with alacrity, and the infantry swept over the

ridge, with some thirty or forty casualties, the majority of which fell

to the Warwicks. The position was taken, and Hamilton, who came up

late, was only able to send on De Lisle's mounted infantry, chiefly

Australians, who ran down one of the Boer maxims in the open. The action

had cost us altogether about seventy men. Among the injured was the Duke

of Norfolk, who had shown a high sense of civic virtue in laying aside

the duties and dignity of a Cabinet Minister in order to serve as a

simple captain of volunteers. At the end of this one fight the capital

lay at the mercy of Lord Roberts. Consider the fight which they made for

their chief city, compare it with that which the British made for the

village of Mafeking, and say on which side is that stern spirit of

self-sacrifice and resolution which are the signs of the better cause.

In the early morning of June 5th, the Coldstream Guards were mounting

the hills which commanded the town. Beneath them in the clear African

air lay the famous city, embowered in green, the fine central buildings

rising grandly out of the wide circle of villas. Through the Nek part of

the Guards' Brigade and Maxwell's Brigade had passed, and had taken over

the station, from which at least one train laden with horses had steamed

that morning. Two others, both ready to start, were only just stopped in

time.

The first thought was for the British prisoners, and a small party

headed by the Duke of Marlborough rode to their rescue. Let it be said

once for all that their treatment by the Boers was excellent and that

their appearance would alone have proved it. One hundred and twenty-nine

officers and thirty-nine soldiers were found in the Model Schools, which

had been converted into a prison. A day later our cavalry arrived at

Waterval, which is fourteen miles to the north of Pretoria. Here were

confined three thousand soldiers, whose fare had certainly been of

the scantiest, though in other respects they appear to have been well

treated. [Footnote: Further information unfortunately shows that in the

case of the sick and of the Colonial prisoners the treatment was by

no means good.] Nine hundred of their comrades had been removed by the

Boers, but Porter's cavalry was in time to release the others, under

a brisk shell fire from a Boer gun upon the ridge. Many pieces of good

luck we had in the campaign, but this recovery of our prisoners, which

left the enemy without a dangerous lever for exacting conditions of

peace, was the most fortunate of all.

In the centre of the town there is a wide square decorated or disfigured

by a bare pedestal upon which a statue of the President was to have been

placed. Hard by is the bleak barnlike church in which he preached, and

on either side are the Government offices and the Law Courts, buildings

which would grace any European capital. Here, at two o'clock on the

afternoon of June 5th, Lord Roberts sat his horse and saw pass in

front of him the men who had followed him so far and so faithfully--the

Guards, the Essex, the Welsh, the Yorks, the Warwicks, the guns, the

mounted infantry, the dashing irregulars, the Gordons, the Canadians,

the Shropshires, the Cornwalls, the Camerons, the Derbys, the Sussex,

and the London Volunteers. For over two hours the khaki waves with their

crests of steel went sweeping by. High above their heads from the summit

of the Raad-saal the broad Union Jack streamed for the first time.

Through months of darkness we had struggled onwards to the light. Now

at last the strange drama seemed to be drawing to its close. The God of

battles had given the long-withheld verdict. But of all the hearts which

throbbed high at that supreme moment there were few who felt one touch

of bitterness towards the brave men who had been overborne. They had

fought and died for their ideal. We had fought and died for ours. The

hope for the future of South Africa is that they or their descendants

may learn that that banner which has come to wave above Pretoria means

no racial intolerance, no greed for gold, no paltering with injustice or

corruption, but that it means one law for all and one freedom for all,

as it does in every other continent in the whole broad earth. When that

is learned it may happen that even they will come to date a happier life

and a wider liberty from that 5th of June which saw the symbol of their

nation pass for ever from among the ensigns of the world.

CHAPTER 26. DIAMOND HILL--RUNDLE'S OPERATIONS.

The military situation at the time of the occupation of Pretoria was

roughly as follows. Lord Roberts with some thirty thousand men was in

possession of the capital, but had left his long line of communications

very imperfectly guarded behind him. On the flank of this line of

communications, in the eastern and north-eastern corner of the Free

State, was an energetic force of unconquered Freestaters who had rallied

round President Steyn. They were some eight or ten thousand in number,

well horsed, with a fair number of guns, under the able leadership of

De Wet, Prinsloo, and Olivier. Above all, they had a splendid position,

mountainous and broken, from which, as from a fortress, they could make

excursions to the south or west. This army included the commandos of

Ficksburg, Senekal, and Harrismith, with all the broken and desperate

men from other districts who had left their farms and fled to the

mountains. It was held in check as a united force by Rundle's Division

and the Colonial Division on the south, while Colvile, and afterwards

Methuen, endeavoured to pen them in on the west. The task was a hard

one, however, and though Rundle succeeded in holding his line intact, it

appeared to be impossible in that wide country to coop up altogether

an enemy so mobile. A strange game of hide-and-seek ensued, in which De

Wet, who led the Boer raids, was able again and again to strike our

line of rails and to get back without serious loss. The story of these

instructive and humiliating episodes will be told in their order. The

energy and skill of the guerilla chief challenge our admiration, and the

score of his successes would be amusing were it not that the points of

the game are marked by the lives of British soldiers.

General Buller had spent the latter half of May in making his way from

Ladysmith to Laing's Nek, and the beginning of June found him with

twenty thousand men in front of that difficult position. Some talk of

a surrender had arisen, and Christian Botha, who commanded the Boers,

succeeded in gaining several days' armistice, which ended in nothing.

The Transvaal forces at this point were not more than a few thousand in

number, but their position was so formidable that it was a serious task

to turn them out. Van Wyk's Hill, however, had been left unguarded, and

as its possession would give the British the command of Botha's Pass,

its unopposed capture by the South African Light Horse was an event of

great importance. With guns upon this eminence the infantry were able,

on June 8th, to attack and to carry with little loss the rest of the

high ground, and so to get the Pass into their complete possession.

Botha fired the grass behind him, and withdrew sullenly to the north. On

the 9th and 10th the convoys were passed over the Pass, and on the 11th

the main body of the army followed them.

The operations were now being conducted in that extremely acute angle of

Natal which runs up between the Transvaal and the Orange Free State.

In crossing Botha's Pass the army had really entered what was now the

Orange River Colony. But it was only for a very short time, as the

object of the movement was to turn the Laing's Nek position, and then

come back into the Transvaal through Alleman's Pass. The gallant South

African Light Horse led the way, and fought hard at one point to clear

a path for the army, losing six killed and eight wounded in a sharp

skirmish. On the morning of the 12th the flanking movement was far

advanced, and it only remained for the army to force Alleman's Nek,

which would place it to the rear of Laing's Nek, and close to the

Transvaal town of Volksrust.

Had the Boers been the men of Colenso and of Spion Kop, this storming

of Alleman's Nek would have been a bloody business. The position was

strong, the cover was slight, and there was no way round. But the

infantry came on with the old dash without the old stubborn resolution

being opposed to them. The guns prepared the way, and then the Dorsets,

the Dublins, the Middlesex, the Queen's, and the East Surrey did the

rest. The door was open and the Transvaal lay before us. The next day

Volksrust was in our hands.

The whole series of operations were excellently conceived and carried

out. Putting Colenso on one side, it cannot be denied that General

Buller showed considerable power of manoeuvring large bodies of troops.

The withdrawal of the compromised army after Spion Kop, the change of

the line of attack at Pieter's Hill, and the flanking marches in this

campaign of Northern Natal, were all very workmanlike achievements.

In this case a position which the Boers had been preparing for months,

scored with trenches and topped by heavy artillery, had been rendered

untenable by a clever flank movement, the total casualties in the whole

affair being less than two hundred killed and wounded. Natal was cleared

of the invader, Buller's foot was on the high plateau of the Transvaal,

and Roberts could count on twenty thousand good men coming up to him

from the south-east. More important than all, the Natal railway was

being brought up, and soon the central British Army would depend

upon Durban instead of Cape Town for its supplies--a saving of nearly

two-thirds of the distance. The fugitive Boers made northwards in the

Middelburg direction, while Buller advanced to Standerton, which town he

continued to occupy until Lord Roberts could send a force down through

Heidelberg to join hands with him. Such was the position of the Natal

Field Force at the end of June. From the west and the south-west

British forces were also converging upon the capital. The indomitable

Baden-Powell sought for rest and change of scene after his prolonged

trial by harrying the Boers out of Zeerust and Rustenburg. The forces

of Hunter and of Mahon converged upon Potchefstroom, from which, after

settling that district, they could be conveyed by rail to Krugersdorp

and Johannesburg.

Before briefly recounting the series of events which took place upon

the line of communications, the narrative must return to Lord Roberts at

Pretoria, and describe the operations which followed his occupation of

that city. In leaving the undefeated forces of the Free State behind

him, the British General had unquestionably run a grave risk, and was

well aware that his railway communication was in danger of being cut.

By the rapidity of his movements he succeeded in gaining the enemy's

capital before that which he had foreseen came to pass; but if Botha had

held him at Pretoria while De Wet struck at him behind, the situation

would have been a serious one. Having once attained his main object,

Roberts could receive with equanimity the expected news that De Wet with

a mobile force of less than two thousand men had, on June 7th, cut the

line at Roodeval to the north of Kroonstad. Both rail and telegraph were

destroyed, and for a few days the army was isolated. Fortunately there

were enough supplies to go on with, and immediate steps were taken to

drive away the intruder, though, like a mosquito, he was brushed from

one place only to settle upon another.

Leaving others to restore his broken communications, Lord Roberts turned

his attention once more to Botha, who still retained ten or fifteen

thousand men under his command. The President had fled from Pretoria

with a large sum of money, estimated at over two millions sterling,

and was known to be living in a saloon railway carriage, which had been

transformed into a seat of government even more mobile than that of

President Steyn. From Waterval-Boven, a point beyond Middelburg, he

was in a position either to continue his journey to Delagoa Bay, and so

escape out of the country, or to travel north into that wild Lydenburg

country which had always been proclaimed as the last ditch of the

defence. Here he remained with his gold-bags waiting the turn of events.

Botha and his stalwarts had not gone far from the capital. Fifteen miles

out to the east the railway line runs through a gap in the hills called

Pienaars Poort, and here was such a position as the Boer loves to

hold. It was very strong in front, and it had widely spread formidable

flanking hills to hamper those turning movements which had so often

been fatal to the Boer generals. Behind was the uncut railway line along

which the guns could in case of need be removed. The whole position was

over fifteen miles from wing to wing, and it was well known to the Boer

general that Lord Roberts had no longer that preponderance of force

which would enable him to execute wide turning movements, as he had

done in his advance from the south. His army had decreased seriously in

numbers. The mounted men, the most essential branch of all, were so

ill horsed that brigades were not larger than regiments. One brigade of

infantry (the 14th) had been left to garrison Johannesburg, and another

(the 18th) had been chosen for special duty in Pretoria. Smith-Dorrien's

Brigade had been detached for duty upon the line of communications. With

all these deductions and the wastage caused by wounds and disease, the

force was in no state to assume a vigorous offensive. So hard pressed

were they for men that the three thousand released prisoners from

Waterval were hurriedly armed with Boer weapons and sent down the line

to help to guard the more vital points.

Had Botha withdrawn to a safe distance, Lord Roberts would certainly

have halted, as he had done at Bloemfontein, and waited for remounts

and reinforcements. But the war could not be allowed to languish when an

active enemy lay only fifteen miles off, within striking distance of

two cities and of the line of rail. Taking all the troops that he could

muster, the British General moved out once more on Monday, June 11th,

to drive Botha from his position. He had with him Pole-Carew's 11th

Division, which numbered about six thousand men with twenty guns,

Ian Hamilton's force, which included one infantry brigade (Bruce

Hamilton's), one cavalry brigade, and a corps of mounted infantry, say,

six thousand in all, with thirty guns. There remained French's Cavalry

Division, with Hutton's Mounted Infantry, which could not have exceeded

two thousand sabres and rifles. The total force was, therefore, not more

than sixteen or seventeen thousand men, with about seventy guns. Their

task was to carry a carefully prepared position held by at least ten

thousand burghers with a strong artillery. Had the Boer of June been the

Boer of December, the odds would have been against the British.

There had been some negotiations for peace between Lord Roberts and

Botha, but the news of De Wet's success from the south had hardened the

Boer general's heart, and on June 9th the cavalry had their orders to

advance. Hamilton was to work round the left wing of the Boers, and

French round their right, while the infantry came up in the centre. So

wide was the scene of action that the attack and the resistance in

each flank and in the centre constituted, on June 11th, three separate

actions. Of these the latter was of least importance, as it merely

entailed the advance of the infantry to a spot whence they could take

advantage of the success of the flanking forces when they had made their

presence felt. The centre did not on this as on several other occasions

in the campaign make the mistake of advancing before the way had been

prepared for it.

French with his attenuated force found so vigorous a resistance

on Monday and Tuesday that he was hard put to it to hold his own.

Fortunately he had with him three excellent Horse Artillery batteries,

G, O, and T, who worked until, at the end of the engagement, they had

only twenty rounds in their limbers. The country was an impossible

one for cavalry, and the troopers fought dismounted, with intervals of

twenty or thirty paces between the men. Exposed all day to rifle and

shell fire, unable to advance and unwilling to retreat, it was only

owing to their open formation that they escaped with about thirty

casualties. With Boers on his front, his flank, and even on his rear,

French held grimly on, realising that a retreat upon his part would mean

a greater pressure at all other points of the British advance. At night

his weary men slept upon the ground which they had held. All Monday and

all Tuesday French kept his grip at Kameelsdrift, stolidly indifferent

to the attempt of the enemy to cut his line of communications. On

Wednesday, Hamilton, upon the other flank, had gained the upper hand,

and the pressure was relaxed. French then pushed forward, but the horses

were so utterly beaten that no effective pursuit was possible.

During the two days that French had been held up by the Boer right wing

Hamilton had also been seriously engaged upon the left--so seriously

that at one time the action appeared to have gone against him. The fight

presented some distinctive features, which made it welcome to soldiers

who were weary of the invisible man with his smokeless gun upon the

eternal kopje. It is true that man, gun, and kopje were all present

upon this occasion, but in the endeavours to drive him off some new

developments took place, which formed for one brisk hour a reversion

to picturesque warfare. Perceiving a gap in the enemy's line, Hamilton

pushed up the famous Q battery--the guns which had plucked glory out of

disaster at Sanna's Post. For the second time in one campaign they were

exposed and in imminent danger of capture. A body of mounted Boers with

great dash and hardihood galloped down within close range and opened

fire. Instantly the 12th Lancers were let loose upon them. How they must

have longed for their big-boned long-striding English troop horses

as they strove to raise a gallop out of their spiritless overworked

Argentines! For once, however, the lance meant more than five pounds

dead weight and an encumbrance to the rider. The guns were saved, the

Boers fled, and a dozen were left upon the ground. But a cavalry charge

has to end in a re-formation, and that is the instant of danger if

any unbroken enemy remains within range. Now a sleet of bullets hissed

through their ranks as they retired, and the gallant Lord Airlie, as

modest and brave a soldier as ever drew sword, was struck through

the heart. 'Pray moderate your language!' was his last characteristic

remark, made to a battle-drunken sergeant. Two officers, seventeen men,

and thirty horses went down with their Colonel, the great majority only

slightly injured. In the meantime the increasing pressure upon his right

caused Broadwood to order a second charge, of the Life Guards this time,

to drive off the assailants. The appearance rather than the swords

of the Guards prevailed, and cavalry as cavalry had vindicated their

existence more than they had ever done during the campaign. The guns

were saved, the flank attack was rolled back, but one other danger had

still to be met, for the Heidelberg commando--a corps d'elite of the

Boers--had made its way outside Hamilton's flank and threatened to get

past him. With cool judgment the British General detached a battalion

and a section of a battery, which pushed the Boers back into a less

menacing position. The rest of Bruce Hamilton's Brigade were ordered to

advance upon the hills in front, and, aided by a heavy artillery fire,

they had succeeded, before the closing in of the winter night, in

getting possession of this first line of the enemy's defences. Night

fell upon an undecided fight, which, after swaying this way and that,

had finally inclined to the side of the British. The Sussex and the City

Imperial Volunteers were clinging to the enemy's left flank, while the

11th Division were holding them in front. All promised well for the

morrow.

By order of Lord Roberts the Guards were sent round early on Tuesday,

the 12th, to support the flank attack of Bruce Hamilton's infantry. It

was afternoon before all was ready for the advance, and then the Sussex,

the London Volunteers, and the Derbyshires won a position upon the

ridge, followed later by the three regiments of Guards. But the ridge

was the edge of a considerable plateau, swept by Boer fire, and no

advance could be made over its bare expanse save at a considerable loss.

The infantry clung in a long fringe to the edge of the position, but for

two hours no guns could be brought up to their support, as the steepness

of the slope was insurmountable. It was all that the stormers could do

to hold their ground, as they were enfiladed by a Vickers-Maxim, and

exposed to showers of shrapnel as well as to an incessant rifle fire.

Never were guns so welcome as those of the 82nd battery, brought by

Major Connolly into the firing line. The enemy's riflemen were only a

thousand yards away, and the action of the artillery might have seemed

as foolhardy as that of Long at Colenso. Ten horses went down on the

instant, and a quarter of the gunners were hit; but the guns roared one

by one into action, and their shrapnel soon decided the day. Undoubtedly

it is with Connolly and his men that the honours lie.

At four o'clock, as the sun sank towards the west, the tide of fight had

set in favour of the attack. Two more batteries had come up, every rifle

was thrown into the firing line, and the Boer reply was decreasing in

volume. The temptation to an assault was great, but even now it might

mean heavy loss of life, and Hamilton shrank from the sacrifice. In

the morning his judgment was justified, for Botha had abandoned the

position, and his army was in full retreat. The mounted men followed as

far as Elands River Station, which is twenty-five miles from Pretoria,

but the enemy was not overtaken, save by a small party of De Lisle's

Australians and Regular Mounted Infantry. This force, less than a

hundred in number, gained a kopje which overlooked a portion of the

Boer army. Had they been more numerous, the effect would have been

incalculable. As it was, the Australians fired every cartridge which

they possessed into the throng, and killed many horses and men. It would

bear examination why it was that only this small corps was present at so

vital a point, and why, if they could push the pursuit to such purpose,

others should not be able to do the same. Time was bringing some

curious revenges. Already Paardeberg had come upon Majuba Day. Buller's

victorious soldiers had taken Laing's Nek. Now, the Spruit at which the

retreating Boers were so mishandled by the Australians was that same

Bronkers Spruit at which, nineteen years before, a regiment had been

shot down. Many might have prophesied that the deed would be avenged;

but who could ever have guessed the men who would avenge it?

Such was the battle of Diamond Hill, as it was called from the name of

the ridge which was opposite to Hamilton's attack. The prolonged two

days' struggle showed that there was still plenty of fight in the

burghers. Lord Roberts had not routed them, nor had he captured their

guns; but he had cleared the vicinity of the capital, he had inflicted a

loss upon them which was certainly as great as his own, and he had again

proved to them that it was vain for them to attempt to stand. A long

pause followed at Pretoria, broken by occasional small alarms and

excursions, which served no end save to keep the army from ennui. In

spite of occasional breaks in his line of communications, horses and

supplies were coming up rapidly, and, by the middle of July, Roberts

was ready for the field again. At the same time Hunter had come up from

Potchefstroom, and Hamilton had taken Heidelberg, and his force was

about to join hands with Buller at Standerton. Sporadic warfare broke

out here and there in the west, and in the course of it Snyman of

Mafeking had reappeared, with two guns, which were promptly taken from

him by the Canadian Mounted Rifles. On all sides it was felt that if

the redoubtable De Wet could be captured there was every hope that the

burghers might discontinue a struggle which was disagreeable to the

British and fatal to themselves. As a point of honour it was impossible

for Botha to give in while his ally held out. We will turn, therefore,

to this famous guerilla chief, and give some account of his exploits. To

understand them some description must be given of the general military

situation in the Free State.

When Lord Roberts had swept past to the north he had brushed aside the

flower of the Orange Free State army, who occupied the considerable

quadrilateral which is formed by the north-east of that State. The

function of Rundle's 8th Division and of Brabant's Colonial Division was

to separate the sheep from the goats by preventing the fighting burghers

from coming south and disturbing those districts which had been settled.

For this purpose Rundle formed a long line which should serve as a

cordon. Moving up through Trommel and Clocolan, Ficksburg was occupied

on May 25th by the Colonial Division, while Rundle seized Senekal, forty

miles to the north-west. A small force of forty Yeomanry, who entered

the town some time in advance of the main body, was suddenly attacked

by the Boers, and the gallant Dalbiac, famous rider and sportsman, was

killed, with four of his men. He was a victim, as so many have been in

this campaign, to his own proud disregard of danger.

The Boers were in full retreat, but now, as always, they were dangerous.

One cannot take them for granted, for the very moment of defeat is that

at which they are capable of some surprising effort. Rundle, following

them up from Senekal, found them in strong possession of the kopjes at

Biddulphsberg, and received a check in his endeavour to drive them off.

It was an action fought amid great grass fires, where the possible fate

of the wounded was horrible to contemplate. The 2nd Grenadiers, the

Scots Guards, the East Yorkshires, and the West Kents were all engaged,

with the 2nd and 79th Field Batteries and a force of Yeomanry. Our

losses incurred in the open from unseen rifles were thirty killed and

130 wounded, including Colonel Lloyd of the Grenadiers. Two days later

Rundle, from Senekal, joined hands with Brabant from Ficksburg, and

a defensive line was formed between those two places, which was held

unbroken for two months, when the operations ended in the capture of the

greater part of the force opposed to him. Clements's Brigade, consisting

of the 1st Royal Irish, the 2nd Bedfords, the 2nd Worcesters, and the

2nd Wiltshires, had come to strengthen Rundle, and altogether he may

have had as many as twelve thousand men under his orders. It was not

a large force with which to hold a mobile adversary at least eight

thousand strong, who might attack him at any point of his extended line.

So well, however, did he select his positions that every attempt of the

enemy, and there were many, ended in failure. Badly supplied with food,

he and his half-starved men held bravely to their task, and no soldiers

in all that great host deserve better of their country.

At the end of May, then, the Colonial Division, Rundle's Division, and

Clements's Brigade held the Boers from Ficksburg on the Basuto border

to Senekal. This prevented them from coming south. But what was there to

prevent them from coming west, and falling upon the railway line?

There was the weak point of the British position. Lord Methuen had been

brought across from Boshof, and was available with six thousand men.

Colvile was on that side also, with the Highland Brigade. A few details

were scattered up and down the line, waiting to be gathered up by an

enterprising enemy. Kroonstad was held by a single militia battalion;

each separate force had to be nourished by convoys with weak escorts.

Never was there such a field for a mobile and competent guerilla leader.

And, as luck would have it, such a man was at hand, ready to take full

advantage of his opportunities.

CHAPTER 27. THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION.

Christian de Wet, the elder of two brothers of that name, was at this

time in the prime of life, a little over forty years of age. He was a

burly middle-sized bearded man, poorly educated, but endowed with much

energy and common-sense. His military experience dated back to Majuba

Hill, and he had a large share of that curious race hatred which

is intelligible in the case of the Transvaal, but inexplicable in a

Freestater who has received no injury from the British Empire. Some

weakness of his sight compels the use of tinted spectacles, and he had

now turned these, with a pair of particularly observant eyes behind

them, upon the scattered British forces and the long exposed line of

railway.

De Wet's force was an offshoot from the army of Freestaters under De

Villiers, Olivier, and Prinsloo, which lay in the mountainous north-east

of the State. To him were committed five guns, fifteen hundred men, and

the best of the horses. Well armed, well mounted, and operating in

a country which consisted of rolling plains with occasional fortress

kopjes, his little force had everything in its favour. There were so

many tempting objects of attack lying before him that he must have had

some difficulty in knowing where to begin. The tinted spectacles were

turned first upon the isolated town of Lindley.

Colvile with the Highland Brigade had come up from Ventersburg with

instructions to move onward to Heilbron, pacifying the country as he

passed. The country, however, refused to be pacified, and his march from

Ventersburg to Lindley was harassed by snipers every mile of the way.

Finding that De Wet and his men were close upon him, he did not linger

at Lindley, but passed on to his destination, his entire march of 126

miles costing him sixty-three casualties, of which nine were fatal.

It was a difficult and dangerous march, especially for the handful of

Eastern Province Horse, upon whom fell all the mounted work. By evil

fortune a force of five hundred Yeomanry, the 18th battalion, including

the Duke of Cambridge's Own and the Irish companies, had been sent from

Kroonstad to join Colvile at Lindley. Colonel Spragge was in command.

On May 27th this body of horsemen reached their destination only to find

that Colvile had already abandoned it. They appear to have determined to

halt for a day in Lindley, and then follow Colvile to Heilbron. Within

a few hours of their entering the town they were fiercely attacked by De

Wet.

Colonel Spragge seems to have acted for the best. Under a heavy fire he

caused his troopers to fall back upon his transport, which had been

left at a point a few miles out upon the Kroonstad Road, where three

defensible kopjes sheltered a valley in which the cattle and horses

could be herded. A stream ran through it. There were all the materials

there for a stand which would have brought glory to the British arms.

The men were of peculiarly fine quality, many of them from the public

schools and from the universities, and if any would fight to the death

these with their sporting spirit and their high sense of honour might

have been expected to do so.

They had the stronger motive for holding out, as they had taken steps

to convey word of their difficulty to Colvile and to Methuen. The former

continued his march to Heilbron, and it is hard to blame him for doing

so, but Methuen on hearing the message, which was conveyed to him at

great personal peril by Corporal Hankey of the Yeomanry, pushed on

instantly with the utmost energy, though he arrived too late to prevent,

or even to repair, a disaster. It must be remembered that Colvile was

under orders to reach Heilbron on a certain date, that he was himself

fighting his way, and that the force which he was asked to relieve was

much more mobile than his own. His cavalry at that date consisted of 100

men of the Eastern Province Horse.

Colonel Spragge's men had held their own for the first three days

of their investment, during which they had been simply exposed to a

long-range rifle fire which inflicted no very serious loss upon them.

Their principal defence consisted of a stone kraal about twenty yards

square, which sheltered them from rifle bullets, but must obviously be a

perfect death-trap in the not improbable event of the Boers sending for

artillery. The spirit of the troopers was admirable. Several dashing

sorties were carried out under the leadership of Captain Humby and Lord

Longford. The latter was a particularly dashing business, ending in a

bayonet charge which cleared a neighbouring ridge. Early in the siege

the gallant Keith met his end. On the fourth day the Boers brought up

five guns. One would have thought that during so long a time as three

days it would have been possible for the officer in command to make such

preparations against this obvious possibility as were so successfully

taken at a later stage of the war by the handful who garrisoned

Ladybrand. Surely in this period, even without engineers, it would not

have been hard to construct such trenches as the Boers have again and

again opposed to our own artillery. But the preparations which were

made proved to be quite inadequate. One of the two smaller kopjes was

carried, and the garrison fled to the other. This also was compelled to

surrender, and finally the main kopje also hoisted the white flag.

No blame can rest upon the men, for their presence there at all is a

sufficient proof of their public spirit and their gallantry. But the

lessons of the war seem to have been imperfectly learned, especially

that very certain lesson that shell fire in a close formation is

insupportable, while in an open formation with a little cover it can

never compel surrender. The casualty lists (80 killed and wounded out

of a force of 470) show that the Yeomanry took considerable punishment

before surrendering, but do not permit us to call the defence desperate

or heroic. It is only fair to add that Colonel Spragge was acquitted

of all blame by a court of inquiry, which agreed, however, that the

surrender was premature, and attributed it to the unauthorised hoisting

of a white flag upon one of the detached kopjes. With regard to the

subsequent controversy as to whether General Colvile might have returned

to the relief of the Yeomanry, it is impossible to see how that General

could have acted in any other way than he did.

Some explanation is needed of Lord Methuen's appearance upon the central

scene of warfare, his division having, when last described, been at

Boshof, not far from Kimberley, where early in April he fought the

successful action which led to the death of Villebois. Thence he

proceeded along the Vaal and then south to Kroonstad, arriving there on

May 28th. He had with him the 9th Brigade (Douglas's), which contained

the troops which had started with him for the relief of Kimberley six

months before. These were the Northumberland Fusiliers, Loyal North

Lancashires, Northamptons, and Yorkshire Light Infantry. With him also

were the Munsters, Lord Chesham's Yeomanry (five companies), with the

4th and 37th batteries, two howitzers and two pom-poms. His total force

was about 6000 men. On arriving at Kroonstad he was given the task

of relieving Heilbron, where Colvile, with the Highland Brigade, some

Colonial horse, Lovat's Scouts, two naval guns, and the 5th battery,

were short of food and ammunition. The more urgent message from the

Yeomen at Lindley, however, took him on a fruitless journey to that

town on June 1st. So vigorous was the pursuit of the Yeomanry that

the leading squadrons, consisting of South Notts Hussars and Sherwood

Rangers, actually cut into the Boer convoy and might have rescued the

prisoners had they been supported. As it was they were recalled, and

had to fight their way back to Lindley with some loss, including Colonel

Rolleston, the commander, who was badly wounded. A garrison was left

under Paget, and the rest of the force pursued its original mission

to Heilbron, arriving there on June 7th, when the Highlanders had been

reduced to quarter rations. 'The Salvation Army' was the nickname by

which they expressed their gratitude to the relieving force.

A previous convoy sent to the same destination had less good fortune.

On June 1st fifty-five wagons started from the railway line to reach

Heilbron. The escort consisted of one hundred and sixty details

belonging to Highland regiments without any guns, Captain Corballis in

command. But the gentleman with the tinted glasses was waiting on the

way. 'I have twelve hundred men and five guns. Surrender at once!'

Such was the message which reached the escort, and in their defenceless

condition there was nothing for it but to comply. Thus one disaster

leads to another, for, had the Yeomanry held out at Lindley, De Wet

would not on June 4th have laid hands upon our wagons; and had he not

recruited his supplies from our wagons it is doubtful if he could have

made his attack upon Roodeval. This was the next point upon which he

turned his attention.

Two miles beyond Roodeval station there is a well-marked kopje by the

railway line, with other hills some distance to the right and the left.

A militia regiment, the 4th Derbyshire, had been sent up to occupy this

post. There were rumours of Boers on the line, and Major Haig, who with

one thousand details of various regiments commanded at railhead, had

been attacked on June 6th but had beaten off his assailants. De Wet,

acting sometimes in company with, and sometimes independently of, his

lieutenant Nel, passed down the line looking fur some easier prey,

and on the night of June 7th came upon the militia regiment, which was

encamped in a position which could be completely commanded by artillery.

It is not true that they had neglected to occupy the kopje under which

they lay, for two companies had been posted upon it. But there seems to

have been no thought of imminent danger, and the regiment had pitched

its tents and gone very comfortably to sleep without a thought of the

gentleman in the tinted glasses. In the middle of the night he was upon

them with a hissing sleet of bullets. At the first dawn the guns opened

and the shells began to burst among them. It was a horrible ordeal for

raw troops. The men were miners and agricultural labourers, who had

never seen more bloodshed than a cut finger in their lives. They had

been four months in the country, but their life had been a picnic, as

the luxury of their baggage shows. Now in an instant the picnic was

ended, and in the grey cold dawn war was upon them--grim war with the

whine of bullets, the screams of pain, the crash of shell, the horrible

rending and riving of body and limb. In desperate straits, which would

have tried the oldest soldiers, the brave miners did well. They never

from the beginning had a chance save to show how gamely they could take

punishment, but that at least they did. Bullets were coming from all

sides at once and yet no enemy was visible. They lined one side of the

embankment, and they were shot in the back. They lined the other, and

were again shot in the back. Baird-Douglas, the Colonel, vowed to shoot

the man who should raise the white flag, and he fell dead himself before

he saw the hated emblem. But it had to come. A hundred and forty of the

men were down, many of them suffering from the horrible wounds which

shell inflicts. The place was a shambles. Then the flag went up and the

Boers at last became visible. Outnumbered, outgeneralled, and without

guns, there is no shadow of stain upon the good name of the one militia

regiment which was ever seriously engaged during the war. Their position

was hopeless from the first, and they came out of it with death,

mutilation, and honour.

Two miles south of the Rhenoster kopje stands Roodeval station, in

which, on that June morning, there stood a train containing the mails

for the army, a supply of great-coats, and a truck full of enormous

shells. A number of details of various sorts, a hundred or more, had

alighted from the train, twenty of them Post-office volunteers, some

of the Pioneer Railway corps, a few Shropshires, and other waifs and

strays. To them in the early morning came the gentleman with the tinted

glasses, his hands still red with the blood of the Derbies. 'I have

fourteen hundred men and four guns. Surrender!' said the messenger.

But it is not in nature for a postman to give up his postbag without

a struggle. 'Never!' cried the valiant postmen. But shell after shell

battered the corrugated-iron buildings about their ears, and it was not

possible for them to answer the guns which were smashing the life out of

them. There was no help for it but to surrender. De Wet added samples of

the British volunteer and of the British regular to his bag of militia.

The station and train were burned down, the great-coats looted, the

big shells exploded, and the mails burned. The latter was the one

unsportsmanlike action which can up to that date be laid to De Wet's

charge. Forty thousand men to the north of him could forego their coats

and their food, but they yearned greatly for those home letters,

charred fragments of which are still blowing about the veld. [Footnote:

Fragments continually met the eye which must have afforded curious

reading for the victors. 'I hope you have killed all those Boers by

now,' was the beginning of one letter which I could not help observing.]

For three days De Wet held the line, and during all that time he worked

his wicked will upon it. For miles and miles it was wrecked with most

scientific completeness. The Rhenoster bridge was destroyed. So, for the

second time, was the Roodeval bridge. The rails were blown upwards with

dynamite until they looked like an unfinished line to heaven. De Wet's

heavy hand was everywhere. Not a telegraph-post remained standing within

ten miles. His headquarters continued to be the kopje at Roodeval.

On June 10th two British forces were converging upon the point of

danger. One was Methuen's, from Heilbron. The other was a small force

consisting of the Shropshires, the South Wales Borderers, and a battery

which had come south with Lord Kitchener. The energetic Chief of the

Staff was always sent by Lord Roberts to the point where a strong man

was needed, and it was seldom that he failed to justify his mission.

Lord Methuen, however, was the first to arrive, and at once attacked

De Wet, who moved swiftly away to the eastward. With a tendency to

exaggeration, which has been too common during the war, the affair was

described as a victory. It was really a strategic and almost bloodless

move upon the part of the Boers. It is not the business of guerillas

to fight pitched battles. Methuen pushed for the south, having been

informed that Kroonstad had been captured. Finding this to be untrue, he

turned again to the eastward in search of De Wet.

That wily and indefatigable man was not long out of our ken. On June

14th he appeared once more at Rhenoster, where the construction trains,

under the famous Girouard, were working furiously at the repair of the

damage which he had already done. This time the guard was sufficient

to beat him off, and he vanished again to the eastward. He succeeded,

however, in doing some harm, and very nearly captured Lord Kitchener

himself. A permanent post had been established at Rhenoster under the

charge of Colonel Spens of the Shropshires, with his own regiment and

several guns. Smith-Dorrien, one of the youngest and most energetic

of the divisional commanders, had at the same time undertaken the

supervision and patrolling of the line.

An attack had at this period been made by a commando of some hundred

Boers at the Sand River to the south of Kroonstad, where there is a

most important bridge. The attempt was frustrated by the Royal Lancaster

regiment and the Railway Pioneer regiment, helped by some mounted

infantry and Yeomanry. The fight was for a time a brisk one, and the

Pioneers, upon whom the brunt of it fell, behaved with great steadiness.

The skirmish is principally remarkable for the death of Major Seymour

of the Pioneers, a noble American, who gave his services and at last his

life for what, in the face of all slander and misrepresentation, he knew

to be the cause of justice and of liberty.

It was hoped now, after all these precautions, that the last had been

seen of the gentleman with the tinted glasses, but on June 21st he was

back in his old haunts once more. Honing Spruit Station, about midway

between Kroonstad and Roodeval, was the scene of his new raid. On that

date his men appeared suddenly as a train waited in the station, and

ripped up the rails on either side of it. There were no guns at this

point, and the only available troops were three hundred of the prisoners

from Pretoria, armed with Martini-Henry rifles and obsolete ammunition.

A good man was in command, however--the same Colonel Bullock of the

Devons who had distinguished himself at Colenso--and every tattered,

half-starved wastrel was nerved by a recollection of the humiliations

which he had already endured. For seven hours they lay helpless under

the shell-fire, but their constancy was rewarded by the arrival of

Colonel Brookfield with 300 Yeomanry and four guns of the 17th R.F.A.,

followed in the evening by a larger force from the south. The Boers

fled, but left some of their number behind them; while of the British,

Major Hobbs and four men were killed and nineteen wounded. This defence

of three hundred half-armed men against seven hundred Boer riflemen,

with three guns firing shell and shrapnel, was a very good performance.

The same body of burghers immediately afterwards attacked a post held by

Colonel Evans with two companies of the Shropshires and fifty Canadians.

They were again beaten back with loss, the Canadians under Inglis

especially distinguishing themselves by their desperate resistance in an

exposed position.

All these attacks, irritating and destructive as they were, were not

able to hinder the general progress of the war. After the battle of

Diamond Hill the captured position was occupied by the mounted infantry,

while the rest of the forces returned to their camps round Pretoria,

there to await the much-needed remounts. At other parts of the seat

of war the British cordon was being drawn more tightly round the Boer

forces. Buller had come as far as Standerton, and Ian Hamilton, in the

last week of June, had occupied Heidelberg. A week afterwards the two

forces were able to join hands, and so to completely cut off the Free

State from the Transvaal armies. Hamilton in these operations had the

misfortune to break his collar-bone, and for a time the command of his

division passed to Hunter--the one man, perhaps, whom the army would

regard as an adequate successor.

It was evident now to the British commanders that there would be no

peace and no safety for their communications while an undefeated army of

seven or eight thousand men, under such leaders as De Wet and Olivier,

was lurking amid the hills which flanked their railroad. A determined

effort was made, therefore, to clear up that corner of the country.

Having closed the only line of escape by the junction of Ian Hamilton

and of Buller, the attention of six separate bodies of troops was

concentrated upon the stalwart Freestaters. These were the divisions of

Rundle and of Brabant from the south, the brigade of Clements on their

extreme left, the garrison of Lindley under Paget, the garrison of

Heilbron under Macdonald, and, most formidable of all, a detachment

under Hunter which was moving from the north. A crisis was evidently

approaching.

The nearest Free State town of importance still untaken was Bethlehem--a

singular name to connect with the operations of war. The country on the

south of it forbade an advance by Rundle or Brabant, but it was more

accessible from the west. The first operation of the British consisted,

therefore, in massing sufficient troops to be able to advance from

this side. This was done by effecting a junction between Clements from

Senekal, and Paget who commanded at Lindley, which was carried out upon

July 1st near the latter place. Clements encountered some opposition,

but besides his excellent infantry regiments, the Royal Irish,

Worcesters, Wiltshires, and Bedfords, he had with him the 2nd Brabant's

Horse, with yeomanry, mounted infantry, two 5-inch guns, and the 38th

R.F.A. Aided by a demonstration on the part of Grenfell and of Brabant,

he pushed his way through after three days of continual skirmish.

On getting into touch with Clements, Paget sallied out from Lindley,

leaving the Buffs behind to garrison the town. He had with him

Brookfield's mounted brigade one thousand strong, eight guns, and two

fine battalions of infantry, the Munster Fusiliers and the Yorkshire

Light Infantry. On July 3rd he found near Leeuw Kop a considerable force

of Boers with three guns opposed to him, Clements being at that time

too far off upon the flank to assist him. Four guns of the 38th R.F.A.

(Major Oldfield) and two belonging to the City Volunteers came into

action. The Royal Artillery guns appear to have been exposed to a very

severe fire, and the losses were so heavy that for a time they could not

be served. The escort was inadequate, insufficiently advanced, and badly

handled, for the Boer riflemen were able, by creeping up a donga, to

get right into the 38th battery, and the gallant major, with Lieutenant

Belcher, was killed in the defence of the guns. Captain FitzGerald, the

only other officer present, was wounded in two places, and twenty men

were struck down, with nearly all the horses of one section. Captain

Marks, who was brigade-major of Colonel Brookfield's Yeomanry, with the

help of Lieutenant Keevil Davis and the 15th I.Y. came to the rescue of

the disorganised and almost annihilated section. At the same time the

C.I.V. guns were in imminent danger, but were energetically covered by

Captain Budworth, adjutant of the battery. Soon, however, the infantry,

Munster Fusiliers, and Yorkshire Light Infantry, which had been carrying

out a turning movement, came into action, and the position was

taken. The force moved onwards, and on July 6th they were in front of

Bethlehem.

The place is surrounded by hills, and the enemy was found strongly

posted. Clements's force was now on the left and Paget's on the right.

From both sides an attempt was made to turn the Boer flanks, but they

were found to be very wide and strong. All day a long-range action was

kept up while Clements felt his way in the hope of coming upon some weak

spot in the position, but in the evening a direct attack was made by

Paget's two infantry regiments upon the right, which gave the British

a footing on the Boer position. The Munster Fusiliers and the Yorkshire

Light Infantry lost forty killed and wounded, including four officers,

in this gallant affair, the heavier loss and the greater honour going to

the men of Munster.

The centre of the position was still held, and on the morning of July

7th Clements gave instructions to the colonel of the Royal Irish to

storm it if the occasion should seem favourable. Such an order to such

a regiment means that the occasion will seem favourable. Up they went in

three extended lines, dropping forty or fifty on the way, but arriving

breathless and enthusiastic upon the crest of the ridge. Below them,

upon the further side, lay the village of Bethlehem. On the slopes

beyond hundreds of horsemen were retreating, and a gun was being

hurriedly dragged into the town. For a moment it seemed as if nothing

had been left as a trophy, but suddenly a keen-eyed sergeant raised a

cheer, which was taken up again and again until it resounded over the

veld. Under the crest, lying on its side with a broken wheel, was a

gun--one of the 15-pounders of Stormberg which it was a point of honour

to regain once more. Many a time had the gunners been friends in need

to the infantry. Now it was the turn of the infantry to do something in

exchange. That evening Clements had occupied Bethlehem, and one more of

their towns had passed out of the hands of the Freestaters.

A word now as to that force under General Hunter which was closing in

from the north. The gallant and energetic Hamilton, lean, aquiline, and

tireless, had, as already stated, broken his collar-bone at Heidelberg,

and it was as his lieutenant that Hunter was leading these troops out

of the Transvaal into the Orange River Colony. Most of his infantry was

left behind at Heidelberg, but he took with him Broadwood's cavalry

(two brigades) and Bruce Hamilton's 21st infantry brigade, with Ridley's

mounted infantry, some seven thousand men in all. On the 2nd of July

this force reached Frankfort in the north of the Free State without

resistance, and on July 3rd they were joined there by Macdonald's force

from Heilbron, so that Hunter found himself with over eleven thousand

men under his command. Here was an instrument with which surely the coup

de grace could be given to the dying State. Passing south, still without

meeting serious resistance, Hunter occupied Reitz, and finally sent on

Broadwood's cavalry to Bethlehem, where on July 8th they joined Paget

and Clements.

The net was now in position, and about to be drawn tight, but at this

last moment the biggest fish of all dashed furiously out from it.

Leaving the main Free State force in a hopeless position behind him, De

Wet, with fifteen hundred well-mounted men and five guns, broke through

Slabbert's Nek between Bethlehem and Ficksburg, and made swiftly for the

north-west, closely followed by Paget's and Broadwood's cavalry. It was

on July 16th that he made his dash for freedom. On the 19th Little, with

the 3rd Cavalry Brigade, had come into touch with him near Lindley. De

Wet shook himself clear, and with splendid audacity cut the railway once

more to the north of Honing Spruit, gathering up a train as he passed,

and taking two hundred details prisoners. On July 22nd De Wet was at

Vredefort, still closely followed by Broadwood, Ridley, and Little, who

gleaned his wagons and his stragglers. Thence he threw himself into the

hilly country some miles to the south of the Vaal River, where he

lurked for a week or more while Lord Kitchener came south to direct the

operations which would, as it was hoped, lead to a surrender.

Leaving the indomitable guerilla in his hiding-place, the narrative must

return to that drawing of the net which still continued in spite of the

escape of this one important fish. On all sides the British forces had

drawn closer, and they were both more numerous and more formidable in

quality. It was evident now that by a rapid advance from Bethlehem in

the direction of the Basuto border all Boers to the north of Ficksburg

would be hemmed in. On July 22nd the columns were moving. On that

date Paget moved out of Bethlehem, and Rundle took a step forward from

Ficksburg. Bruce Hamilton had already, at the cost of twenty Cameron

Highlanders, got a grip upon a bastion of that rocky country in which

the enemy lurked. On the 23rd Hunter's force was held by the Boers at

the strong pass of Retief's Nek, but on the 24th they were compelled

to abandon it, as the capture of Slabbert's Nek by Clements threatened

their rear. This latter pass was fortified most elaborately. It was

attacked upon the 23rd by Brabant's Horse and the Royal Irish without

success. Later in the day two companies of the Wiltshire Regiment were

also brought to a standstill, but retained a position until nightfall

within stone-throw of the Boer lines, though a single company had lost

17 killed and wounded. Part of the Royal Irish remained also close

to the enemy's trenches. Under cover of darkness, Clements sent four

companies of the Royal Irish and two of the Wiltshires under Colonel

Guinness to make a flanking movement along the crest of the heights.

These six companies completely surprised the enemy, and caused them to

hurriedly evacuate the position. Their night march was performed under

great difficulties, the men crawling on hands and knees along a rocky

path with a drop of 400 feet upon one side. But their exertions were

greatly rewarded. Upon the success of their turning movement depended

the fall of Slabbert's Nek. Retief's Nek was untenable if we held

Slabbert's Nek, and if both were in our hands the retreat of Prinsloo

was cut off.

At every opening of the hills the British guns were thundering, and the

heads of British columns were appearing on every height. The Highland

Brigade had fairly established themselves over the Boer position, though

not without hard fighting, in which a hundred men of the Highland Light

Infantry had been killed and wounded. The Seaforths and the Sussex had

also gripped the positions in front of them, and taken some punishment

in doing so. The outworks of the great mountain fortress were all taken,

and on July 26th the British columns were converging on Fouriesburg,

while Naauwpoort on the line of retreat was held by Macdonald. It was

only a matter of time now with the Boers.

On the 28th Clements was still advancing, and contracting still further

the space which was occupied by our stubborn foe. He found himself faced

by the stiff position of Slaapkrantz, and a hot little action was needed

before the Boers could be dislodged. The fighting fell upon Brabant's

Horse, the Royal Irish, and the Wiltshires. Three companies of the

latter seized a farm upon the enemy's left, but lost ten men in doing

so, while their gallant colonel, Carter, was severely wounded in two

places. The Wiltshires, who were excellently handled by Captain Bolton,

held on to the farm and were reinforced there by a handful of the Scots

Guards. In the night the position was abandoned by the Boers, and

the advance swept onwards. On all sides the pressure was becoming

unendurable. The burghers in the valley below could see all day the

twinkle of British heliographs from every hill, while at night the

constant flash of signals told of the sleepless vigilance which hemmed

them in. Upon July 29th, Prinsloo sent in a request for an armistice,

which was refused. Later in the day he despatched a messenger with

the white flag to Hunter, with an announcement of his unconditional

surrender.

On July 30th the motley army which had held the British off so long

emerged from among the mountains. But it soon became evident that in

speaking for all Prinsloo had gone beyond his powers. Discipline was low

and individualism high in the Boer army. Every man might repudiate the

decision of his commandant, as every man might repudiate the white flag

of his comrade. On the first day no more than eleven hundred men of the

Ficksburg and Ladybrand commandos, with fifteen hundred horses and two

guns, were surrendered. Next day seven hundred and fifty more men

came in with eight hundred horses, and by August 6th the total of the

prisoners had mounted to four thousand one hundred and fifty with three

guns, two of which were our own. But Olivier, with fifteen hundred men

and several guns, broke away from the captured force and escaped through

the hills. Of this incident General Hunter, an honourable soldier,

remarks in his official report: 'I regard it as a dishonourable

breach of faith upon the part of General Olivier, for which I hold him

personally responsible. He admitted that he knew that General Prinsloo

had included him in the unconditional surrender.' It is strange that,

on Olivier's capture shortly afterwards, he was not court-martialled

for this breach of the rules of war, but that good-natured giant, the

Empire, is quick--too quick, perhaps--to let byegones be byegones. On

August 4th Harrismith surrendered to Macdonald, and thus was secured

the opening of the Van Reenen's Pass and the end of the Natal system

of railways. This was of the very first importance, as the utmost

difficulty had been found in supplying so large a body of troops so far

from the Cape base. In a day the base was shifted to Durban, and the

distance shortened by two-thirds, while the army came to be on the

railway instead of a hundred miles from it. This great success assured

Lord Roberts's communications from serious attack, and was of the utmost

importance in enabling him to consolidate his position at Pretoria.

CHAPTER 28. THE HALT AT PRETORIA.

Lord Roberts had now been six weeks in the capital, and British troops

had overrun the greater part of the south and west of the Transvaal,

but in spite of this there was continued Boer resistance, which flared

suddenly up in places which had been nominally pacified and disarmed.

It was found, as has often been shown in history, that it is easier

to defeat a republican army than to conquer it. From Klerksdorp, from

Ventersdorp, from Rustenburg, came news of risings against the newly

imposed British authority. The concealed Mauser and the bandolier were

dug up once more from the trampled corner of the cattle kraal, and the

farmer was a warrior once again. Vague news of the exploits of De Wet

stimulated the fighting burghers and shamed those who had submitted. A

letter was intercepted from the guerilla chief to Cronje's son, who had

surrendered near Rustenburg. De Wet stated that he had gained two great

victories and had fifteen hundred captured rifles with which to replace

those which the burghers had given up. Not only were the outlying

districts in a state of revolt, but even round Pretoria the Boers were

inclined to take the offensive, while both that town and Johannesburg

were filled with malcontents who were ready to fly to their arms once

more.

Already at the end of June there were signs that the Boers realised

how helpless Lord Roberts was until his remounts should arrive. The

mosquitoes buzzed round the crippled lion. On June 29th there was an

attack upon Springs near Johannesburg, which was easily beaten off by

the Canadians. Early in July some of the cavalry and mounted infantry

patrols were snapped up in the neighbourhood of the capital. Lord

Roberts gave orders accordingly that Hutton and Mahon should sweep the

Boers back upon his right, and push them as far as Bronkhorst Spruit.

This was done on July 6th and 7th, the British advance meeting with

considerable resistance from artillery as well as rifles. By this

movement the pressure upon the right was relieved, which might have

created a dangerous unrest in Johannesburg, and it was done at the

moderate cost of thirty-four killed and wounded, half of whom belonged

to the Imperial Light Horse. This famous corps, which had come across

with Mahon from the relief of Mafeking, had, a few days before, ridden

with mixed feelings through the streets of Johannesburg and past, in

many instances, the deserted houses which had once been their homes.

Many weary months were to pass before the survivors might occupy them.

On July 9th the Boers again attacked, but were again pushed back to the

eastward.

It is probable that all these demonstrations of the enemy upon the right

of Lord Roberts's extended position were really feints in order to cover

the far-reaching plans which Botha had in his mind. The disposition of

the Boer forces at this time appears to have been as follows: Botha with

his army occupied a position along Delagoa railway line, further east

than Diamond Hill, whence he detached the bodies which attacked Hutton

upon the extreme right of the British position to the south-east of

Pretoria. To the north of Pretoria a second force was acting under

Grobler, while a third under De la Rey had been despatched secretly

across to the left wing of the British, north-west of Pretoria. While

Botha engaged the attention of Lord Roberts by energetic demonstrations

on his right, Grobler and De la Rey were to make a sudden attack upon

his centre and his left, each point being twelve or fifteen miles

from the other. It was well devised and very well carried out; but the

inherent defect of it was that, when subdivided in this way, the Boer

force was no longer strong enough to gain more than a mere success of

outposts.

De la Rey's attack was delivered at break of day on July 11th at

Uitval's Nek, a post some eighteen miles west of the capital. This

position could not be said to be part of Lord Roberts's line, but rather

to be a link to connect his army with Rustenburg. It was weakly held by

three companies of the Lincolns with two others in support, one squadron

of the Scots Greys, and two guns of O battery R.H.A. The attack came

with the first grey light of dawn, and for many hours the small garrison

bore up against a deadly fire, waiting for the help which never came.

All day they held their assailants at bay, and it was not until evening

that their ammunition ran short and they were forced to surrender.

Nothing could have been better than the behaviour of the men, both

infantry, cavalry, and gunners, but their position was a hopeless one.

The casualties amounted to eighty killed and wounded. Nearly two hundred

were made prisoners and the two guns were taken.

On the same day that De la Rey made his coup at Uitval's Nek, Grobler

had shown his presence on the north side of the town by treating very

roughly a couple of squadrons of the 7th Dragoon Guards which had

attacked him. By the help of a section of the ubiquitous O battery and

of the 14th Hussars, Colonel Lowe was able to disengage his cavalry from

the trap into which they had fallen, but it was at the cost of between

thirty and forty officers and men killed, wounded, or taken. The old

'Black Horse' sustained their historical reputation, and fought their

way bravely out of an almost desperate situation, where they were

exposed to the fire of a thousand riflemen and four guns.

On this same day of skirmishes, July 11th, the Gordons had seen some hot

work twenty miles or so to the south of Uitval's Nek. Orders had been

given to the 19th Brigade (Smith-Dorrien's) to proceed to Krugersdorp,

and thence to make their way north. The Scottish Yeomanry and a section

of the 78th R.F.A. accompanied them. The idea seems to have been that

they would be able to drive north any Boers in that district, who would

then find the garrison of Uitval's Nek at their rear. The advance was

checked, however, at a place called Dolverkrantz, which was strongly

held by Boer riflemen. The two guns were insufficiently protected, and

the enemy got within short range of them, killing or wounding many of

the gunners. The lieutenant in charge, Mr. A.J. Turner, the famous Essex

cricketer, worked the gun with his own hands until he also fell wounded

in three places. The situation was now very serious, and became more

so when news was flashed of the disaster at Uitval's Nek, and they were

ordered to retire. They could not retire and abandon the guns, yet the

fire was so hot that it was impossible to remove them. Gallant attempts

were made by volunteers from the Gordons--Captain Younger and other

brave men throwing away their lives in the vain effort to reach and to

limber up the guns. At last, under the cover of night, the teams were

harnessed and the two field-pieces successfully removed, while the Boers

who rushed in to seize them were scattered by a volley. The losses in

the action were thirty-six and the gain nothing. Decidedly July 11th was

not a lucky day for the British arms.

It was well known to Botha that every train from the south was bringing

horses for Lord Roberts's army, and that it had become increasingly

difficult for De Wet and his men to hinder their arrival. The last horse

must win, and the Empire had the world on which to draw. Any movement

which the Boers would make must be made at once, for already both the

cavalry and the mounted infantry were rapidly coming back to their full

strength once more. This consideration must have urged Botha to deliver

an attack on July 16th, which had some success at first, but was

afterwards beaten off with heavy loss to the enemy. The fighting fell

principally upon Pole-Carew and Hutton, the corps chiefly engaged being

the Royal Irish Fusiliers, the New Zealanders, the Shropshires, and the

Canadian Mounted Infantry. The enemy tried repeatedly to assault the

position, but were beaten back each time with a loss of nearly a hundred

killed and wounded. The British loss was about sixty, and included two

gallant young Canadian officers, Borden and Birch, the former being the

only son of the minister of militia. So ended the last attempt made by

Botha upon the British positions round Pretoria. The end of the war

was not yet, but already its futility was abundantly evident. This had

become more apparent since the junction of Hamilton and of Buller had

cut off the Transvaal army from that of the Free State. Unable to send

their prisoners away, and also unable to feed them, the Freestaters were

compelled to deliver up in Natal the prisoners whom they had taken

at Lindley and Roodeval. These men, a ragged and starving battalion,

emerged at Ladysmith, having made their way through Van Reenen's Pass.

It is a singular fact that no parole appears on these and similar

occasions to have been exacted by the Boers.

Lord Roberts, having remounted a large part of his cavalry, was ready

now to advance eastward and give Botha battle. The first town of any

consequence along the Delagoa Railway is Middelburg, some seventy miles

from the capital. This became the British objective, and the forces of

Mahon and Hamilton on the north, of Pole-Carew in the centre, and of

French and Hutton to the south, all converged upon it. There was no

serious resistance, though the weather was abominable, and on July 27th

the town was in the hands of the invaders. From that date until the

final advance to the eastward French held this advanced post, while

Pole-Carew guarded the railway line. Rumours of trouble in the west had

convinced Roberts that it was not yet time to push his advantage to the

east, and he recalled Ian Hamilton's force to act for a time upon

the other side of the seat of the war. This excellent little army,

consisting of Mahon's and Pilcher's mounted infantry, M battery R.H.A.,

the Elswick battery, two 5-inch and two 4.7 guns, with the Berkshires,

the Border Regiment, the Argyle and Sutherlands, and the Scottish

Borderers, put in as much hard work in marching and in fighting as any

body of troops in the whole campaign.

The renewal of the war in the west had begun some weeks before, but was

much accelerated by the transference of De la Rey and his burghers to

that side. There is no district in the Transvaal which is better worth

fighting for, for it is a fair country side, studded with farmhouses and

green with orange-groves, with many clear streams running through it.

The first sign of activity appears to have been on July 7th, when a

commando with guns appeared upon the hills above Rustenburg. Hanbury

Tracy, commandant of Rustenburg, was suddenly confronted with a summons

to surrender. He had only 120 men and one gun, but he showed a bold

front. Colonel Houldsworth, at the first whisper of danger, had started

from Zeerust with a small force of Australian bushmen, and arrived at

Rustenburg in time to drive the enemy away in a very spirited action. On

the evening of July 8th Baden-Powell took over the command, the garrison

being reinforced by Plumer's command.

The Boer commando was still in existence, however, and it was reinforced

and reinvigorated by De la Rey's success at Uitval's Nek. On July 18th

they began to close in upon Rustenburg again, and a small skirmish took

place between them and the Australians. Methuen's division, which had

been doing very arduous service in the north of the Free State during

the last six weeks, now received orders to proceed into the Transvaal

and to pass northwards through the disturbed districts en route for

Rustenburg, which appeared to be the storm centre. The division was

transported by train from Kroonstad to Krugersdorp, and advanced on the

evening of July 18th upon its mission, through a bare and fire-blackened

country. On the 19th Lord Methuen manoeuvred the Boers out of a strong

position, with little loss to either side. On the 21st he forced his

way through Olifant's Nek, in the Magaliesberg range, and so established

communication with Baden-Powell, whose valiant bushmen, under Colonel

Airey, had held their own in a severe conflict near Magato Pass, in

which they lost six killed, nineteen wounded, and nearly two hundred

horses. The fortunate arrival of Captain FitzClarence with the

Protectorate Regiment helped on this occasion to avert a disaster. The

force, only 300 strong, without guns, had walked into an ugly ambuscade,

and only the tenacity and resource of the men enabled them ever to

extricate themselves.

Although Methuen came within reach of Rustenburg, he did not actually

join hands with Baden-Powell. No doubt he saw and heard enough to

convince him that that astute soldier was very well able to take care of

himself. Learning of the existence of a Boer force in his rear,

Methuen turned, and on July 29th he was back at Frederickstad on the

Potchefstroom to Krugersdorp railway. The sudden change in his plans

was caused doubtless by the desire to head off De Wet in case he should

cross the Vaal River. Lord Roberts was still anxious to clear the

neighbourhood of Rustenburg entirely of the enemy; and he therefore,

since Methuen was needed to complete the cordon round De Wet, recalled

Hamilton's force from the east and despatched it, as already described,

to the west of Pretoria.

Before going into the details of the great De Wet hunt, in which

Methuen's force was to be engaged, I shall follow Hamilton's division

across, and give some account of their services. On August 1st he set

out from Pretoria for Rustenburg. On that day and on the next he had

brisk skirmishes which brought him successfully through the Magaliesberg

range with a loss of forty wounded, mostly of the Berkshires. On the 5th

of August he had made his way to Rustenburg and drove off the investing

force. A smaller siege had been going on to westward, where at Elands

River another Mafeking man, Colonel Hore, had been held up by the

burghers. For some days it was feared, and even officially announced,

that the garrison had surrendered. It was known that an attempt by

Carrington to relieve the place on August 5th had been beaten back, and

that the state of the country appeared so threatening that he had been

compelled, or had imagined himself to be compelled, to retreat as far

as Mafeking, evacuating Zeerust and Otto's Hoop, abandoning the

considerable stores which were collected at those places. In spite of

all these sinister indications the garrison was still holding its own,

and on August 16th it was relieved by Lord Kitchener.

This stand at Brakfontein on the Elands River appears to have been one

of the very finest deeds of arms of the war. The Australians have been

so split up during the campaign, that though their valour and efficiency

were universally recognised, they had no single exploit which they could

call their own. But now they can point to Elands River as proudly as the

Canadians can to Paardeberg. They were 500 in number, Victorians, New

South Welshmen, and Queenslanders, the latter the larger unit, with a

corps of Rhodesians. Under Hore were Major Hopper of the Rhodesians, and

Major Toubridge of the Queenslanders. Two thousand five hundred Boers

surrounded them, and most favourable terms of surrender were offered and

scouted. Six guns were trained upon them, and during 11 days 1800 shells

fell within their lines. The river was half a mile off, and every drop

of water for man or beast had to come from there. Nearly all their

horses and 75 of the men were killed or wounded. With extraordinary

energy and ingenuity the little band dug shelters which are said to

have exceeded in depth and efficiency any which the Boers have devised.

Neither the repulse of Carrington, nor the jamming of their only gun,

nor the death of the gallant Annett, was sufficient to dishearten them.

They were sworn to die before the white flag should wave above them. And

so fortune yielded, as fortune will when brave men set their teeth, and

Broadwood's troopers, filled with wonder and admiration, rode into the

lines of the reduced and emaciated but indomitable garrison. When the

ballad-makers of Australia seek for a subject, let them turn to Elands

River, for there was no finer resistance in the war. They will not

grudge a place in their record to the 130 gallant Rhodesians who shared

with them the honours and the dangers of the exploit.

On August 7th Ian Hamilton abandoned Rustenburg, taking Baden-Powell and

his men with him. It was obviously unwise to scatter the British forces

too widely by attempting to garrison every single town. For the instant

the whole interest of the war centred upon De Wet and his dash into the

Transvaal. One or two minor events, however, which cannot be fitted into

any continuous narrative may be here introduced.

One of these was the action at Faber's Put, by which Sir Charles Warren

crushed the rebellion in Griqualand. In that sparsely inhabited country

of vast distances it was a most difficult task to bring the revolt to

a decisive ending. This Sir Charles Warren, with his special local

knowledge and interest, was able to do, and the success is doubly

welcome as bringing additional honour to a man who, whatever view one

may take of his action at Spion Kop, has grown grey in the service of

the Empire. With a column consisting mainly of colonials and of yeomanry

he had followed the rebels up to a point within twelve miles of Douglas.

Here at the end of May they turned upon him and delivered a fierce night

attack, so sudden and so strongly pressed that much credit is due both

to General and to troops for having repelled it. The camp was attacked

on all sides in the early dawn. The greater part of the horses were

stampeded by the firing, and the enemy's riflemen were found to be at

very close quarters. For an hour the action was warm, but at the end

of that time the Boers fled, leaving a number of dead behind them. The

troops engaged in this very creditable action, which might have tried

the steadiness of veterans, were four hundred of the Duke of Edinburgh's

volunteers, some of Paget's horse and of the 8th Regiment Imperial

Yeomanry, four Canadian guns, and twenty-five of Warren's Scouts. Their

losses were eighteen killed and thirty wounded. Colonel Spence, of the

volunteers, died at the head of his regiment. A few days before, on May

27th, Colonel Adye had won a small engagement at Kheis, some distance

to the westward, and the effect of the two actions was to put an end

to open resistance. On June 20th De Villiers, the Boer leader, finally

surrendered to Sir Charles Warren, handing over two hundred and twenty

men with stores, rifles, and ammunition. The last sparks had for the

time been stamped out in the colony.

There remain to be mentioned those attacks upon trains and upon the

railway which had spread from the Free State to the Transvaal. On July

19th a train was wrecked on the way from Potchefstroom to Krugersdorp

without serious injury to the passengers. On July 31st, however, the

same thing occurred with more murderous effect, the train running at

full speed off the metals. Thirteen of the Shropshires were killed and

thirty-seven injured in this deplorable affair, which cost us more

than many an important engagement. On August 2nd a train coming up from

Bloemfontein was derailed by Sarel Theron and his gang some miles south

of Kroonstad. Thirty-five trucks of stores were burned, and six of the

passengers (unarmed convalescent soldiers) were killed or wounded. A

body of mounted infantry followed up the Boers, who numbered eighty, and

succeeded in killing and wounding several of them.

On July 21st the Boers made a determined attack upon the railhead at

a point thirteen miles east of Heidelberg, where over a hundred Royal

Engineers were engaged upon a bridge. They were protected by three

hundred Dublin Fusiliers under Major English. For some hours the little

party was hard pressed by the burghers, who had two field-pieces and a

pom-pom. They could make no impression, however, upon the steady

Irish infantry, and after some hours the arrival of General Hart with

reinforcements scattered the assailants, who succeeded in getting their

guns away in safety.

At the beginning of August it must be confessed that the general

situation in the Transvaal was not reassuring. Springs near Johannesburg

had in some inexplicable way, without fighting, fallen into the hands

of the enemy. Klerksdorp, an important place in the south-west, had also

been reoccupied, and a handful of men who garrisoned it had been made

prisoners without resistance. Rustenburg was about to be abandoned, and

the British were known to be falling back from Zeerust and Otto's Hoop,

concentrating upon Mafeking. The sequel proved however, that there was

no cause for uneasiness in all this. Lord Roberts was concentrating his

strength upon those objects which were vital, and letting the others

drift for a time. At present the two obviously important things were

to hunt down De Wet and to scatter the main Boer army under Botha. The

latter enterprise must wait upon the former, so for a fortnight all

operations were in abeyance while the flying columns of the British

endeavoured to run down their extremely active and energetic antagonist.

At the end of July De Wet had taken refuge in some exceedingly difficult

country near Reitzburg, seven miles south of the Vaal River. The

operations were proceeding vigorously at that time against the main army

at Fouriesberg, and sufficient troops could not be spared to attack him,

but he was closely observed by Kitchener and Broadwood with a force of

cavalry and mounted infantry. With the surrender of Prinsloo a large

army was disengaged, and it was obvious that if De Wet remained where he

was he must soon be surrounded. On the other hand, there was no place of

refuge to the south of him. With great audacity he determined to make

a dash for the Transvaal, in the hope of joining hands with De la Rey's

force, or else of making his way across the north of Pretoria, and

so reaching Botha's army. President Steyn went with him, and a most

singular experience it must have been for him to be harried like a mad

dog through the country in which he had once been an honoured guest. De

Wet's force was exceedingly mobile, each man having a led horse, and the

ammunition being carried in light Cape carts.

In the first week of August the British began to thicken round his

lurking-place, and De Wet knew that it was time for him to go. He made

a great show of fortifying a position, but it was only a ruse to deceive

those who watched him. Travelling as lightly as possible, he made a dash

on August 7th at the drift which bears his own name, and so won his

way across the Vaal River, Kitchener thundering at his heels with

his cavalry and mounted infantry. Methuen's force was at that time at

Potchefstroom, and instant orders had been sent to him to block the

drifts upon the northern side. It was found as he approached the river

that the vanguard of the enemy was already across and that it was

holding the spurs of the hills which would cover the crossing of their

comrades. By the dash of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers and the exertions of

the artillery ridge after ridge was carried, but before evening De Wet

with supreme skill had got his convoy across, and had broken away, first

to the eastward and then to the north. On the 9th Methuen was in touch

with him again, and the two savage little armies, Methuen worrying at

the haunch, and De Wet snapping back over his shoulder, swept northward

over the huge plains. Wherever there was ridge or kopje the Boer

riflemen staved off the eager pursuers. Where the ground lay flat and

clear the British guns thundered onwards and fired into the lines of

wagons. Mile after mile the running fight was sustained, but the other

British columns, Broadwood's men and Kitchener's men, had for some

reason not come up. Methuen alone was numerically inferior to the men he

was chasing, but he held on with admirable energy and spirit. The Boers

were hustled off the kopjes from which they tried to cover their rear.

Twenty men of the Yorkshire Yeomanry carried one hill with the bayonet,

though only twelve of them were left to reach the top.

De Wet trekked onwards during the night of the 9th, shedding wagons and

stores as he went. He was able to replace some of his exhausted beasts

from the farmhouses which he passed. Methuen on the morning of the

10th struck away to the west, sending messages back to Broadwood and

Kitchener in the rear that they should bear to the east, and so nurse

the Boer column between them. At the same time he sent on a messenger,

who unfortunately never arrived, to warn Smith-Dorrien at Bank Station

to throw himself across De Wet's path. On the 11th it was realised

that De Wet had succeeded, in spite of great exertions upon the part of

Smith-Dorrien's infantry, in crossing the railway line, and that he had

left all his pursuers to the south of him. But across his front lay

the Magaliesberg range. There are only three passes, the Magato Pass,

Olifant's Nek, and Commando Nek. It was understood that all three were

held by British troops. It was obvious, therefore, that if Methuen could

advance in such a way as to cut De Wet off from slipping through to the

west he would be unable to get away. Broadwood and Kitchener would be

behind him, and Pretoria, with the main British army, to the east.

Methuen continued to act with great energy and judgment. At three A.M.

on the 12th be started from Fredericstadt, and by 5 P.M. on Tuesday he

had done eighty miles in sixty hours. The force which accompanied him

was all mounted, 1200 of the Colonial Division (1st Brabant's, Cape

Mounted Rifles, Kaffrarian Rifles, and Border Horse), and the Yeomanry

with ten guns. Douglas with the infantry was to follow behind, and these

brave fellows covered sixty-six miles in seventy-six hours in their

eagerness to be in time. No men could have made greater efforts than

did those of Methuen, for there was not one who did not appreciate the

importance of the issue and long to come to close quarters with the wily

leader who had baffled us so long.

On the 12th Methuen's van again overtook De Wet's rear, and the old game

of rearguard riflemen on one side, and a pushing artillery on the other,

was once more resumed. All day the Boers streamed over the veld with

the guns and the horsemen at their heels. A shot from the 78th battery

struck one of De Wet's guns, which was abandoned and captured. Many

stores were taken and much more, with the wagons which contained

them, burned by the Boers. Fighting incessantly, both armies traversed

thirty-five miles of ground that day.

It was fully understood that Olifant's Nek was held by the British, so

Methuen felt that if he could block the Magato Pass all would be well.

He therefore left De Wet's direct track, knowing that other British

forces were behind him, and he continued his swift advance until he

had reached the desired position. It really appeared that at last the

elusive raider was in a corner. But, alas for fallen hopes, and alas for

the wasted efforts of gallant men! Olifant's Nek had been abandoned and

De Wet had passed safely through it into the plains beyond, where De

la Rey's force was still in possession. In vain Methuen's weary column

forced the Magato Pass and descended into Rustenburg. The enemy was in a

safe country once more. Whose the fault, or whether there was a fault at

all, it is for the future to determine. At least unalloyed praise can

be given to the Boer leader for the admirable way in which he had

extricated himself from so many dangers. On the 17th., moving along

the northern side of the mountains, he appeared at Commando Nek on the

Little Crocodile River, where he summoned Baden-Powell to surrender, and

received some chaff in reply from that light-hearted commander. Then,

swinging to the eastward, he endeavoured to cross to the north of

Pretoria. On the 19th he was heard of at Hebron. Baden-Powell and Paget

had, however, already barred this path, and De Wet, having sent Steyn on

with a small escort, turned back to the Free State. On the 22nd it was

reported that, with only a handful of his followers, he had crossed

the Magaliesberg range by a bridlepath and was riding southwards. Lord

Roberts was at last free to turn his undivided attention upon Botha.

Two Boer plots had been discovered during the first half of August,

the one in Pretoria and the other in Johannesburg, each having for its

object a rising against the British in the town. Of these the former,

which was the more serious, involving as it did the kidnapping of Lord

Roberts, was broken up by the arrest of the deviser, Hans Cordua,

a German lieutenant in the Transvaal Artillery. On its merits it is

unlikely that the crime would have been met by the extreme penalty,

especially as it was a question whether the agent provocateur had

not played a part. But the repeated breaches of parole, by which our

prisoners of one day were in the field against us on the next, called

imperatively for an example, and it was probably rather for his broken

faith than for his hare-brained scheme that Cordua died. At the

same time it is impossible not to feel sorrow for this idealist of

twenty-three who died for a cause which was not his own. He was shot in

the garden of Pretoria Gaol upon August 24th. A fresh and more stringent

proclamation from Lord Roberts showed that the British Commander was

losing his patience in the face of the wholesale return of paroled

men to the field, and announced that such perfidy would in future be

severely punished. It was notorious that the same men had been taken and

released more than once. One man killed in action was found to have nine

signed passes in his pocket. It was against such abuses that the extra

severity of the British was aimed.

CHAPTER 29. THE ADVANCE TO KOMATIPOORT.

The time had now come for the great combined movement which was to sweep

the main Boer army off the line of the Delagoa railway, cut its source

of supplies, and follow it into that remote and mountainous Lydenburg

district which had always been proclaimed as the last refuge of the

burghers. Before entering upon this most difficult of all his advances

Lord Roberts waited until the cavalry and mounted infantry were well

mounted again. Then, when all was ready, the first step in this last

stage of the regular campaign was taken by General Buller, who moved his

army of Natal veterans off the railway line and advanced to a position

from which he could threaten the flank and rear of Botha if he held his

ground against Lord Roberts. Buller's cavalry had been reinforced by the

arrival of Strathcona's Horse, a fine body of Canadian troopers,

whose services had been presented to the nation by the public-spirited

nobleman whose name they bore. They were distinguished by their fine

physique, and by the lassoes, cowboy stirrups, and large spurs of the

North-Western plains.

It was in the first week of July that Clery joined hands with the

Heidelberg garrison, while Coke with the 10th Brigade cleared the right

flank of the railway by an expedition as far as Amersfoort. On July 6th

the Natal communications were restored, and on the 7th Buller was able

to come through to Pretoria and confer with the Commander-in-Chief. A

Boer force with heavy guns still hung about the line, and several small

skirmishes were fought between Vlakfontein and Greylingstad in order

to drive it away. By the middle of July the immediate vicinity of the

railway was clear save for some small marauding parties who endeavoured

to tamper with the rails and the bridges. Up to the end of the month the

whole of the Natal army remained strung along the line of communications

from Heidelberg to Standerton, waiting for the collection of forage and

transport to enable them to march north against Botha's position.

On August 8th Buller's troops advanced to the north-east from Paardekop,

pushing a weak Boer force with five guns in front of them. At the cost

of twenty-five wounded, principally of the 60th Rifles, the enemy was

cleared off, and the town of Amersfoort was occupied. On the 13th,

moving on the same line, and meeting with very slight opposition, Buller

took possession of Ermelo. His advance was having a good effect upon the

district, for on the 12th the Standerton commando, which numbered 182

men, surrendered to Clery. On the 15th, still skirmishing, Buller's men

were at Twyfelaar, and had taken possession of Carolina. Here and there

a distant horseman riding over the olive-coloured hills showed how

closely and incessantly he was watched; but, save for a little sniping

upon his flanks, there was no fighting. He was coming now within

touch of French's cavalry, operating from Middelburg, and on the 14th

heliographic communication was established with Gordon's Brigade.

Buller's column had come nearer to its friends, but it was also nearer

to the main body of Boers who were waiting in that very rugged piece of

country which lies between Belfast in the west and Machadodorp in the

east. From this rocky stronghold they had thrown out mobile bodies to

harass the British advance from the south, and every day brought Buller

into closer touch with these advance guards of the enemy. On August 21st

he had moved eight miles nearer to Belfast, French operating upon his

left flank. Here he found the Boers in considerable numbers, but he

pushed them northward with his cavalry, mounted infantry, and artillery,

losing between thirty and forty killed and wounded, the greater part

from the ranks of the 18th Hussars and the Gordon Highlanders. This

march brought him within fifteen miles of Belfast, which lay due north

of him. At the same time Pole-Carew with the central column of Lord

Roberts's force had advanced along the railway line, and on August 24th

he occupied Belfast with little resistance. He found, however, that the

enemy were holding the formidable ridges which lie between that place

and Dalmanutha, and that they showed every sign of giving battle,

presenting a firm front to Buller on the south as well as to Roberts's

army on the west.

On the 23rd some successes attended their efforts to check the advance

from the south. During the day Buller had advanced steadily, though

under incessant fire. The evening found him only six miles to the south

of Dalmanutha, the centre of the Boer position. By some misfortune,

however, after dark two companies of the Liverpool Regiment found

themselves isolated from their comrades and exposed to a very heavy

fire. They had pushed forward too far, and were very near to being

surrounded and destroyed. There were fifty-six casualties in their

ranks, and thirty-two, including their wounded captain, were taken. The

total losses in the day were 121.

On August 25th it was evident that important events were at hand, for

on that date Lord Roberts arrived at Belfast and held a conference with

Buller, French, and Pole-Carew. The general communicated his plans to

his three lieutenants, and on the 26th and following days the fruits of

the interview were seen in a succession of rapid manoeuvres which drove

the Boers out of this, the strongest position which they had held since

they left the banks of the Tugela.

The advance of Lord Roberts was made, as his wont is, with two

widespread wings, and a central body to connect them. Such a movement

leaves the enemy in doubt as to which flank will really be attacked,

while if he denudes his centre in order to strengthen both flanks there

is the chance of a frontal advance which might cut him in two. French

with two cavalry brigades formed the left advance, Pole-Carew the

centre, and Buller the right, the whole operations extending over thirty

miles of infamous country. It is probable that Lord Roberts had reckoned

that the Boer right was likely to be their strongest position, since if

it were turned it would cut off their retreat upon Lydenburg, so his

own main attack was directed upon their left. This was carried out by

General Buller on August 26th and 27th.

On the first day the movement upon Buller's part consisted in a very

deliberate reconnaissance of and closing in upon the enemy's position,

his troops bivouacking upon the ground which they had won. On the

second, finding that all further progress was barred by the strong ridge

of Bergendal, he prepared his attack carefully with artillery and then

let loose his infantry upon it. It was a gallant feat of arms upon

either side. The Boer position was held by a detachment of the

Johannesburg Police, who may have been bullies in peace, but were

certainly heroes in war. The fire of sixty guns was concentrated for a

couple of hours upon a position only a few hundred yards in diameter.

In this infernal fire, which left the rocks yellow with lyddite, the

survivors still waited grimly for the advance of the infantry. No finer

defence was made in the war. The attack was carried out across an open

glacis by the 2nd Rifle Brigade and by the Inniskilling Fusiliers, the

men of Pieter's Hill. Through a deadly fire the gallant infantry swept

over the position, though Metcalfe, the brave colonel of the Rifles,

with eight other officers, and seventy men were killed or wounded.

Lysley, Steward, and Campbell were all killed in leading their

companies, but they could not have met their deaths upon an occasion

more honourable to their battalion. Great credit must also be given to

A and B companies of the Inniskilling Fusiliers, who were actually the

first over the Boer position. The cessation of the artillery fire was

admirably timed. It was sustained up to the last possible instant. 'As

it was,' said the captain of the leading company, 'a 94-pound shell

burst about thirty yards in front of the right of our lot. The smell of

the lyddite was awful.' A pom-pom and twenty prisoners, including the

commander of the police, were the trophies of the day. An outwork of the

Boer position had been carried, and the rumour of defeat and disaster

had already spread through their ranks. Braver men than the burghers

have never lived, but they had reached the limits of human endurance,

and a long experience of defeat in the field had weakened their nerve

and lessened their morale. They were no longer men of the same fibre as

those who had crept up to the trenches of Spion Kop, or faced the lean

warriors of Ladysmith on that grim January morning at Caesar's Camp.

Dutch tenacity would not allow them to surrender, and yet they realised

how hopeless was the fight in which they were engaged. Nearly fifteen

thousand of their best men were prisoners, ten thousand at the least had

returned to their farms and taken the oath. Another ten had been killed,

wounded, or incapacitated. Most of the European mercenaries had left;

they held only the ultimate corner of their own country, they had lost

their grip upon the railway line, and their supply of stores and of

ammunition was dwindling. To such a pass had eleven months of war

reduced that formidable army who had so confidently advanced to the

conquest of South Africa.

While Buller had established himself firmly upon the left of the Boer

position, Pole-Carew had moved forward to the north of the railway line,

and French had advanced as far as Swart Kopjes upon the Boer right.

These operations on August 26th and 27th were met with some resistance,

and entailed a loss of forty or fifty killed and wounded; but it soon

became evident that the punishment which they had received at Bergendal

had taken the fight out of the Boers, and that this formidable position

was to be abandoned as the others had been. On the 28th the burghers

were retreating, and Machadodorp, where Kruger had sat so long in his

railway carriage, protesting that he would eventually move west and not

east, was occupied by Buller. French, moving on a more northerly route,

entered Watervalonder with his cavalry upon the same date, driving a

small Boer force before him. Amid rain and mist the British columns

were pushing rapidly forwards, but still the burghers held together, and

still their artillery was uncaptured. The retirement was swift, but it

was not yet a rout.

On the 30th the British cavalry were within touch of Nooitgedacht, and

saw a glad sight in a long trail of ragged men who were hurrying in

their direction along the railway line. They were the British prisoners,

eighteen hundred in number, half of whom had been brought from Waterval

when Pretoria was captured, while the other half represented the men who

had been sent from the south by De Wet, or from the west by De la

Rey. Much allowance must be made for the treatment of prisoners by a

belligerent who is himself short of food, but nothing can excuse the

harshness which the Boers showed to the Colonials who fell into their

power, or the callous neglect of the sick prisoners at Waterval. It is

a humiliating but an interesting fact that from first to last no fewer

than seven thousand of our men passed into their power, all of whom were

now recovered save some sixty officers, who had been carried off by them

in their flight.

On September 1st Lord Roberts showed his sense of the decisive nature

of these recent operations by publishing the proclamation which had been

issued as early as July 4th, by which the Transvaal became a portion of

the British Empire. On the same day General Buller, who had ceased to

advance to the east and retraced his steps as far as Helvetia, began his

northerly movement in the direction of Lydenburg, which is nearly fifty

miles to the north of the railway line. On that date his force made a

march of fourteen miles, which brought them over the Crocodile River to

Badfontein. Here, on September 2nd, Buller found that the indomitable

Botha was still turning back upon him, for he was faced by so heavy

a shell fire, coming from so formidable a position, that he had to be

content to wait in front of it until some other column should outflank

it. The days of unnecessary frontal attacks were for ever over, and his

force, though ready for anything which might be asked of it, had gone

through a good deal in the recent operations. Since August 21st they had

been under fire almost every day, and their losses, though never great

on any one occasion, amounted in the aggregate during that time to

365. They had crossed the Tugela, they had relieved Ladysmith, they had

forced Laing's Nek, and now it was to them that the honour had fallen of

following the enemy into this last fastness. Whatever criticism may be

directed against some episodes in the Natal campaign, it must never be

forgotten that to Buller and to his men have fallen some of the hardest

tasks of the war, and that these tasks have always in the end been

successfully carried out. The controversy about the unfortunate message

to White, and the memory of the abandoned guns at Colenso, must not

lead us to the injustice of ignoring all that is to be set to the credit

account.

On September 3rd Lord Roberts, finding how strong a position faced

Buller, despatched Ian Hamilton with a force to turn it upon the right.

Brocklehurst's brigade of cavalry joined Hamilton in his advance. On the

4th he was within signalling distance of Buller, and on the right rear

of the Boer position. The occupation of a mountain called Zwaggenhoek

would establish Hamilton firmly, and the difficult task of seizing it

at night was committed to Colonel Douglas and his fine regiment of Royal

Scots. It was Spion Kop over again, but with a happier ending. At

break of day the Boers discovered that their position had been rendered

untenable and withdrew, leaving the road to Lydenburg clear to Buller.

Hamilton and he occupied the town upon the 6th. The Boers had split into

two parties, the larger one with the guns falling back upon Kruger's

Post, and the others retiring to Pilgrim's Rest. Amid cloud-girt peaks

and hardly passable ravines the two long-enduring armies still wrestled

for the final mastery.

To the north-east of Lydenburg, between that town and Spitzkop, there is

a formidable ridge called the Mauchberg, and here again the enemy were

found to be standing at bay. They were even better than their word, for

they had always said that they would make their last stand at Lydenburg,

and now they were making one beyond it. But the resistance was

weakening. Even this fine position could not be held against the rush of

the three regiments, the Devons, the Royal Irish, and the Royal

Scots, who were let loose upon it. The artillery supported the attack

admirably. 'They did nobly,' said one who led the advance. 'It is

impossible to overrate the value of their support. They ceased also

exactly at the right moment. One more shell would have hit us.' Mountain

mists saved the defeated burghers from a close pursuit, but the hills

were carried. The British losses on this day, September 8th, were

thirteen killed and twenty-five wounded; but of these thirty-eight no

less than half were accounted for by one of those strange malignant

freaks which can neither be foreseen nor prevented. A shrapnel shell,

fired at an incredible distance, burst right over the Volunteer Company

of the Gordons who were marching in column. Nineteen men fell, but it is

worth recording that, smitten so suddenly and so terribly, the gallant

Volunteers continued to advance as steadily as before this misfortune

befell them. On the 9th Buller was still pushing forward to Spitzkop,

his guns and the 1st Rifles overpowering a weak rearguard resistance of

the Boers. On the 10th he had reached Klipgat, which is halfway between

the Mauchberg and Spitzkop. So close was the pursuit that the Boers,

as they streamed through the passes, flung thirteen of their ammunition

wagons over the cliffs to prevent them from falling into the hands of

the British horsemen. At one period it looked as if the gallant Boer

guns had waited too long in covering the retreat of the burghers.

Strathcona's Horse pressed closely upon them. The situation was saved by

the extreme coolness and audacity of the Boer gunners. 'When the cavalry

were barely half a mile behind the rear gun' says an eye-witness 'and

we regarded its capture as certain, the LEADING Long Tom deliberately

turned to bay and opened with case shot at the pursuers streaming down

the hill in single file over the head of his brother gun. It was a

magnificent coup, and perfectly successful. The cavalry had to retire,

leaving a few men wounded, and by the time our heavy guns had arrived

both Long Toms had got clean away.' But the Boer riflemen would no

longer stand. Demoralised after their magnificent struggle of eleven

months the burghers were now a beaten and disorderly rabble flying

wildly to the eastward, and only held together by the knowledge that in

their desperate situation there was more comfort and safety in numbers.

The war seemed to be swiftly approaching its close. On the 15th Buller

occupied Spitzkop in the north, capturing a quantity of stores, while on

the 14th French took Barberton in the south, releasing all the remaining

British prisoners and taking possession of forty locomotives, which do

not appear to have been injured by the enemy. Meanwhile Pole-Carew had

worked along the railway line, and had occupied Kaapmuiden, which was

the junction where the Barberton line joins that to Lourenco Marques.

Ian Hamilton's force, after the taking of Lydenburg and the action which

followed, turned back, leaving Buller to go his own way, and reached

Komatipoort on September 24th, having marched since September 9th

without a halt through a most difficult country.

On September 11th an incident had occurred which must have shown the

most credulous believer in Boer prowess that their cause was indeed

lost. On that date Paul Kruger, a refugee from the country which he had

ruined, arrived at Lourenco Marques, abandoning his beaten commandos

and his deluded burghers. How much had happened since those distant days

when as a little herdsboy he had walked behind the bullocks on the great

northward trek. How piteous this ending to all his strivings and his

plottings! A life which might have closed amid the reverence of a

nation and the admiration of the world was destined to finish in exile,

impotent and undignified. Strange thoughts must have come to him during

those hours of flight, memories of his virile and turbulent youth, of

the first settlement of those great lands, of wild wars where his

hand was heavy upon the natives, of the triumphant days of the war

of independence, when England seemed to recoil from the rifles of the

burghers. And then the years of prosperity, the years when the simple

farmer found himself among the great ones of the earth, his name a

household word in Europe, his State rich and powerful, his coffers

filled with the spoil of the poor drudges who worked so hard and paid

taxes so readily. Those were his great days, the days when he hardened

his heart against their appeals for justice and looked beyond his own

borders to his kinsmen in the hope of a South Africa which should be

all his own. And now what had come of it all? A handful of faithful

attendants, and a fugitive old man, clutching in his flight at his

papers and his moneybags. The last of the old-world Puritans, he

departed poring over his well-thumbed Bible, and proclaiming that the

troubles of his country arose, not from his own narrow and corrupt

administration, but from some departure on the part of his fellow

burghers from the stricter tenets of the dopper sect. So Paul Kruger

passed away from the country which he had loved and ruined.

Whilst the main army of Botha had been hustled out of their position

at Machadodorp and scattered at Lydenburg and at Barberton, a number of

other isolated events had occurred at different points of the seat

of war, each of which deserves some mention. The chief of these was a

sudden revival of the war in the Orange River Colony, where the band

of Olivier was still wandering in the north-eastern districts. Hunter,

moving northwards after the capitulation of Prinsloo at Fouriesburg,

came into contact on August 15th with this force near Heilbron, and

had forty casualties, mainly of the Highland Light Infantry, in a brisk

engagement. For a time the British seemed to have completely lost touch

with Olivier, who suddenly on August 24th struck at a small detachment

consisting almost entirely of Queenstown Rifle Volunteers under Colonel

Ridley, who were reconnoitring near Winburg. The Colonial troopers made

a gallant defence. Throwing themselves into the farmhouse of Helpmakaar,

and occupying every post of vantage around it, they held off more than a

thousand assailants, in spite of the three guns which the latter brought

to bear upon them. A hundred and thirty-two rounds were fired at the

house, but the garrison still refused to surrender. Troopers who had

been present at Wepener declared that the smaller action was the warmer

of the two. Finally on the morning of the third day a relief force

arrived upon the scene, and the enemy dispersed. The British losses were

thirty-two killed and wounded. Nothing daunted by his failure, Olivier

turned upon the town of Winburg and attempted to regain it, but was

defeated again and scattered, he and his three sons being taken. The

result was due to the gallantry and craft of a handful of the Queenstown

Volunteers, who laid an ambuscade in a donga, and disarmed the Boers as

they passed, after the pattern of Sanna's Post. By this action one of

the most daring and resourceful of the Dutch leaders fell into the

hands of the British. It is a pity that his record is stained by his

dishonourable conduct in breaking the compact made on the occasion

of the capture of Prinsloo. But for British magnanimity a drumhead

court-martial should have taken the place of the hospitality of the

Ceylon planters.

On September 2nd another commando of Free State Boers under Fourie

emerged from the mountain country on the Basuto border, and fell upon

Ladybrand, which was held by a feeble garrison consisting of one company

of the Worcester regiment and forty-three men of the Wiltshire Yeomanry.

The Boers, who had several guns with them, appear to have been the same

force which had been repulsed at Winburg. Major White, a gallant marine,

whose fighting qualities do not seem to have deteriorated with his

distance from salt water, had arranged his defences upon a hill, after

the Wepener model, and held his own most stoutly. So great was the

disparity of the forces that for days acute anxiety was felt lest

another of those humiliating surrenders should interrupt the record of

victories, and encourage the Boers to further resistance. The point was

distant, and it was some time before relief could reach them. But

the dusky chiefs, who from their native mountains looked down on the

military drama which was played so close to their frontier, were

again, as on the Jammersberg, to see the Boer attack beaten back by the

constancy of the British defence. The thin line of soldiers, 150 of them

covering a mile and a half of ground, endured a heavy shell and rifle

fire with unshaken resolution, repulsed every attempt of the burghers,

and held the flag flying until relieved by the forces under White and

Bruce Hamilton. In this march to the relief Hamilton's infantry covered

eighty miles in four and a half days. Lean and hard, inured to warfare,

and far from every temptation of wine or women, the British troops

at this stage of the campaign were in such training, and marched so

splendidly, that the infantry was often very little slower than

the cavalry. Methuen's fine performance in pursuit of De Wet, where

Douglas's infantry did sixty-six miles in seventy-five hours, the City

Imperial Volunteers covering 224 miles in fourteen days, with a single

forced march of thirty miles in seventeen hours, the Shropshires

forty-three miles in thirty-two hours, the forty-five miles in

twenty-five hours of the Essex Regiment, Bruce Hamilton's march

recorded above, and many other fine efforts serve to show the spirit and

endurance of the troops.

In spite of the defeat at Winburg and the repulse at Ladybrand, there

still remained a fair number of broken and desperate men in the Free

State who held out among the difficult country of the east. A party of

these came across in the middle of September and endeavoured to cut the

railway near Brandfort. They were pursued and broken up by Macdonald,

who, much aided in his operations by the band of scouts which Lord Lovat

had brought with him from Scotland, took several prisoners and a large

number of wagons and of oxen. A party of these Boers attacked a small

post of sixteen Yeomanry under Lieutenant Slater at Bultfontein, but

were held at bay until relief came from Brandfort.

At two other points the Boer and British forces were in contact during

these operations. One was to the immediate north of Pretoria, where

Grobler's commando was faced by Paget's brigade. On August 18th the

Boers were forced with some loss out of Hornies Nek, which is ten miles

to the north of the capital. On the 22nd a more important skirmish took

place at Pienaar's River, in the same direction, between Baden-Powell's

men, who had come thither in pursuit of De Wet, and Grobler's band. The

advance guards of the two forces galloped into each other, and for once

Boer and Briton looked down the muzzles of each other's rifles. The

gallant Rhodesian Regiment, which had done such splendid service during

the war, suffered most heavily. Colonel Spreckley and four others were

killed, and six or seven wounded. The Boers were broken, however, and

fled, leaving twenty-five prisoners to the victors. Baden-Powell and

Paget pushed forwards as far as Nylstroom, but finding themselves

in wild and profitless country they returned towards Pretoria, and

established the British northern posts at a place called Warm Baths.

Here Paget commanded, while Baden-Powell shortly afterwards went down to

Cape Town to make arrangements for taking over the police force of the

conquered countries, and to receive the enthusiastic welcome of his

colonial fellow-countrymen. Plumer, with a small force operating from

Warm Baths, scattered a Boer commando on September 1st, capturing a few

prisoners and a considerable quantity of munitions of war. On the 5th

there was another skirmish in the same neighbourhood, during which the

enemy attacked a kopje held by a company of Munster Fusiliers, and was

driven off with loss. Many thousands of cattle were captured by the

British in this part of the field of operations, and were sent into

Pretoria, whence they helped to supply the army in the east.

There was still considerable effervescence in the western districts of

the Transvaal, and a mounted detachment met with fierce opposition at

the end of August on their journey from Zeerust to Krugersdorp. Methuen,

after his unsuccessful chase of De Wet, had gone as far as Zeerust,

and had then taken his force on to Mafeking to refit. Before leaving

Zeerust, however, he had despatched Colonel Little to Pretoria with a

column which consisted of his own third cavalry brigade, 1st Brabant's,

the Kaffrarian Rifles, R battery of Horse Artillery, and four Colonial

guns. They were acting as guard to a very large convoy of 'returned

empties.' The district which they had to traverse is one of the most

fertile in the Transvaal, a land of clear streams and of orange groves.

But the farmers are numerous and aggressive, and the column, which was

900 strong, could clear all resistance from its front, but found it

impossible to brush off the snipers upon its flanks and rear. Shortly

after their start the column was deprived of the services of its gallant

leader, Colonel Little, who was shot while riding with his advance

scouts. Colonel Dalgety took over the command. Numerous desultory

attacks culminated in a fierce skirmish at Quaggafontein on August 31st,

in which the column had sixty casualties. The event might have been

serious, as De la Rey's main force appears to have been concentrated

upon the British detachment, the brunt of the action falling upon the

Kaffrarian Rifles. By a rapid movement the column was able to extricate

itself and win its way safely to Krugersdorp, but it narrowly escaped

out of the wolf's jaws, and as it emerged into the open country De la

Rey's guns were seen galloping for the pass which they had just come

through. This force was sent south to Kroonstad to refit.

Lord Methuen's army, after its long marches and arduous work, arrived

at Mafeking on August 28th for the purpose of refitting. Since his

departure from Boshof on May 14th his men had been marching with hardly

a rest, and he had during that time fought fourteen engagements. He was

off upon the war-path once more, with fresh horses and renewed energy,

on September 8th, and on the 9th, with the co-operation of General

Douglas, he scattered a Boer force at Malopo, capturing thirty prisoners

and a great quantity of stores. On the 14th he ran down a convoy and

regained one of the Colenso guns and much ammunition. On the 20th he

again made large captures. If in the early phases of the war the Boers

had given Paul Methuen some evil hours, he was certainly getting his own

back again. At the same time Clements was despatched from Pretoria with

a small mobile force for the purpose of clearing the Rustenburg and

Krugersdorp districts, which had always been storm centres. These two

forces, of Methuen and of Clements, moved through the country, sweeping

the scattered Boer bands before them, and hunting them down until they

dispersed. At Kekepoort and at Hekspoort Clements fought successful

skirmishes, losing at the latter action Lieutenant Stanley of the

Yeomanry, the Somersetshire cricketer, who showed, as so many have done,

how close is the connection between the good sportsman and the

good soldier. On the 12th Douglas took thirty-nine prisoners near

Lichtenburg. On the 18th Rundle captured a gun at Bronkhorstfontein.

Hart at Potchefstroom, Hildyard in the Utrecht district, Macdonald in

the Orange River Colony, everywhere the British Generals were busily

stamping out the remaining embers of what had been so terrible a

conflagration.

Much trouble but no great damage was inflicted upon the British during

this last stage of the war by the incessant attacks upon the lines of

railway by roving bands of Boers. The actual interruption of traffic

was of little consequence, for the assiduous Sappers with their gangs of

Basuto labourers were always at hand to repair the break. But the loss

of stores, and occasionally of lives, was more serious. Hardly a day

passed that the stokers and drivers were not made targets of by snipers

among the kopjes, and occasionally a train was entirely destroyed.

[Footnote: It is to be earnestly hoped that those in authority will see

that these men obtain the medal and any other reward which can mark our

sense of their faithful service. One of them in the Orange River Colony,

after narrating to me his many hairbreadth escapes, prophesied bitterly

that the memory of his services would pass with the need for them.]

Chief among these raiders was the wild Theron, who led a band which

contained men of all nations--the same gang who had already, as

narrated, held up a train in the Orange River Colony. On August 31st he

derailed another at Flip River to the south of Johannesburg, blowing up

the engine and burning thirteen trucks. Almost at the same time a train

was captured near Kroonstad, which appeared to indicate that the great

De Wet was back in his old hunting-grounds. On the same day the line was

cut at Standerton. A few days later, however, the impunity with which

these feats had been performed was broken, for in a similar venture near

Krugersdorp the dashing Theron and several of his associates lost their

lives.

Two other small actions performed at this period of the war demand a

passing notice. One was a smart engagement near Kraai Railway Station,

in which Major Broke of the Sappers with a hundred men attacked a

superior Boer force upon a kopje and drove them off with loss--a feat

which it is safe to say he could not have accomplished six months

earlier. The other was the fine defence made by 125 of the Canadian

Mounted Rifles, who, while guarding the railway, were attacked by

a considerable Boer force with two guns. They proved once more, as

Ladybrand and Elands River had shown, that with provisions, cartridges,

and brains, the smallest force can successfully hold its own if it

confines itself to the defensive.

And now the Boer cause appeared to be visibly tottering to its fall. The

flight of the President had accelerated that process of disintegration

which had already set in. Schalk Burger had assumed the office

of Vice-President, and the notorious Ben Viljoen had become first

lieutenant of Louis Botha in maintaining the struggle. Lord Roberts had

issued an extremely judicious proclamation, in which he pointed out the

uselessness of further resistance, declared that guerilla warfare would

be ruthlessly suppressed, and informed the burghers that no fewer

than fifteen thousand of their fellow-countrymen were in his hands as

prisoners, and that none of these could be released until the last rifle

had been laid down. From all sides in the third week of September

the British forces were converging on Komatipoort, the frontier town.

Already wild figures, stained and tattered after nearly a year of

warfare, were walking the streets of Lourenco Marques, gazed at with

wonder and some distrust by the Portuguese inhabitants. The exiled

burghers moodily pacing the streets saw their exiled President seated in

his corner of the Governor's verandah, the well-known curved pipe still

dangling from his mouth, the Bible by his chair. Day by day the number

of these refugees increased. On September 17th special trains were

arriving crammed with the homeless burghers, and with the mercenaries of

many nations--French, German, Irish-American, and Russian--all anxious

to make their way home. By the 19th no fewer than seven hundred had

passed over.

At dawn on September 22nd a half-hearted attempt was made by the

commando of Erasmus to attack Elands River Station, but it was beaten

back by the garrison. While it was going on Paget fell upon the camp

which Erasmus had left behind him, and captured his stores. From all

over the country, from Plumer's Bushmen, from Barton at Krugersdorp,

from the Colonials at Heilbron, from Clements on the west, came the same

reports of dwindling resistance and of the abandoning of cattle, arms,

and ammunition.

On September 24th came the last chapter in this phase of the campaign in

the Eastern Transvaal, when at eight in the morning Pole-Carew and his

Guardsmen occupied Komatipoort. They had made desperate marches, one

of them through thick bush, where they went for nineteen miles without

water, but nothing could shake the cheery gallantry of the men. To

them fell the honour, an honour well deserved by their splendid work

throughout the whole campaign, of entering and occupying the ultimate

eastern point which the Boers could hold. Resistance had been threatened

and prepared for, but the grim silent advance of that veteran infantry

took the heart out of the defence. With hardly a shot fired the town

was occupied. The bridge which would enable the troops to receive their

supplies from Lourenco Marques was still intact. General Pienaar and

the greater part of his force, amounting to over two thousand men, had

crossed the frontier and had been taken down to Delagoa Bay, where they

met the respect and attention which brave men in misfortune deserve.

Small bands had slipped away to the north and the south, but they were

insignificant in numbers and depressed in spirit. For the time it seemed

that the campaign was over, but the result showed that there was greater

vitality in the resistance of the burghers and less validity in their

oaths than any one had imagined.

One find of the utmost importance was made at Komatipoort, and at Hector

Spruit on the Crocodile River. That excellent artillery which had

fought so gallant a fight against our own more numerous guns, was found

destroyed and abandoned. Pole-Carew at Komatipoort got one Long Tom

(96-pound) Creusot, and one smaller gun. Ian Hamilton at Hector

Spruit found the remains of many guns, which included two of our horse

artillery twelve-pounders, two large Creusot guns, two Krupps, one

Vickers-Maxim quick firer, two pompoms and four mountain guns.

CHAPTER 30. THE CAMPAIGN OF DE WET.

It had been hoped that the dispersal of the main Boer army, the capture

of its guns and the expulsion of many both of the burghers and of

the foreign mercenaries, would have marked the end of the war. These

expectations were, however, disappointed, and South Africa was destined

to be afflicted and the British Empire disturbed by a useless guerilla

campaign. After the great and dramatic events which characterised the

earlier phases of the struggle between the Briton and the Boer for the

mastery of South Africa it is somewhat of the nature of an anticlimax to

turn one's attention to those scattered operations which prolonged the

resistance for a turbulent year at the expense of the lives of many

brave men on either side. These raids and skirmishes, which had their

origin rather in the hope of vengeance than of victory, inflicted much

loss and misery upon the country, but, although we may deplore the

desperate resolution which bids brave men prefer death to subjugation,

it is not for us, the countrymen of Hereward or Wallace, to condemn it.

In one important respect these numerous, though trivial, conflicts

differed from the battles in the earlier stages of the war. The British

had learned their lesson so thoroughly that they often turned the tables

upon their instructors. Again and again the surprise was effected, not

by the nation of hunters, but by those rooineks whose want of cunning

and of veld-craft had for so long been a subject of derision and

merriment. A year of the kopje and the donga had altered all that. And

in the proportion of casualties another very marked change had occurred.

Time was when in battle after battle a tenth would have been a liberal

estimate for the losses of the Boers compared with those of the Briton.

So it was at Stormberg; so it was at Colenso; so it may have been at

Magersfontein. But in this last stage of the war the balance was

rather in favour of the British. It may have been because they were

now frequently acting on the defensive, or it may have been from an

improvement in their fire, or it may have come from the more desperate

mood of the burghers, but in any case the fact remains that every

encounter diminished the small reserves of the Boers rather than the

ample forces of their opponents.

One other change had come over the war, which caused more distress and

searchings of conscience among some of the people of Great Britain

than the darkest hours of their misfortunes. This lay in the increased

bitterness of the struggle, and in those more strenuous measures which

the British commanders felt themselves entitled and compelled to adopt.

Nothing could exceed the lenity of Lord Roberts's early proclamations

in the Free State. But, as the months went on and the struggle still

continued, the war assumed a harsher aspect. Every farmhouse represented

a possible fort, and a probable depot for the enemy. The extreme measure

of burning them down was only carried out after a definite offence, such

as affording cover for snipers, or as a deterrent to railway wreckers,

but in either case it is evident that the women or children who were

usually the sole occupants of the farm could not by their own unaided

exertions prevent the line from being cut or the riflemen from firing.

It is even probable that the Boers may have committed these deeds in

the vicinity of houses the destruction of which they would least regret.

Thus, on humanitarian grounds there were strong arguments against this

policy of destruction being pushed too far, and the political reasons

were even stronger, since a homeless man is necessarily the last man

to settle down, and a burned-out family the last to become contented

British citizens. On the other hand, the impatience of the army towards

what they regarded as the abuses of lenity was very great, and they

argued that the war would be endless if the women in the farm were

allowed always to supply the sniper on the kopje. The irregular

and brigand-like fashion in which the struggle was carried out had

exasperated the soldiers, and though there were few cases of individual

outrage or unauthorised destruction, the general orders were applied

with some harshness, and repressive measures were taken which warfare

may justify but which civilisation must deplore.

After the dispersal of the main army at Komatipoort there remained

a considerable number of men in arms, some of them irreconcilable

burghers, some of them foreign adventurers, and some of them Cape

rebels, to whom British arms were less terrible than British law. These

men, who were still well armed and well mounted, spread themselves over

the country, and acted with such energy that they gave the impression

of a large force. They made their way into the settled districts, and

brought fresh hope and fresh disaster to many who had imagined that

the war had passed for ever away from them. Under compulsion from their

irreconcilable countrymen, a large number of the farmers broke their

parole, mounted the horses which British leniency had left with them,

and threw themselves once more into the struggle, adding their honour

to the other sacrifices which they had made for their country. In any

account of the continual brushes between these scattered bands and the

British forces, there must be such a similarity in procedure and result,

that it would be hard for the writer and intolerable for the reader if

they were set forth in detail. As a general statement it may be said

that during the months to come there was no British garrison in any

one of the numerous posts in the Transvaal, and in that portion of

the Orange River Colony which lies east of the railway, which was not

surrounded by prowling riflemen, there was no convoy sent to supply

those garrisons which was not liable to be attacked upon the road, and

there was no train upon any one of the three lines which might not find

a rail up and a hundred raiders covering it with their Mausers. With

some two thousand miles of railroad to guard, so many garrisons to

provide, and an escort to be furnished to every convoy, there remained

out of the large body of British troops in the country only a moderate

force who were available for actual operations. This force was

distributed in different districts scattered over a wide extent of

country, and it was evident that while each was strong enough to

suppress local resistance, still at any moment a concentration of the

Boer scattered forces upon a single British column might place the

latter in a serious position. The distribution of the British in October

and November was roughly as follows. Methuen was in the Rustenburg

district, Barton at Krugersdorp and operating down the line to

Klerksdorp, Settle was in the West, Paget at Pienaar's River, Clements

in the Magaliesberg, Hart at Potchefstroom, Lyttelton at Middelburg,

Smith-Dorrien at Belfast, W. Kitchener at Lydenburg, French in the

Eastern Transvaal, Hunter, Rundle, Brabant, and Bruce Hamilton in the

Orange River Colony. Each of these forces was occupied in the same

sort of work, breaking up small bodies of the enemy, hunting for arms,

bringing in refugees, collecting supplies, and rounding up cattle. Some,

however, were confronted with organised resistance and some were not. A

short account may be given in turn of each separate column.

I would treat first the operations of General Barton, because they form

the best introduction to that narrative of the doings of Christian De

Wet to which this chapter will be devoted.

The most severe operations during the month of October fell to the lot

of this British General, who, with some of the faithful fusiliers whom

he had led from the first days in Natal, was covering the line from

Krugersdorp to Klerksdorp. It is a long stretch, and one which, as the

result shows, is as much within striking distance of the Orange Free

Staters as of the men of the Transvaal. Upon October 5th Barton

left Krugersdorp with a force which consisted of the Scots and Welsh

Fusiliers, five hundred mounted men, the 78th R.F.A., three pom-poms,

and a 4.7 naval gun. For a fortnight, as the small army moved slowly

down the line of the railroad, their progress was one continual

skirmish. On October 6th they brushed the enemy aside in an action in

which the volunteer company of the Scots Fusiliers gained the

applause of their veteran comrades. On the 8th and 9th there was sharp

skirmishing, the brunt of which on the latter date fell upon the Welsh

Fusiliers, who had three officers and eleven men injured. The commandos

of Douthwaite, Liebenberg, and Van der Merwe seem to have been occupied

in harassing the column during their progress through the Gatsrand

range. On the 15th the desultory sniping freshened again into a skirmish

in which the honours and the victory belonged mainly to the Welshmen and

to that very keen and efficient body, the Scottish Yeomanry. Six Boers

were left dead upon the ground. On October 17th the column reached

Frederickstad, where it halted. On that date six of Marshall's Horse

were cut off while collecting supplies. The same evening three hundred

of the Imperial Light Horse came in from Krugersdorp.

Up to this date the Boer forces which dogged the column had been

annoying but not seriously aggressive. On the 19th, however, affairs

took an unexpected turn. The British scouts rode in to report a huge

dust cloud whirling swiftly northwards from the direction of the Vaal

River--soon plainly visible to all, and showing as it drew nearer the

hazy outline of a long column of mounted men. The dark coats of the

riders, and possibly the speed of their advance, showed that they were

Boers, and soon it was rumoured that it was no other than Christian De

Wet with his merry men, who, with characteristic audacity, had ridden

back into the Transvaal in the hope of overwhelming Barton's column.

It is some time since we have seen anything of this energetic gentleman

with the tinted glasses, but as the narrative will be much occupied with

him in the future a few words are needed to connect him with the past.

It has been already told how he escaped through the net which caught so

many of his countrymen at the time of the surrender of Prinsloo, and how

he was chased at furious speed from the Vaal River to the mountains of

Magaliesberg. Here he eluded his pursuers, separated from Steyn, who

desired to go east to confer with Kruger, and by the end of August was

back again in his favourite recruiting ground in the north of the

Orange River Colony. Here for nearly two months he had lain very quiet,

refitting and reassembling his scattered force, until now, ready for

action once more, and fired by the hope of cutting off an isolated

British force, he rode swiftly northwards with two thousand men

under that rolling cloud which had been spied by the watchers of

Frederickstad.

The problem before him was a more serious one, however, than any which

he had ever undertaken, for this was no isolated regiment or ill-manned

post, but a complete little field force very ready to do battle with

him. De Wet's burghers, as they arrived, sprang from their ponies and

went into action in their usual invisible but effective fashion,

covered by the fire of several guns. The soldiers had thrown up lines

of sangars, however, and were able, though exposed to a very heavy fire

coming from several directions, to hold their own until nightfall, when

the defences were made more secure. On the 20th, 21st, 22nd, 23rd, and

24th the cordon of the attack was drawn gradually closer, the Boers

entirely surrounding the British force, and it was evident that they

were feeling round for a point at which an assault might be delivered.

The position of the defenders upon the morning of October 25th was as

follows. The Scots Fusiliers were holding a ridge to the south. General

Barton with the rest of his forces occupied a hill some distance off.

Between the two was a valley down which ran the line, and also the

spruit upon which the British depended for their water supply. On each

side of the line were ditches, and at dawn on this seventh day of the

investment it was found that these had been occupied by snipers during

the night, and that it was impossible to water the animals. One of two

things must follow. Either the force must shift its position or it must

drive these men out of their cover. No fire could do it, as they lay in

perfect safety. They must be turned out at the point of the bayonet.

About noon several companies of Scots and Welsh Fusiliers advanced from

different directions in very extended order upon the ditches. Captain

Baillie's company of the former regiment first attracted the fire of

the burghers. Wounded twice the brave officer staggered on until a third

bullet struck him dead. Six of his men were found lying beside him. The

other companies were exposed in their turn to a severe fire, but rushing

onwards they closed rapidly in upon the ditches. There have been few

finer infantry advances during the war, for the veld was perfectly flat

and the fire terrific. A mile of ground was crossed by the fusiliers.

Three gallant officers--Dick, Elliot, and Best--went down; but the rush

of the men was irresistible. At the edge of the ditches the supports

overtook the firing line, and they all surged into the trenches

together. Then it was seen how perilous was the situation of the Boer

snipers. They had placed themselves between the upper and the nether

millstone. There was no escape for them save across the open. It says

much for their courage that they took that perilous choice rather than

wave the white flag, which would have ensured their safety.

The scene which followed has not often been paralleled. About a hundred

and fifty burghers rushed out of the ditches, streaming across the veld

upon foot to the spot where their horses had been secreted. Rifles,

pom-poms, and shrapnel played upon them during this terrible race. 'A

black running mob carrying coats, blankets, boots, rifles, &c., was seen

to rise as if from nowhere and rush as fast as they could, dropping the

various things they carried as they ran.' One of their survivors has

described how awful was that wild blind flight, through a dust-cloud

thrown up by the shells. For a mile the veld was dotted with those who

had fallen. Thirty-six were found dead, thirty were wounded, and thirty

more gave themselves up as prisoners. Some were so demoralised that

they rushed into the hospital and surrendered to the British doctor. The

Imperial Light Horse were for some reason slow to charge. Had they done

so at once, many eye-witnesses agree that not a fugitive should have

escaped. On the other hand, the officer in command may have feared that

in doing so he might mask the fire of the British guns.

One incident in the action caused some comment at the time. A small

party of Imperial Light Horse, gallantly led by Captain Yockney of B

Squadron, came to close quarters with a group of Boers. Five of the

enemy having held up their hands Yockney passed them and pushed on

against their comrades. On this the prisoners seized their rifles once

more and fired upon their captors. A fierce fight ensued with only a few

feet between the muzzles of the rifles. Three Boers were shot dead, five

wounded, and eight taken. Of these eight three were shot next day by

order of court-martial for having resumed their weapons after surrender,

while two others were acquitted. The death of these men in cold blood

is to be deplored, but it is difficult to see how any rules of civilised

warfare can be maintained if a flagrant breach of them is not promptly

and sternly punished.

On receiving this severe blow De Wet promptly raised the investment and

hastened to regain his favourite haunts. Considerable reinforcements

had reached Barton upon the same day, including the Dublins, the Essex,

Strathcona's Horse, and the Elswick Battery, with some very welcome

supplies of ammunition. As Barton had now more than a thousand mounted

men of most excellent quality it is difficult to imagine why he did not

pursue his defeated enemy. He seems to have underrated the effect which

he had produced, for instead of instantly assuming the offensive he

busied himself in strengthening his defences. Yet the British losses in

the whole operations had not exceeded one hundred, so that there does

not appear to have been any reason why the force should be crippled.

As Barton was in direct and constant telegraphic communication with

Pretoria, it is possible that he was acting under superior orders in the

course which he adopted.

It was not destined, however, that De Wet should be allowed to escape

with his usual impunity. On the 27th, two days after his retreat

from Frederickstad he was overtaken--stumbled upon by pure chance

apparently--by the mounted infantry and cavalry of Charles Knox and De

Lisle. The Boers, a great disorganised cloud of horsemen, swept swiftly

along the northern bank of the Vaal, seeking for a place to cross, while

the British rode furiously after them, spraying them with shrapnel

at every opportunity. Darkness and a violent storm gave De Wet his

opportunity to cross, but the closeness of the pursuit compelled him to

abandon two of his guns, one of them a Krupp and the other one of the

British twelve-pounders of Sanna's Post, which, to the delight of the

gunners, was regained by that very U battery to which it belonged.

Once across the river and back in his own country De Wet, having placed

seventy miles between himself and his pursuers, took it for granted that

he was out of their reach, and halted near the village of Bothaville to

refit. But the British were hard upon his track, and for once they were

able to catch this indefatigable man unawares. Yet their knowledge of

his position seems to have been most hazy, and on the very day before

that on which they found him, General Charles Knox, with the main body

of the force, turned north, and was out of the subsequent action. De

Lisle's mounted troops also turned north, but fortunately not entirely

out of call. To the third and smallest body of mounted men, that under

Le Gallais, fell the honour of the action which I am about to describe.

It is possible that the move northwards of Charles Knox and of De Lisle

had the effect of a most elaborate stratagem, since it persuaded the

Boer scouts that the British were retiring. So indeed they were, save

only the small force of Le Gallais, which seems to have taken one last

cast round to the south before giving up the pursuit. In the grey of the

morning of November 6th, Major Lean with forty men of the 5th Mounted

Infantry came upon three weary Boers sleeping upon the veld. Having

secured the men, and realising that they were an outpost, Lean pushed

on, and topping a rise some hundreds of yards further, he and his men

saw a remarkable scene. There before them stretched the camp of the

Boers, the men sleeping, the horses grazing, the guns parked, and the

wagons outspanned.

There was little time for consideration. The Kaffir drivers were already

afoot and strolling out for their horses, or lighting the fires for

their masters' coffee. With splendid decision, although he had but forty

men to oppose to over a thousand, Lean sent back for reinforcements

and opened fire upon the camp. In an instant it was buzzing like an

overturned hive. Up sprang the sleepers, rushed for their horses, and

galloped away across the veld, leaving their guns and wagons behind.

A few stalwarts remained, however, and their numbers were increased by

those whose horses had stampeded, and who were, therefore, unable to get

away. They occupied an enclosed kraal and a farmhouse in front of the

British, whence they opened a sharp fire. At the same time a number of

the Boers who had ridden away came back again, having realised how weak

their assailants were, and worked round the British flanks upon either

side.

Le Gallais, with his men, had come up, but the British force was still

far inferior to that which it was attacking. A section of U battery

was able to unlimber, and open fire at four hundred yards from the

Boer position. The British made no attempt to attack, but contented

themselves with holding on to the position from which they could prevent

the Boer guns from being removed. The burghers tried desperately to

drive off the stubborn fringe of riflemen. A small stone shed in the

possession of the British was the centre of the Boer fire, and it was

within its walls that Ross of the Durhams was horribly wounded by an

explosive ball, and that the brave Jerseyman, Le Gallais, was killed.

Before his fall he had despatched his staff officer, Major Hickie, to

hurry up men from the rear.

On the fall of Ross and Le Gallais the command fell upon Major Taylor

of U battery. The position at that time was sufficiently alarming. The

Boers were working round each flank in considerable numbers, and they

maintained a heavy fire from a stone enclosure in the centre. The

British forces actually engaged were insignificant, consisting of forty

men of the 5th Mounted Infantry, and two guns in the centre, forty-six

men of the 17th and 18th Imperial Yeomanry upon the right, and 105 of

the 8th Mounted Infantry on the left or 191 rifles in all. The flanks of

this tiny force had to extend to half a mile to hold off the Boer flank

attack, but they were heartened in their resistance by the knowledge

that their comrades were hastening to their assistance. Taylor,

realising that a great effort must be made to tide over the crisis, sent

a messenger back with orders that the convoy should be parked, and

every available man sent up to strengthen the right flank, which was the

weakest. The enemy got close on to one of the guns, and swept down the

whole detachment, but a handful of the Suffolk Mounted Infantry under

Lieutenant Peebles most gallantly held them off from it. For an hour

the pressure was extreme. Then two companies of the 7th Mounted Infantry

came up, and were thrown on to each flank. Shortly afterwards Major

Welch, with two more companies of the same corps, arrived, and the

tide began slowly to turn. The Boers were themselves outflanked by the

extension of the British line and were forced to fall back. At half-past

eight De Lisle, whose force had trotted and galloped for twelve miles,

arrived with several companies of Australians, and the success of the

day was assured. The smoke of the Prussian guns at Waterloo was not

a more welcome sight than the dust of De Lisle's horsemen. But the

question now was whether the Boers, who were in the walled inclosure and

farm which formed their centre, would manage to escape. The place was

shelled, but here, as often before, it was found how useless a weapon

is shrapnel against buildings. There was nothing for it but to storm

it, and a grim little storming party of fifty men, half British, half

Australian, was actually waiting with fixed bayonets for the whistle

which was to be their signal, when the white flag flew out from the

farm, and all was over. Warned by many a tragic experience the British

still lay low in spite of the flag. 'Come out! come out!' they shouted.

Eighty-two unwounded Boers filed out of the enclosure, and the total

number of prisoners came to 114, while between twenty and thirty Boers

were killed. Six guns, a pom-pom, and 1000 head of cattle were the

prizes of the victors.

This excellent little action showed that the British mounted infantry

had reached a point of efficiency at which they were quite able to match

the Boers at their own game. For hours they held them with an inferior

force, and finally, when the numbers became equal, were able to drive

them off and capture their guns. The credit is largely due to Major

Lean for his prompt initiative on discovering their laager, and to Major

Taylor for his handling of the force during a very critical time. Above

all, it was due to the dead leader, Le Gallais, who had infected every

man under him with his own spirit of reckless daring. 'If I die, tell my

mother that I die happy, as we got the guns,' said he, with his failing

breath. The British total losses were twelve killed (four officers) and

thirty-three wounded (seven officers). Major Welch, a soldier of great

promise, much beloved by his men, was one of the slain. Following

closely after the repulse at Frederickstad this action was a heavy blow

to De Wet. At last, the British were beginning to take something off the

score which they owed the bold raider, but there was to be many an item

on either side before the long reckoning should be closed. The Boers,

with De Wet, fled south, where it was not long before they showed that

they were still a military force with which we had to reckon.

In defiance of chronology it may perhaps make a clearer narrative if I

continue at once with the movements of De Wet from the time that he lost

his guns at Bothaville, and then come back to the consideration of the

campaign in the Transvaal, and to a short account of those scattered

and disconnected actions which break the continuity of the story. Before

following De Wet, however, it is necessary to say something of

the general state of the Orange River Colony and of some military

developments which had occurred there. Under the wise and conciliatory

rule of General Pretyman the farmers in the south and west were settling

down, and for the time it looked as if a large district was finally

pacified. The mild taxation was cheerfully paid, schools were reopened,

and a peace party made itself apparent, with Fraser and Piet de Wet, the

brother of Christian, among its strongest advocates.

Apart from the operations of De Wet there appeared to be no large force

in the field in the Orange River Colony, but early in October of 1900

a small but very mobile and efficient Boer force skirted the eastern

outposts of the British, struck the southern line of communications, and

then came up the western flank, attacking, where an attack was possible,

each of the isolated and weakly garrisoned townlets to which it came,

and recruiting its strength from a district which had been hardly

touched by the ravages of war, and which by its prosperity alone might

have proved the amenity of British military rule. This force seems to

have skirted Wepener without attacking a place of such evil omen to

their cause. Their subsequent movements are readily traced by a sequence

of military events.

On October 1st Rouxville was threatened. On the 9th an outpost of the

Cheshire Militia was taken and the railway cut for a few hours in the

neighbourhood of Bethulie. A week later the Boer riders were dotting the

country round Phillipolis, Springfontein and Jagersfontein, the latter

town being occupied upon October 16th, while the garrison held out upon

the nearest kopje. The town was retaken from the enemy by King Hall

and his men, who were Seaforth Highlanders and police. There was fierce

fighting in the streets, and from twenty to thirty of each side were

killed or wounded. Fauresmith was attacked on October 19th, but was also

in the very safe hands of the Seaforths, who held it against a severe

assault. Phillipolis was continually attacked between the 18th and the

24th, but made a most notable defence, which was conducted by Gostling,

the resident magistrate, with forty civilians. For a week this band of

stalwarts held their own against 600 Boers, and were finally relieved

by a force from the railway. All the operations were not, however, as

successful as these three defences. On October 24th a party of cavalry

details belonging to many regiments were snapped up in an ambuscade.

On the next day Jacobsdal was attacked, with considerable loss to the

British. The place was entered in the night, and the enemy occupied the

houses which surrounded the square. The garrison, consisting of about

sixty men of the Capetown Highlanders, had encamped in the square, and

were helpless when fire was opened upon them in the morning. There was

practically no resistance, and yet for hours a murderous fire was kept

up upon the tents in which they cowered, so that the affair seems not to

have been far removed from murder. Two-thirds of the little force were

killed or wounded. The number of the assailants does not appear to have

been great, and they vanished upon the appearance of a relieving force

from Modder River.

After the disaster at Jacobsdal the enemy appeared on November 1st near

Kimberley and captured a small convoy. The country round was disturbed,

and Settle was sent south with a column to pacify it. In this way we can

trace this small cyclone from its origin in the old storm centre in the

north-east of the Orange River Colony, sweeping round the whole

country, striking one post after another, and finally blowing out at the

corresponding point upon the other side of the seat of war.

We have last seen De Wet upon November 6th, when he fled south from

Bothaville, leaving his guns but not his courage behind him. Trekking

across the line, and for a wonder gathering up no train as he passed,

he made for that part of the eastern Orange River Colony which had been

reoccupied by his countrymen. Here, in the neighbourhood of Thabanchu,

he was able to join other forces, probably the commandos of Haasbroek

and Fourie, which still retained some guns. At the head of a

considerable force he attacked the British garrison of Dewetsdorp, a

town some forty miles to the south-east of Bloemfontein.

It was on November 18th that De Wet assailed the place, and it fell upon

the 24th, after a defence which appears to have been a very creditable

one. Several small British columns were moving in the south-east of the

Colony, but none of them arrived in time to avert the disaster, which

is the more inexplicable as the town is within one day's ride of

Bloemfontein. The place is a village hemmed in upon its western side by

a semicircle of steep rocky hills broken in the centre by a gully. The

position was a very extended one, and had the fatal weakness that

the loss of any portion of it meant the loss of it all. The garrison

consisted of one company of Highland Light Infantry on the southern horn

of the semicircle, three companies of the 2nd Gloucester Regiment on the

northern and central part, with two guns of the 68th battery. Some of

the Royal Irish Mounted Infantry and a handful of police made up the

total of the defenders to something over four hundred, Major Massy in

command.

The attack developed at that end of the ridge which was held by the

company of Highlanders. Every night the Boer riflemen drew in closer,

and every morning found the position more desperate. On the 20th the

water supply of the garrison was cut, though a little was still brought

up by volunteers during the night. The thirst in the sultry trenches was

terrible, but the garrison still, with black lips and parched tongues,

held on to their lines. On the 22nd the attack had made such progress

that the post had by the Highlanders became untenable, and had to be

withdrawn. It was occupied next morning by the Boers, and the whole

ridge was at their mercy. Out of eighteen men who served one of the

British guns sixteen were killed or wounded, and the last rounds were

fired by the sergeant-farrier, who carried, loaded, and fired all by

himself. All day the soldiers held out, but the thirst was in itself

enough to justify if not to compel a surrender. At half-past five

the garrison laid down their arms, having lost about sixty killed or

wounded. There does not, as far as one can learn, seem to have been any

attempt to injure the two guns which fell into the hands of the enemy.

De Wet himself was one of the first to ride into the British trenches,

and the prisoners gazed with interest at the short strong figure, with

the dark tail coat and the square-topped bowler hat, of the most famous

of the Boer leaders.

British columns were converging, however, from several quarters, and De

Wet had to be at once on the move. On the 26th Dewetsdorp was reoccupied

by General Charles Knox with fifteen hundred men. De Wet had two days'

start, but so swift was Knox that on the 27th he had run him down at

Vaalbank, where he shelled his camp. De Wet broke away, however, and

trekking south for eighteen hours without a halt, shook off the pursuit.

He had with him at this time nearly 8000 men with several guns under

Haasbroek, Fourie, Philip Botha, and Steyn. It was his declared

intention to invade Cape Colony with his train of weary footsore

prisoners, and the laurels of Dewetsdorp still green upon him. He was

much aided in all his plans by that mistaken leniency which had refused

to recognise that a horse is in that country as much a weapon as a

rifle, and had left great numbers upon the farms with which he could

replace his useless animals. So numerous were they that many of the

Boers had two or three for their own use. It is not too much to say that

our weak treatment of the question of horses will come to be recognised

as the one great blot upon the conduct of the war, and that our undue

and fantastic scruples have prolonged hostilities for months, and cost

the country many lives and many millions of pounds.

De Wet's plan for the invasion of the Colony was not yet destined to be

realised, for a tenacious man had set himself to frustrate it. Several

small but mobile British columns, those of Pilcher, of Barker, and

of Herbert, under the supreme direction of Charles Knox, were working

desperately to head him off. In torrents of rain which turned every

spruit into a river and every road into a quagmire, the British horsemen

stuck manfully to their work. De Wet had hurried south, crossed the

Caledon River, and made for Odendaal's Drift. But Knox, after the

skirmish at Vaalbank, had trekked swiftly south to Bethulie, and was now

ready with three mobile columns and a network of scouts and patrols

to strike in any direction. For a few days he had lost touch, but his

arrangements were such that he must recover it if the Boers either

crossed the railroad or approached the river. On December 2nd he had

authentic information that De Wet was crossing the Caledon, and in an

instant the British columns were all off at full cry once more, sweeping

over the country with a front of fifteen miles. On the 3rd and 4th, in

spite of frightful weather, the two little armies of horsemen struggled

on, fetlock-deep in mud, with the rain lashing their faces. At night

without cover, drenched and bitterly cold, the troopers threw themselves

down on the sodden veld to snatch a few hours' sleep before renewing the

interminable pursuit. The drift over the Caledon flowed deep and strong,

but the Boer had passed and the Briton must pass also. Thirty guns took

to the water, diving completely under the coffee-coloured surface, to

reappear glistening upon the southern bank. Everywhere there were signs

of the passage of the enemy. A litter of crippled or dying horses marked

their track, and a Krupp gun was found abandoned by the drift. The

Dewetsdorp prisoners, too, had been set loose, and began to stumble

and stagger back to their countrymen, their boots worn off, and their

putties wrapped round their bleeding feet. It is painful to add that

they had been treated with a personal violence and a brutality in marked

contrast to the elaborate hospitality shown by the British Government to

its involuntary guests.

On December 6th De Wet had at last reached the Orange River a clear day

in front of his pursuers. But it was only to find that his labours had

been in vain. At Odendaal, where he had hoped to cross, the river was in

spate, the British flag waved from a post upon the further side, and a

strong force of expectant Guardsmen eagerly awaited him there. Instantly

recognising that the game was up, the Boer leader doubled back for the

north and safety. At Rouxville he hesitated as to whether he should snap

up the small garrison, but the commandant, Rundle, showed a bold face,

and De Wet passed on to the Coomassie Bridge over the Caledon. The small

post there refused to be bluffed into a surrender, and the Boers,

still dropping their horses fast, passed on, and got over the drift

at Amsterdam, their rearguard being hardly across before Knox had also

reached the river.

On the 10th the British were in touch again near Helvetia, where

there was a rearguard skirmish. On the 11th both parties rode

through Reddersberg, a few hours separating them. The Boers in

their cross-country trekking go, as one of their prisoners observed,

'slap-bang at everything,' and as they are past-masters in the art of ox

and mule driving, and have such a knowledge of the country that they can

trek as well by night as by day, it says much for the energy of Knox

and his men that he was able for a fortnight to keep in close touch with

them.

It became evident now that there was not much chance of overtaking

the main body of the burghers, and an attempt was therefore made to

interpose a fresh force who might head them off. A line of posts existed

between Thabanchu and Ladybrand, and Colonel Thorneycroft was stationed

there with a movable column. It was Knox's plan therefore to prevent

the Boers from breaking to the west and to head them towards the Basuto

border. A small column under Parsons had been sent by Hunter from

Bloemfontein, and pushed in upon the flank of De Wet, who had on the

12th got back to Dewetsdorp. Again the pursuit became warm, but De Wet's

time was not yet come. He headed for Springhaan Nek, about fifteen miles

east of Thabanchu. This pass is about four miles broad, with a British

fort upon either side of it. There was only one way to safety, for

Knox's mounted infantrymen and lancers were already dotting the southern

skyline. Without hesitation the whole Boer force, now some 2500 strong,

galloped at full speed in open order through the Nek, braving the long

range fire of riflemen and guns. The tactics were those of French in

his ride to Kimberley, and the success was as complete. De Wet's force

passed through the last barrier which had been held against him, and

vanished into the mountainous country round Ficksburg, where it could

safely rest and refit.

The result then of these bustling operations had been that De Wet and

his force survived, but that he had failed in his purpose of invading

the Colony, and had dropped some five hundred horses, two guns, and

about a hundred of his men. Haasbroek's commando had been detached by

De Wet to make a feint at another pass while he made his way through the

Springhaan. Parsons's force followed Haasbroek up and engaged him, but

under cover of night he was able to get away and to join his leader to

the north of Thabanchu. On December 13th, this, the second great chase

after De Wet, may be said to have closed.

CHAPTER 31. THE GUERILLA WARFARE IN THE TRANSVAAL: NOOITGEDACHT.

Leaving De Wet in the Ficksburg mountains, where he lurked until after

the opening of the New Year, the story of the scattered operations

in the Transvaal may now be carried down to the same point--a story

comprising many skirmishes and one considerable engagement, but so

devoid of any central thread that it is difficult to know how to

approach it. From Lichtenburg to Komati, a distance of four hundred

miles, there was sporadic warfare everywhere, attacks upon scattered

posts, usually beaten off but occasionally successful, attacks upon

convoys, attacks upon railway trains, attacks upon anything and

everything which could harass the invaders. Each General in his own

district had his own work of repression to perform, and so we had best

trace the doings of each up to the end of the year 1900.

Lord Methuen after his pursuit of De Wet in August had gone to Mafeking

to refit. From that point, with a force which contained a large

proportion of yeomanry and of Australian bushmen, he conducted a long

series of operations in the difficult and important district which lies

between Rustenburg, Lichtenburg, and Zeerust. Several strong and mobile

Boer commandos with guns moved about in it, and an energetic though not

very deadly warfare raged between Lemmer, Snyman, and De la Rey on the

one side, and the troops of Methuen, Douglas, Broadwood, and Lord Errol

upon the other. Methuen moved about incessantly through the broken

country, winning small skirmishes and suffering the indignity of

continual sniping. From time to time he captured stores, wagons,

and small bodies of prisoners. Early in October he and Douglas had

successes. On the 15th Broadwood was engaged. On the 20th there was

a convoy action. On the 25th Methuen had a success and twenty-eight

prisoners. On November 9th he surprised Snyman and took thirty

prisoners. On the 10th he got a pom-pom. Early in this month Douglas

separated from Methuen, and marched south from Zeerust through

Ventersdorp to Klerksdorp, passing over a country which had been hardly

touched before, and arriving at his goal with much cattle and some

prisoners. Towards the end of the month a considerable stock of

provisions were conveyed to Zeerust, and a garrison left to hold that

town so as to release Methuen's column for service elsewhere.

Hart's sphere of action was originally round Potchefstroom. On September

9th he made a fine forced march to surprise this town, which had been

left some time before with an entirely inadequate garrison to fall into

the hands of the enemy. His infantry covered thirty-six and his cavalry

fifty-four miles in fifteen hours. The operation was a complete

success, the town with eighty Boers falling into his hands with little

opposition. On September 30th Hart returned to Krugersdorp, where, save

for one skirmish upon the Gatsrand on November 22nd, he appears to have

had no actual fighting to do during the remainder of the year.

After the clearing of the eastern border of the Transvaal by the

movement of Pole-Carew along the railway line, and of Buller aided by

Ian Hamilton in the mountainous country to the north of it, there were

no operations of importance in this district. A guard was kept upon

the frontier to prevent the return of refugees and the smuggling of

ammunition, while General Kitchener, the brother of the Sirdar, broke

up a few small Boer laagers in the neighbourhood of Lydenburg.

Smith-Dorrien guarded the line at Belfast, and on two occasions,

November 1st and November 6th, he made aggressive movements against the

enemy. The first, which was a surprise executed in concert with Colonel

Spens of the Shropshires, was frustrated by a severe blizzard, which

prevented the troops from pushing home their success. The second was a

two days' expedition, which met with a spirited opposition, and demands

a fuller notice.

This was made from Belfast, and the force, which consisted of about

fourteen hundred men, advanced south to the Komati River. The infantry

were Suffolks and Shropshires, the cavalry Canadians and 5th Lancers,

with two Canadian guns and four of the 84th battery. All day the Boer

snipers clung to the column, as they had done to French's cavalry in the

same district. Mere route marches without a very definite and adequate

objective appear to be rather exasperating than overawing, for so long

as the column is moving onwards the most timid farmer may be tempted

into long-range fire from the flanks or rear. The river was reached

and the Boers driven from a position which they had taken up, but their

signal fires brought mounted riflemen from every farm, and the retreat

of the troops was pressed as they returned to Belfast. There was all the

material for a South African Lexington. The most difficult of military

operations, the covering of a detachment from a numerous and aggressive

enemy, was admirably carried out by the Canadian gunners and dragoons

under the command of Colonel Lessard. So severe was the pressure that

sixteen of the latter were for a time in the hands of the enemy,

who attempted something in the nature of a charge upon the steadfast

rearguard. The movement was repulsed, and the total Boer loss would

appear to have been considerable, since two of their leaders, Commandant

Henry Prinsloo and General Joachim Fourie, were killed, while General

Johann Grobler was wounded. If the rank and file suffered in proportion

the losses must have been severe. The British casualties in the two

days amounted to eight killed and thirty wounded, a small total when

the arduous nature of the service is considered. The Canadians and

the Shropshires seem to have borne off the honours of these trying

operations.

In the second week of October, General French, with three brigades of

cavalry (Dickson's, Gordon's, and Mahon's), started for a cross-country

ride from Machadodorp. Three brigades may seem an imposing force, but

the actual numbers did not exceed two strong regiments, or about 1500

sabres in all. A wing of the Suffolk Regiment went with them. On October

13th Mahon's brigade met with a sharp resistance, and lost ten killed

and twenty-nine wounded. On the 14th the force entered Carolina. On the

16th they lost six killed and twenty wounded, and from the day that they

started until they reached Heidelberg on the 27th there was never a day

that they could shake themselves clear of their attendant snipers. The

total losses of the force were about ninety killed and wounded, but they

brought in sixty prisoners and a large quantity of cattle and stores.

The march had at least the effect of making it clear that the passage of

a column of troops encumbered with baggage through a hostile country is

an inefficient means for quelling a popular resistance. Light and mobile

parties acting from a central depot were in future to be employed, with

greater hopes of success.

Some appreciable proportion of the British losses during this phase of

the war arose from railway accidents caused by the persistent tampering

with the lines. In the first ten days of October there were four such

mishaps, in which two Sappers, twenty-three of the Guards (Coldstreams),

and eighteen of the 66th battery were killed or wounded. On the

last occasion, which occurred on October 10th near Vlakfontein, the

reinforcements who came to aid the sufferers were themselves waylaid,

and lost twenty, mostly of the Rifle Brigade, killed, wounded, or

prisoners. Hardly a day elapsed that the line was not cut at some point.

The bringing of supplies was complicated by the fact that the Boer women

and children were coming more and more into refugee camps, where they

had to be fed by the British, and the strange spectacle was frequently

seen of Boer snipers killing or wounding the drivers and stokers of the

very trains which were bringing up food upon which Boer families were

dependent for their lives. Considering that these tactics were continued

for over a year, and that they resulted in the death or mutilation of

many hundreds of British officers and men, it is really inexplicable

that the British authorities did not employ the means used by all armies

under such circumstances--which is to place hostages upon the trains. A

truckload of Boers behind every engine would have stopped the practice

for ever. Again and again in this war the British have fought with the

gloves when their opponents used their knuckles.

We will pass now to a consideration of the doings of General Paget, who

was operating to the north and north-east of Pretoria with a force which

consisted of two regiments of infantry, about a thousand horsemen, and

twelve guns. His mounted men were under the command of Plumer. In the

early part of November this force had been withdrawn from Warm Baths and

had fallen back upon Pienaar's River, where it had continual skirmishes

with the enemy. Towards the end of November, news having reached

Pretoria that the enemy under Erasmus and Viljoen were present in force

at a place called Rhenoster Kop, which is about twenty miles north of

the Delagoa Railway line and fifty miles north-east of the capital,

it was arranged that Paget should attack them from the south, while

Lyttelton from Middelburg should endeavour to get behind them. The force

with which Paget started upon this enterprise was not a very formidable

one. He had for mounted troops some Queensland, South Australian, New

Zealand, and Tasmanian Bushmen, together with the York, Montgomery, and

Warwick Yeomanry. His infantry were the 1st West Riding regiment

and four companies of the Munsters. His guns were the 7th and 38th

batteries, with two naval quick-firing twelve-pounders and some smaller

pieces. The total could not have exceeded some two thousand men. Here,

as at other times, it is noticeable that in spite of the two hundred

thousand soldiers whom the British kept in the field, the lines of

communication absorbed so many that at the actual point of contact they

were seldom superior and often inferior in numbers to the enemy. The

opening of the Natal and Delagoa lines though valuable in many ways, had

been an additional drain. Where every culvert needs its picket and every

bridge its company, the guardianship of many hundreds of miles of rail

is no light matter.

In the early morning of November 29th Paget's men came in contact with

the enemy, who were in some force upon an admirable position. A ridge

for their centre, a flanking kopje for their cross fire, and a grass

glacis for the approach--it was an ideal Boer battlefield. The colonials

and the yeomanry under Plumer on the left, and Hickman on the right,

pushed in upon them, until it was evident that they meant to hold their

ground. Their advance being checked by a very severe fire, the horsemen

dismounted and took such cover as they could. Paget's original idea had

been a turning movement, but the Boers were the more numerous body, and

it was impossible for the smaller British force to find their flanks,

for they extended over at least seven miles. The infantry were moved up

into the centre, therefore, between the wings of dismounted horsemen,

and the guns were brought up to cover the advance. The country was

ill-suited, however, to the use of artillery, and it was only possible

to use an indirect fire from under a curve of the grass land. The guns

made good practice, however, one section of the 38th battery being in

action all day within 800 yards of the Boer line, and putting themselves

out of action after 300 rounds by the destruction of their own rifling.

Once over the curve every yard of the veld was commanded by the hidden

riflemen. The infantry advanced, but could make no headway against the

deadly fire which met them. By short rushes the attack managed to get

within 300 yards of the enemy, and there it stuck. On the right the

Munsters carried a detached kopje which was in front of them, but

could do little to aid the main attack. Nothing could have exceeded

the tenacity of the Yorkshiremen and the New Zealanders, who were

immediately to their left. Though unable to advance they refused to

retire, and indeed they were in a position from which a retirement would

have been a serious operation. Colonel Lloyd of the West Ridings was hit

in three places and killed. Five out of six officers of the New Zealand

corps were struck down. There were no reserves to give a fresh impetus

to the attack, and the thin scattered line, behind bullet-spotted stones

or anthills, could but hold its own while the sun sank slowly upon a

day which will not be forgotten by those who endured it. The Boers were

reinforced in the afternoon, and the pressure became so severe that the

field guns were retired with much difficulty. Many of the infantry had

shot away all their cartridges and were helpless. Just one year before

British soldiers had lain under similar circumstances on the plain which

leads to Modder River, and now on a smaller scale the very same drama

was being enacted. Gradually the violet haze of evening deepened into

darkness, and the incessant rattle of the rifle fire died away on either

side. Again, as at Modder River, the British infantry still lay in their

position, determined to take no backward step, and again the Boers stole

away in the night, leaving the ridge which they had defended so well.

A hundred killed and wounded was the price paid by the British for that

line of rock studded hills--a heavier proportion of losses than had

befallen Lord Methuen in the corresponding action. Of the Boer losses

there was as usual no means of judging, but several grave-mounds, newly

dug, showed that they also had something to deplore. Their retreat,

however, was not due to exhaustion, but to the demonstration which

Lyttelton had been able to make in their rear. The gunners and the

infantry had all done well in a most trying action, but by common

consent it was with the men from New Zealand that the honours lay.

It was no empty compliment when Sir Alfred Milner telegraphed to the

Premier of New Zealand his congratulations upon the distinguished

behaviour of his fellow countrymen.

From this time onwards there was nothing of importance in this part of

the seat of war.

It is necessary now to turn from the north-east to the north-west of

Pretoria, where the presence of De la Rey and the cover afforded by the

Magaliesberg mountains had kept alive the Boer resistance. Very rugged

lines of hill, alternating with fertile valleys, afforded a succession

of forts and of granaries to the army which held them. To General

Clements' column had been committed the task of clearing this difficult

piece of country. His force fluctuated in numbers, but does not appear

at any time to have consisted of more than three thousand men, which

comprised the Border Regiment, the Yorkshire Light Infantry, the second

Northumberland Fusiliers, mounted infantry, yeomanry, the 8th R.F.A., P

battery R.H.A., and one heavy gun. With this small army he moved about

the district, breaking up Boer bands, capturing supplies, and bringing

in refugees. On November 13th he was at Krugersdorp, the southern

extremity of his beat. On the 24th he was moving north again, and found

himself as he approached the hills in the presence of a force of Boers

with cannon. This was the redoubtable De la Rey, who sometimes operated

in Methuen's country to the north of the Magaliesberg, and sometimes

to the south. He had now apparently fixed upon Clements as his definite

opponent. De la Rey was numerically inferior, and Clements had no

difficulty in this first encounter in forcing him back with some loss.

On November 26th Clements was back at Krugersdorp again with cattle and

prisoners. In the early days of December he was moving northwards

once more, where a serious disaster awaited him. Before narrating the

circumstances connected with the Battle of Nooitgedacht there is one

incident which occurred in this same region which should be recounted.

This consists of the determined attack made by a party of De la Rey's

men, upon December 3rd, on a convoy which was proceeding from Pretoria

to Rustenburg, and had got as far as Buffel's Hoek. The convoy was a

very large one, consisting of 150 wagons, which covered about three

miles upon the march. It was guarded by two companies of the West

Yorkshires, two guns of the 75th battery, and a handful of the Victoria

Mounted Rifles. The escort appears entirely inadequate when it is

remembered that these stores, which were of great value, were being

taken through a country which was known to be infested by the enemy.

What might have been foreseen occurred. Five hundred Boers suddenly rode

down upon the helpless line of wagons and took possession of them. The

escort rallied, however, upon a kopje, and, though attacked all day,

succeeded in holding their own until help arrived. They prevented the

Boers from destroying or carrying off as much of the convoy as was under

their guns, but the rest was looted and burned. The incident was a

most unfortunate one, as it supplied the enemy with a large quantity of

stores, of which they were badly in need. It was the more irritating

as it was freely rumoured that a Boer attack was pending; and there is

evidence that a remonstrance was addressed from the convoy before it

left Rietfontein to the General of the district, pointing out the danger

to which it was exposed. The result was the loss of 120 wagons and of

more than half the escort. The severity of the little action and the

hardihood of the defence are indicated by the fact that the small body

who held the kopje lost fifteen killed and twenty-two wounded, the

gunners losing nine out of fifteen. A relieving force appeared at the

close of the action, but no vigorous pursuit was attempted, although

the weather was wet and the Boers had actually carried away sixty loaded

wagons, which could only go very slowly. It must be confessed that from

its feckless start to its spiritless finish the story of the Buffel's

Hoek convoy is not a pleasant one to tell.

Clements, having made his way once more to the Magaliesberg range, had

pitched his camp at a place called Nooitgedacht--not to be confused with

the post upon the Delagoa Railway at which the British prisoners had

been confined. Here, in the very shadow of the mountain, he halted

for five days, during which, with the usual insouciance of British

commanders, he does not seem to have troubled himself with any

entrenching. He knew, no doubt, that he was too strong for his opponent

De la Rey, but what he did not know, but might have feared, was that a

second Boer force might appear suddenly upon the scene and join with

De la Rey in order to crush him. This second Boer force was that of

Commandant Beyers from Warm Baths. By a sudden and skilful movement the

two united, and fell like a thunderbolt upon the British column, which

was weakened by the absence of the Border Regiment. The result was such

a reverse as the British had not sustained since Sanna's Post--a reverse

which showed that, though no regular Boer army might exist, still a

sudden coalition of scattered bands could at any time produce a force

which would be dangerous to any British column which might be taken at

a disadvantage. We had thought that the days of battles in this war

were over, but an action which showed a missing and casualty roll of 550

proved that in this, as in so many other things, we were mistaken.

As already stated, the camp of Clements lay under a precipitous cliff,

upon the summit of which he had placed four companies of the 2nd

Northumberland Fusiliers. This strong post was a thousand feet higher

than the camp. Below lay the main body of the force, two more companies

of fusiliers, four of Yorkshire Light Infantry, the 2nd Mounted

Infantry, Kitchener's Horse, yeomanry, and the artillery. The latter

consisted of one heavy naval gun, four guns of the 8th R.F.A., and P

battery R.H.A. The whole force amounted to about fifteen hundred men.

It was just at the first break of dawn--the hour of fate in South

African warfare--that the battle began. The mounted infantry post

between the camp and the mountains were aware of moving figures in front

of them. In the dim light they could discern that they were clothed in

grey, and that they wore the broad-brimmed hats and feathers of some

of our own irregular corps. They challenged, and the answer was a

shattering volley, instantly returned by the survivors of the picket. So

hot was the Boer attack that before help could come every man save

one of the picket was on the ground. The sole survivor, Daley of the

Dublins, took no backward step, but continued to steadily load and fire

until help came from the awakened camp. There followed a savage conflict

at point blank-range. The mounted infantry men, rushing half clad to the

support of their comrades, were confronted by an ever-thickening swarm

of Boer riflemen, who had already, by working round on the flank,

established their favourite cross fire. Legge, the leader of the mounted

infantry, a hard little Egyptian veteran, was shot through the head, and

his men lay thick around him. For some minutes it was as hot a corner

as any in the war. But Clements himself had appeared upon the scene, and

his cool gallantry turned the tide of fight. An extension of the

line checked the cross fire, and gave the British in turn a flanking

position. Gradually the Boer riflemen were pushed back, until at last

they broke and fled for their horses in the rear. A small body were

cut off, many of whom were killed and wounded, while a few were taken

prisoners.

This stiff fight of an hour had ended in a complete repulse of the

attack, though at a considerable cost. Both Boers and British had lost

heavily. Nearly all the staff were killed or wounded, though General

Clements had come through untouched. Fifty or sixty of both sides had

fallen. But it was noted as an ominous fact that in spite of shell fire

the Boers still lingered upon the western flank. Were they coming on

again? They showed no signs of it. And yet they waited in groups, and

looked up towards the beetling crags above them. What were they waiting

for? The sudden crash of a murderous Mauser fire upon the summit, with

the rolling volleys of the British infantry, supplied the answer.

Only now must it have been clear to Clements that he was not dealing

merely with some spasmodic attack from his old enemy De la Rey, but that

this was a largely conceived movement, in which a force at least double

the strength of his own had suddenly been concentrated upon him. His

camp was still menaced by the men whom he had repulsed, and he could

not weaken it by sending reinforcements up the hill. But the roar of

the musketry was rising louder and louder. It was becoming clearer that

there was the main attack. It was a Majuba Hill action up yonder, a

thick swarm of skirmishers closing in from many sides upon a central

band of soldiers. But the fusiliers were hopelessly outnumbered, and

this rock fighting is that above all others in which the Boer has an

advantage over the regular. A helio on the hill cried for help. The

losses were heavy, it said, and the assailants numerous. The Boers

closed swiftly in upon the flanks, and the fusiliers were no match for

their assailants. Till the very climax the helio still cried that they

were being overpowered, and it is said that even while working it

the soldier in charge was hurled over the cliff by the onrush of the

victorious Boers.

The fight of the mounted infantry men had been at half-past four. At

six the attack upon the hill had developed, and Clements in response

to those frantic flashes of light had sent up a hundred men of the

yeomanry, from the Fife and Devon squadrons, as a reinforcement. To

climb a precipitous thousand feet with rifle, bandolier, and spurs, is

no easy feat, yet that roar of battle above them heartened them upon

their way. But in spite of all their efforts they were only in time

to share the general disaster. The head of the line of hard-breathing

yeomen reached the plateau just as the Boers, sweeping over the remnants

of the Northumberland Fusiliers, reached the brink of the cliff. One by

one the yeomen darted over the edge, and endeavoured to find some cover

in the face of an infernal point-blank fire. Captain Mudie of the staff,

who went first, was shot down. So was Purvis of the Fifes, who followed

him. The others, springing over their bodies, rushed for a small trench,

and tried to restore the fight. Lieutenant Campbell, a gallant young

fellow, was shot dead as he rallied his men. Of twenty-seven of the

Fifeshires upon the hill six were killed and eleven wounded. The

statistics of the Devons are equally heroic. Those yeomen who had not

yet reached the crest were in a perfectly impossible position, as the

Boers were firing from complete cover right down upon them. There was

no alternative for them but surrender. By seven o'clock every British

soldier upon the hill, yeoman or fusilier, had been killed, wounded,

or taken. It is not true that the supply of cartridges ran out, and the

fusiliers, with the ill-luck which has pursued the 2nd battalion, were

outnumbered and outfought by better skirmishers than themselves.

Seldom has a General found himself in a more trying position than

Clements, or extricated himself more honourably. Not only had he lost

nearly half his force, but his camp was no longer tenable, and his whole

army was commanded by the fringe of deadly rifles upon the cliff. From

the berg to the camp was from 800 to 1000 yards, and a sleet of bullets

whistled down upon it. How severe was the fire may be gauged from the

fact that the little pet monkey belonging to the yeomanry--a small

enough object--was hit three times, though he lived to survive as

a battle-scarred veteran. Those wounded in the early action found

themselves in a terrible position, laid out in the open under a

withering fire, 'like helpless Aunt Sallies,' as one of them described

it. 'We must get a red flag up, or we shall be blown off the face of the

earth,' says the same correspondent, a corporal of the Ceylon Mounted

Infantry. 'We had a pillow-case, but no red paint. Then we saw what

would do instead, so they made the upright with my blood, and the

horizontal with Paul's.' It is pleasant to add that this grim flag was

respected by the Boers. Bullocks and mules fell in heaps, and it was

evident that the question was not whether the battle could be restored,

but whether the guns could be saved. Leaving a fringe of yeomen, mounted

infantry, and Kitchener's Horse to stave off the Boers, who were already

descending by the same steep kloof up which the yeomen had climbed, the

General bent all his efforts to getting the big naval gun out of danger.

Only six oxen were left out of a team of forty, and so desperate did

the situation appear that twice dynamite was placed beneath the gun to

destroy it. Each time, however, the General intervened, and at last,

under a stimulating rain of pom-pom shells, the great cannon lurched

slowly forward, quickening its pace as the men pulled on the drag-ropes,

and the six oxen broke into a wheezy canter. Its retreat was covered by

the smaller guns which rained shrapnel upon the crest of the hill, and

upon the Boers who were descending to the camp. Once the big gun was out

of danger, the others limbered up and followed, their rear still covered

by the staunch mounted infantry, with whom rest all the honours of the

battle. Cookson and Brooks with 250 men stood for hours between Clements

and absolute disaster. The camp was abandoned as it stood, and all the

stores, four hundred picketed horses, and, most serious of all, two

wagons of ammunition, fell into the hands of the victors. To have saved

all his guns, however, after the destruction of half his force by an

active enemy far superior to him in numbers and in mobility, was a feat

which goes far to condone the disaster, and to increase rather than to

impair the confidence which his troops feel in General Clements. Having

retreated for a couple of miles he turned his big gun round upon the

hill, which is called Yeomanry Hill, and opened fire upon the camp,

which was being looted by swarms of Boers. So bold a face did he present

that he was able to remain with his crippled force upon Yeomanry Hill

from about nine until four in the afternoon, and no attack was pressed

home, though he lay under both shell and rifle fire all day. At four

in the afternoon he began his retreat, which did not cease till he had

reached Rietfontein, twenty miles off, at six o'clock upon the following

morning. His weary men had been working for twenty-six hours, and

actually fighting for fourteen, but the bitterness of defeat was

alleviated by the feeling that every man, from the General downwards,

had done all that was possible, and that there was every prospect of

their having a chance before long of getting their own back.

The British losses at the battle of Nooitgedacht amounted to 60 killed,

180 wounded, and 315 prisoners, all of whom were delivered up a few days

later at Rustenburg. Of the Boer losses it is, as usual, impossible

to speak with confidence, but all the evidence points to their actual

casualties being as heavy as those of the British. There was the long

struggle at the camp in which they were heavily punished, the fight on

the mountain, where they exposed themselves with unusual recklessness,

and the final shelling from shrapnel and from lyddite. All accounts

agree that their attack was more open than usual. 'They were mowed down

in twenties that day, but it had no effect. They stood like fanatics,'

says one who fought against them. From first to last their conduct was

most gallant, and great credit is due to their leaders for the skilful

sudden concentration by which they threw their whole strength upon the

exposed force. Some eighty miles separate Warm Baths from Nooitgedacht,

and it seems strange that our Intelligence Department should have

remained in ignorance of so large a movement.

General Broadwood's 2nd Cavalry Brigade had been stationed to the north

of Magaliesberg, some twelve miles westward of Clements, and formed

the next link in the long chain of British forces. Broadwood does not

appear, however, to have appreciated the importance of the engagement,

and made no energetic movement to take part in it. If Colvile is open

to the charge of having been slow to 'march upon the cannon' at Sanna's

Post, it might be urged that Broadwood in turn showed some want of

energy and judgment upon this occasion. On the morning of the 13th his

force could hear the heavy firing to the eastward, and could even see

the shells bursting on the top of the Magaliesberg. It was but ten or

twelve miles distant, and, as his Elswick guns have a range of

nearly five, a very small advance would have enabled him to make a

demonstration against the flank of the Boers, and so to relieve the

pressure upon Clements. It is true that his force was not large, but it

was exceptionally mobile. Whatever the reasons, no effective advance was

made by Broadwood. On hearing the result he fell back upon Rustenburg,

the nearest British post, his small force being dangerously isolated.

Those who expected that General Clements would get his own back had not

long to wait. In a few days he was in the field again. The remains of

his former force had, however, been sent into Pretoria to refit, and

nothing remained of it save the 8th R.F.A. and the indomitable cow-gun

still pocked with the bullets of Nooitgedacht. He had also F battery

R.H.A., the Inniskillings, the Border regiment, and a force of mounted

infantry under Alderson. More important than all, however, was the

co-operation of General French, who came out from Pretoria to assist in

the operations. On the 19th, only six days after his defeat, Clements

found himself on the very same spot fighting some at least of the very

same men. This time, however, there was no element of surprise, and the

British were able to approach the task with deliberation and method. The

result was that both upon the 19th and 20th the Boers were shelled out

of successive positions with considerable loss, and driven altogether

away from that part of the Magaliesberg. Shortly afterwards General

Clements was recalled to Pretoria, to take over the command of the 7th

Division, General Tucker having been appointed to the military command

of Bloemfontein in the place of the gallant Hunter, who, to the regret

of the whole army, was invalided home. General Cunningham henceforward

commanded the column which Clements had led back to the Magaliesberg.

Upon November 13th the first of a series of attacks was made upon the

posts along the Delagoa Railway line. These were the work of Viljoen's

commando, who, moving swiftly from the north, threw themselves upon the

small garrisons of Balmoral and of Wilge River, stations which are about

six miles apart. At the former was a detachment of the Buffs, and at

the latter of the Royal Fusiliers. The attack was well delivered, but

in each instance was beaten back with heavy loss to the assailants. A

picket of the Buffs was captured at the first rush, and the detachment

lost six killed and nine wounded. No impression was made upon the

position, however, and the double attack seems to have cost the Boers a

large number of casualties.

Another incident calling for some mention was the determined attack made

by the Boers upon the town of Vryheid, in the extreme south-east of the

Transvaal near the Natal border. Throughout November this district had

been much disturbed, and the small British garrison had evacuated the

town and taken up a position on the adjacent hills. Upon December 11th

the Boers attempted to carry the trenches. The garrison of the town

appears to have consisted of the 2nd Royal Lancaster regiment, some five

hundred strong, a party of the Lancashire Fusiliers, 150 strong, and

fifty men of the Royal Garrison Artillery, with a small body of mounted

infantry. They held a hill about half a mile north of the town, and

commanding it. The attack, which was a surprise in the middle of the

night, broke upon the pickets of the British, who held their own in a

way which may have been injudicious but was certainly heroic. Instead

of falling back when seriously attacked, the young officers in charge of

these outposts refused to move, and were speedily under such a fire that

it was impossible to reinforce them. There were four outposts, under

Woodgate, Theobald, Lippert, and Mangles. The attack at 2.15 on a

cold dark morning began at the post held by Woodgate, the Boers coming

hand-to-hand before they were detected. Woodgate, who was unarmed at the

instant, seized a hammer, and rushed at the nearest Boer, but was struck

by two bullets and killed. His post was dispersed or taken. Theobald and

Lippert, warned by the firing, held on behind their sangars, and were

ready for the storm which burst over them. Lippert was unhappily killed,

and his ten men all hit or taken, but young Theobald held his own

under a heavy fire for twelve hours. Mangles also, the gallant son of

a gallant father, held his post all day with the utmost tenacity. The

troops in the trenches behind were never seriously pressed, thanks

to the desperate resistance of the outposts, but Colonel Gawne of the

Lancasters was unfortunately killed. Towards evening the Boers abandoned

the attack, leaving fourteen of their number dead upon the ground, from

which it may be guessed that their total casualties were not less than

a hundred. The British losses were three officers and five men killed,

twenty-two men wounded, and thirty men with one officer missing--the

latter being the survivors of those outposts which were overwhelmed by

the Boer advance.

A few incidents stand out among the daily bulletins of snipings,

skirmishes, and endless marchings which make the dull chronicle of

these, the last months of the year 1900. These must be enumerated

without any attempt at connecting them. The first is the long-drawn-out

siege or investment of Schweizer-Renecke. This small village stands upon

the Harts River, on the western border of the Transvaal. It is not easy

to understand why the one party should desire to hold, or the other to

attack, a position so insignificant. From August 19th onwards it was

defended by a garrison of 250 men, under the very capable command of

Colonel Chamier, who handled a small business in a way which marks him

as a leader. The Boer force, which varied in numbers from five hundred

to a thousand, never ventured to push home an attack, for Chamier, fresh

from the experience of Kimberley, had taken such precautions that

his defences were formidable, if not impregnable. Late in September a

relieving force under Colonel Settle threw fresh supplies into the town,

but when he passed on upon his endless march the enemy closed in once

more, and the siege was renewed. It lasted for several months, until a

column withdrew the garrison and abandoned the position.

Of all the British detachments, the two which worked hardest and

marched furthest during this period of the war was the 21st Brigade

(Derbysbires, Sussex, and Camerons) under General Bruce Hamilton, and

the column under Settle, which operated down the western border of the

Orange River Colony, and worked round and round with such pertinacity

that it was familiarly known as Settle's Imperial Circus. Much hard and

disagreeable work, far more repugnant to the soldier than the actual

dangers of war, fell to the lot of Bruce Hamilton and his men. With

Kroonstad as their centre they were continually working through the

dangerous Lindley and Heilbron districts, returning to the railway line

only to start again immediately upon a fresh quest. It was work for

mounted police, not for infantry soldiers, but what they were given to

do they did to the best of their ability. Settle's men had a similar

thankless task. From the neighbourhood of Kimberley he marched in

November with his small column down the border of the Orange River

Colony, capturing supplies and bringing in refugees. He fought one brisk

action with Hertzog's commando at Kloof, and then, making his way across

the colony, struck the railway line again at Edenburg on December 7th,

with a train of prisoners and cattle.

Rundle also had put in much hard work in his efforts to control the

difficult district in the north-east of the Colony which had been

committed to his care. He traversed in November from north to south the

same country which he had already so painfully traversed from south to

north. With occasional small actions he moved about from Vrede to Reitz,

and so to Bethlehem and Harrismith. On him, as on all other commanders,

the vicious system of placing small garrisons in the various towns

imposed a constant responsibility lest they should be starved or

overwhelmed.

The year and the century ended by a small reverse to the British arms

in the Transvaal. This consisted in the capture of a post at Helvetia

defended by a detachment of the Liverpool Regiment and by a 4.7 gun.

Lydenburg, being seventy miles off the railway line, had a chain of

posts connecting it with the junction at Machadodorp. These posts were

seven in number, ten miles apart, each defended by 250 men. Of these

Helvetia was the second. The key of the position was a strongly

fortified hill about three-quarters of a mile from the headquarter

camp, and commanding it. This post was held by Captain Kirke with forty

garrison artillery to work the big gun, and seventy Liverpool infantry.

In spite of the barbed-wire entanglements, the Boers most gallantly

rushed this position, and their advance was so rapid, or the garrison so

slow, that the place was carried with hardly a shot fired. Major Cotton,

who commanded the main lines, found himself deprived in an instant of

nearly half his force and fiercely attacked by a victorious and exultant

enemy. His position was much too extended for the small force at his

disposal, and the line of trenches was pierced and enfiladed at

many points. It must be acknowledged that the defences were badly

devised--little barbed wire, frail walls, large loopholes, and the

outposts so near the trenches that the assailants could reach them as

quickly as the supports. With the dawn Cotton's position was serious,

if not desperate. He was not only surrounded, but was commanded from Gun

Hill. Perhaps it would have been wiser if, after being wounded, he had

handed over the command to Jones, his junior officer. A stricken man's

judgement can never be so sound as that of the hale. However that may

be, he came to the conclusion that the position was untenable, and that

it was best to prevent further loss of life. Fifty of the Liverpools

were killed and wounded, 200 taken. No ammunition of the gun was

captured, but the Boers were able to get safely away with this

humiliating evidence of their victory. One post, under Captain Wilkinson

with forty men, held out with success, and harassed the enemy in their

retreat. As at Dewetsdorp and at Nooitgedacht, the Boers were unable

to retain their prisoners, so that the substantial fruits of their

enterprise were small, but it forms none the less one more of those

incidents which may cause us to respect our enemy and to be critical

towards ourselves. [Footnote: Considering that Major Stapelton Cotton

was himself wounded in three places during the action (one of these

wounds being in the head), he has had hard measure in being deprived

of his commission by a court-martial which sat eight months after the

event. It is to be earnestly hoped that there may be some revision of

this severe sentence.]

In the last few months of the year some of those corps which had served

their time or which were needed elsewhere were allowed to leave the seat

of war. By the middle of November the three different corps of the City

Imperial Volunteers, the two Canadian contingents, Lumsden's Horse, the

Composite Regiment of Guards, six hundred Australians, A battery R.H.A.,

and the volunteer companies of the regular regiments, were all homeward

bound. This loss of several thousand veteran troops before the war was

over was to be deplored, and though unavoidable in the case of volunteer

contingents, it is difficult to explain where regular troops are

concerned. Early in the new year the Government was compelled to send

out strong reinforcements to take their place.

Early in December Lord Roberts also left the country, to take over the

duties of Commander-in-Chief. High as his reputation stood when, in

January, he landed at Cape Town, it is safe to say that it had been

immensely enhanced when, ten months later, he saw from the quarter-deck

of the 'Canada' the Table Mountain growing dimmer in the distance. He

found a series of disconnected operations, in which we were uniformly

worsted. He speedily converted them into a series of connected

operations in which we were almost uniformly successful. Proceeding

to the front at the beginning of February, within a fortnight he had

relieved Kimberley, within a month he had destroyed Cronje's force, and

within six weeks he was in Bloemfontein. Then, after a six weeks' halt

which could not possibly have been shortened, he made another of his

tiger leaps, and within a month had occupied Johannesburg and Pretoria.

From that moment the issue of the campaign was finally settled, and

though a third leap was needed, which carried him to Komatipoort,

and though brave and obstinate men might still struggle against

their destiny, he had done what was essential, and the rest, however

difficult, was only the detail of the campaign. A kindly gentleman, as

well as a great soldier, his nature revolted from all harshness, and a

worse man might have been a better leader in the last hopeless phases of

the war. He remembered, no doubt, how Grant had given Lee's army their

horses, but Lee at the time had been thoroughly beaten, and his men had

laid down their arms. A similar boon to the partially conquered Boers

led to very different results, and the prolongation of the war is

largely due to this act of clemency. At the same time political and

military considerations were opposed to each other upon the point, and

his moral position in the use of harsher measures is the stronger

since a policy of conciliation had been tried and failed. Lord Roberts

returned to London with the respect and love of his soldiers and of his

fellow-countrymen. A passage from his farewell address to his troops may

show the qualities which endeared him to them.

'The service which the South African Force has performed is, I

venture to think, unique in the annals of war, inasmuch as it has been

absolutely almost incessant for a whole year, in some cases for more

than a year. There has been no rest, no days off to recruit, no going

into winter quarters, as in other campaigns which have extended over

a long period. For months together, in fierce heat, in biting cold, in

pouring rain, you, my comrades, have marched and fought without halt,

and bivouacked without shelter from the elements. You frequently have

had to continue marching with your clothes in rags and your boots

without soles, time being of such consequence that it was impossible

for you to remain long enough in one place to refit. When not engaged

in actual battle you have been continually shot at from behind kopjes

by invisible enemies to whom every inch of the country was familiar,

and who, from the peculiar nature of the country, were able to inflict

severe punishment while perfectly safe themselves. You have forced your

way through dense jungles, over precipitous mountains, through and over

which with infinite manual labour you have had to drag heavy guns

and ox-wagons. You have covered with almost incredible speed enormous

distances, and that often on very short supplies of food. You have

endured the sufferings inevitable in war to sick and wounded men far

from the base, without a murmur and even with cheerfulness.'

The words reflect honour both upon the troops addressed and upon the man

who addressed them. From the middle of December 1900 Lord Kitchener took

over the control of the campaign.

CHAPTER 32. THE SECOND INVASION OF CAPE COLONY.

(DECEMBER 1900 TO APRIL 1901.)

During the whole war the task of the British had been made very much

more difficult by the openly expressed sympathy with the Boers from

the political association known as the Afrikander Bond, which either

inspired or represented the views which prevailed among the great

majority of the Dutch inhabitants of Cape Colony. How strong was this

rebel impulse may be gauged by the fact that in some of the border

districts no less than ninety per cent of the voters joined the Boer

invaders upon the occasion of their first entrance into the Colony. It

is not pretended that these men suffered from any political grievances

whatever, and their action is to be ascribed partly to a natural

sympathy with their northern kinsmen, and partly to racial ambition and

to personal dislike to their British neighbours. The liberal British

policy towards the natives had especially alienated the Dutch, and had

made as well-marked a line of cleavage in South Africa as the slave

question had done in the States of the Union.

With the turn of the war the discontent in Cape Colony became less

obtrusive, if not less acute, but in the later months of the year

1900 it increased to a degree which became dangerous. The fact of the

farm-burning in the conquered countries, and the fiction of outrages by

the British troops, raised a storm of indignation. The annexation of the

Republics, meaning the final disappearance of any Dutch flag from South

Africa, was a racial humiliation which was bitterly resented. The Dutch

papers became very violent, and the farmers much excited. The agitation

culminated in a conference at Worcester upon December 6th, at which some

thousands of delegates were present. It is suggestive of the Imperial

nature of the struggle that the assembly of Dutch Afrikanders was

carried out under the muzzles of Canadian artillery, and closely watched

by Australian cavalry. Had violent words transformed themselves into

deeds, all was ready for the crisis.

Fortunately the good sense of the assembly prevailed, and the agitation,

though bitter, remained within those wide limits which a British

constitution permits. Three resolutions were passed, one asking that

the war be ended, a second that the independence of the Republics be

restored, and a third protesting against the actions of Sir Alfred

Milner. A deputation which carried these to the Governor received a

courteous but an uncompromising reply. Sir Alfred Milner pointed out

that the Home Government, all the great Colonies, and half the Cape

were unanimous in their policy, and that it was folly to imagine that

it could be reversed on account of a local agitation. All were agreed in

the desire to end the war, but the last way of bringing this about was

by encouraging desperate men to go on fighting in a hopeless cause. Such

was the general nature of the Governor's reply, which was, as might be

expected, entirely endorsed by the British Government and people.

Had De Wet, in the operations which have already been described, evaded

Charles Knox and crossed the Orange River, his entrance into the Colony

would have been synchronous with the congress at Worcester, and the

situation would have become more acute. This peril was fortunately

averted. The agitation in the Colony suggested to the Boer leaders,

however, that here was an untouched recruiting ground, and that small

mobile invading parties might gather strength and become formidable.

It was obvious, also, that by enlarging the field of operations the

difficulties of the British Commander-in-chief would be very much

increased, and the pressure upon the Boer guerillas in the Republics

relaxed. Therefore, in spite of De Wet's failure to penetrate the

Colony, several smaller bands under less-known leaders were despatched

over the Orange River. With the help of the information and the supplies

furnished by the local farmers, these bands wandered for many months

over the great expanse of the Colony, taking refuge, when hard pressed,

among the mountain ranges. They moved swiftly about, obtaining remounts

from their friends, and avoiding everything in the nature of an action,

save when the odds were overwhelmingly in their favour. Numerous small

posts or patrols cut off, many skirmishes, and one or two railway

smashes were the fruits of this invasion, which lasted till the end of

the war, and kept the Colony in an extreme state of unrest during that

period. A short account must be given here of the movement and exploits

of these hostile bands, avoiding, as far as possible, that catalogue of

obscure 'fonteins' and 'kops' which mark their progress.

The invasion was conducted by two main bodies, which shed off numerous

small raiding parties. Of these two, one operated on the western side

of the Colony, reaching the sea-coast in the Clanwilliam district, and

attaining a point which is less than a hundred miles from Cape Town.

The other penetrated even more deeply down the centre of the Colony,

reaching almost to the sea in the Mossel Bay direction. Yet the

incursion, although so far-reaching, had small effect, since the

invaders held nothing save the ground on which they stood, and won their

way, not by victory, but by the avoidance of danger. Some recruits were

won to their cause, but they do not seem at that time to have been more

than a few hundreds in number, and to have been drawn for the most part

from the classes of the community which had least to lose and least to

offer.

The Western Boers were commanded by Judge Hertzog of the Free State,

having with him Brand, the son of the former president, and about twelve

hundred well-mounted men. Crossing the Orange River at Sand Drift, north

of Colesberg, upon December 16th, they paused at Kameelfontein to

gather up a small post of thirty yeomen and guardsmen under Lieutenant

Fletcher, the wellknown oar. Meeting with a stout resistance, and

learning that British forces were already converging upon them, they

abandoned the attack, and turning away from Colesberg they headed west,

cutting the railway line twenty miles to the north of De Aar. On the

22nd they occupied Britstown, which is eighty miles inside the border,

and on the same day they captured a small body of yeomanry who had been

following them. These prisoners were released again some days later.

Taking a sweep round towards Prieska and Strydenburg, they pushed south

again. At the end of the year Hertzog's column was 150 miles deep in the

Colony, sweeping through the barren and thinly-inhabited western lands,

heading apparently for Fraserburg and Beaufort West.

The second column was commanded by Kritzinger, a burgher of Zastron, in

the Orange River Colony. His force was about 800 strong. Crossing

the border at Rhenoster Hoek upon December 16th, they pushed for

Burghersdorp, but were headed off by a British column. Passing through

Venterstad, they made for Steynsberg, fighting two indecisive skirmishes

with small British forces. The end of the year saw them crossing the

rail road at Sherburne, north of Rosmead Junction, where they captured a

train as they passed, containing some Colonial troops. At this time they

were a hundred miles inside the Colony, and nearly three hundred from

Hertzog's western column.

In the meantime Lord Kitchener, who had descended for a few days to De

Aar, had shown great energy in organising small mobile columns which

should follow and, if possible, destroy the invaders. Martial law was

proclaimed in the parts of the Colony affected, and as the invaders

came further south the utmost enthusiasm was shown by the loyalists,

who formed themselves everywhere into town guards. The existing Colonial

regiments, such as Brabant's, the Imperial and South African Light

Horse--Thorneycroft's, Rimington's, and the others--had already been

brought up to strength again, and now two new regiments were added,

Kitchener's Bodyguard and Kitchener's Fighting Scouts, the latter being

raised by Johann Colenbrander, who had made a name for himself in the

Rhodesian wars. At this period of the war between twenty and thirty

thousand Cape colonists were under arms. Many of these were untrained

levies, but they possessed the martial spirit of the race, and they set

free more seasoned troops for other duties.

It will be most convenient and least obscure to follow the movements of

the western force (Hertzog's), and afterwards to consider those of the

eastern (Kritzinger's). The opening of the year saw the mobile column of

Free Staters 150 miles over the border, pushing swiftly south over the

barren surface of the Karoo. It is a country of scattered farms and

scanty population; desolate plains curving upwards until they rise into

still more desolate mountain ranges. Moving in a very loose formation

over a wide front, the Boers swept southwards. On or about January 4th

they took possession of the small town of Calvinia, which remained their

headquarters for more than a month. From this point their roving bands

made their way as far as the seacoast in the Clanwilliam direction, for

they expected at Lambert's Bay to meet with a vessel with mercenaries

and guns from Europe. They pushed their outposts also as far as

Sutherland and Beaufort West in the south. On January 15th strange

horsemen were seen hovering about the line at Touws River, and the

citizens of Cape Town learned with amazement that the war had been

carried to within a hundred miles of their own doors.

Whilst the Boers were making this daring raid a force consisting of

several mobile columns was being organised by General Settle to arrest

and finally to repel the western invasion. The larger body was under the

command of Colonel De Lisle, an officer who brought to the operations

of war the same energy and thoroughness with which he had made the polo

team of an infantry regiment the champions of the whole British Army.

His troops consisted of the 6th Mounted Infantry, the New South Wales

Mounted Infantry, the Irish Yeomanry, a section of R battery R.H.A., and

a pom-pom. With this small but mobile and hardy force he threw himself

in front of Hertzog's line of advance. On January 13th he occupied

Piquetburg, eighty miles south of the Boer headquarters. On the 23rd he

was at Clanwilliam, fifty miles south-west of them. To his right were

three other small British columns under Bethune, Thorneycroft, and

Henniker, the latter resting upon the railway at Matjesfontein, and the

whole line extending over 120 miles--barring the southern path to the

invaders.

Though Hertzog at Calvinia and De Lisle at Clanwilliam were only fifty

miles apart, the intervening country is among the most broken and

mountainous in South Africa. Between the two points, and nearer to De

Lisle than to Hertzog, flows the Doorn River. The Boers advancing from

Calvinia came into touch with the British scouts at this point, and

drove them in upon January 21st. On the 28th De Lisle, having been

reinforced by Bethune's column, was able at last to take the initiative.

Bethune's force consisted mainly of Colonials, and included Kitchener's

Fighting Scouts, the Cape Mounted Police, Cape Mounted Rifles, Brabant's

Horse, and the Diamond Field Horse. At the end of January the

united forces of Bethune and of De Lisle advanced upon Calvinia. The

difficulties lay rather in the impassable country than in the resistance

of an enemy who was determined to refuse battle. On February 6th, after

a fine march, De Lisle and his men took possession of Calvinia, which

had been abandoned by the Boers. It is painful to add that during the

month that they had held the town they appear to have behaved with great

harshness, especially to the kaffirs. The flogging and shooting of a

coloured man named Esan forms one more incident in the dark story of the

Boer and his relations to the native.

The British were now sweeping north on a very extended front.

Colenbrander had occupied Van Rhyns Dorp, to the east of Calvinia, while

Bethune's force was operating to the west of it. De Lisle hardly halted

at Calvinia, but pushed onwards to Williston, covering seventy-two

miles of broken country in forty-eight hours, one of the most amazing

performances of the war. Quick as he was, the Boers were quicker still,

and during his northward march he does not appear to have actually come

into contact with them. Their line of retreat lay through Carnarvon, and

upon February 22nd they crossed the railway line to the north of De Aar,

and joined upon February 26th the new invading force under De Wet, who

had now crossed the Orange River. De Lisle, who had passed over five

hundred miles of barren country since he advanced from Piquetburg, made

for the railway at Victoria West, and was despatched from that place on

February 22nd to the scene of action in the north. From all parts Boer

and Briton were concentrating in their effort to aid or to repel the

inroad of the famous guerilla.

Before describing this attempt it would be well to trace the progress

of the eastern invasion (Kritzinger's), a movement which may be treated

rapidly, since it led to no particular military result at that time,

though it lasted long after Hertzog's force had been finally dissipated.

Several small columns, those of Williams, Byng, Grenfell, and Lowe,

all under the direction of Haig, were organised to drive back these

commandos; but so nimble were the invaders, so vast the distances and

so broken the country, that it was seldom that the forces came into

contact. The operations were conducted over a portion of the Colony

which is strongly Dutch in sympathy, and the enemy, though they do

not appear to have obtained any large number of recruits, were able to

gather stores, horses, and information wherever they went.

When last mentioned Kritzinger's men had crossed the railway north of

Rosmead on December 30th, and held up a train containing some Colonial

troops. From then onwards a part of them remained in the Middelburg and

Graaf-Reinet districts, while part moved towards the south. On January

11th there was a sharp skirmish near Murraysburg, in which Byng's column

was engaged, at the cost of twenty casualties, all of Brabant's or the

South African Light Horse. On the 16th a very rapid movement towards the

south began. On that date Boers appeared at Aberdeen, and on the 18th at

Willowmore, having covered seventy miles in two days. Their long, thin

line was shredded out over 150 miles, and from Maraisburg, in the north,

to Uniondale, which is only thirty miles from the coast, there

was rumour of their presence. In this wild district and in that of

Oudtshoorn the Boer vanguard flitted in and out of the hills, Haig's

column striving hard to bring them to an action. So well-informed

were the invaders that they were always able to avoid the British

concentrations, while if a British outpost or patrol was left exposed

it was fortunate if it escaped disaster. On February 6th a small body

of twenty-five of the 7th King's Dragoon Guards and of the West

Australians, under Captain Oliver, were overwhelmed at Klipplaat, after

a very fine defence, in which they held their own against 200 Boers for

eight hours, and lost nearly fifty per cent of their number. On the 12th

a patrol of yeomanry was surprised and taken near Willowmore.

The coming of De Wet had evidently been the signal for all the Boer

raiders to concentrate, for in the second week of February Kritzinger

also began to fall back, as Hertzog had done in the west, followed

closely by the British columns. He did not, however, actually join De

Wet, and his evacuation of the country was never complete, as was the

case with Hertzog's force. On the 19th Kritzinger was at Bethesda, with

Gorringe and Lowe at his heels. On the 23rd an important railway bridge

at Fish River, north of Cradock, was attacked, but the attempt was

foiled by the resistance of a handful of Cape Police and Lancasters. On

March 6th a party of Boers occupied the village of Pearston, capturing

a few rifles and some ammunition. On the same date there was a skirmish

between Colonel Parsons's column and a party of the enemy to the north

of Aberdeen. The main body of the invading force appears to have been

lurking in this neighbourhood, as they were able upon April 7th to

cut off a strong British patrol, consisting of a hundred Lancers and

Yeomanry, seventy-five of whom remained as temporary prisoners in

the hands of the enemy. With this success we may for the time leave

Kritzinger and his lieutenant, Scheepers, who commanded that portion of

his force which had penetrated to the south of the Colony.

The two invasions which have been here described, that of Hertzog in the

west and of Kritzinger in the midlands, would appear in themselves to

be unimportant military operations, since they were carried out by

small bodies of men whose policy was rather to avoid than to overcome

resistance. Their importance, however, is due to the fact that they were

really the forerunners of a more important incursion upon the part of De

Wet. The object of these two bands of raiders was to spy out the land,

so that on the arrival of the main body all might be ready for that

general rising of their kinsmen in the Colony which was the last chance,

not of winning, but of prolonging the war. It must be confessed that,

however much their reason might approve of the Government under which

they lived, the sentiment of the Cape Dutch had been cruelly, though

unavoidably, hurt in the course of the war. The appearance of so popular

a leader as De Wet with a few thousand veterans in the very heart of

their country might have stretched their patience to the breaking-point.

Inflamed, as they were, by that racial hatred which had always

smouldered, and had now been fanned into a blaze by the speeches of

their leaders and by the fictions of their newspapers, they were ripe

for mischief, while they had before their eyes an object-lesson of the

impotence of our military system in those small bands who had kept the

country in a ferment for so long. All was propitious, therefore, for the

attempt which Steyn and De Wet were about to make to carry the war into

the enemy's country.

We last saw De Wet when, after a long chase, he had been headed back

from the Orange River, and, winning clear from Knox's pursuit, had

in the third week of December passed successfully through the British

cordon between Thabanchu and Ladybrand. Thence he made his way to

Senekal, and proceeded, in spite of the shaking which he had had, to

recruit and recuperate in the amazing way which a Boer army has. There

is no force so easy to drive and so difficult to destroy. The British

columns still kept in touch with De Wet, but found it impossible

to bring him to an action in the difficult district to which he had

withdrawn. His force had split up into numerous smaller bodies, capable

of reuniting at a signal from their leader. These scattered bodies,

mobile as ever, vanished if seriously attacked, while keenly on the

alert to pounce upon any British force which might be overpowered before

assistance could arrive. Such an opportunity came to the commando led

by Philip Botha, and the result was another petty reverse to the British

arms.

Upon January 3rd Colonel White's small column was pushing north, in

co-operation with those of Knox, Pilcher, and the others. Upon that date

it had reached a point just north of Lindley, a district which has never

been a fortunate one for the invaders. A patrol of Kitchener' s newly

raised bodyguard, under Colonel Laing, 120 strong, was sent forward to

reconnoitre upon the road from Lindley to Reitz.

The scouting appears to have been negligently done, there being only

two men out upon each flank. The little force walked into one of those

horse-shoe positions which the Boers love, and learned by a sudden

volley from a kraal upon their right that the enemy was present in

strength. On attempting to withdraw it was instantly evident that the

Boers were on all sides and in the rear with a force which numbered at

least five to one. The camp of the main column was only four miles away,

however, and the bodyguard, having sent messages of their precarious

position, did all they could to make a defence until help could reach

them. Colonel Laing had fallen, shot through the heart, but found a

gallant successor in young Nairne, the adjutant. Part of the force had

thrown themselves, under Nairne and Milne, into a donga, which gave some

shelter from the sleet of bullets. The others, under Captain Butters,

held on to a ruined kraal. The Boers pushed the attack very rapidly,

however, and were soon able with their superior numbers to send a raking

fire down the donga, which made it a perfect death-trap. Still hoping

that the laggard reinforcements would come up, the survivors held

desperately on; but both in the kraal and in the donga their numbers

were from minute to minute diminishing. There was no formal surrender

and no white flag, for, when fifty per cent of the British were down,

the Boers closed in swiftly and rushed the position. Philip Botha, the

brother of the commandant, who led the Boers, behaved with courtesy and

humanity to the survivors; but many of the wounds were inflicted with

those horrible explosive and expansive missiles, the use of which among

civilised combatants should now and always be a capital offence. To

disable one's adversary is a painful necessity of warfare, but nothing

can excuse the wilful mutilation and torture which is inflicted by these

brutal devices.

'How many of you are there?' asked Botha. 'A hundred,' said an officer.

'It is not true. There are one hundred and twenty. I counted you as you

came along.' The answer of the Boer leader shows how carefully the small

force had been nursed until it was in an impossible position. The margin

was a narrow one, however, for within fifteen minutes of the disaster

White's guns were at work. There may be some question as to whether the

rescuing force could have come sooner, but there can be none as to

the resistance of the bodyguard. They held out to the last cartridge.

Colonel Laing and three officers with sixteen men were killed, four

officers and twenty-two men were wounded. The high proportion of fatal

casualties can only be explained by the deadly character of the Boer

bullets. Hardly a single horse of the bodyguard was left unwounded, and

the profit to the victors, since they were unable to carry away their

prisoners, lay entirely in the captured rifles. It is worthy of record

that the British wounded were despatched to Heilbron without guard

through the Boer forces. That they arrived there unmolested is due

to the forbearance of the enemy and to the tact and energy of

Surgeon-Captain Porter, who commanded the convoy.

Encouraged by this small success, and stimulated by the news that

Hertzog and Kritzinger had succeeded in penetrating the Colony without

disaster, De Wet now prepared to follow them. British scouts to the

north of Kroonstad reported horsemen riding south and east, sometimes

alone, sometimes in small parties. They were recruits going to swell

the forces of De Wet. On January 23rd five hundred men crossed the line,

journeying in the same direction. Before the end of the month, having

gathered together about 2500 men with fresh horses at the Doornberg,

twenty miles north of Winburg, the Boer leader was ready for one of his

lightning treks once more. On January 28th he broke south through the

British net, which appears to have had more meshes than cord. Passing

the Bloemfontein-Ladybrand line at Israel Poort he swept southwards,

with British columns still wearily trailing behind him, like honest

bulldogs panting after a greyhound.

Before following him upon this new venture it is necessary to say a

few words about that peace movement in the Boer States to which some

allusion has already been made. On December 20th Lord Kitchener had

issued a proclamation which was intended to have the effect of affording

protection to those burghers who desired to cease fighting, but who were

unable to do so without incurring the enmity of their irreconcilable

brethren. 'It is hereby notified,' said the document, 'to all burghers

that if after this date they voluntarily surrender they will be allowed

to live with their families in Government laagers until such time as

the guerilla warfare now being carried on will admit of their returning

safely to their homes. All stock and property brought in at the time

of the surrender of such burghers will be respected and paid for if

requisitioned.' This wise and liberal offer was sedulously concealed

from their men by the leaders of the fighting commandos, but was largely

taken advantage of by those Boers to whom it was conveyed. Boer refugee

camps were formed at Pretoria, Johannesburg, Kroonstad, Bloemfontein,

Warrenton; and other points, to which by degrees the whole civil

population came to be transferred. It was the reconcentrado system of

Cuba over again, with the essential difference that the guests of

the British Government were well fed and well treated during their

detention. Within a few months the camps had 50,000 inmates.

It was natural that some of these people, having experienced the

amenity of British rule, and being convinced of the hopelessness of the

struggle, should desire to convey their feelings to their friends and

relations in the field. Both in the Transvaal and in the Orange River

Colony Peace Committees were formed, which endeavoured to persuade their

countrymen to bow to the inevitable. A remarkable letter was published

from Piet de Wet, a man who had fought bravely for the Boer cause, to

his brother, the famous general. 'Which is better for the Republics,'

he asked, 'to continue the struggle and run the risk of total ruin as

a nation, or to submit? Could we for a moment think of taking back

the country if it were offered to us, with thousands of people to be

supported by a Government which has not a farthing?... Put passionate

feeling aside for a moment and use common-sense, and you will then agree

with me that the best thing for the people and the country is to

give in, to be loyal to the new government, and to get responsible

government...Should the war continue a few months longer the nation will

become so poor that they will be the working class in the country, and

disappear as a nation in the future... The British are convinced that

they have conquered the land and its people, and consider the matter

ended, and they only try to treat magnanimously those who are continuing

the struggle in order to prevent unnecessary bloodshed.'

Such were the sentiments of those of the burghers who were in favour of

peace. Their eyes had been opened and their bitterness was transferred

from the British Government to those individual Britons who, partly from

idealism and partly from party passion, had encouraged them to their

undoing. But their attempt to convey their feelings to their countrymen

in the field ended in tragedy. Two of their number, Morgendaal and

Wessels, who had journeyed to De Wet's camp, were condemned to death by

order of that leader. In the case of Morgendaal the execution actually

took place, and seems to have been attended by brutal circumstances, the

man having been thrashed with a sjambok before being put to death.

The circumstances are still surrounded by such obscurity that it is

impossible to say whether the message of the peace envoys was to the

General himself or to the men under his command. In the former case the

man was murdered. In the latter the Boer leader was within his rights,

though the rights may have been harshly construed and brutally enforced.

On January 29th, in the act of breaking south, De Wet's force, or a

portion of it, had a sharp brush with a small British column (Crewe's)

at Tabaksberg, which lies about forty miles north-east of Bloemfontein;

This small force, seven hundred strong, found itself suddenly in the

presence of a very superior body of the enemy, and had some difficulty

in extricating itself. A pom-pom was lost in this affair. Crewe fell

back upon Knox, and the combined columns made for Bloemfontein, whence

they could use the rails for their transport. De Wet meanwhile moved

south as far as Smithfield, and then, detaching several small bodies to

divert the attention of the British, he struck due west, and crossed the

track between Springfontein and Jagersfontein road, capturing the usual

supply train as he passed. On February 9th he had reached Phillipolis,

well ahead of the British pursuit, and spent a day or two in making his

final arrangements before carrying the war over the border. His force

consisted at this time of nearly 8000 men, with two 15-pounders, one

pom-pom, and one maxim. The garrisons of all the towns in the south-west

of the Orange River Colony had been removed in accordance with the

policy of concentration, so De Wet found himself for the moment in a

friendly country.

The British, realising how serious a situation might arise should De Wet

succeed in penetrating the Colony and in joining Hertzog and Kritzinger,

made every effort both to head him off and to bar his return. General

Lyttelton at Naauwpoort directed the operations, and the possession of

the railway line enabled him to concentrate his columns rapidly at the

point of danger. On February 11th De Wet forded the Orange River at Zand

Drift, and found himself once more upon British territory. Lyttelton's

plan of campaign appears to have been to allow De Wet to come some

distance south, and then to hold him in front by De Lisle's force,

while a number of small mobile columns under Plumer, Crabbe, Henniker,

Bethune, Haig, and Thorneycroft should shepherd him behind. On crossing,

De Wet at once moved westwards, where, upon February 12th, Plumer's

column, consisting of the Queensland Mounted Infantry, the Imperial

Bushmen, and part of the King's Dragoon Guards, came into touch with his

rearguard. All day upon the 13th and 14th, amid terrific rain, Plumer's

hardy troopers followed close upon the enemy, gleaning a few ammunition

wagons, a maxim, and some prisoners. The invaders crossed the railway

line near Houtnek, to the north of De Aar, in the early hours of the

15th, moving upon a front of six or eight miles. Two armoured trains

from the north and the south closed in upon him as he passed, Plumer

still thundered in his rear, and a small column under Crabbe came

pressing from the south. This sturdy Colonel of Grenadiers had already

been wounded four times in the war, so that he might be excused if he

felt some personal as well as patriotic reasons for pushing a relentless

pursuit. On crossing the railroad De Wet turned furiously upon his

pursuers, and, taking an excellent position upon a line of kopjes rising

out of the huge expanse of the Karoo, he fought a stubborn rearguard

action in order to give time for his convoy to get ahead. He was hustled

off the hills, however, the Australian Bushmen with great dash carrying

the central kopje, and the guns driving the invaders to the westward.

Leaving all his wagons and his reserve ammunition behind him, the

guerilla chief struck north-west, moving with great swiftness, but

never succeeding in shaking off Plumer's pursuit. The weather continued,

however, to be atrocious, rain and hail falling with such violence

that the horses could hardly be induced to face it. For a week the two

sodden, sleepless, mud-splashed little armies swept onwards over the

Karoo. De Wet passed northwards through Strydenburg, past Hopetown, and

so to the Orange River, which was found to be too swollen with the

rains to permit of his crossing. Here upon the 23rd, after a march of

forty-five miles on end, Plumer ran into him once more, and captured

with very little fighting a fifteen-pounder, a pom-pom, and close on

to a hundred prisoners. Slipping away to the east, De Wet upon February

24th crossed the railroad again between Krankuil and Orange River

Station, with Thorneycroft's column hard upon his heels. The Boer leader

was now more anxious to escape from the Colony than ever he had been to

enter it, and he rushed distractedly from point to point, endeavouring

to find a ford over the great turbid river which cut him off from his

own country. Here he was joined by Hertzog's commando with a number of

invaluable spare horses. It is said also that he had been able to

get remounts in the Hopetown district, which had not been cleared--an

omission for which, it is to be hoped, someone has been held

responsible. The Boer ponies, used to the succulent grasses of the veld,

could make nothing of the rank Karoo, and had so fallen away that an

enormous advantage should have rested with the pursuers had ill luck

and bad management not combined to enable the invaders to renew their

mobility at the very moment when Plumer's horses were dropping dead

under their riders.

The Boer force was now so scattered that, in spite of the advent of

Hertzog, De Wet had fewer men with him than when he entered the Colony.

Several hundreds had been taken prisoners, many had deserted, and a

few had been killed. It was hoped now that the whole force might be

captured, and Thorneycroft's, Crabbe's, Henniker's, and other columns

were closing swiftly in upon him, while the swollen river still barred

his retreat. There was a sudden drop in the flood, however; one ford

became passable, and over it, upon the last day of February, De Wet and

his bedraggled, dispirited commando escaped to their own country. There

was still a sting in his tail, however; for upon that very day a portion

of his force succeeded in capturing sixty and killing or wounding twenty

of Colenbrander's new regiment, Kitchener's Fighting Scouts. On the

other hand, De Wet was finally relieved upon the same day of all care

upon the score of his guns, as the last of them was most gallantly

captured by Captain Dallimore and fifteen Victorians, who at the same

time brought in thirty-three Boer prisoners. The net result of De

Wet's invasion was that he gained nothing, and that he lost about four

thousand horses, all his guns, all his convoy, and some three hundred of

his men.

Once safely in his own country again, the guerilla chief pursued his way

northwards with his usual celerity and success. The moment that it

was certain that De Wet had escaped, the indefatigable Plumer, wiry,

tenacious man, had been sent off by train to Springfontein, while

Bethune's column followed direct. This latter force crossed the Orange

River bridge and marched upon Luckhoff and Fauresmith. At the latter

town they overtook Plumer, who was again hard upon the heels of De Wet.

Together they ran him across the Riet River and north to Petrusburg,

until they gave it up as hopeless upon finding that, with only fifty

followers, he had crossed the Modder River at Abram's Kraal. There they

abandoned the chase and fell back upon Bloemfontein to refit and prepare

for a fresh effort to run down their elusive enemy.

While Plumer and Bethune were following upon the track of De Wet until

he left them behind at the Modder, Lyttelton was using the numerous

columns which were ready to his hand in effecting a drive up the

south-eastern section of the Orange River Colony. It was disheartening

to remember that all this large stretch of country had from April to

November been as peaceful and almost as prosperous as Kent or Yorkshire.

Now the intrusion of the guerilla bands, and the pressure put by them

upon the farmers, had raised the whole country once again, and the work

of pacification had to be set about once more, with harsher measures

than before. A continuous barrier of barbed-wire fencing had been

erected from Bloemfontein to the Basuto border, a distance of eighty

miles, and this was now strongly held by British posts. From the south

Bruce Hamilton, Hickman, Thorneycroft, and Haig swept upwards, stripping

the country as they went in the same way that French had done in the

Eastern Transvaal, while Pilcher's column waited to the north of the

barbed-wire barrier. It was known that Fourie, with a considerable

commando, was lurking in this district, but he and his men slipped at

night between the British columns and escaped. Pilcher, Bethune, and

Byng were able, however, to send in 200 prisoners and very great

numbers of cattle. On April 10th Monro, with Bethune's Mounted Infantry,

captured eighty fighting Boers near Dewetsdorp, and sixty more were

taken by a night attack at Boschberg. There is no striking victory to

record in these operations, but they were an important part of that

process of attrition which was wearing the Boers out and helping to

bring the war to an end. Terrible it is to see that barren countryside,

and to think of the depths of misery to which the once flourishing and

happy Orange Free State had fallen, through joining in a quarrel with a

nation which bore it nothing but sincere friendship and goodwill. With

nothing to gain and everything to lose, the part played by the Orange

Free State in this South African drama is one of the most inconceivable

things in history. Never has a nation so deliberately and so causelessly

committed suicide.

CHAPTER 33. THE NORTHERN OPERATIONS FROM JANUARY TO APRIL, 1901.

Three consecutive chapters have now given some account of the campaign

of De Wet, of the operations in the Transvaal up to the end of the year

1900, and of the invasion of Cape Colony up to April 1901. The present

chapter will deal with the events in the Transvaal from the beginning

of the new century. The military operations in that country, though

extending over a very large area, may be roughly divided into two

categories: the attacks by the Boers upon British posts, and the

aggressive sweeping movements of British columns. Under the first

heading come the attacks on Belfast, on Zuurfontein, on Kaalfontein,

on Zeerust, on Modderfontein, and on Lichtenburg, besides many minor

affairs. The latter comprises the operations of Babington and of

Cunningham to the west and south-west of Pretoria, those of Methuen

still further to the south-west, and the large movement of French in

the south-east. In no direction did the British forces in the field meet

with much active resistance. So long as they moved the gnats did not

settle; it was only when quiet that they buzzed about and occasionally

stung.

The early days of January 1901 were not fortunate for the British arms,

as the check in which Kitchener's Bodyguard was so roughly handled,

near Lindley, was closely followed by a brisk action at Naauwpoort or

Zandfontein, near the Magaliesberg, in which De la Rey left his mark

upon the Imperial Light Horse. The Boer commandos, having been driven

into the mountains by French and Clements in the latter part of

December, were still on the look-out to strike a blow at any British

force which might expose itself. Several mounted columns had been formed

to scour the country, one under Kekewich, one under Gordon, and one

under Babington. The two latter, meeting in a mist upon the morning

of January 5th, actually turned their rifles upon each other, but

fortunately without any casualties resulting. A more deadly rencontre

was, however, awaiting them.

A force of Boers were observed, as the mist cleared, making for a

ridge which would command the road along which the convoy and guns

were moving. Two squadrons (B and C) of the Light Horse were instantly

detached to seize the point. They do not appear to have realised that

they were in the immediate presence of the enemy, and they imagined that

the ground over which they were passing had been already reconnoitred

by a troop of the 14th Hussars. It is true that four scouts were thrown

forward, but as both squadrons were cantering there was no time for

these to get ahead. Presently C squadron, which was behind, was ordered

to close up upon the left of B squadron, and the 150 horsemen in one

long line swept over a low grassy ridge. Some hundreds of De la Rey's

men were lying in the long grass upon the further side, and their first

volley, fired at a fifty-yard range, emptied a score of saddles.

It would have been wiser, if less gallant, to retire at once in the

presence of a numerous and invisible enemy, but the survivors were

ordered to dismount and return the fire. This was done, but the hail of

bullets was terrific and the casualties were numerous. Captain Norman,

of C squadron, then retired his men, who withdrew in good order. B

squadron having lost Yockney, its brave leader, heard no order, so they

held their ground until few of them had escaped the driving sleet of

lead. Many of the men were struck three and four times. There was no

surrender, and the extermination of B company added another laurel, even

at a moment of defeat, to the regiment whose reputation was so grimly

upheld. The Boer victors walked in among the litter of stricken men

and horses. 'Practically all of them were dressed in khaki and had the

water-bottles and haversacks of our soldiers. One of them snatched a

bayonet from a dead man, and was about to despatch one of our wounded

when he was stopped in the nick of time by a man in a black suit, who, I

afterwards heard, was De la Rey himself...The feature of the action

was the incomparable heroism of our dear old Colonel Wools-Sampson.'

So wrote a survivor of B company, himself shot through the body. It was

four hours before a fresh British advance reoccupied the ridge, and by

that time the Boers had disappeared. Some seventy killed and wounded,

many of them terribly mutilated, were found on the scene of the

disaster. It is certainly a singular coincidence that at distant points

of the seat of war two of the crack irregular corps should have suffered

so severely within three days of each other. In each case, however,

their prestige was enhanced rather than lowered by the result. These

incidents tend, however, to shake the belief that scouting is better

performed in the Colonial than in the regular forces.

Of the Boer attacks upon British posts to which allusion has been made,

that upon Belfast, in the early morning of January 7th, appears to have

been very gallantly and even desperately pushed. On the same date

a number of smaller attacks, which may have been meant simply as

diversions, were made upon Wonderfontein, Nooitgedacht, Wildfontein,

Pan, Dalmanutha, and Machadodorp. These seven separate attacks,

occurring simultaneously over sixty miles, show that the Boer forces

were still organised and under one effective control. The general object

of the operations was undoubtedly to cut Lord Roberts's communications

upon that side and to destroy a considerable section of the railway.

The town of Belfast was strongly held by Smith-Dorrien, with 1750

men, of which 1300 were infantry belonging to the Royal Irish, the

Shropshires, and the Gordons. The perimeter of defence, however, was

fifteen miles, and each little fort too far from its neighbour for

mutual support, though connected with headquarters by telephone. It

is probable that the leaders and burghers engaged in this very gallant

attack were in part the same as those concerned in the successful

attempt at Helvetia upon December 29th, for the assault was delivered

in the same way, at the same hour, and apparently with the same primary

object. This was to gain possession of the big 5-inch gun, which is as

helpless by night as it is formidable by day. At Helvetia they attained

their object and even succeeded not merely in destroying, but in

removing their gigantic trophy. At Belfast they would have performed the

same feat had it not been for the foresight of General Smith-Dorrien,

who had the heavy gun trundled back into the town every night.

The attack broke first upon Monument Hill, a post held by Captain

Fosbery with eighty-three Royal Irish. Chance or treason guided the

Boers to the weak point of the wire entanglement and they surged into

the fort, where the garrison fought desperately to hold its own. There

was thick mist and driving rain; and the rush of vague and shadowy

figures amid the gloom was the first warning of the onslaught. The

Irishmen were overborne by a swarm of assailants, but they nobly upheld

their traditional reputation. Fosbery met his death like a gallant

gentleman, but not more heroically than Barry, the humble private, who,

surrounded by Boers, thought neither of himself nor of them, but smashed

at the maxim gun with a pickaxe until he fell riddled with bullets. Half

the garrison were on the ground before the post was carried.

A second post upon the other side of the town was defended by Lieutenant

Marshall with twenty men, mostly Shropshires. For an hour they held out

until Marshall and nine out of his twelve Shropshires had been hit. Then

this post also was carried.

The Gordon Highlanders held two posts to the southeast and to the

south-west of the town, and these also were vigorously attacked. Here,

however, the advance spent itself without result. In vain the Ermelo

and Carolina commandos stormed up to the Gordon pickets. They were blown

back by the steady fire of the infantry. One small post manned by twelve

Highlanders was taken, but the rest defied all attack. Seeing therefore

that his attempt at a coup-de-main was a failure, Viljoen withdrew his

men before daybreak. The Boer casualties have not been ascertained, but

twenty-four of their dead were actually picked up within the British

lines. The British lost sixty killed and wounded, while about as many

were taken prisoners. Altogether the action was a brisk and a gallant

one, of which neither side has cause to be ashamed. The simultaneous

attacks upon six other stations were none of them pressed home, and were

demonstrations rather than assaults.

The attempts upon Kaalfontein and on Zuurfontein were both made in the

early morning of January 12th. These two places are small stations upon

the line between Johannesburg and Pretoria. It is clear that the Boers

were very certain of their own superior mobility before they ventured

to intrude into the very heart of the British position, and the result

showed that they were right in supposing that even if their attempt were

repulsed, they would still be able to make good their escape. Better

horsed, better riders, with better intelligence and a better knowledge

of the country, their ventures were always attended by a limited

liability.

The attacks seem to have been delivered by a strong commando, said to

have been under the command of Beyers, upon its way to join the Boer

concentration in the Eastern Transvaal. They had not the satisfaction,

however, of carrying the garrison of a British post with them, for

at each point they were met by a stout resistance and beaten

off. Kaalfontein was garrisoned by 120 men of Cheshire under

Williams-Freeman, Zuurfontein by as many Norfolks and a small body of

Lincolns under Cordeaux and Atkinson. For six hours the pressure was

considerable, the assailants of Kaalfontein keeping up a brisk shell and

rifle fire, while those of Zuurfontein were without artillery. At the

end of that time two armoured trains came up with reinforcements and the

enemy continued his trek to the eastward. Knox 's 2nd cavalry brigade

followed them up, but without any very marked result.

Zeerust and Lichtenburg had each been garrisoned and provisioned by Lord

Methuen before he carried his column away to the south-west, where much

rough and useful work awaited him. The two towns were at once invested

by the enemy, who made an attack upon each of them. That upon Zeerust,

on January 7th, was a small matter and easily repulsed. A more

formidable one was made on Lichtenburg, on March 3rd. The attack was

delivered by De la Rey, Smuts, and Celliers, with 1500 men, who galloped

up to the pickets in the early morning. The defenders were 600 in

number, consisting of Paget's Horse and three companies of the 1st

battalion of the Northumberland Fusiliers, a veteran regiment with

a long record of foreign service, not to be confused with that 2nd

battalion which was so severely handled upon several occasions. It was

well that it was so, for less sturdy material might have been overborne

by the vigour of the attack. As it was, the garrison were driven to

their last trench, but held out under a very heavy fire all day, and

next morning the Boers abandoned the attack. Their losses appear to have

been over fifty in number, and included Commandant Celliers, who was

badly wounded and afterwards taken prisoner at Warm Baths. The

brave garrison lost fourteen killed, including two officers of the

Northumberlands, and twenty wounded.

In each of these instances the attacks by the Boers upon British posts

had ended in a repulse to themselves. They were more fortunate, however,

in their attempt upon Modderfontein on the Gatsrand at the end of

January. The post was held by 200 of the South Wales Borderers,

reinforced by the 59th Imperial Yeomanry, who had come in as escort to

a convoy from Krugersdorp. The attack, which lasted all day, was carried

out by a commando of 2000 Boers under Smuts, who rushed the position

upon the following morning. As usual, the Boers, who were unable to

retain their prisoners, had little to show for their success. The

British casualties, however, were between thirty and forty, mostly

wounded.

On January 22nd General Cunninghame left Oliphant's Nek with a small

force consisting of the Border and Worcester Regiments, the 6th Mounted

Infantry, Kitchener's Horse, 7th Imperial Yeomanry, 8th R.F.A., and P

battery R.H.A. It had instructions to move south upon the enemy known to

be gathering there. By midday this force was warmly engaged, and found

itself surrounded by considerable bodies of De la Rey's burghers. That

night they camped at Middelfontein, and were strongly attacked in the

early morning. So menacing was the Boer attitude, and so formidable the

position, that the force was in some danger. Fortunately they were in

heliographic communication with Oliphant's Nek, and learned upon

the 23rd that Babington had been ordered to their relief. All day

Cunninghame's men were under a long-range fire, but on the 24th

Babington appeared, and the British force was successfully extricated,

having seventy-five casualties. This action of Middelfontein is

interesting as having been begun in Queen Victoria's reign, and ended in

that of Edward VII.

Cunninghame's force moved on to Krugersdorp, and there, having heard of

the fall of the Modderfontein post as already described, a part of his

command moved out to the Gatsrand in pursuit of Smuts. It was found,

however, that the Boers had taken up a strong defensive position, and

the British were not numerous enough to push the attack. On February

3rd Cunninghame endeavoured to outflank the enemy with his small cavalry

force while pushing his infantry up in front, but in neither attempt did

he succeed, the cavalry failing to find the flank, while the infantry

were met with a fire which made further advance impossible. One company

of the Border Regiment found itself in such a position that the greater

part of it was killed, wounded, or taken. This check constituted the

action of Modderfontein. On the 4th, however, Cunningham, assisted by

some of the South African Constabulary, made his way round the flank,

and dislodged the enemy, who retreated to the south. A few days later

some of Smuts's men made an attempt upon the railway near Bank, but

were driven off with twenty-six casualties. It was after this that Smuts

moved west and joined De la Rey's commando to make the attack already

described upon Lichtenburg. These six attempts represent the chief

aggressive movements which the Boers made against British posts in the

Transvaal during these months. Attacks upon trains were still common,

and every variety of sniping appears to have been rife, from the

legitimate ambuscade to something little removed from murder.

It has been described in a previous chapter how Lord Kitchener made an

offer to the burghers which amounted to an amnesty, and how a number

of those Boers who had come under the influence of the British formed

themselves into peace committees, and endeavoured to convey to the

fighting commandos some information as to the hopelessness of the

struggle, and the lenient mood of the British. Unfortunately these

well-meant offers appear to have been mistaken for signs of weakness

by the Boer leaders, and encouraged them to harden their hearts. Of the

delegates who conveyed the terms to their fellow countrymen two at least

were shot, several were condemned to death, and few returned without

ill-usage. In no case did they bear back a favourable answer. The only

result of the proclamation was to burden the British resources by an

enormous crowd of women and children who were kept and fed in refugee

camps, while their fathers and husbands continued in most cases to

fight.

This allusion to the peace movement among the burghers may serve as

an introduction to the attempt made by Lord Kitchener, at the end of

February 1901, to bring the war to a close by negotiation. Throughout

its course the fortitude of Great Britain and of the Empire had never

for an instant weakened, but her conscience had always been sensitive

at the sight of the ruin which had befallen so large a portion of South

Africa, and any settlement would have been eagerly hailed which would

insure that the work done had not been wasted, and would not need to

be done again. A peace on any other terms would simply shift upon the

shoulders of our descendants those burdens which we were not manly

enough to bear ourselves. There had arisen, as has been said, a

considerable peace movement among the burghers of the refugee camps and

also among the prisoners of war. It was hoped that some reflection of

this might be found among the leaders of the people. To find out if this

were so Lord Kitchener, at the end of February, sent a verbal message to

Louis Botha, and on the 27th of that month the Boer general rode with an

escort of Hussars into Middelburg. 'Sunburned, with a pleasant, fattish

face of a German type, and wearing an imperial,' says one who rode

beside him. Judging from the sounds of mirth heard by those without, the

two leaders seem to have soon got upon amiable terms, and there was hope

that a definite settlement might spring from their interview. From the

beginning Lord Kitchener explained that the continued independence of

the two republics was an impossibility. But on every other point the

British Government was prepared to go great lengths in order to satisfy

and conciliate the burghers.

On March 7th Lord Kitchener wrote to Botha from Pretoria, recapitulating

the points which he had advanced. The terms offered were certainly as

far as, and indeed rather further than, the general sentiment of the

Empire would have gone. If the Boers laid down their arms there was to

be a complete amnesty, which was apparently to extend to rebels also so

long as they did not return to Cape Colony or Natal. Self-government was

promised after a necessary interval, during which the two States should

be administered as Crown colonies. Law courts should be independent

of the Executive from the beginning, and both languages be official.

A million pounds of compensation would be paid to the burghers--a most

remarkable example of a war indemnity being paid by the victors. Loans

were promised to the farmers to restart them in business, and a pledge

was made that farms should not be taxed. The Kaffirs were not to have

the franchise, but were to have the protection of law. Such were the

generous terms offered by the British Government. Public opinion at

home, strongly supported by that of the colonies, and especially of

the army, felt that the extreme step had been taken in the direction of

conciliation, and that to do more would seem not to offer peace, but

to implore it. Unfortunately, however, the one thing which the British

could not offer was the one thing which the Boers would insist upon

having, and the leniency of the proposals in all other directions may

have suggested weakness to their minds. On March 15th an answer was

returned by General Botha to the effect that nothing short of total

independence would satisfy them, and the negotiations were accordingly

broken off.

There was a disposition, however, upon the Boer side to renew them, and

upon May 10th General Botha applied to Lord Kitchener for permission to

cable to President Kruger, and to take his advice as to the making

of peace. The stern old man at The Hague was still, however, in an

unbending mood. His reply was to the effect that there were great hopes

of a successful issue of the war, and that he had taken steps to make

proper provision for the Boer prisoners and for the refugee women. These

steps, and very efficient ones too, were to leave them entirely to the

generosity of that Government which he was so fond of reviling.

On the same day upon which Botha applied for leave to use the British

cable, a letter was written by Reitz, State Secretary of the Transvaal,

to Steyn, in which the desperate condition of the Boers was clearly

set forth. This document explained that the burghers were continually

surrendering, that the ammunition was nearly exhausted, the food running

low, and the nation in danger of extinction. 'The time has come to take

the final step,' said the Secretary of State. Steyn wrote back a reply

in which, like his brother president, he showed a dour resolution to

continue the struggle, prompted by a fatalist conviction that some

outside interference would reverse the result of his appeal to arms. His

attitude and that of Kruger determined the Boer leaders to hold out for

a few more months, a resolution which may have been injudicious, but

was certainly heroic. 'It's a fight to a finish this time,' said the two

combatants in the 'Punch' cartoon which marked the beginning of the war.

It was indeed so, as far as the Boers were concerned. As the victors we

can afford to acknowledge that no nation in history has ever made a more

desperate and prolonged resistance against a vastly superior antagonist.

A Briton may well pray that his own people may be as staunch when their

hour of adversity comes round.

The British position at this stage of the war was strengthened by a

greater centralisation. Garrisons of outlying towns were withdrawn so

that fewer convoys became necessary. The population was removed also and

placed near the railway lines, where they could be more easily fed. In

this way the scene of action was cleared and the Boer and British forces

left face to face. Convinced of the failure of the peace policy, and

morally strengthened by having tried it, Lord Kitchener set himself to

finish the war by a series of vigorous operations which should sweep the

country from end to end. For this purpose mounted troops were essential,

and an appeal from him for reinforcements was most nobly answered. Five

thousand horsemen were despatched from the colonies, and twenty thousand

cavalry, mounted infantry, and Yeomanry were sent from home. Ten

thousand mounted men had already been raised in Great Britain, South

Africa, and Canada for the Constabulary force which was being organised

by Baden-Powell. Altogether the reinforcements of horsemen amounted to

more than thirty-five thousand men, all of whom had arrived in South

Africa before the end of April. With the remains of his old regiments

Lord Kitchener had under him at this final period of the war between

fifty and sixty thousand cavalry--such a force as no British General in

his happiest dream had ever thought of commanding, and no British war

minister in his darkest nightmare had ever imagined himself called upon

to supply.

Long before his reinforcements had come to hand, while his Yeomanry was

still gathering in long queues upon the London pavement to wait their

turn at the recruiting office, Lord Kitchener had dealt the enemy

several shrewd blows which materially weakened their resources in men

and material. The chief of these was the great drive down the Eastern

Transvaal undertaken by seven columns under the command of French.

Before considering this, however, a few words must be devoted to the

doings of Methuen in the south-west.

This hard-working General, having garrisoned Zeerust and Lichtenburg,

had left his old district and journeyed with a force which consisted

largely of Bushmen and Yeomanry to the disturbed parts of Bechuanaland

which had been invaded by De Villiers. Here he cleared the country as

far as Vryburg, which he had reached in the middle of January, working

round to Kuruman and thence to Taungs. From Taungs his force crossed the

Transvaal border and made for Klerksdorp, working through an area which

had never been traversed and which contained the difficult Masakani

hills. He left Taungs upon February 2nd, fighting skirmishes at Uitval's

Kop, Paardefontein and Lilliefontein, in each of which the enemy was

brushed aside. Passing through Wolmaranstad, Methuen turned to the

north, where at Haartebeestefontein, on February 19th, he fought a brisk

engagement with a considerable force of Boers under De Villiers and

Liebenberg. On the day before the fight he successfully outwitted the

Boers, for, learning that they had left their laager in order to take

up a position for battle, he pounced upon the laager and captured 10,000

head of cattle, forty-three wagons, and forty prisoners. Stimulated by

this success, he attacked the Boers next day, and after five hours of

hard fighting forced the pass which they were holding against him. As

Methuen had but 1500 men, and was attacking a force which was as large

as his own in a formidable position, the success was a very creditable

one. The Yeomanry all did well, especially the 5th and 10th battalions.

So also did the Australians and the Loyal North Lancashires. The British

casualties amounted to sixteen killed and thirty-four wounded, while

the Boers left eighteen of their dead upon the position which they had

abandoned. Lord Methuen's little force returned to Klerksdorp, having

deserved right well of their country. From Klerksdorp Methuen struck

back westwards to the south of his former route, and on March 14th

he was reported at Warrenton. Here also in April came Erroll's small

column, bringing with it the garrison and inhabitants of Hoopstad, a

post which it had been determined, in accordance with Lord Kitchener's

policy of centralisation, to abandon.

In the month of January, 1901, there had been a considerable

concentration of the Transvaal Boers into that large triangle which is

bounded by the Delagoa railway line upon the north, the Natal railway

line upon the south, and the Swazi and Zulu frontiers upon the east. The

bushveld is at this season of the year unhealthy both for man and beast,

so that for the sake of their herds, their families, and themselves the

burghers were constrained to descend into the open veld. There seemed

the less objection to their doing so since this tract of country,

though traversed once both by Buller and by French, had still remained a

stronghold of the Boers and a storehouse of supplies. Within its borders

are to be found Carolina, Ermelo, Vryheid, and other storm centres.

Its possession offers peculiar strategical advantages, as a force lying

there can always attack either railway, and might even make, as was

indeed intended, a descent into Natal. For these mingled reasons of

health and of strategy a considerable number of burghers united in this

district under the command of the Bothas and of Smuts.

Their concentration had not escaped the notice of the British military

authorities, who welcomed any movement which might bring to a focus that

resistance which had been so nebulous and elusive. Lord Kitchener having

once seen the enemy fairly gathered into this huge cover, undertook

the difficult task of driving it from end to end. For this enterprise

General French was given the chief command, and had under his orders

no fewer than seven columns, which started from different points of the

Delagoa and of the Natal railway lines, keeping in touch with each

other and all trending south and east. A glance at the map would show,

however, that it was a very large field for seven guns, and that it

would need all their alertness to prevent the driven game from

breaking back. Three columns started from the Delagoa line, namely,

Smith-Dorrien's from Wonderfontein (the most easterly), Campbell's from

Middelburg, and Alderson's from Eerstefabrieken, close to Pretoria.

Four columns came from the western railway line: General Knox's from

Kaalfontein, Major Allenby's from Zuurfontein (both stations between

Pretoria and Johannesburg), General Dartnell's from Springs, close to

Johannesburg, and finally General Colville (not to be confused with

Colvile) from Greylingstad in the south. The whole movement resembled a

huge drag net, of which Wonderfontein and Greylingstad formed the ends,

exactly one hundred miles apart. On January 27th the net began to be

drawn. Some thousands of Boers with a considerable number of guns were

known to be within the enclosure, and it was hoped that even if their

own extreme mobility enabled them to escape it would be impossible for

them to save their transport and their cannon.

Each of the British columns was about 2000 strong, making a total of

14,000 men with about fifty guns engaged in the operations. A front of

not less than ten miles was to be maintained by each force. The first

decided move was on the part of the extreme left wing, Smith-Dorrien's

column, which moved south on Carolina, and thence on Bothwell near Lake

Chrissie. The arduous duty of passing supplies down from the line

fell mainly upon him, and his force was in consequence larger than the

others, consisting of 8500 men with thirteen guns. On the arrival of

Smith-Dorrien at Carolina the other columns started, their centre of

advance being Ermelo. Over seventy miles of veld the gleam of the helio

by day and the flash of the signal lamps at night marked the steady flow

of the British tide. Here and there the columns came in touch with the

enemy and swept him before them. French had a skirmish at Wilge River at

the end of January, and Campbell another south of Middelburg, in which

he had twenty casualties. On February 4th Smith-Dorrien was at Lake

Chrissie; French had passed through Bethel and the enemy was retiring on

Amsterdam. The hundred-mile ends of the drag net were already contracted

to a third of that distance, and the game was still known to be within

it. On the 5th Ermelo was occupied, and the fresh deep ruts upon the

veld told the British horsemen of the huge Boer convoy that was ahead of

them. For days enormous herds, endless flocks, and lines of wagons which

stretched from horizon to horizon had been trekking eastward. Cavalry

and mounted infantry were all hot upon the scent.

Botha, however, was a leader of spirit, not to be hustled with impunity.

Having several thousand burghers with him, it was evident that if he

threw himself suddenly upon any part of the British line he might hope

for a time to make an equal fight, and possibly to overwhelm it. Were

Smith-Dorrien out of the way there would be a clear road of escape

for his whole convoy to the north, while a defeat of any of the other

columns would not help him much. It was on Smith-Dorrien, therefore,

that he threw himself with great impetuosity. That General's force

was, however, formidable, consisting of the Suffolks, West Yorks

and Camerons, 5th Lancers, 2nd Imperial Light Horse, and 3rd Mounted

Infantry, with eight field guns and three heavy pieces. Such a force

could hardly be defeated in the open, but no one can foresee the effect

of a night surprise well pushed home, and such was the attack delivered

by Botha at 3 A.M. upon February 6th, when his opponent was encamped at

Bothwell Farm.

The night was favourable to the attempt, as it was dark and misty.

Fortunately, however, the British commander had fortified himself and

was ready for an assault. The Boer forlorn hope came on with a gallant

dash, driving a troop of loose horses in upon the outposts, and charging

forward into the camp. The West Yorkshires, however, who bore the brunt

of the attack, were veterans of the Tugela, who were no more to be

flurried at three in the morning than at three in the afternoon. The

attack was blown backwards, and twenty dead Boers, with their brave

leader Spruyt, were left within the British lines. The main body of the

Boers contented themselves with a heavy fusillade out of the darkness,

which was answered and crushed by the return fire of the infantry. In

the morning no trace, save their dead, was to be seen of the enemy, but

twenty killed and fifty wounded in Smith-Dorrien's column showed how

heavy had been the fire which had swept through the sleeping camp.

The Carolina attack, which was to have co-operated with that of the

Heidelbergers, was never delivered, through difficulties of the ground,

and considerable recriminations ensued among the Boers in consequence.

Beyond a series of skirmishes and rearguard actions this attack of

Botha's was the one effort made to stay the course of French's columns.

It did not succeed, however, in arresting them for an hour. From that

day began a record of captures of men, herds, guns, and wagons, as the

fugitives were rounded up from the north, the west, and the south. The

operation was a very thorough one, for the towns and districts occupied

were denuded of their inhabitants, who were sent into the refugee camps

while the country was laid waste to prevent its furnishing the commandos

with supplies in the future. Still moving south-east, General French's

columns made their way to Piet Retief upon the Swazi frontier, pushing

a disorganised array which he computed at 5000 in front of them. A party

of the enemy, including the Carolina commando, had broken back in the

middle of February and Louis Botha had got away at the same time, but so

successful were his main operations that French was able to report

his total results at the end of the month as being 292 Boers killed or

wounded, 500 surrendered, 3 guns and one maxim taken, with 600 rifles,

4000 horses, 4500 trek oxen, 1300 wagons and carts, 24,000 cattle, and

165,000 sheep. The whole vast expanse of the eastern veld was dotted

with the broken and charred wagons of the enemy.

Tremendous rains were falling and the country was one huge quagmire,

which crippled although it did not entirely prevent the further

operations. All the columns continued to report captures. On March 3rd

Dartnell got a maxim and 50 prisoners, while French reported 50 more,

and Smith-Dorrien 80. On March 6th French captured two more guns, and

on the 14th he reported 46 more Boer casualties and 146 surrenders, with

500 more wagons, and another great haul of sheep and oxen. By the end

of March French had moved as far south as Vryheid, his troops having

endured the greatest hardships from the continual heavy rains, and

the difficulty of bringing up any supplies. On the 27th he reported

seventeen more Boer casualties and 140 surrenders, while on the last

day of the month he took another gun and two pom-poms. The enemy at that

date were still retiring eastward, with Alderson and Dartnell pressing

upon their rear. On April 4th French announced the capture of the last

piece of artillery which the enemy possessed in that region. The rest

of the Boer forces doubled back at night between the columns and escaped

over the Zululand border, where 200 of them surrendered. The total

trophies of French's drive down the Eastern Transvaal amounted to eleven

hundred of the enemy killed, wounded, or taken, the largest number in

any operation since the surrender of Prinsloo. There is no doubt that

the movement would have been even more successful had the weather been

less boisterous, but this considerable loss of men, together with the

capture of all the guns in that region, and of such enormous quantities

of wagons, munitions, and stock, inflicted a blow upon the Boers from

which they never wholly recovered. On April 20th French was back in

Johannesburg once more.

While French had run to earth the last Boer gun in the south-eastern

corner of the Transvaal, De la Rey, upon the western side, had still

managed to preserve a considerable artillery with which he flitted about

the passes of the Magaliesberg or took refuge in the safe districts to

the south-west of it. This part of the country had been several times

traversed, but had never been subdued by British columns. The Boers,

like their own veld grass, need but a few sparks to be left behind to

ensure a conflagration breaking out again. It was into this inflammable

country that Babington moved in March with Klerksdorp for his base. On

March 21st he had reached Haartebeestefontein, the scene not long before

of a successful action by Methuen. Here he was joined by Shekleton's

Mounted Infantry, and his whole force consisted of these, with the 1st

Imperial Light Horse, the 6th Imperial Bushmen, the New Zealanders, a

squadron of the 14th Hussars, a wing each of the Somerset Light Infantry

and of the Welsh Fusiliers, with Carter's guns and four pom-poms. With

this mobile and formidable little force Babington pushed on in search

of Smuts and De la Rey, who were known to be in the immediate

neighbourhood.

As a matter of fact the Boers were not only there, but were nearer and

in greater force than had been anticipated. On the 22nd three squadrons

of the Imperial Light Horse under Major Briggs rode into 1500 of them,

and it was only by virtue of their steadiness and gallantry that

they succeeded in withdrawing themselves and their pom-pom without

a disaster. With Boers in their front and Boers on either flank they

fought an admirable rearguard action. So hot was the fire that A

squadron alone had twenty-two casualties. They faced it out, however,

until their gun had reached a place of safety, when they made an orderly

retirement towards Babington's camp, having inflicted as heavy a loss

as they had sustained. With Elandslaagte, Waggon Hill, the relief of

Mafeking, Naauwpoort, and Haartebeestefontein upon their standards, the

Imperial Light Horse, should they take a permanent place in the Army

List, will start with a record of which many older regiments might be

proud.

If the Light Horse had a few bad hours on March 22nd at the hands of

the Boers, they and their colonial comrades were soon able to return the

same with interest. On March 23rd Babington moved forward through Kafir

Kraal, the enemy falling back before him. Next morning the British again

advanced, and as the New Zealanders and Bushmen, who formed the vanguard

under Colonel Gray, emerged from a pass they saw upon the plain in front

of them the Boer force with all its guns moving towards them. Whether

this was done of set purpose or whether the Boers imagined that the

British had turned and were intending to pursue them cannot now be

determined, but whatever the cause it is certain that for almost the

first time in the campaign a considerable force of each side found

themselves in the open and face to face.

It was a glorious moment. Setting spurs to their horses, officers

and men with a yell dashed forward at the enemy. One of the Boer guns

unlimbered and attempted to open fire, but was overwhelmed by the wave

of horsemen. The Boer riders broke and fled, leaving their artillery to

escape as best it might. The guns dashed over the veld in a mad gallop,

but wilder still was the rush of the fiery cavalry behind them. For once

the brave and cool-headed Dutchmen were fairly panic-stricken. Hardly a

shot was fired at the pursuers, and the riflemen seem to have been only

too happy to save their own skins. Two field guns, one pom-pom, six

maxims, fifty-six wagons and 140 prisoners were the fruits of that one

magnificent charge, while fifty-four stricken Boers were picked up after

the action. The pursuit was reluctantly abandoned when the spent horses

could go no farther.

While the vanguard had thus scattered the main body of the enemy a

detachment of riflemen had ridden round to attack the British rear and

convoy. A few volleys from the escort drove them off, however, with some

loss. Altogether, what with the loss of nine guns and of at least 200

men, the rout of Haartebeestefontein was a severe blow to the Boer

cause. A week or two later Sir H. Rawlinson's column, acting with

Babington, rushed Smuts's laager at daylight and effected a further

capture of two guns and thirty prisoners. Taken in conjunction with

French's successes in the east and Plumer's in the north, these

successive blows might have seemed fatal to the Boer cause, but the

weary struggle was still destined to go on until it seemed that it must

be annihilation rather than incorporation which would at last bring a

tragic peace to those unhappy lands.

All over the country small British columns had been operating during

these months--operations which were destined to increase in scope and

energy as the cold weather drew in. The weekly tale of prisoners and

captures, though small for any one column, gave the aggregate result of

a considerable victory. In these scattered and obscure actions there was

much good work which can have no reward save the knowledge of duty

done. Among many successful raids and skirmishes may be mentioned two by

Colonel Park from Lydenburg, which resulted between them in the

capture of nearly 100 of the enemy, including Abel Erasmus of sinister

reputation. Nor would any summary of these events be complete without a

reference to the very gallant defence of Mahlabatini in Zululand, which

was successfully held by a handful of police and civilians against an

irruption of the Boers. With the advent of winter and of reinforcements

the British operations became very energetic in every part of the

country, and some account of them will now be added.

CHAPTER 34. THE WINTER CAMPAIGN (APRIL TO SEPTEMBER, 1901).

The African winter extends roughly from April to September, and as the

grass during that period would be withered on the veld, the mobility

of the Boer commandos must be very much impaired. It was recognised

therefore that if the British would avoid another year of war it could

only be done by making good use of the months which lay before them.

For this reason Lord Kitchener had called for the considerable

reinforcements which have been already mentioned, but on the other

hand he was forced to lose many thousands of his veteran Yeomanry,

Australians, and Canadians, whose term of service was at an end. The

volunteer companies of the infantry returned also to England, and so

did nine militia battalions, whose place was taken however by an equal

number of new-comers.

The British position was very much strengthened during the winter by the

adoption of the block-house system. These were small square or hexagonal

buildings, made of stone up to nine feet with corrugated iron above it.

They were loopholed for musketry fire and held from six to thirty men.

These little forts were dotted along the railways at points not more

than 2000 yards apart, and when supplemented by a system of armoured

trains they made it no easy matter for the Boers to tamper with or

to cross the lines. So effective did these prove that their use was

extended to the more dangerous portions of the country, and lines

were pushed through the Magaliesberg district to form a chain of posts

between Krugersdorp and Rustenburg. In the Orange River Colony and on

the northern lines of the Cape Colony the same system was extensively

applied. I will now attempt to describe the more important operations

of the winter, beginning with the incursion of Plumer into the untrodden

ground to the north.

At this period of the war the British forces had overrun, if they had

not subdued, the whole of the Orange River Colony and every part of the

Transvaal which is south of the Mafeking-Pretoria-Komati line. Through

this great tract of country there was not a village and hardly a

farmhouse which had not seen the invaders. But in the north there

remained a vast district, two hundred miles long and three hundred

broad, which had hardly been touched by the war. It is a wild country,

scrub-covered, antelope-haunted plains rising into desolate hills,

but there are many kloofs and valleys with rich water meadows and lush

grazings, which formed natural granaries and depots for the enemy. Here

the Boer government continued to exist, and here, screened by their

mountains, they were able to organise the continuation of the struggle.

It was evident that there could be no end to the war until these last

centres of resistance had been broken up.

The British forces had advanced as far north as Rustenburg in the west,

Pienaar in the centre, and Lydenburg in the east, but here they had

halted, unwilling to go farther until their conquests had been made good

behind them. A General might well pause before plunging his troops into

that vast and rugged district, when an active foe and an exposed line of

communication lay for many hundreds of miles to the south of them. But

Lord Kitchener with characteristic patience waited for the right hour to

come, and then with equally characteristic audacity played swiftly and

boldly for his stake. De Wet, impotent for the moment, had been hunted

back over the Orange River. French had harried the burghers in the

South-east Transvaal, and the main force of the enemy was known to be on

that side of the seat of war. The north was exposed, and with one long,

straight lunge to the heart, Pietersburg might be transfixed.

There could only be one direction for the advance, and that must be

along the Pretoria to Pietersburg railroad. This is the only line of

rails which leads to the north, and as it was known to be in working

order (the Boers were running a bi-weekly service from Pietersburg to

Warm Baths), it was hoped that a swift advance might seize it before any

extensive damage could be done. With this object a small but very mobile

force rapidly assembled at the end of March at Pienaar River, which was

the British rail-head forty miles north of Pretoria and a hundred

and thirty from Pietersburg. This column consisted of the Bushveld

Carbineers, the 4th Imperial Bushmen's Corps, and the 6th New Zealand

contingent. With them were the 18th battery R.F.A., and three pom-poms.

A detachment of the invaluable mounted Sappers rode with the force,

and two infantry regiments, the 2nd Gordons and the Northamptons,

were detached to garrison the more vulnerable places upon the line of

advance.

Upon March 29th the untiring Plumer, called off from the chase of De

Wet, was loosed upon this fresh line, and broke swiftly away to the

north. The complete success of his undertaking has obscured our estimate

of its danger, but it was no light task to advance so great a distance

into a bitterly hostile country with a fighting force of 2000 rifles. As

an enterprise it was in many ways not unlike Mahon's dash on Mafeking,

but without any friendly force with which to join hands at the end.

However from the beginning all went well. On the 30th the force had

reached Warm Baths, where a great isolated hotel already marks the site

of what will be a rich and fashionable spa. On April 1st the Australian

scouts rode into Nylstroom, fifty more miles upon their way. There had

been sufficient sniping to enliven the journey, but nothing which could

be called an action. Gleaning up prisoners and refugees as they went,

with the railway engineers working like bees behind them, the force

still swept unchecked upon its way. On April 5th Piet Potgietersrust

was entered, another fifty-mile stage, and on the morning of the 8th

the British vanguard rode into Pietersburg. Kitchener's judgment and

Plumer's energy had met with their reward.

The Boer commando had evacuated the town and no serious opposition was

made to the British entry. The most effective resistance came from

a single schoolmaster, who, in a moment of irrational frenzy or of

patriotic exaltation, shot down three of the invaders before he met

his own death. Some rolling stock, one small gun, and something under a

hundred prisoners were the trophies of the capture, but the Boer arsenal

and the printing press were destroyed, and the Government sped off in

a couple of Cape carts in search of some new capital. Pietersburg was

principally valuable as a base from which a sweeping movement might be

made from the north at the same moment as one from the south-east.

A glance at the map will show that a force moving from this point in

conjunction with another from Lydenburg might form the two crooked claws

of a crab to enclose a great space of country, in which smaller

columns might collect whatever was to be found. Without an instant of

unnecessary delay the dispositions were made, and no fewer than eight

columns slipped upon the chase. It will be best to continue to follow

the movements of Plumer's force, and then to give some account of the

little armies which were operating from the south, with the results of

their enterprise.

It was known that Viljoen and a number of Boers were within the district

which lies north of the line in the Middelburg district. An impenetrable

bush-veld had offered them a shelter from which they made their constant

sallies to wreck a train or to attack a post. This area was now to be

systematically cleared up. The first thing was to stop the northern line

of retreat. The Oliphant River forms a loop in that direction, and as it

is a considerable stream, it would, if securely held, prevent any escape

upon that side. With this object Plumer, on April 14th, the sixth day

after his occupation of Pietersburg, struck east from that town and

trekked over the veld, through the formidable Chunies Pass, and so

to the north bank of the Oliphant, picking up thirty or forty Boer

prisoners upon the way. His route lay through a fertile country dotted

with native kraals. Having reached the river which marked the line which

he was to hold, Plumer, upon April 17th, spread his force over many

miles, so as to block the principal drifts. The flashes of his helio

were answered by flash after flash from many points upon the southern

horizon. What these other forces were, and whence they came, must now be

made clear to the reader.

General Bindon Blood, a successful soldier, had confirmed in the

Transvaal a reputation which he had won on the northern frontier of

India. He and General Elliot were two of the late comers who had been

spared from the great Eastern dependency to take the places of some of

those Generals who had returned to England for a well-earned rest. He

had distinguished himself by his systematic and effective guardianship

of the Delagoa railway line, and he was now selected for the supreme

control of the columns which were to advance from the south and sweep

the Roos-Senekal district. There were seven of them, which were arranged

as follows:

Two columns started from Middelburg under Beatson and Benson, which

might be called the left wings of the movement. The object of Beatson's

column was to hold the drifts of the Crocodile River, while Benson's was

to seize the neighbouring hills called the Bothasberg. This it was

hoped would pin the Boers from the west, while Kitchener from Lydenburg

advanced from the east in three separate columns. Pulteney and Douglas

would move up from Belfast in the centre, with Dulstoom for their

objective. It was the familiar drag net of French, but facing north

instead of south.

On April 13th the southern columns were started, but already the British

preparations had alarmed the Boers, and Botha, with his main commandos,

had slipped south across the line into that very district from which he

had been so recently driven. Viljoen's commando still remained to the

north, and the British troops, pouring in from every side, converged

rapidly upon it. The success of the operations was considerable, though

not complete. The Tantesberg, which had been the rallying-point of the

Boers, was occupied, and Roos-Senekal, their latest capital, was

taken, with their State papers and treasure. Viljoen, with a number of

followers, slipped through between the columns, but the greater part

of the burghers, dashing furiously about like a shoal of fish when they

become conscious of the net, were taken by one or other of the columns.

A hundred of the Boksburg commando surrendered en masse, fifty more were

taken at Roos-Senekal; forty-one of the formidable Zarps with Schroeder,

their leader, were captured in the north by the gallantry and wit of a

young Australian officer named Reid; sixty more were hunted down by

the indefatigable Vialls, leader of the Bushmen. From all parts of the

district came the same story of captures and surrenders.

Knowing, however, that Botha and Viljoen had slipped through to the

south of the railway line, Lord Kitchener determined to rapidly transfer

the scene of the operations to that side. At the end of April, after a

fortnight's work, during which this large district was cropped, but

by no means shaved, the troops turned south again. The results of the

operation had been eleven hundred prisoners, almost the same number

as French had taken in the south-east, together with a broken Krupp, a

pom-pom, and the remains of the big naval gun taken from us at Helvetia.

It was determined that Plumer's advance upon Pietersburg should not be

a mere raid, but that steps should be taken to secure all that he had

gained, and to hold the lines of communication. With this object the

2nd Gordon Highlanders and the 2nd Wiltshires were pushed up along

the railroad, followed by Kitchener's Fighting Scouts. These troops

garrisoned Pietersburg and took possession of Chunies Poort, and other

strategic positions. They also furnished escorts for the convoys

which supplied Plumer on the Oliphant River, and they carried out some

spirited operations themselves in the neighbourhood of Pietersburg.

Grenfell, who commanded the force, broke up several laagers, and

captured a number of prisoners, operations in which he was much assisted

by Colenbrander and his men. Finally the last of the great Creusot guns,

the formidable Long Toms, was found mounted near Haenertsburg. It was

the same piece which had in succession scourged Mafeking and Kimberley.

The huge gun, driven to bay, showed its powers by opening an effective

fire at ten thousand yards. The British galloped in upon it, the Boer

riflemen were driven off, and the gun was blown up by its faithful

gunners. So by suicide died the last of that iron brood, the four

sinister brothers who had wrought much mischief in South Africa. They

and their lesson will live in the history of modern artillery.

The sweeping of the Roos-Senekal district being over, Plumer left his

post upon the River of the Elephants, a name which, like Rhenoster,

Zeekoe, Kameelfontein, Leeuw Kop, Tigerfontein, Elands River, and so

many more, serves as a memorial to the great mammals which once covered

the land. On April 28th the force turned south, and on May 4th they had

reached the railroad at Eerstefabrieken close to Pretoria. They had come

in touch with a small Boer force upon the way, and the indefatigable

Vialls hounded them for eighty miles, and tore away the tail of their

convoy with thirty prisoners. The main force had left Pretoria on

horseback on March 28th, and found themselves back once again upon foot

on May 5th. They had something to show, however, for the loss of their

horses, since they had covered a circular march of 400 miles, had

captured some hundreds of the enemy, and had broken up their last

organised capital. From first to last it was a most useful and

well-managed expedition.

It is the more to be regretted that General Blood was recalled from his

northern trek before it had attained its full results, because those

operations to which he turned did not offer him any great opportunities

for success. Withdrawing from the north of the railway with his columns,

he at once started upon a sweep of that portion of the country which

forms an angle between the Delagoa line and the Swazi frontier--the

Barberton district. But again the two big fish, Viljoen and Botha, had

slipped away, and the usual collection of sprats was left in the net.

The sprats count also, however, and every week now telegrams were

reaching England from Lord Kitchener which showed that from three to

five hundred more burghers had fallen into our hands. Although the

public might begin to look upon the war as interminable, it had become

evident to the thoughtful observer that it was now a mathematical

question, and that a date could already be predicted by which the whole

Boer population would have passed into the power of the British.

Among the numerous small British columns which were at work in different

parts of the country, in the latter half of May, there was one

under General Dixon which was operating in the neighbourhood of the

Magaliesberg Range. This locality has never been a fortunate one for the

British arms. The country is peculiarly mountainous and broken, and it

was held by the veteran De la Rey and a numerous body of irreconcilable

Boers. Here in July we had encountered a check at Uitval's Nek, in

December Clements had met a more severe one at Nooitgedacht, while

shortly afterwards Cunningham had been repulsed at Middelfontein, and

the Light Horse cut up at Naauwpoort. After such experiences one would

have thought that no column which was not of overmastering strength

would have been sent into this dangerous region, but General Dixon had

as a matter of fact by no means a strong force with him. With 1600 men

and a battery he was despatched upon a quest after some hidden guns

which were said to have been buried in those parts.

On May 26th Dixon's force, consisting of Derbyshires, King's Own

Scottish Borderers, Imperial Yeomanry, Scottish Horse, and six guns

(four of 8th R.F.A. and two of 28th R.F.A.), broke camp at Naauwpoort

and moved to the west. On the 28th they found themselves at a place

called Vlakfontein, immediately south of Oliphant's Nek. On that

day there were indications that there were a good many Boers in the

neighbourhood. Dixon left a guard over his camp and then sallied out in

search of the buried guns. His force was divided into three parts,

the left column under Major Chance consisting of two guns of the 28th

R.F.A., 230 of the Yeomanry, and one company of the Derbys. The centre

comprised two guns (8th R.F. A.), one howitzer, two companies of the

Scottish Borderers and one of the Derbys; while the right was made up

of two guns (8th R.F.A. ), 200 Scottish Horse, and two companies of

Borderers. Having ascertained that the guns were not there, the force

about midday was returning to the camp, when the storm broke suddenly

and fiercely upon the rearguard.

There had been some sniping during the whole morning, but no indications

of the determined attack which was about to be delivered. The force in

retiring upon the camp had become divided, and the rearguard consisted

of the small column under Major Chance which had originally formed the

left wing. A veld fire was raging on one flank of this rearguard, and

through the veil of smoke a body of five hundred Boers charged suddenly

home with magnificent gallantry upon the guns. We have few records of a

more dashing or of a more successful action in the whole course of the

war. So rapid was it that hardly any time elapsed between the glimpse

of the first dark figures galloping through the haze and the thunder

of their hoofs as they dashed in among the gunners. The Yeomanry were

driven back and many of them shot down. The charge of the mounted

Boers was supported by a very heavy fire from a covering party, and the

gun-detachments were killed or wounded almost to a man. The lieutenant

in charge and the sergeant were both upon the ground. So far as it is

possible to reconstruct the action from the confused accounts of excited

eye-witnesses and from the exceedingly obscure official report of

General Dixon, there was no longer any resistance round the guns,

which were at once turned by their captors upon the nearest British

detachment.

The company of infantry which had helped to escort the guns proved

however to be worthy representatives of that historic branch of

the British service. They were northerners, men of Derbyshire and

Nottingham, the same counties which had furnished the brave militia who

had taken their punishment so gamely at Roodeval. Though hustled and

broken they re-formed and clung doggedly to their task, firing at the

groups of Boers who surrounded the guns. At the same time word had been

sent of their pressing need to the Scotch Borderers and the Scottish

Horse, who came swarming across the valley to the succour of their

comrades. Dixon had brought two guns and a howitzer into action, which

subdued the fire of the two captured pieces, and the infantry, Derbys

and Borderers, swept over the position, retaking the two guns and

shooting down those of the enemy who tried to stand. The greater number

vanished into the smoke, which veiled their retreat as it had their

advance. Forty-one of them were left dead upon the ground. Six officers

and fifty men killed with about a hundred and twenty wounded made up the

British losses, to which two guns would certainly have been added

but for the gallant counter-attack of the infantry. With Dargai and

Vlakfontein to their credit the Derbys have green laurels upon their

war-worn colours. They share them on this occasion with the Scottish

Borderers, whose volunteer company carried itself as stoutly as the

regulars.

How is such an action to be summed up? To Kemp, the young Boer leader,

and his men belongs the credit of the capture of the guns; to the

British that of their recapture and of the final possession of the

field. The British loss was probably somewhat higher than that of the

Boers, but upon the other hand there could be no question as to which

side could afford loss the better. The Briton could be replaced, but

there were no reserves behind the fighting line of the Boers.

There is one subject which cannot be ignored in discussing this battle,

however repugnant it may be. That is the shooting of some of the British

wounded who lay round the guns. There is no question at all about the

fact, which is attested by many independent witnesses. There is reason

to hope that some of the murderers paid for their crimes with their

lives before the battle was over. It is pleasant to add that there is at

least one witness to the fact that Boer officers interfered with threats

to prevent some of these outrages. It is unfair to tarnish the whole

Boer nation and cause on account of a few irresponsible villains,

who would be disowned by their own decent comrades. Very many--too

many--British soldiers have known by experience what it is to fall into

the hands of the enemy, and it must be confessed that on the whole

they have been dealt with in no ungenerous spirit, while the British

treatment of the Boers has been unexampled in all military history for

its generosity and humanity. That so fair a tale should be darkened by

such ruffianly outrages is indeed deplorable, but the incident is too

well authenticated to be left unrecorded in any detailed account of the

campaign. General Dixon, finding the Boers very numerous all round him,

and being hampered by his wounded, fell back upon Naauwpoort, which he

reached on June 1st.

In May, Sir Bindon Blood, having returned to the line to refit, made yet

another cast through that thrice-harried belt of country which contains

Ermelo, Bethel, and Carolina, in which Botha, Viljoen, and the fighting

Boers had now concentrated. Working over the blackened veld he swung

round in the Barberton direction, and afterwards made a westerly

drive in conjunction with small columns commanded by Walter Kitchener,

Douglas, and Campbell of the Rifles, while Colville, Garnett, and

Bullock co-operated from the Natal line. Again the results were

disappointing when compared with the power of the instrument employed.

On July 5th he reached Springs, near Johannesburg, with a considerable

amount of stock, but with no great number of prisoners. The elusive

Botha had slipped away to the south and was reported upon the Zululand

border, while Viljoen had succeeded in crossing the Delagoa line and

winning back to his old lair in the district north of Middelburg,

from which he had been evicted in April. The commandos were like those

pertinacious flies which buzz upwards when a hand approaches them, but

only to settle again in the same place. One could but try to make the

place less attractive than before.

Before Viljoen's force made its way over the line it had its revenge for

the long harrying it had undergone by a well-managed night attack, in

which it surprised and defeated a portion of Colonel Beatson's column

at a place called Wilmansrust, due south of Middelburg, and between

that town and Bethel. Beatson had divided his force, and this section

consisted of 850 of the 5th Victorian Mounted Rifles, with thirty

gunners and two pom-poms, the whole under the command of Major

Morris. Viljoen's force trekking north towards the line came upon this

detachment upon June 12th. The British were aware of the presence of the

enemy, but do not appear to have posted any extra outposts or taken any

special precautions. Long months of commando chasing had imbued them too

much with the idea that these were fugitive sheep, and not fierce and

wily wolves, whom they were endeavouring to catch. It is said that 700

yards separated the four pickets. With that fine eye for detail which

the Boer leaders possess, they had started a veld fire upon the west of

the camp and then attacked from the east, so that they were themselves

invisible while their enemies were silhouetted against the light.

Creeping up between the pickets, the Boers were not seen until they

opened fire at point-blank range upon the sleeping men. The rifles were

stacked--another noxious military tradition--and many of the troopers

were shot down while they rushed for their weapons. Surprised out of

their sleep and unable to distinguish their antagonists, the brave

Australians did as well as any troops could have done who were placed in

so impossible a position. Captain Watson, the officer in charge of the

pom-poms, was shot down, and it proved to be impossible to bring the

guns into action. Within five minutes the Victorians had lost twenty

killed and forty wounded, when the survivors surrendered. It is

pleasant to add that they were very well treated by the victors, but

the high-spirited colonials felt their reverse most bitterly. 'It is the

worst thing that ever happened to Australia!' says one in the letter in

which he describes it. The actual number of Boers who rushed the camp

was only 180, but 400 more had formed a cordon round it. To Viljoen and

his lieutenant Muller great credit must be given for this well-managed

affair, which gave them a fresh supply of stores and clothing at a time

when they were hard pressed for both. These same Boer officers had

led the attack upon Helvetia where the 4.7 gun was taken. The

victors succeeded in getting away with all their trophies, and having

temporarily taken one of the blockhouses on the railway near Brugspruit,

they crossed the line in safety and returned, as already said, to their

old quarters in the north, which had been harried but not denuded by the

operations of General Blood.

It would take a volume to catalogue, and a library to entirely describe

the movements and doings of the very large number of British columns

which operated over the Transvaal and the Orange River Colony during

this cold-weather campaign. If the same columns and the same leaders

were consistently working in the same districts, some system of

narrative might enable the reader to follow their fortunes, but they

were, as a matter of fact, rapidly transferred from one side of the

field of action to another in accordance with the concentrations of the

enemy. The total number of columns amounted to at least sixty, which

varied in number from two hundred to two thousand, and seldom hunted

alone. Could their movements be marked in red upon a chart, the whole

of that huge district would be criss-crossed, from Taungs to Komati

and from Touws River to Pietersburg, with the track of our weary but

indomitable soldiers.

Without attempting to enter into details which would be unbecoming to

the modesty of a single volume, one may indicate what the other more

important groupings were during the course of these months, and which

were the columns that took part in them. Of French's drive in the

south-east, and of Blood's incursion into the Roos-Senekal district some

account has been given, and of his subsequent sweeping of the south. At

the same period Babington, Dixon, and Rawlinson were co-operating in the

Klerksdorp district, though the former officer transferred his services

suddenly to Blood's combination, and afterwards to Elliot's column in

the north of Orange River Colony. Williams and Fetherstonhaugh came

later to strengthen this Klerksdorp district, in which, after the

clearing of the Magaliesberg, De la Rey had united his forces to those

of Smuts. This very important work of getting a firm hold upon the

Magaliesberg was accomplished in July by Barton, Allenby, Kekewich,

and Lord Basing, who penetrated into the wild country and established

blockhouses and small forts in very much the same way as Cumberland

and Wade in 1746 held down the Highlands. The British position was much

strengthened by the firm grip obtained of this formidable stronghold

of the enemy, which was dangerous not only on account of its extreme

strength, but also of its proximity to the centres of population and of

wealth.

De la Rey, as already stated, had gone down to the Klerksdorp district,

whence, for a time at least, he seems to have passed over into the

north of the Orange River Colony. The British pressure at Klerksdorp had

become severe, and thither in May came the indefatigable Methuen, whom

we last traced to Warrenton. From this point on May 1st he railed his

troops to Mafeking, whence he trekked to Lichtenburg, and south as far

as his old fighting ground of Haartebeestefontein, having one skirmish

upon the way and capturing a Boer gun. Thence he returned to Mafeking,

where he had to bid adieu to those veteran Yeomanry who had been his

comrades on so many a weary march. It was not their fortune to be

present at any of the larger battles of the war, but few bodies of

troops have returned to England with a finer record of hard and useful

service.

No sooner, however, had Methuen laid down one weapon than he snatched

up another. Having refitted his men and collected some of the more

efficient of the new Yeomanry, he was off once more for a three weeks'

circular tour in the direction of Zeerust. It is difficult to believe

that the oldest inhabitant could have known more of the western side of

the Transvaal, for there was hardly a track which he had not traversed

or a kopje from which he had not been sniped. Early in August he had

made a fresh start from Mafeking, dividing his force into two columns,

the command of the second being given to Von Donop. Having joined hands

with Fetherstonhaugh, he moved through the south-west and finally

halted at Klerksdorp. The harried Boers moved a hundred miles north to

Rustenburg, followed by Methuen, Fetherstonhaugh, Hamilton, Kekewich,

and Allenby, who found the commandos of De la Rey and Kemp to be

scattering in front of them and hiding in the kloofs and dongas, whence

in the early days of September no less than two hundred were extracted.

On September 6th and 8th Methuen engaged the main body of De la Rey in

the valley of the Great Marico River which lies to the north-west of

Rustenburg. In these two actions he pushed the Boers in front of him

with a loss of eighteen killed and forty-one prisoners, but the fighting

was severe, and fifteen of his men were killed and thirty wounded before

the position had been carried. The losses were almost entirely among the

newly raised Yeomanry, who had already shown on several occasions that,

having shed their weaker members and had some experience of the field,

they were now worthy to take their place beside their veteran comrades.

The only other important operation undertaken by the British columns in

the Transvaal during this period was in the north, where Beyers and

his men were still harried by Grenfell, Colenbrander, and Wilson. A

considerable proportion of the prisoners which figured in the weekly

lists came from this quarter. On May 30th there was a notable action,

the truth of which was much debated but finally established, in which

Kitchener's Scouts under Wilson surprised and defeated a Boer force

under Pretorius, killing and wounding several, and taking forty

prisoners. On July 1st Grenfell took nearly a hundred of Beyers' men

with a considerable convoy. North, south, east, and west the tale

was ever the same, but so long as Botha, De la Rey, Steyn, and De Wet

remained uncaptured, the embers might still at any instant leap into a

flame.

It only remains to complete this synopsis of the movements of columns

within the Transvaal that I should add that after the conclusion of

Blood's movement in July, several of his columns continued to clear the

country and to harass Viljoen in the Lydenburg and Dulstroom districts.

Park, Kitchener, Spens, Beatson, and Benson were all busy at this

work, never succeeding in forcing more than a skirmish, but continually

whittling away wagons, horses, and men from that nucleus of resistance

which the Boer leaders still held together.

Though much hampered by the want of forage for their horses, the Boers

were ever watchful for an opportunity to strike back, and the long list

of minor successes gained by the British was occasionally interrupted

by a petty reverse. Such a one befell the small body of South African

Constabulary stationed near Vereeniging, who encountered upon July 13th

a strong force of Boers supposed to be the main commando of De Wet.

The Constabulary behaved with great gallantry but were hopelessly

outnumbered, and lost their seven-pounder gun, four killed, six wounded,

and twenty-four prisoners. Another small reverse occurred at a far

distant point of the seat of war, for the irregular corps known as

Steinacker's Horse was driven from its position at Bremersdorp in

Swaziland upon July 24th, and had to fall back sixteen miles, with a

loss of ten casualties and thirty prisoners. Thus in the heart of a

native state the two great white races of South Africa were to be seen

locked in a desperate conflict. However unavoidable, the sight was

certainly one to be deplored.

To the Boer credit, or discredit, are also to be placed those repeated

train wreckings, which cost the British during this campaign the lives

and limbs of many brave soldiers who were worthy of some less ignoble

fate. It is true that the laws of war sanction such enterprises, but

there is something indiscriminate in the results which is repellent to

humanity, and which appears to justify the most energetic measures to

prevent them. Women, children, and sick must all travel by these trains

and are exposed to a common danger, while the assailants enjoy a safety

which renders their exploit a peculiarly inglorious one. Two Boers,

Trichardt and Hindon, the one a youth of twenty-two, the other a man of

British birth, distinguished, or disgraced, themselves by this unsavoury

work upon the Delagoa line, but with the extension of the blockhouse

system the attempts became less successful. There was one, however, upon

the northern line near Naboomspruit which cost the lives of Lieutenant

Best and eight Gordon Highlanders, while ten were wounded. The party of

Gordons continued to resist after the smash, and were killed or wounded

to a man. The painful incident is brightened by such an example of

military virtue, and by the naive reply of the last survivor, who on

being questioned why he continued to fight until he was shot down,

answered with fine simplicity, 'Because I am a Gordon Highlander.'

Another train disaster of an even more tragic character occurred near

Waterval, fifteen miles north of Pretoria, upon the last day of August.

The explosion of a mine wrecked the train, and a hundred Boers who

lined the banks of the cutting opened fire upon the derailed carriages.

Colonel Vandeleur, an officer of great promise, was killed and twenty

men, chiefly of the West Riding regiment, were shot. Nurse Page was also

among the wounded. It was after this fatal affair that the regulation of

carrying Boer hostages upon the trains was at last carried out.

It has been already stated that part of Lord Kitchener's policy of

concentration lay in his scheme for gathering the civil population

into camps along the lines of communication. The reasons for this, both

military and humanitarian, were overwhelming. Experience had proved that

the men if left at liberty were liable to be persuaded or coerced by the

fighting Boers into breaking their parole and rejoining the commandos.

As to the women and children, they could not be left upon the farms in

a denuded country. That the Boers in the field had no doubts as to

the good treatment of these people was shown by the fact that they

repeatedly left their families in the way of the columns so that they

might be conveyed to the camps. Some consternation was caused in England

by a report of Miss Hobhouse, which called public attention to the very

high rate of mortality in some of these camps, but examination showed

that this was not due to anything insanitary in their situation or

arrangement, but to a severe epidemic of measles which had swept away

a large number of the children. A fund was started in London to give

additional comforts to these people, though there is reason to believe

that their general condition was superior to that of the Uitlander

refugees, who still waited permission to return to their homes. By the

end of July there were no fewer than sixty thousand inmates of the camps

in the Transvaal alone, and half as many in the Orange River Colony. So

great was the difficulty in providing the supplies for so large a number

that it became more and more evident that some at least of the camps

must be moved down to the sea coast.

Passing to the Orange River Colony we find that during this winter

period the same British tactics had been met by the same constant

evasions on the part of the dwindling commandos. The Colony had been

divided into four military districts: that of Bloemfontein, which was

given to Charles Knox, that of Lyttelton at Springfontein, that of

Rundle at Harrismith, and that of Elliot in the north. The latter was

infinitely the most important, and Elliot, the warden of the northern

marches, had under him during the greater part of the winter a mobile

force of about 6000 men, commanded by such experienced officers as

Broadwood, De Lisle, and Bethune. Later in the year Spens, Bullock,

Plumer, and Rimington were all sent into the Orange River Colony to

help to stamp out the resistance. Numerous skirmishes and snipings

were reported from all parts of the country, but a constant stream of

prisoners and of surrenders assured the soldiers that, in spite of the

difficulty of the country and the obstinacy of the enemy, the term of

their labours was rapidly approaching.

In all the petty and yet necessary operations of these columns, two

incidents demand more than a mere mention. The first was a hard-fought

skirmish in which some of Elliot's horsemen were engaged upon June

6th. His column had trekked during the month of May from Kroonstad to

Harrismith, and then turning north found itself upon that date near the

hamlet of Reitz. Major Sladen with 200 Mounted Infantry, when detached

from the main body, came upon the track of a Boer convoy and ran it

down. Over a hundred vehicles with forty-five prisoners were the fruits

of their enterprise. Well satisfied with his morning's work, the British

leader despatched a party of his men to convey the news to De Lisle, who

was behind, while he established himself with his loot and his prisoners

in a convenient kraal. Thence they had an excellent view of a large body

of horsemen approaching them with scouts, flankers, and all military

precautions. One warm-hearted officer seems actually to have sallied out

to meet his comrades, and it was not till his greeting of them took

the extreme form of handing over his rifle that the suspicion of danger

entered the heads of his companions. But if there was some lack of wit

there was none of heart in Sladen and his men. With forty-five Boers to

hold down, and 500 under Fourie, De Wet, and De la Rey around them,

the little band made rapid preparation for a desperate resistance: the

prisoners were laid upon their faces, the men knocked loopholes in the

mud walls of the kraal, and a blunt soldierly answer was returned to the

demand for surrender.

But it was a desperate business. The attackers were five to one, and

the five were soldiers of De Wet, the hard-bitten veterans of a hundred

encounters. The captured wagons in a long double row stretched out over

the plain, and under this cover the Dutchmen swarmed up to the kraal.

But the men who faced them were veterans also, and the defence made up

for the disparity of numbers. With fine courage the Boers made their way

up to the village, and established themselves in the outlying huts, but

the Mounted Infantry clung desperately to their position. Out of the

few officers present Findlay was shot through the head, Moir and Cameron

through the heart, and Strong through the stomach. It was a Waggon Hill

upon a small scale, two dour lines of skirmishers emptying their rifles

into each other at point-blank range. Once more, as at Bothaville, the

British Mounted Infantry proved that when it came to a dogged pelting

match they could stand punishment longer than their enemy. They suffered

terribly. Fifty-one out of the little force were on the ground, and the

survivors were not much more numerous than their prisoners. To the 1st

Gordons, the 2nd Bedfords, the South Australians, and the New South

Welsh men belongs the honour of this magnificent defence. For four hours

the fierce battle raged, until at last the parched and powder-stained

survivors breathed a prayer of thanks as they saw on the southern

horizon the vanguard of De Lisle riding furiously to the rescue. For the

last hour, since they had despaired of carrying the kraal, the Boers had

busied themselves in removing their convoy; but now, for the second time

in one day, the drivers found British rifles pointed at their heads, and

the oxen were turned once more and brought back to those who had fought

so hard to hold them. Twenty-eight killed and twenty-six wounded were

the losses in this desperate affair. Of the Boers seventeen were left

dead in front of the kraal, and the forty-five had not escaped from the

bulldog grip which held them. There seems for some reason to have been

no effective pursuit of the Boers, and the British column held on its

way to Kroonstad.

The second incident which stands out amid the dreary chronicle of

hustlings and snipings is the surprise visit paid by Broadwood with a

small British column to the town of Reitz upon July 11th, which resulted

in the capture of nearly every member of the late government of the Free

State, save only the one man whom they particularly wanted. The column

consisted of 200 yeomen, 200 of the 7th Dragoon Guards, and two guns.

Starting at 11 P.M., the raiders rode hard all night and broke with

the dawn upon the sleeping village. Racing into the main street, they

secured the startled Boers as they rushed from the houses. It is easy

to criticise such an operation from a distance, and to overlook the

practical difficulties in the way, but on the face of it it seems a pity

that the holes had not been stopped before the ferret was sent in.

A picket at the farther end of the street would have barred Steyn's

escape. As it was, he flung himself upon his horse and galloped

half-clad out of the town. Sergeant Cobb of the Dragoons snapped a rifle

at close quarters upon him, but the cold of the night had frozen the oil

on the striker and the cartridge hung fire. On such trifles do the large

events of history turn! Two Boer generals, two commandants, Steyn's

brother, his secretary, and several other officials were among the

nine-and-twenty prisoners. The treasury was also captured, but it is

feared that the Yeomen and Dragoons will not be much the richer from

their share of the contents.

Save these two incidents, the fight at Reitz and the capture of a

portion of Steyn's government at the same place, the winter's campaign

furnished little which was of importance, though a great deal of very

hard and very useful work was done by the various columns under the

direction of the governors of the four military districts. In the south

General Bruce Hamilton made two sweeps, one from the railway line to

the western frontier, and the second from the south and east in the

direction of Petrusburg. The result of the two operations was about 300

prisoners. At the same time Monro and Hickman re-cleared the already

twice-cleared districts of Rouxville and Smithfield. The country in the

east of the Colony was verging now upon the state which Grant described

in the Shenandoah Valley: 'A crow,' said he, 'must carry his own rations

when he flies across it.'

In the middle district General Charles Knox, with the columns of

Pine-Coffin, Thorneycroft, Pilcher, and Henry, were engaged in the same

sort of work with the same sort of results.

The most vigorous operations fell to the lot of General Elliot, who

worked over the northern and north-eastern district, which still

contained a large number of fighting burghers. In May and June Elliot

moved across to Vrede and afterwards down the eastern frontier of the

Colony, joining hands at last with Rundle at Harrismith. He then worked

his way back to Kroonstad through Reitz and Lindley. It was on this

journey that Sladen's Mounted Infantry had the sharp experience which

has been already narrated. Western's column, working independently,

co-operated with Elliot in this clearing of the north-east. In August

there were very large captures by Broadwood's force, which had attained

considerable mobility, ninety miles being covered by it on one occasion

in two days.

Of General Rundle there is little to be said, as he was kept busy in

exploring the rough country in his own district--the same district

which had been the scene of the operations against Prinsloo and the

Fouriesburg surrender. Into this district Kritzinger and his men

trekked after they were driven from the Colony in July, and many

small skirmishes and snipings among the mountains showed that the Boer

resistance was still alive.

July and August were occupied in the Orange River Colony by energetic

operations of Spens' and Rimington's columns in the midland districts,

and by a considerable drive to the north-eastern corner, which was

shared by three columns under Elliot and two under Plumer, with one

under Henry and several smaller bodies. A considerable number of

prisoners and a large amount of stock were the result of the movement,

but it was very evident that there was a waste of energy in the

employment of such forces for such an end. The time appeared to be

approaching when a strong force of military police stationed permanently

in each district might prove a more efficient instrument. One

interesting development of this phase of the war was the enrolment of

a burgher police among the Boers who had surrendered. These men--well

paid, well mounted, and well armed--were an efficient addition to the

British forces. The movement spread until before the end of the war

there were several thousand burghers under such well-known officers

as Celliers, Villonel, and young Cronje, fighting against their

own guerilla countrymen. Who, in 1899, could have prophesied such a

phenomenon as that!

Lord Kitchener's proclamation issued upon August 9th marked one more

turn in the screw upon the part of the British authorities. By it the

burghers were warned that those who had not laid down their arms by

September 15th would in the case of the leaders be banished, and in

the case of the burghers be compelled to support their families in

the refugee camps. As many of the fighting burghers were men of no

substance, the latter threat did not affect them much, but the other,

though it had little result at the time, may be useful for the exclusion

of firebrands during the period of reconstruction. Some increase was

noticeable in the number of surrenders after the proclamation, but on

the whole it had not the result which was expected, and its expediency

is very open to question. This date may be said to mark the conclusion

of the winter campaign and the opening of a new phase in the struggle.

CHAPTER 35. THE GUERILLA OPERATIONS IN CAPE COLONY.

In the account which has been given in a preceding chapter of the

invasion of Cape Colony by the Boer forces, it was shown that the

Western bands were almost entirely expelled, or at least that they

withdrew, at the time when De Wet was driven across the Orange River.

This was at the beginning of March 1901. It was also mentioned that

though the Boers evacuated the barren and unprofitable desert of the

Karoo, the Eastern bands which had come with Kritzinger did not follow

the same course, but continued to infest the mountainous districts of

the Central Colony, whence they struck again and again at the railway

lines, the small towns, British patrols, or any other quarry which

was within their reach and strength. From the surrounding country they

gathered a fair number of recruits, and they were able through the

sympathy and help of the Dutch farmers to keep themselves well mounted

and supplied. In small wandering bands they spread themselves over a

vast extent of country, and there were few isolated farmhouses from

the Orange River to the Oudtshoorn Mountains, and from the Cape Town

railroad in the west to the Fish River in the east, which were not

visited by their active and enterprising scouts. The object of the whole

movement was, no doubt, to stimulate a general revolt in the Colony; and

it must be acknowledged that if the powder did not all explode it was

not for want of the match being thoroughly applied.

It might at first sight seem the simplest of military operations to hunt

down these scattered and insignificant bands; but as a matter of fact

nothing could be more difficult. Operating in a country which was both

vast and difficult, with excellent horses, the best of information

and supplies ready for them everywhere, it was impossible for the

slow-moving British columns with their guns and their wagons to overtake

them. Formidable even in flight, the Boers were always ready to turn

upon any force which exposed itself too rashly to retaliation, and so

amid the mountain passes the British chiefs had to use an amount of

caution which was incompatible with extreme speed. Only when a commando

was exactly localised so that two or three converging British forces

could be brought to bear upon it, was there a reasonable chance of

forcing a fight. Still, with all these heavy odds against them, the

various little columns continued month after month to play hide-and-seek

with the commandos, and the game was by no means always on the one side.

The varied fortunes of this scrambling campaign can only be briefly

indicated in these pages.

It has already been shown that Kritzinger's original force broke into

many bands, which were recruited partly from the Cape rebels and partly

from fresh bodies which passed over from the Orange River Colony. The

more severe the pressure in the north, the greater reason was there

for a trek to this land of plenty. The total number of Boers who were

wandering over the eastern and midland districts may have been about two

thousand, who were divided into bands which varied from fifty to three

hundred. The chief leaders of separate commandos were Kritzinger,

Scheepers, Malan, Myburgh, Fouche, Lotter, Smuts, Van Reenen, Lategan,

Maritz, and Conroy, the two latter operating on the western side of the

country. To hunt down these numerous and active bodies the British were

compelled to put many similar detachments into the field, known as

the columns of Gorringe, Crabbe, Henniker, Scobell, Doran, Kavanagh,

Alexander, and others. These two sets of miniature armies performed an

intricate devil's dance over the Colony, the main lines of which are

indicated by the red lines upon the map. The Zuurberg mountains to the

north of Steynsburg, the Sneeuwberg range to the south of Middelburg,

the Oudtshoorn Mountains in the south, the Cradock district, the

Murraysburg district, and the Graaf-Reinet district--these were the

chief centres of Boer activity.

In April Kritzinger made his way north to the Orange River Colony, for

the purpose of consulting with De Wet, but he returned with a following

of 200 men about the end of May. Continual brushes occurred during this

month between the various columns, and much hard marching was done upon

either side, but there was nothing which could be claimed as a positive

success.

Early in May two passengers sailed for Europe, the journey of each being

in its way historical. The first was the weary and overworked Pro-Consul

who had the foresight to distinguish the danger and the courage to

meet it. Milner's worn face and prematurely grizzled hair told of the

crushing weight which had rested upon him during three eventful years. A

gentle scholar, he might have seemed more fitted for a life of academic

calm than for the stormy part which the discernment of Mr. Chamberlain

had assigned to him. The fine flower of an English university,

low-voiced and urbane, it was difficult to imagine what impression

he would produce upon those rugged types of which South Africa is so

peculiarly prolific. But behind the reserve of a gentleman there lay

within him a lofty sense of duty, a singular clearness of vision, and

a moral courage which would brace him to follow whither his reason

pointed. His visit to England for three months' rest was the

occasion for a striking manifestation of loyalty and regard from his

fellow-countrymen. He returned in August as Lord Milner to the scene of

his labours, with the construction of a united and loyal commonwealth of

South Africa as the task of his life.

The second traveller who sailed within a few days of the Governor was

Mrs. Botha, the wife of the Boer General, who visited Europe for private

as well as political reasons. She bore to Kruger an exact account of the

state of the country and of the desperate condition of the burghers.

Her mission had no immediate or visible effect, and the weary war,

exhausting for the British but fatal for the Boers, went steadily on.

To continue the survey of the operations in the Cape, the first point

scored was by the invaders, for Malan's commando succeeded upon May 13th

in overwhelming a strong patrol of the Midland Mounted Rifles, the local

colonial corps, to the south of Maraisburg. Six killed, eleven wounded,

and forty-one prisoners were the fruits of his little victory, which

furnished him also with a fresh supply of rifles and ammunition. On May

21st Crabbe's column was in touch with Lotter and with Lategan, but no

very positive result came from the skirmish.

The end of May showed considerable Boer activity in the Cape Colony,

that date corresponding with the return of Kritzinger from the north.

Haig had for the moment driven Scheepers back from the extreme southerly

point which he had reached, and he was now in the Graaf-Reinet district;

but on the other side of the colony Conroy had appeared near Kenhart,

and upon May 23rd he fought a sharp skirmish with a party of Border

Scouts. The main Boer force under Kritzinger was in the midlands,

however, and had concentrated to such an extent in the Cradock district

that it was clear that some larger enterprise was on foot. This soon

took shape, for on June 2nd, after a long and rapid march, the Boer

leader threw himself upon Jamestown, overwhelmed the sixty townsmen who

formed the guard, and looted the town, from which he drew some welcome

supplies and 100 horses. British columns were full cry upon his heels,

however, and the Boers after a few hours left the gutted town and

vanished into the hills once more. On June 6th the British had a little

luck at last, for on that date Scobell and Lukin in the Barkly East

district surprised a laager and took twenty prisoners, 166 horses, and

much of the Jamestown loot. On the same day Windham treated Van

Reenen in a similar rough fashion near Steynsburg, and took twenty-two

prisoners.

On June 8th the supreme command of the operations in Cape Colony was

undertaken by General French, who from this time forward manoeuvred his

numerous columns upon a connected plan with the main idea of pushing the

enemy northwards. It was some time, however, before his disposition

bore fruit, for the commandos were still better mounted and lighter than

their pursuers. On June 13th the youthful and dashing Scheepers, who

commanded his own little force at an age when he would have been a

junior lieutenant of the British army, raided Murraysburg and captured

a patrol. On June 17th Monro with Lovat's Scouts and Bethune's Mounted

Infantry had some slight success near Tarkastad, but three days later

the ill-fated Midland Mounted Rifles were surprised in the early morning

by Kritzinger at Waterkloof, which is thirty miles west of Cradock,

and were badly mauled by him. They lost ten killed, eleven wounded,

and sixty-six prisoners in this unfortunate affair. Again the myth that

colonial alertness is greater than that of regular troops seems to have

been exposed.

At the end of June, Fouche, one of the most enterprising of the guerilla

chiefs, made a dash from Barkly East into the native reserves of the

Transkei in order to obtain horses and supplies. It was a desperate

measure, as it was vain to suppose that the warlike Kaffirs would permit

their property to be looted without resistance, and if once the assegais

were reddened no man could say how far the mischief might go. With great

loyalty the British Government, even in the darkest days, had held back

those martial races--Zulus, Swazis, and Basutos--who all had old grudges

against the Amaboon. Fouche's raid was stopped, however, before it led

to serious trouble. A handful of Griqualand Mounted Rifles held it in

front, while Dalgety and his colonial veterans moving very swiftly drove

him back northwards.

Though baulked, Fouche was still formidable, and on July 14th he made

a strong attack in the neighbourhood of Jamestown upon a column of

Connaught Rangers who were escorting a convoy. Major Moore offered a

determined resistance, and eventually after some hours of fighting drove

the enemy away and captured their laager. Seven killed and seventeen

wounded were the British losses in this spirited engagement.

On July 10th General French, surveying from a lofty mountain peak the

vast expanse of the field of operations, with his heliograph calling up

responsive twinkles over one hundred miles of country, gave the order

for the convergence of four columns upon the valley in which he knew

Scheepers to be lurking. We have it from one of his own letters that

his commando at the time consisted of 240 men, of whom forty were Free

Staters and the rest colonial rebels. Crewe, Windham, Doran, and Scobell

each answered to the call, but the young leader was a man of resource,

and a long kloof up the precipitous side of the hill gave him a road to

safety. Yet the operations showed a new mobility in the British columns,

which shed their guns and their baggage in order to travel faster. The

main commando escaped, but twenty-five laggards were taken. The action

took place among the hills thirty miles to the west of Graaf-Reinet.

On July 21st Crabbe and Kritzinger had a skirmish in the mountains near

Cradock, in which the Boers were strong enough to hold their own; but on

the same date near Murraysburg, Lukin, the gallant colonial gunner, with

ninety men rode into 150 of Lategan's band and captured ten of them,

with a hundred horses. On July 27th a small party of twenty-one Imperial

Yeomanry was captured, after a gallant resistance, by a large force of

Boers at the Doorn River on the other side of the Colony. The Kaffir

scouts of the British were shot dead in cold blood by their captors

after the action. There seems to be no possible excuse for the repeated

murders of coloured men by the Boers, as they had themselves from the

beginning of the war used their Kaffirs for every purpose short of

actually fighting. The war had lost much of the good humour which marked

its outset. A fiercer feeling had been engendered on both sides by the

long strain, but the execution of rebels by the British, though much to

be deplored, is still recognised as one of the rights of a belligerent.

When one remembers the condonation upon the part of the British of the

use of their own uniforms by the Boers, of the wholesale breaking of

paroles, of the continual use of expansive bullets, of the abuse of the

pass system and of the red cross, it is impossible to blame them for

showing some severity in the stamping out of armed rebellion within

their own Colony. If stern measures were eventually adopted it was

only after extreme leniency had been tried and failed. The loss of five

years' franchise as a penalty for firing upon their own flag is surely

the most gentle correction which an Empire ever laid upon a rebellious

people.

At the beginning of August the connected systematic work of French's

columns began to tell. In a huge semicircle the British were pushing

north, driving the guerillas in front of them. Scheepers in his usual

wayward fashion had broken away to the south, but the others had been

unable to penetrate the cordon and were herded over the Stormberg to

Naauwport line. The main body of the Boers was hustled swiftly along

from August 7th to August 10th, from Graaf-Reinet to Thebus, and thrust

over the railway line at that point with some loss of men and a great

shedding of horses. It was hoped that the blockhouses on the railroad

would have held the enemy, but they slipped across by night and got into

the Steynsburg district, where Gorringe's colonials took up the running.

On August 18th he followed the commandos from Steynsburg to Venterstad,

killing twenty of them and taking several prisoners. On the 15th,

Kritzinger with the main body of the invaders passed the Orange River

near Bethulie, and made his way to the Wepener district of the Orange

River Colony. Scheepers, Lotter, Lategan, and a few small wandering

bands were the only Boers left in the Colony, and to these the British

columns now turned their attention, with the result that Lategan,

towards the end of the month, was also driven over the river. For the

time, at least, the situation seemed to have very much improved, but

there was a drift of Boers over the north-western frontier, and the

long-continued warfare at their own doors was undoubtedly having a

dangerous effect upon the Dutch farmers. Small successes from time

to time, such as the taking of sixty of French's Scouts by Theron's

commando on August 10th, served to keep them from despair. Of the

guerilla bands which remained, the most important was that of Scheepers,

which now numbered 300 men, well mounted and supplied. He had broken

back through the cordon, and made for his old haunts in the south-west.

Theron, with a smaller band, was also in the Uniondale and Willowmore

district, approaching close to the sea in the Mossel Bay direction, but

being headed off by Kavanagh. Scheepers turned in the direction of Cape

Town, but swerved aside at Montagu, and moved northwards towards Touws

River.

So far the British had succeeded in driving and injuring, but never in

destroying, the Boer bands. It was a new departure therefore when, upon

September 4th, the commando of Lotter was entirely destroyed by the

column of Scobell. This column consisted of some of the Cape Mounted

Rifles and of the indefatigable 9th Lancers. It marked the enemy down in

a valley to the west of Cradock and attacked them in the morning, after

having secured all the approaches. The result was a complete success.

The Boers threw themselves into a building and held out valiantly,

but their position was impossible, and after enduring considerable

punishment they were forced to hoist the white flag. Eleven had been

killed, forty-six wounded, and fifty-six surrendered--figures which are

in themselves a proof of the tenacity of their defence. Lotter was among

the prisoners, 260 horses were taken, and a good supply of ammunition,

with some dynamite. A few days later, on September 10th, a similar blow,

less final in its character, was dealt by Colonel Crabbe to the commando

of Van der Merve, which was an offshoot of that of Scheepers. The action

was fought near Laingsburg, which is on the main line, just north of

Matjesfontein, and it ended in the scattering of the Boer band, the

death of their boy leader (he was only eighteen years of age), and the

capture of thirty-seven prisoners. Seventy of the Beers escaped by a

hidden road. To Colonials and Yeomanry belongs the honour of the action,

which cost the British force seven casualties. Colonel Crabbe pushed

on after the success, and on September 14th he was in touch with

Scheepers's commando near Ladismith (not to be confused with the

historical town of Natal), and endured and inflicted some losses. On

the 17th a patrol of Grenadier Guards was captured in the north of the

Colony, Rebow, the young lieutenant in charge of them, meeting with a

soldier's death.

On the same day a more serious engagement occurred near Tarkastad,

a place which lies to the east of Cradock, a notorious centre of

disaffection in the midland district. Smuts's commando, some hundreds

strong, was marked down in this part, and several forces converged upon

it. One of the outlets, Elands River Poort, was guarded by a single

squadron of the 17th Lancers. Upon this the Boers made a sudden and very

fierce attack, their approach being facilitated partly by the mist and

partly by the use of khaki, a trick which seems never to have grown too

stale for successful use. The result was that they were able to ride

up to the British camp before any preparations had been made for

resistance, and to shoot down a number of the Lancers before they could

reach their horses. So terrible was the fire that the single squadron

lost thirty-four killed and thirty-six wounded. But the regiment may

console itself for the disaster by the fact that the sorely stricken

detachment remained true to the spirited motto of the corps, and that no

prisoners appear to have been lost.

After this one sharp engagement there ensued several weeks during

which the absence of historical events, or the presence of the military

censor, caused a singular lull in the account of the operations. With

so many small commandos and so many pursuing columns it is extraordinary

that there should not have been a constant succession of actions.

That there was not must indicate a sluggishness upon the part of the

pursuers, and this sluggishness can only be explained by the condition

of their horses. Every train of thought brings the critic back always to

the great horse question, and encourages the conclusion that there, at

all seasons of the war and in all scenes of it, is to be found the most

damning indictment against British foresight, common-sense, and power

of organisation. That the third year of the war should dawn without

the British forces having yet got the legs of the Boers, after having

penetrated every portion of their country and having the horses of the

world on which to draw, is the most amazingly inexplicable point in the

whole of this strange campaign. From the telegram 'Infantry preferred'

addressed to a nation of rough-riders, down to the failure to secure the

excellent horses on the spot, while importing them unfit for use from

the ends of the earth, there has been nothing but one long series of

blunders in this, the most vital question of all. Even up to the end, in

the Colony the obvious lesson had not yet been learnt that it is better

to give 1000 men two horses each, and to let them reach the enemy, than

give 2000 men one horse each, with which they can never attain their

object. The chase during two years of the man with two horses by the man

with one horse, has been a sight painful to ourselves and ludicrous to

others.

In connection with this account of operations within the Colony, there

is one episode which occurred in the extreme north-west which will

not fit in with this connected narrative, but which will justify the

distraction of the reader's intelligence, for few finer deeds of arms

are recorded in the war. This was the heroic defence of a convoy by the

14th Company of Irish Imperial Yeomanry. The convoy was taking food to

Griquatown, on the Kimberley side of the seat of war. The town had been

long invested by Conroy, and the inhabitants were in such straits that

it was highly necessary to relieve them. To this end a convoy, two miles

long, was despatched under Major Humby of the Irish Yeomanry. The escort

consisted of seventy-five Northumberland Fusiliers, twenty-four

local troops, and 100 of the 74th Irish Yeomanry. Fifteen miles from

Griquatown, at a place called Rooikopjes, the convoy was attacked by the

enemy several hundred in number. Two companies of the Irishmen seized

the ridge, however, which commanded the wagons, and held it until they

were almost exterminated. The position was covered with bush, and the

two parties came to the closest of quarters, the Yeomen refusing to take

a backward step, though it was clear that they were vastly outnumbered.

Encouraged by the example of Madan and Ford, their gallant young

leaders, they deliberately sacrificed their lives in order to give time

for the guns to come up and for the convoy to pass. Oliffe, Bonynge, and

Maclean, who had been children together, were shot side by side on the

ridge, and afterwards buried in one grave. Of forty-three men in action,

fourteen were killed and twenty severely wounded. Their sacrifice was

not in vain, however. The Boers were beaten back, and the convoy, as

well as Griquatown, was saved. Some thirty or forty Boers were killed or

wounded in the skirmish, and Conroy, their leader, declared that it was

the stiffest fight of his life.

In the autumn and winter of 1901 General French had steadily pursued the

system of clearing certain districts, one at a time, and endeavouring by

his blockhouses and by the arrangement of his forces to hold in strict

quarantine those sections of the country which were still infested by

the commandos. In this manner he succeeded by the November of this year

in confining the active forces of the enemy to the extreme north-east

and to the south-west of the peninsula. It is doubtful if the whole Boer

force, three-quarters of whom were colonial rebels, amounted to more

than fifteen hundred men. When we learn that at this period of the war

they were indifferently armed, and that many of them were mounted upon

donkeys, it is impossible, after making every allowance for the passive

assistance of the farmers, and the difficulties of the country, to

believe that the pursuit was always pushed with the spirit and vigour

which was needful.

In the north-east, Myburgh, Wessels, and the truculent Fouche were

allowed almost a free hand for some months, while the roving bands were

rounded up in the midlands and driven along until they were west of the

main railroad. Here, in the Calvinia district, several commandos united

in October 1901 under Maritz, Louw, Smit, and Theron. Their united

bands rode down into the rich grain-growing country round Piquetberg

and Malmesbury, pushing south until it seemed as if their academic

supporters at Paarl were actually to have a sight of the rebellion which

they had fanned to a flame. At one period their patrols were within

forty miles of Cape Town. The movement was checked, however, by a small

force of Lancers and district troops, and towards the end of October,

Maritz, who was chief in this quarter, turned northwards, and on the

29th captured a small British convoy which crossed his line of march.

Early in November he doubled back and attacked Piquetberg, but was

beaten off with some loss. From that time a steady pressure from the

south and east drove these bands farther and farther into the great

barren lands of the west, until, in the following April, they had got as

far as Namaqualand, many hundred miles away.

Upon October 9th, the second anniversary of the Ultimatum, the hands of

the military were strengthened by the proclamation of Cape Town and all

the seaport towns as being in a state of martial law. By this means a

possible source of supplies and recruits for the enemy was effectually

blocked. That it had not been done two years before is a proof of how

far local political considerations can be allowed to over-ride the

essentials of Imperial policy. Meanwhile treason courts were sitting,

and sentences, increasing rapidly from the most trivial to the most

tragic, were teaching the rebel that his danger did not end upon the

field of battle. The execution of Lotter and his lieutenants was a sign

that the patience of a long-suffering Empire had at last reached an end.

The young Boer leader, Scheepers, had long been a thorn in the side of

the British. He had infested the southern districts for some months, and

he had distinguished himself both by the activity of his movements

and by the ruthless vigour of some of his actions. Early in October a

serious illness and consequent confinement to his bed brought him at

last within the range of British mobility. On his recovery he was

tried for repeated breaches of the laws of war, including the murder

of several natives. He was condemned to death, and was executed in

December. Much sympathy was excited by his gallantry and his youth--he

was only twenty-three. On the other hand, our word was pledged to

protect the natives, and if he whose hand had been so heavy upon them

escaped, all confidence would have been lost in our promises and our

justice. That British vengeance was not indiscriminate was shown soon

afterwards in the case of a more important commander, Kritzinger, who

was the chief leader of the Boers within Cape Colony. Kritzinger was

wounded and captured while endeavouring to cross the line near Hanover

Road upon December 15th. He was put upon his trial, and his fate

turned upon how far he was responsible for the misdeeds of some of his

subordinates. It was clearly shown that he had endeavoured to hold them

within the bounds of civilised warfare, and with congratulations and

handshakings he was acquitted by the military court.

In the last two months of the year 1901, a new system was introduced

into the Cape Colony campaign by placing the Colonial and district

troops immediately under the command of Colonial officers and of the

Colonial Government. It had long been felt that some devolution was

necessary, and the change was justified by the result. Without any

dramatic incident, an inexorable process of attrition, caused by

continual pursuit and hardship, wore out the commandos. Large bands had

become small ones, and small ones had vanished. Only by the union

of several bodies could any enterprise higher than the looting of a

farmhouse be successfully attempted.

Such a union occurred, however, in the early days of February 1902, when

Smuts, Malan, and several other Boer leaders showed great activity in

the country round Calvinia. Their commandos seem to have included

a proportion of veteran Republicans from the north, who were more

formidable fighting material than the raw Colonial rebels. It happened

that several dangerously weak British columns were operating within

reach at that time, and it was only owing to the really admirable

conduct of the troops that a serious disaster was averted. Two separate

actions, each of them severe, were fought on the same date, and in each

case the Boers were able to bring very superior numbers into the field.

The first of these was the fight in which Colonel Doran's column

extricated itself with severe loss from a most perilous plight. The

whole force under Doran consisted of 350 men with two guns, and this

handful was divided by an expedition which he, with 150 men, undertook

in order to search a distant farm. The remaining two hundred men, under

Captain Saunders, were left upon February 5th with the guns and the

convoy at a place called Middlepost, which lies about fifty miles

south-west of Calvinia. These men were of the 11th, 23rd, and 24th

Imperial Yeomanry, with a troop of Cape Police. The Boer Intelligence

was excellent, as might be expected in a country which is dotted with

farms. The weakened force at Middlepost was instantly attacked by

Smuts's commando. Saunders evacuated the camp and abandoned the convoy,

which was the only thing he could do, but he concentrated all his

efforts upon preserving his guns. The night was illuminated by the

blazing wagons, and made hideous by the whoops of the drunken rebels

who caroused among the captured stores. With the first light of dawn the

small British force was fiercely assailed on all sides, but held its

own in a manner which would have done credit to any troops. The much

criticised Yeomen fought like veterans. A considerable position had

to be covered, and only a handful of men were available at the most

important points. One ridge, from which the guns would be enfiladed, was

committed to the charge of Lieutenants Tabor and Chichester with eleven

men of the 11th Imperial Yeomanry, their instructions being 'to hold

it to the death.' The order was obeyed with the utmost heroism. After

a desperate defence the ridge was only taken by the Boers when both

officers had been killed and nine out of eleven men were on the ground.

In spite of the loss of this position the fight was still sustained

until shortly after midday, when Doran with the patrol returned. The

position was still most dangerous, the losses had been severe, and the

Boers were increasing in strength. An immediate retreat was ordered, and

the small column, after ten days of hardship and anxiety, reached the

railway line in safety. The wounded were left to the care of Smuts, who

behaved with chivalry and humanity.

At about the same date a convoy proceeding from Beaufort West to

Fraserburg was attacked by Malan's commando. The escort, which consisted

of sixty Colonial Mounted Rifles and 100 of the West Yorkshire militia,

was overwhelmed after a good defence, in which Major Crofton, their

commander, was killed. The wagons were destroyed, but the Boers were

driven off by the arrival of Crabbe's column, followed by those of

Capper and Lund. The total losses of the British in these two actions

amounted to twenty-three killed and sixty-five wounded.

The re-establishment of settled law and order was becoming more marked

every week in those south-western districts, which had long been most

disturbed. Colonel Crewe in this region, and Colonel Lukin upon the

other side of the line, acting entirely with Colonial troops, were

pushing back the rebels, and holding, by a well-devised system of

district defence, all that they had gained. By the end of February there

were none of the enemy south of the Beaufort West and Clanwilliam line.

These results were not obtained without much hard marching and a little

hard fighting. Small columns under Crabbe, Capper, Wyndham, Nickall, and

Lund, were continually on the move, with little to show for it save an

ever-widening area of settled country in their rear. In a skirmish on

February 20th Judge Hugo, a well-known Boer leader, was killed, and

Vanheerden, a notorious rebel, was captured. At the end of this month

Fouche's tranquil occupation of the north-east was at last disturbed,

and he was driven out of it into the midlands, where he took refuge with

the remains of his commando in the Camdeboo Mountains. Malan's men had

already sought shelter in the same natural fortress. Malan was wounded

and taken in a skirmish near Somerset East a few days before the general

Boer surrender. Fouche gave himself up at Cradock on June 2nd.

The last incident of this scattered, scrambling, unsatisfactory campaign

in the Cape peninsula was the raid made by Smuts, the Transvaal leader,

into the Port Nolloth district of Namaqualand, best known for its copper

mines. A small railroad has been constructed from the coast at this

point, the terminus being the township of Ookiep. The length of the

line is about seventy miles. It is difficult to imagine what the Boers

expected to gain in this remote corner of the seat of war, unless they

had conceived the idea that they might actually obtain possession

of Port Nolloth itself, and so restore the communications with their

sympathisers and allies. At the end of March the Boer horsemen appeared

suddenly out of the desert, drove in the British outposts, and summoned

Ookiep to surrender. Colonel Shelton, who commanded the small garrison,

sent an uncompromising reply, but he was unable to protect the railway

in his rear, which was wrecked, together with some of the blockhouses

which had been erected to guard it. The loyal population of the

surrounding country had flocked into Ookiep, and the Commandant found

himself burdened with the care of six thousand people. The enemy had

succeeded in taking the small post of Springbok, and Concordia, the

mining centre, was surrendered into their hands without resistance,

giving them welcome supplies of arms, ammunition, and dynamite. The

latter was used by the Boers in the shape of hand-bombs, and proved to

be a very efficient weapon when employed against blockhouses. Several of

the British defences were wrecked by them, with considerable loss to

the garrison; but in the course of a month's siege, in spite of several

attacks, the Boers were never able to carry the frail works which

guarded the town. Once more, at the end of the war as at the beginning

of it, there was shown the impotence of the Dutch riflemen against a

British defence. A relief column, under Colonel Cooper, was quickly

organised at Port Nolloth, and advanced along the railway line,

forcing Smuts to raise the siege in the first week of May. Immediately

afterwards came the news of the negotiations for peace, and the Boer

general presented himself at Port Nolloth, whence he was conveyed by

ship to Cape Town, and so north again to take part in the deliberations

of his fellow-countrymen. Throughout the war he had played a manly

and honourable part. It may be hoped that with youth and remarkable

experience, both of diplomacy and of war, he may now find a long and

brilliant career awaiting him in a wider arena than that for which he

strove.

CHAPTER 36. THE SPRING CAMPAIGN (SEPTEMBER TO DECEMBER, 1901).

The history of the war during the African winter of 1901 has now

been sketched, and some account given of the course of events in the

Transvaal, the Orange River Colony, and the Cape Colony. The hope of

the British that they might stamp out resistance before the grass

should restore mobility to the larger bodies of Boers was destined to be

disappointed. By the middle of September the veld had turned from

drab to green, and the great drama was fated to last for one more act,

however anxious all the British and the majority of the Boers might be

to ring down the curtain. Exasperating as this senseless prolongation

of a hopeless struggle might be, there was still some consolation in the

reflection that those who drank this bitter cup to the very lees would

be less likely to thirst for it again.

September 15th was the date which brought into force the British

Proclamation announcing the banishment of those Boer leaders who

continued in arms. It must be confessed that this step may appear harsh

and unchivalrous to the impartial observer, so long as those leaders

were guilty of no practices which are foreign to the laws of civilised

warfare. The imposition of personal penalties upon the officers of an

opposing army is a step for which it is difficult to quote a precedent,

nor is it wise to officially rule your enemy outside the pale of

ordinary warfare, since it is equally open to him to take the same

step against you. The only justification for such a course would be its

complete success, as this would suggest that the Intelligence Department

were aware that the leaders desired some strong excuse for coming

in--such an excuse as the Proclamation would afford. The result proved

that nothing of the kind was needed, and the whole proceeding must

appear to be injudicious and high-handed. In honourable war you conquer

your adversary by superior courage, strength, or wit, but you do not

terrorise him by particular penalties aimed at individuals. The burghers

of the Transvaal and of the late Orange Free State were legitimate

belligerents, and to be treated as such--a statement which does not, of

course, extend to the Afrikander rebels who were their allies.

The tendency of the British had been to treat their antagonists as a

broken and disorganised banditti, but with the breaking of the spring

they were sharply reminded that the burghers were still capable of a

formidable and coherent effort. The very date which put them beyond the

pale as belligerents was that which they seem to have chosen in order

to prove what active and valiant soldiers they still remained. A quick

succession of encounters occurred at various parts of the seat of war,

the general tendency of which was not entirely in favour of the British

arms, though the weekly export of prisoners reassured all who noted it

as to the sapping and decay of the Boer strength. These incidents must

now be set down in the order of their occurrence, with their relation to

each other so far as it is possible to trace it.

General Louis Botha, with the double intention of making an offensive

move and of distracting the wavering burghers from a close examination

of Lord Kitchener's proclamation, assembled his forces in the second

week of September in the Ermelo district. Thence he moved them rapidly

towards Natal, with the result that the volunteers of that colony had

once more to grasp their rifles and hasten to the frontier. The whole

situation bore for an instant an absurd resemblance to that of two years

before--Botha playing the part of Joubert, and Lyttelton, who commanded

on the frontier, that of White. It only remained, to make the parallel

complete, that some one should represent Penn Symons, and this perilous

role fell to a gallant officer, Major Gough, commanding a detached force

which thought itself strong enough to hold its own, and only learned by

actual experiment that it was not.

This officer, with a small force consisting of three companies of

Mounted Infantry with two guns of the 69th R.F.A., was operating in the

neighbourhood of Utrecht in the south-eastern corner of the Transvaal,

on the very path along which Botha must descend. On September 17th

he had crossed De Jagers Drift on the Blood River, not very far from

Dundee, when he found himself in touch with the enemy. His mission was

to open a path for an empty convoy returning from Vryheid, and in order

to do so it was necessary that Blood River Poort, where the Boers were

now seen, should be cleared. With admirable zeal Gough pushed rapidly

forward, supported by a force of 350 Johannesburg Mounted Rifles under

Stewart. Such a proceeding must have seemed natural to any British

officer at this stage of the war, when a swift advance was the only

chance of closing with the small bodies of Boers; but it is strange that

the Intelligence Department had not warned the patrols upon the frontier

that a considerable force was coming down upon them, and that they

should be careful to avoid action against impossible odds. If Gough

had known that Botha's main commando was coming down upon him, it is

inconceivable that he would have pushed his advance until he could

neither extricate his men nor his guns. A small body of the enemy, said

to have been the personal escort of Louis Botha, led him on, until a

large force was able to ride down upon him from the flank and rear.

Surrounded at Scheepers Nek by many hundreds of riflemen in a difficult

country, there was no alternative but a surrender, and so sharp and

sudden was the Boer advance that the whole action was over in a very

short time. The new tactics of the Boers, already used at Vlakfontein,

and afterwards to be successful at Brakenlaagte and at Tweebosch, were

put in force. A large body of mounted men, galloping swiftly in open

order and firing from the saddle, rode into and over the British. Such

temerity should in theory have met with severe punishment, but as a

matter of fact the losses of the enemy seem to have been very small. The

soldiers were not able to return an effective fire from their horses,

and had no time to dismount. The sights and breech-blocks of the two

guns are said to have been destroyed, but the former statement seems

more credible than the latter. A Colt gun was also captured. Of the

small force twenty were killed, forty wounded, and over two hundred

taken. Stewart's force was able to extricate itself with some

difficulty, and to fall back on the Drift. Gough managed to escape that

night and to report that it was Botha himself, with over a thousand men,

who had eaten up his detachment. The prisoners and wounded were sent in

a few days later to Vryheid, a town which appeared to be in some danger

of capture had not Walter Kitchener hastened to carry reinforcements

to the garrison. Bruce Hamilton was at the same time despatched to head

Botha off, and every step taken to prevent his southern advance. So many

columns from all parts converged upon the danger spot that Lyttelton,

who commanded upon the Natal frontier, had over 20,000 men under his

orders.

Botha's plans appear to have been to work through Zululand and then

strike at Natal, an operation which would be the more easy as it would

be conducted a considerable distance from the railway line. Pushing on

a few days after his successful action with Gough, he crossed the Zulu

frontier, and had in front of him an almost unimpeded march as far as

the Tugela. Crossing this far from the British base of power, his force

could raid the Greytown district and raise recruits among the Dutch

farmers, laying waste one of the few spots in South Africa which had

been untouched by the blight of war. All this lay before him, and in

his path nothing save only two small British posts which might be either

disregarded or gathered up as he passed. In an evil moment for himself,

tempted by the thought of the supplies which they might contain, he

stopped to gather them up, and the force of the wave of invasion broke

itself as upon two granite rocks.

These two so-called forts were posts of very modest strength, a chain of

which had been erected at the time of the old Zulu war. Fort Itala, the

larger, was garrisoned by 300 men of the 5th Mounted Infantry, drawn

from the Dublin Fusiliers, Middlesex, Dorsets, South Lancashires, and

Lancashire Fusiliers--most of them old soldiers of many battles. They

had two guns of the 69th R.F.A., the same battery which had lost a

section the week before. Major Chapman, of the Dublins, was in command.

Upon September 25th the small garrison heard that the main force of the

Boers was sweeping towards them, and prepared to give them a soldiers'

welcome. The fort is situated upon the flank of a hill, on the summit of

which, a mile from the main trenches, a strong outpost was stationed.

It was upon this that the first force of the attack broke at midnight

of September 25th. The garrison, eighty strong, was fiercely beset by

several hundred Boers, and the post was eventually carried after a sharp

and bloody contest. Kane, of the South Lancashires, died with the

words 'No surrender' upon his lips, and Potgieter, a Boer leader, was

pistolled by Kane's fellow officer, Lefroy. Twenty of the small garrison

fell, and the remainder were overpowered and taken.

With this vantage-ground in their possession the Boers settled down to

the task of overwhelming the main position. They attacked upon three

sides, and until morning the force was raked from end to end by unseen

riflemen. The two British guns were put out of action and the maxim was

made unserviceable by a bullet. At dawn there was a pause in the attack,

but it recommenced and continued without intermission until sunset. The

span betwixt the rising of the sun and its last red glow in the west is

a long one for the man who spends it at his ease, but how never-ending

must have seemed the hours to this handful of men, outnumbered,

surrounded, pelted by bullets, parched with thirst, torn with anxiety,

holding desperately on with dwindling numbers to their frail defences!

To them it may have seemed a hard thing to endure so much for a tiny

fort in a savage land. The larger view of its vital importance could

have scarcely come to console the regimental officer, far less the

private. But duty carried them through, and they wrought better than

they knew, for the brave Dutchmen, exasperated by so disproportionate a

resistance, stormed up to the very trenches and suffered as they had

not suffered for many a long month. There have been battles with 10,000

British troops hotly engaged in which the Boer losses have not been

so great as in this obscure conflict against an isolated post. When at

last, baffled and disheartened, they drew off with the waning light, it

is said that no fewer than a hundred of their dead and two hundred of

their wounded attested the severity of the fight. So strange are the

conditions of South African warfare that this loss, which would have

hardly made a skirmish memorable in the slogging days of the Peninsula,

was one of the most severe blows which the burghers had sustained in

the course of a two years' warfare against a large and aggressive army.

There is a conflict of evidence as to the exact figures, but at least

they were sufficient to beat the Boer army back and to change their plan

of campaign.

Whilst this prolonged contest had raged round Fort Itala, a similar

attack upon a smaller scale was being made upon Fort Prospect, some

fifteen miles to the eastward. This small post was held by a handful

of Durham Artillery Militia and of Dorsets. The attack was delivered by

Grobler with several hundred burghers, but it made no advance although

it was pushed with great vigour, and repeated many times in the course

of the day. Captain Rowley, who was in command, handled his men

with such judgment that one killed and eight wounded represented his

casualties during a long day's fighting. Here again the Boer losses were

in proportion to the resolution of their attack, and are said to have

amounted to sixty killed and wounded. Considering the impossibility

of replacing the men, and the fruitless waste of valuable ammunition,

September 26th was an evil day for the Boer cause. The British

casualties amounted to seventy-three.

The water of the garrison of Fort Itala had been cut off early in the

attack, and their ammunition had run low by evening. Chapman withdrew

his men and his guns therefore to Nkandhla, where the survivors of his

gallant garrison received the special thanks of Lord Kitchener. The

country around was still swarming with Boers, and on the last day of

September a convoy from Melmoth fell into their hands and provided them

with some badly needed supplies.

But the check which he had received was sufficient to prevent any

important advance upon the part of Botha, while the swollen state of

the rivers put an additional obstacle in his way. Already the British

commanders, delighted to have at last discovered a definite objective,

were hurrying to the scene of action. Bruce Hamilton had reached Fort

Itala upon September 28th and Walter Kitchener had been despatched to

Vryheid. Two British forces, aided by smaller columns, were endeavouring

to surround the Boer leader. On October 6th Botha had fallen back to the

north-east of Vryheid, whither the British forces had followed him. Like

De Wet's invasion of the Cape, Botha's advance upon Natal had ended in

placing himself and his army in a critical position. On October 9th he

had succeeded in crossing the Privaan River, a branch of the Pongolo,

and was pushing north in the direction of Piet Retief, much helped by

misty weather and incessant rain. Some of his force escaped between the

British columns, and some remained in the kloofs and forests of that

difficult country.

Walter Kitchener, who had followed up the Boer retreat, had a brisk

engagement with the rearguard upon October 6th. The Boers shook

themselves clear with some loss, both to themselves and to their

pursuers. On the 10th those of the burghers who held together had

reached Luneburg, and shortly afterwards they had got completely away

from the British columns. The weather was atrocious, and the lumbering

wagons, axle-deep in mud, made it impossible for troops who were

attached to them to keep in touch with the light riders who sped before

them. For some weeks there was no word of the main Boer force, but at

the end of that time they reappeared in a manner which showed that both

in numbers and in spirit they were still a formidable body.

Of all the sixty odd British columns which were traversing the Boer

states there was not one which had a better record than that commanded

by Colonel Benson. During seven months of continuous service this small

force, consisting at that time of the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders,

the 2nd Scottish Horse, the 18th and 19th Mounted Infantry, and two

guns, had acted with great energy, and had reduced its work to a

complete and highly effective system. Leaving the infantry as a camp

guard, Benson operated with mounted troops alone, and no Boer laager

within fifty miles was safe from his nocturnal visits. So skilful had

he and his men become at these night attacks in a strange, and often

difficult country, that out of twenty-eight attempts twenty-one resulted

in complete success. In each case the rule was simply to gallop headlong

into the Boer laager, and to go on chasing as far as the horses could

go. The furious and reckless pace may be judged by the fact that the

casualties of the force were far greater from falls than from bullets.

In seven months forty-seven Boers were killed and six hundred captured,

to say nothing of enormous quantities of munitions and stock. The

success of these operations was due, not only to the energy of Benson

and his men, but to the untiring exertions of Colonel Wools-Sampson,

who acted as intelligence officer. If, during his long persecution by

President Kruger, Wools-Sampson in the bitterness of his heart had vowed

a feud against the Boer cause, it must be acknowledged that he has most

amply fulfilled it, for it would be difficult to point to any single man

who has from first to last done them greater harm.

In October Colonel Benson's force was reorganised, and it then consisted

of the 2nd Buffs, the 2nd Scottish Horse, the 3rd and 25th Mounted

Infantry, and four guns of the 84th battery. With this force, numbering

nineteen hundred men, he left Middelburg upon the Delagoa line on

October 20th and proceeded south, crossing the course along which the

Boers, who were retiring from their abortive raid into Natal, might be

expected to come. For several days the column performed its familiar

work, and gathered up forty or fifty prisoners. On the 26th came news

that the Boer commandos under Grobler were concentrating against it,

and that an attack in force might be expected. For two days there was

continuous sniping, and the column as it moved through the country saw

Boer horsemen keeping pace with it on the far flanks and in the rear.

The weather had been very bad, and it was in a deluge of cold driving

rain that the British set forth upon October 30th, moving towards

Brakenlaagte, which is a point about forty miles due south of

Middelburg. It was Benson's intention to return to his base.

About midday the column, still escorted by large bodies of aggressive

Boers, came to a difficult spruit swollen by the rain. Here the wagons

stuck, and it took some hours to get them all across. The Boer fire was

continually becoming more severe, and had broken out at the head of the

column as well as the rear. The situation was rendered more difficult by

the violence of the rain, which raised a thick steam from the ground and

made it impossible to see for any distance. Major Anley, in command of

the rearguard, peering back, saw through a rift of the clouds a large

body of horsemen in extended order sweeping after them. 'There's miles

of them, begob!' cried an excited Irish trooper. Next instant the

curtain had closed once more, but all who had caught a glimpse of that

vision knew that a stern struggle was at hand.

At this moment two guns of the 84th battery under Major Guinness were

in action against Boer riflemen. As a rear screen on the farther side of

the guns was a body of the Scottish Horse and of the Yorkshire Mounted

Infantry. Near the guns themselves were thirty men of the Buffs. The

rest of the Buffs and of the Mounted Infantry were out upon the flanks

or else were with the advance guard, which was now engaged, under the

direction of Colonel Wools-Sampson, in parking the convoy and in forming

the camp. These troops played a small part in the day's fighting, the

whole force of which broke with irresistible violence upon the few

hundred men who were in front of or around the rear guns. Colonel

Benson seems to have just ridden back to the danger point when the Boers

delivered their furious attack.

Louis Botha with his commando is said to have ridden sixty miles in

order to join the forces of Grobler and Oppermann, and overwhelm the

British column. It may have been the presence of their commander or a

desire to have vengeance for the harrying which they had undergone upon

the Natal border, but whatever the reason, the Boer attack was made

with a spirit and dash which earned the enthusiastic applause of every

soldier who survived to describe it. With the low roar of a great

torrent, several hundred horsemen burst through the curtain of mist,

riding at a furious pace for the British guns. The rear screen of

Mounted Infantry fell back before this terrific rush, and the two bodies

of horsemen came pell-mell down upon the handful of Buffs and the guns.

The infantry were ridden into and surrounded by the Boers, who found

nothing to stop them from galloping on to the low ridge upon which the

guns were stationed. This ridge was held by eighty of the Scottish

Horse and forty of the Yorkshire M.I., with a few riflemen from the 25th

Mounted Infantry. The latter were the escort of the guns, but the former

were the rear screen who had fallen back rapidly because it was the game

to do so, but who were in no way shaken, and who instantly dismounted

and formed when they reached a defensive position.

These men had hardly time to take up their ground when the Boers were

on them. With that extraordinary quickness to adapt their tactics to

circumstances which is the chief military virtue of the Boers, the

horsemen did not gallop over the crest, but lined the edge of it, and

poured a withering fire on to the guns and the men beside them. The

heroic nature of the defence can be best shown by the plain figures of

the casualties. No rhetoric is needed to adorn that simple record. There

were thirty-two gunners round the guns, and twenty-nine fell where they

stood. Major Guinness was mortally wounded while endeavouring with his

own hands to fire a round of case. There were sixty-two casualties out

of eighty among the Scottish Horse, and the Yorkshires were practically

annihilated. Altogether 123 men fell, out of about 160 on the ridge.

'Hard pounding, gentlemen,' as Wellington remarked at Waterloo, and

British troops seemed as ready as ever to endure it.

The gunners were, as usual, magnificent. Of the two little bullet-pelted

groups of men around the guns there was not one who did not stand to

his duty without flinching. Corporal Atkin was shot down with all his

comrades, but still endeavoured with his failing strength to twist the

breech-block out of the gun. Another bullet passed through his upraised

hands as he did it. Sergeant Hayes, badly wounded, and the last survivor

of the crew, seized the lanyard, crawled up the trail, and fired a last

round before he fainted. Sergeant Mathews, with three bullets through

him, kept steadily to his duty. Five drivers tried to bring up a limber

and remove the gun, but all of them, with all the horses, were hit.

There have been incidents in this war which have not increased our

military reputation, but you might search the classical records of

valour and fail to find anything finer than the consistent conduct of

the British artillery.

Colonel Benson was hit in the knee and again in the stomach, but wounded

as he was he despatched a message back to Wools-Sampson, asking him to

burst shrapnel over the ridge so as to prevent the Boers from carrying

off the guns. The burghers had ridden in among the litter of dead and

wounded men which marked the British position, and some of the baser

of them, much against the will of their commanders, handled the injured

soldiers with great brutality. The shell-fire drove them back, however,

and the two guns were left standing alone, with no one near them save

their prostrate gunners and escort.

There has been some misunderstanding as to the part played by the Buffs

in this action, and words have been used which seem to imply that they

had in some way failed their mounted companions. It is due to the honour

of one of the finest regiments in the British army to clear this up. As

a matter of fact, the greater part of the regiment under Major Dauglish

was engaged in defending the camp. Near the guns there were four

separate small bodies of Buffs, none of which appears to have been

detailed as an escort. One of these parties, consisting of thirty men

under Lieutenant Greatwood, was ridden over by the horsemen, and the

same fate befell a party of twenty who were far out upon the flank.

Another small body under Lieutenant Lynch was over taken by the same

charge, and was practically destroyed, losing nineteen killed and

wounded out of thirty. In the rear of the guns was a larger body of

Buffs, 130 in number, under Major Eales. When the guns were taken this

handful attempted a counter-attack, but Eales soon saw that it was a

hopeless effort, and he lost thirty of his men before he could extricate

himself. Had these men been with the others on the gun ridge they might

have restored the fight, but they had not reached it when the position

was taken, and to persevere in the attempt to retake it would have led

to certain disaster. The only just criticism to which the regiment is

open is that, having just come off blockhouse duty, they were much out

of condition, which caused the men to straggle and the movements to be

unduly slow.

It was fortunate that the command of the column devolved upon so

experienced and cool-headed a soldier as Wools-Sampson. To attempt a

counter-attack for the purpose of recapturing the guns would, in case of

disaster, have risked the camp and the convoy. The latter was the prize

which the Boers had particularly in view, and to expose it would be

to play their game. Very wisely, therefore, Wools-Sampson held the

attacking Boers off with his guns and his riflemen, while every spare

pair of hands was set to work entrenching the position and making it

impregnable against attack. Outposts were stationed upon all those

surrounding points which might command the camp, and a summons to

surrender from the Boer leader was treated with contempt. All day a

long-range fire, occasionally very severe, rained upon the camp. Colonel

Benson was brought in by the ambulance, and used his dying breath in

exhorting his subordinate to hold out. 'No more night marches' are said

to have been the last words spoken by this gallant soldier as he passed

away in the early morning after the action. On October 31st the force

remained on the defensive, but early on November 1st the gleaming of two

heliographs, one to the north-east and one to the south-west, told that

two British columns, those of De Lisle and of Barter, were hastening to

the rescue. But the Boers had passed as the storm does, and nothing but

their swathe of destruction was left to show where they had been. They

had taken away the guns during the night, and were already beyond the

reach of pursuit.

Such was the action at Brakenlaagte, which cost the British sixty men

killed and 170 wounded, together with two guns. Colonel Benson, Colonel

Guinness, Captain Eyre Lloyd of the Guards, Major Murray and Captain

Lindsay of the Scottish Horse, with seven other officers were among the

dead, while sixteen officers were wounded. The net result of the action

was that the British rear-guard had been annihilated, but that the

main body and the convoy, which was the chief object of the attack,

was saved. The Boer loss was considerable, being about one hundred

and fifty. In spite of the Boer success nothing could suit the British

better than hard fighting of the sort, since whatever the immediate

result of it might be, it must necessarily cause a wastage among the

enemy which could never be replaced. The gallantry of the Boer charge

was only equalled by that of the resistance offered round the guns,

and it is an action to which both sides can look back without shame or

regret. It was feared that the captured guns would soon be used to break

the blockhouse line, but nothing of the kind was attempted, and within a

few weeks they were both recovered by British columns.

In order to make a consecutive and intelligible narrative, I will

continue with an account of the operations in this south-eastern portion

of the Transvaal from the action of Brakenlaagte down to the end of the

year 1901. These were placed in the early part of November, under the

supreme command of General Bruce Hamilton, and that energetic commander

set in motion a number of small columns, which effected numerous

captures. He was much helped in his work by the new lines of

blockhouses, one of which extended from Standerton to Ermelo, while

another connected Brugspruit with Greylingstad. The huge country was

thus cut into manageable districts, and the fruits were soon seen by the

large returns of prisoners which came from this part of the seat of war.

Upon December 3rd Bruce Hamilton, who had the valuable assistance of

Wools-Sampson to direct his intelligence, struck swiftly out from Ermelo

and fell upon a Boer laager in the early morning, capturing ninety-six

prisoners. On the 10th he overwhelmed the Bethel commando by a similar

march, killing seven and capturing 131. Williams and Wing commanded

separate columns in this operation, and their energy may be judged from

the fact that they covered fifty-one miles during the twenty-four hours.

On the 12th Hamilton's columns were on the war-path once more, and

another commando was wiped out. Sixteen killed and seventy prisoners

were the fruits of this expedition. For the second time in a week the

columns had done their fifty miles a day, and it was no surprise to

hear from their commander that they were in need of a rest. Nearly four

hundred prisoners had been taken from the most warlike portion of

the Transvaal in ten days by one energetic commander, with a list of

twenty-five casualties to ourselves. The thanks of the Secretary of War

were specially sent to him for his brilliant work. From then until

the end of the year 1901, numbers of smaller captures continued to

be reported from the same region, where Plumer, Spens, Mackenzie,

Rawlinson, and others were working. On the other hand there was one

small setback which occurred to a body of two hundred Mounted Infantry

under Major Bridgford, who had been detached from Spens's column to

search some farmhouses at a place called Holland, to the south of

Ermelo. The expedition set forth upon the night of December 19th, and

next morning surrounded and examined the farms.

The British force became divided in doing this work, and were suddenly

attacked by several hundred of Britz's commando, who came to close

quarters through their khaki dress, which enabled them to pass as

Plumer's vanguard. The brunt of the fight fell upon an outlying body of

fifty men, nearly all of whom were killed, wounded or taken. A second

body of fifty men were overpowered in the same way, after a creditable

defence. Fifteen of the British were killed and thirty wounded, while

Bridgford the commander was also taken. Spens came up shortly afterwards

with the column, and the Boers were driven off. There seems every reason

to think that upon this occasion the plans of the British had leaked

out, and that a deliberate ambush had been laid for them round the

farms, but in such operations these are chances against which it is not

always possible to guard. Considering the number of the Boers, and the

cleverness of their dispositions, the British were fortunate in being

able to extricate their force without greater loss, a feat which was

largely due to the leading of Lieutenant Sterling.

Leaving the Eastern Transvaal, the narrative must now return to several

incidents of importance which had occurred at various points of the seat

of war during the latter months of 1901.

On September 19th, two days after Gough's disaster, a misfortune

occurred near Bloemfontein by which two guns and a hundred and forty men

fell temporarily into the hands of the enemy. These guns, belonging to

U battery, were moving south under an escort of Mounted Infantry, from

that very Sanna's Post which had been so fatal to the same battery

eighteen months before. When fifteen miles south of the Waterworks, at

a place called Vlakfontein (another Vlakfontein from that of General

Dixon's engagement), the small force was surrounded and captured by

Ackermann's commando. The gunner officer, Lieutenant Barry, died beside

his guns in the way that gunner officers have. Guns and men were taken,

however, the latter to be released, and the former to be recovered a

week or two later by the British columns. It is certainly a credit to

the Boers that the spring campaign should have opened by four British

guns falling into their hands, and it is impossible to withhold our

admiration for those gallant farmers who, after two years of exhausting

warfare, were still able to turn upon a formidable and victorious enemy,

and to renovate their supplies at his expense.

Two days later, hard on the heels of Gough's mishap, of the Vlakfontein

incident, and of the annihilation of the squadron of Lancers in the

Cape, there was a serious affair at Elands Kloof, near Zastron, in the

extreme south of the Orange River Colony. In this a detachment of the

Highland Scouts raised by the public spirit of Lord Lovat was surprised

at night and very severely handled by Kritzinger's commando. The loss of

Colonel Murray, their commander, of the adjutant of the same name, and

of forty-two out of eighty of the Scouts, shows how fell was the attack,

which broke as sudden and as strong as a South African thunderstorm upon

the unconscious camp. The Boers appear to have eluded the outposts and

crept right among the sleeping troops, as they did in the case of the

Victorians at Wilmansrust. Twelve gunners were also hit, and the

only field gun taken. The retiring Boers were swiftly followed up by

Thorneycroft's column, however, and the gun was retaken, together with

twenty of Kritzinger's men. It must be confessed that there seems some

irony in the fact that, within five days of the British ruling by which

the Boers were no longer a military force, these non-belligerents had

inflicted a loss of nearly six hundred men killed, wounded, or taken.

Two small commandos, that of Koch in the Orange River Colony, and that

of Carolina, had been captured by Williams and Benson. Combined they

only numbered a hundred and nine men, but here, as always, they were men

who could never be replaced.

Those who had followed the war with care, and had speculated upon the

future, were prepared on hearing of Botha's movement upon Natal to

learn that De la Rey had also made some energetic attack in the western

quarter of the Transvaal. Those who had formed this expectation were not

disappointed, for upon the last day of September the Boer chief struck

fiercely at Kekewich's column in a vigorous night attack, which led to

as stern an encounter as any in the campaign. This was the action at

Moedwill, near Magato Nek, in the Magaliesberg.

When last mentioned De la Rey was in the Marico district, near Zeerust,

where he fought two actions with Methuen in the early part of September.

Thence he made his way to Rustenburg and into the Magaliesberg country,

where he joined Kemp. The Boer force was followed up by two British

columns under Kekewich and Fetherstonhaugh. The former commander

had camped upon the night of Sunday, September 30th, at the farm of

Moedwill, in a strong position within a triangle formed by the Selous

River on the west, a donga on the east, and the Zeerust-Rustenburg road

as a base. The apex of the triangle pointed north, with a ridge on the

farther side of the river.

The men with Kekewich were for the most part the same as those who

had fought in the Vlakfontein engagement--the Derbys, the 1st Scottish

Horse, the Yeomanry, and the 28th R.F.A. Every precaution appears to

have been taken by the leader, and his pickets were thrown out so far

that ample warning was assured of an attack. The Boer onslaught came

so suddenly and fiercely, however, in the early morning, that the posts

upon the river bank were driven in or destroyed and the riflemen from

the ridge on the farther side were able to sweep the camp with their

fire. In numbers the two forces were not unequal, but the Boers had

already obtained the tactical advantage, and were playing a game in

which they are the schoolmasters of the world. Never has the British

spirit flamed up more fiercely, and from the commander to the latest

yeoman recruit there was not a man who flinched from a difficult and

almost a desperate task. The Boers must at all hazard be driven from the

position which enabled them to command the camp. No retreat was possible

without such an abandonment of stores as would amount to a disaster. In

the confusion and the uncertain light of early dawn there was no chance

of a concerted movement, though Kekewich made such dispositions as were

possible with admirable coolness and promptness. Squadrons and companies

closed in upon the river bank with the one thought of coming to close

quarters and driving the enemy from their commanding position. Already

more than half the horses and a very large number of officers and men

had gone down before the pelting bullets. Scottish Horse, Yeomanry, and

Derbys pushed on, the young soldiers of the two former corps keeping

pace with the veteran regiment. 'All the men behaved simply splendidly,'

said a spectator, 'taking what little cover there was and advancing yard

by yard. An order was given to try and saddle up a squadron, with the

idea of getting round their flank. I had the saddle almost on one of my

ponies when he was hit in two places. Two men trying to saddle alongside

of me were both shot dead, and Lieutenant Wortley was shot through the

knee. I ran back to where I had been firing from and found the Colonel

slightly hit, the Adjutant wounded and dying, and men dead and wounded

all round.' But the counter-attack soon began to make way. At first the

advance was slow, but soon it quickened into a magnificent rush, the

wounded Kekewich whooping on his men, and the guns coming into action

as the enemy began to fall back before the fierce charge of the British

riflemen. At six o'clock De la Rey's burghers had seen that their

attempt was hopeless, and were in full retreat--a retreat which could

not be harassed by the victors, whose cavalry had been converted by

that hail of bullets into footmen. The repulse had been absolute and

complete, for not a man or a cartridge had been taken from the British,

but the price paid in killed and wounded was a heavy one. No fewer

than 161 had been hit, including the gallant leader, whose hurt did not

prevent him from resuming his duties within a few days. The heaviest

losses fell upon the Scottish Horse, and upon the Derbys; but the

Yeomanry also proved on this, as on some other occasions, how ungenerous

were the criticisms to which they had been exposed. There are few

actions in the war which appear to have been more creditable to the

troops engaged.

Though repulsed at Moedwill, De la Rey, the grim, long-bearded fighting

man, was by no means discouraged. From the earliest days of the

campaign, when he first faced Methuen upon the road to Kimberley, he had

shown that he was a most dangerous antagonist, tenacious, ingenious, and

indomitable. With him were a body of irreconcilable burghers, who

were the veterans of many engagements, and in Kemp he had an excellent

fighting subordinate. His command extended over a wide stretch

of populous country, and at any time he could bring considerable

reinforcements to his aid, who would separate again to their farms and

hiding-places when their venture was accomplished. For some weeks after

the fight at Moedwill the Boer forces remained quiet in that district.

Two British columns had left Zeerust on October 17th, under Methuen and

Von Donop, in order to sweep the surrounding country, the one working in

the direction of Elands River and the other in that of Rustenburg. They

returned to Zeerust twelve days later, after a successful foray, which

had been attended with much sniping and skirmishing, but only one action

which is worthy of record.

This was fought on October 24th at a spot near Kleinfontein, upon the

Great Marico River, which runs to the north-east of Zeerust. Von Donop's

column was straggling through very broken and bush-covered country when

it was furiously charged in the flank and rear by two separate bodies

of burghers. Kemp, who commanded the flank attack, cut into the line of

wagons and destroyed eight of them, killing many of the Kaffir drivers,

before he could be driven off. De la Rey and Steenkamp, who rushed the

rear-guard, had a more desperate contest. The Boer horsemen got among

the two guns of the 4th R.F.A., and held temporary possession of them,

but the small escort were veterans of the 'Fighting Fifth,' who lived

up to the traditions of their famous north-country regiment. Of the

gun crews of the section, amounting to about twenty-six men, the young

officer, Hill, and sixteen men were hit. Of the escort of Northumberland

Fusiliers hardly a man was left standing, and forty-one of the

supporting Yeomanry were killed and wounded. It was for some little

time a fierce and concentrated struggle at the shortest of ranges. The

British horsemen came galloping to the rescue, however, and the attack

was finally driven back into that broken country from which it had

come. Forty dead Boers upon the ground, with their brave chieftain,

Ouisterhuisen, amongst them, showed how manfully the attack had been

driven home. The British losses were twenty-eight killed and fifty-six

wounded. Somewhat mauled, and with eight missing wagons, the small

column made its way back to Zeerust.

From this incident until the end of the year nothing of importance

occurred in this part of the seat of war, save for a sharp and

well-managed action at Beestekraal upon October 29th, in which

seventy-nine Boers were surrounded and captured by Kekewich's horsemen.

The process of attrition went very steadily forwards, and each of the

British columns returned its constant tale of prisoners. The blockhouse

system had now been extended to such an extent that the Magaliesberg was

securely held, and a line had been pushed through from Klerksdorp and

Fredericstad to Ventersdorp. One of Colonel Hickie's Yeomanry patrols

was roughly handled near Brakspruit upon November 13th, but with this

exception the points scored were all upon one side. Methuen and Kekewich

came across early in November from Zeerust to Klerksdorp, and operated

from the railway line. The end of the year saw them both in the

Wolmaranstad district, where they were gathering up prisoners and

clearing the country.

Of the events in the other parts of the Transvaal, during the last three

months of the year 1901, there is not much to be said. In all parts the

lines of blockhouses and of constabulary posts were neutralising the

Boer mobility, and bringing them more and more within reach of the

British. The only fighting forces left in the Transvaal were those

under Botha in the south-east and those under De la Rey in the west. The

others attempted nothing save to escape from their pursuers, and when

overtaken they usually gave in without serious opposition. Among the

larger hauls may be mentioned that of Dawkins in the Nylstrom district

(seventy-six prisoners), Kekewich (seventy-eight), Colenbrander in

the north (fifty-seven), Dawkins and Colenbrander (104), Colenbrander

(sixty-two); but the great majority of the captures were in smaller

bodies, gleaned from the caves, the kloofs, and the farmhouses.

Only two small actions during these months appear to call for any

separate notice. The first was an attack made by Buys' commando, upon

November 20th, on the Railway Pioneers when at work near Villiersdorp,

in the extreme north-east of the Orange River Colony. This corps,

consisting mainly of miners from Johannesburg, had done invaluable

service during the war. On this occasion a working party of them was

suddenly attacked, and most of them taken prisoners. Major Fisher,

who commanded the pioneers, was killed, and three other officers with

several men were wounded. Colonel Rimington's column appeared upon the

scene, however, and drove off the Boers, who left their leader, Buys, a

wounded prisoner in our hands.

The second action was a sharp attack delivered by Muller's Boers upon

Colonel Park's column on the night of December 19th, at Elandspruit.

The fight was sharp while it lasted, but it ended in the repulse of

the assailants. The British casualties were six killed and twenty-four

wounded. The Boers, who left eight dead behind them, suffered probably

to about the same extent.

Already the most striking and pleasing feature in the Transvaal was

the tranquillity of its central provinces, and the way in which the

population was settling down to its old avocations. Pretoria had resumed

its normal quiet life, while its larger and more energetic neighbour

was rapidly recovering from its two years of paralysis. Every week

more stamps were dropped in the mines, and from month to month a steady

increase in the output showed that the great staple industry of the

place would soon be as vigorous as ever. Most pleasing of all was the

restoration of safety upon the railway lines, which, save for some

precautions at night, had resumed their normal traffic. When the

observer took his eyes from the dark clouds which shadowed every

horizon, he could not but rejoice at the ever-widening central stretch

of peaceful blue which told that the storm was nearing its end.

Having now dealt with the campaign in the Transvaal down to the end of

1901, it only remains to bring the chronicle of the events in the Orange

River Colony down to the same date. Reference has already been made to

two small British reverses which occurred in September, the loss of two

guns to the south of the Waterworks near Bloemfontein, and the surprise

of the camp of Lord Lovat's Scouts. There were some indications at

this time that a movement had been planned through the passes of the

Drakensberg by a small Free State force which should aid Louis Botha's

invasion of Natal. The main movement was checked, however, and the

demonstration in aid of it came to nothing.

The blockhouse system had been developed to a very complete extent

in the Orange River Colony, and the small bands of Boers found it

increasingly difficult to escape from the British columns who were for

ever at their heels. The southern portion of the country had been cut

off from the northern by a line which extended through Bloemfontein on

the east to the Basuto frontier, and on the west to Jacobsdal. To the

south of this line the Boer resistance had practically ceased, although

several columns moved continually through it, and gleaned up the broken

fragments of the commandos. The north-west had also settled down to

a large extent, and during the last three months of 1901 no action of

importance occurred in that region. Even in the turbulent north-east,

which had always been the centre of resistance, there was little

opposition to the British columns, which continued every week to send in

their tale of prisoners. Of the column commanders, Williams, Damant,

Du Moulin, Lowry Cole, and Wilson were the most successful. In their

operations they were much aided by the South African Constabulary.

One young officer of this force, Major Pack-Beresford, especially

distinguished himself by his gallantry and ability. His premature death

from enteric was a grave loss to the British army. Save for one skirmish

of Colonel Wilson's early in October, and another of Byng's on November

14th, there can hardly be said to have been any actual fighting until

the events late in December which I am about to describe.

In the meanwhile the peaceful organisation of the country was being

pushed forward as rapidly as in the Transvaal, although here the

problems presented were of a different order, and the population an

exclusively Dutch one. The schools already showed a higher attendance

than in the days before the war, while a continual stream of burghers

presented themselves to take the oath of allegiance, and even to join

the ranks against their own irreconcilable countrymen, whom they looked

upon with justice as the real authors of their troubles.

Towards the end of November there were signs that the word had gone

forth for a fresh concentration of the fighting Boers in their old

haunts in the Heilbron district, and early in December it was known that

the indefatigable De Wet was again in the field. He had remained quiet

so long that there had been persistent rumours of his injury and even

of his death, but he was soon to show that he was as alive as ever.

President Steyn was ill of a most serious complaint, caused possibly by

the mental and physical sufferings which he had undergone; but with an

indomitable resolution which makes one forget and forgive the fatuous

policy which brought him and his State to such a pass, he still appeared

in his Cape cart at the laager of the faithful remnant of his commandos.

To those who remembered how widespread was our conviction of the

half-heartedness of the Free Staters at the outbreak of the war, it was

indeed a revelation to see them after two years still making a stand

against the forces which had crushed them.

It had been long evident that the present British tactics of scouring

the country and capturing the isolated burghers must in time bring the

war to a conclusion. From the Boer point of view the only hope, or at

least the only glory, lay in reassembling once more in larger bodies and

trying conclusions with some of the British columns. It was with this

purpose that De Wet early in December assembled Wessels, Manie Botha,

and others of his lieutenants, together with a force of about two

thousand men, in the Heilbron district. Small as this force was, it

was admirably mobile, and every man in it was a veteran, toughened and

seasoned by two years of constant fighting. De Wet's first operations

were directed against an isolated column of Colonel Wilson's, which was

surrounded within twenty miles of Heilbron. Rimington, in response to a

heliographic call for assistance, hurried with admirable promptitude to

the scene of action, and joined hands with Wilson. De Wet's men were as

numerous, however, as the two columns combined, and they harassed the

return march into Heilbron. A determined attack was made on the convoy

and on the rearguard, but it was beaten off. That night Rimington's camp

was fired into by a large body of Boers, but he had cleverly moved his

men away from the fires, so that no harm was done. The losses in these

operations were small, but with troops which had not been trained in

this method of fighting the situation would have been a serious one.

For a fortnight or more after this the burghers contented themselves

by skirmishing with British columns and avoiding a drive which Elliot's

forces made against them. On December 18th they took the offensive,

however, and within a week fought three actions, two of which ended in

their favour.

News had come to British headquarters that Kaffir's Kop, to the

north-west of Bethlehem, was a centre of Boer activity. Three columns

were therefore turned in that direction, Elliot's, Barker's, and

Dartnell's. Some desultory skirmishing ensued, which was only remarkable

for the death of Haasbroek, a well-known Boer leader. As the columns

separated again, unable to find an objective, De Wet suddenly showed

one of them that their failure was not due to his absence. Dartnell had

retraced his steps nearly as far as Eland's River Bridge, when the Boer

leader sprang out of his lair in the Langberg and threw himself upon

him. The burghers attempted to ride in, as they had successfully done

at Brakenlaagte, but they were opposed by the steady old troopers of the

two regiments of Imperial Horse, and by a General who was familiar with

every Boer ruse. The horsemen never got nearer than 150 yards to the

British line, and were beaten back by the steady fire which met them.

Finding that he made no headway, and learning that Campbell's column

was coming up from Bethlehem, De Wet withdrew his men after four hours'

fighting. Fifteen were hit upon the British side, and the Boer loss

seems to have been certainly as great or greater.

De Wet's general aim in his operations seems to have been to check the

British blockhouse building. With his main force in the Langberg he

could threaten the line which was now being erected between Bethlehem

and Harrismith, a line against which his main commando was destined,

only two months later, to beat itself in vain. Sixty miles to the north

a second line was being run across country from Frankfort to Standerton,

and had reached a place called Tafelkop. A covering party of East

Lancashires and Yeomanry watched over the workers, but De Wet had left

a portion of his force in that neighbourhood, and they harassed the

blockhouse builders to such an extent that General Hamilton, who was

in command, found it necessary to send in to Frankfort for support.

The British columns there had just returned exhausted from a drive, but

three bodies under Damant, Rimington, and Wilson were at once despatched

to clear away the enemy.

The weather was so atrocious that the veld resembled an inland sea, with

the kopjes as islands rising out of it. By this stage of the war the

troops were hardened to all weathers, and they pushed swiftly on to the

scene of action. As they approached the spot where the Boers had been

reported, the line had been extended over many miles, with the result

that it had become very attenuated and dangerously weak in the centre.

At this point Colonel Damant and his small staff were alone with the two

guns and the maxim, save for a handful of Imperial Yeomanry (91st), who

acted as escort to the guns. Across the face of this small force there

rode a body of men in khaki uniforms, keeping British formation, and

actually firing bogus volleys from time to time in the direction of some

distant Boers. Damant and his staff seem to have taken it for granted

that these were Rimington's men, and the clever ruse succeeded to

perfection. Nearer and nearer came the strangers, and suddenly throwing

off all disguise, they made a dash for the guns. Four rounds of case

failed to stop them, and in a few minutes they were over the kopje on

which the guns stood and had ridden among the gunners, supported in

their attack by a flank fire from a number of dismounted riflemen.

The instant that the danger was realised Damant, his staff, and the

forty Yeomen who formed the escort dashed for the crest in the hope of

anticipating the Boers. So rapid was the charge of the others that they

had overwhelmed the gunners before the supports could reach the hill,

and the latter found themselves under the deadly fire of the Boer

rifles from above. Damant was hit in four places, all of his staff

were wounded, and hardly a man of the small body of Yeomanry was left

standing. Nothing could exceed their gallantry. Gaussen their captain

fell at their head. On the ridge the men about the guns were nearly all

killed or wounded. Of the gun detachment only two men remained, both of

them hit, and Jeffcoat their dying captain bequeathed them fifty pounds

each in a will drawn upon the spot. In half an hour the centre of the

British line had been absolutely annihilated. Modern warfare is on the

whole much less bloody than of old, but when one party has gained the

tactical mastery it is a choice between speedy surrender and total

destruction.

The wide-spread British wings had begun to understand that there was

something amiss, and to ride in towards the centre. An officer on the

far right peering through his glasses saw those tell-tale puffs at the

very muzzles of the British guns, which showed that they were firing

case at close quarters. He turned his squadron inwards and soon gathered

up Scott's squadron of Damant's Horse, and both rode for the kopje.

Rimington's men were appearing on the other side, and the Boers rode

off. They were unable to remove the guns which they had taken, because

all the horses had perished. 'I actually thought,' says one officer who

saw them ride away, 'that I had made a mistake and been fighting our

own men. They were dressed in our uniforms and some of them wore the

tiger-skin, the badge of Damant's Horse, round their hats.' The same

officer gives an account of the scene on the gun-kopje. 'The result

when we got to the guns was this, gunners all killed except two (both

wounded), pom-pom officers and men all killed, maxim all killed, 91st

(the gun escort) one officer and one man not hit, all the rest killed or

wounded; staff, every officer hit.' That is what it means to those

who are caught in the vortex of the cyclone. The total loss was about

seventy-five.

In this action the Boers, who were under the command of Wessels,

delivered their attack with a cleverness and dash which deserved

success. Their stratagem, however, depending as it did upon the use of

British uniforms and methods, was illegitimate by all the laws of war,

and one can but marvel at the long-suffering patience of officers and

men who endured such things without any attempt at retaliation. There is

too much reason to believe also, that considerable brutality was shown

by those Boers who carried the kopje, and the very high proportion

of killed to wounded among the British who lay there corroborates the

statement of the survivors that several were shot at close quarters

after all resistance had ceased.

This rough encounter of Tafelkop was followed only four days later by a

very much more serious one at Tweefontein, which proved that even after

two years of experience we had not yet sufficiently understood the

courage and the cunning of our antagonist. The blockhouse line was being

gradually extended from Harrismith to Bethlehem, so as to hold down this

turbulent portion of the country. The Harrismith section had been pushed

as far as Tweefontein, which is nine miles west of Elands River Bridge,

and here a small force was stationed to cover the workers. This column

consisted of four squadrons of the 4th Imperial Yeomanry, one gun of the

79th battery, and one pom-pom, the whole under the temporary command of

Major Williams of the South Staffords, Colonel Firmin being absent.

Knowing that De Wet and his men were in the neighbourhood, the camp

of the Yeomen had been pitched in a position which seemed to secure it

against attack. A solitary kopje presented a long slope to the north,

while the southern end was precipitous. The outposts were pushed well

out upon the plain, and a line of sentries was placed along the crest.

The only precaution which seems to have been neglected was to have other

outposts at the base of the southern declivity. It appears to have been

taken for granted, however, that no attack was to be apprehended from

that side, and that in any case it would be impossible to evade the

vigilance of the sentries upon the top.

Of all the daring and skilful attacks delivered by the Boers during

the war there is certainly none more remarkable than this one. At

two o'clock in the morning of a moonlight night De Wet's forlorn hope

assembled at the base of the hill and clambered up to the summit. The

fact that it was Christmas Eve may conceivably have had something to do

with the want of vigilance upon the part of the sentries. In a season

of good will and conviviality the rigour of military discipline may

insensibly relax. Little did the sleeping Yeomen in the tents, or the

drowsy outposts upon the crest, think of the terrible Christmas visitors

who were creeping on to them, or of the grim morning gift which Santa

Claus was bearing.

The Boers, stealing up in their stockinged feet, poured under the

crest until they were numerous enough to make a rush. It is almost

inconceivable how they could have got so far without their presence

being suspected by the sentries--but so it was. At last, feeling

strong enough to advance, they sprang over the crest and fired into the

pickets, and past them into the sleeping camp. The top of the hill being

once gained, there was nothing to prevent their comrades from swarming

up, and in a very few minutes nearly a thousand Boers were in a position

to command the camp. The British were not only completely outnumbered,

but were hurried from their sleep into the fight without any clear idea

as to the danger or how to meet it, while the hissing sleet of bullets

struck many of them down as they rushed out of their tents. Considering

how terrible the ordeal was to which they were exposed, these untried

Yeomen seem to have behaved very well. 'Some brave gentlemen ran away at

the first shot, but I am thankful to say they were not many,' says one

of their number. The most veteran troops would have been tried very high

had they been placed in such a position. 'The noise and the clamour,'

says one spectator, 'were awful. The yells of the Dutch, the screams and

shrieks of dying men and horses, the cries of natives, howls of dogs,

the firing, the galloping of horses, the whistling of bullets, and the

whirr volleys make in the air, made up such a compound of awful and

diabolical sounds as I never heard before nor hope to hear again. In the

confusion some of the men killed each other and some killed themselves.

Two Boers who put on helmets were killed by their own people. The

men were given no time to rally or to collect their thoughts, for

the gallant Boers barged right into them, shooting them down, and

occasionally being shot down, at a range of a few yards. Harwich and

Watney, who had charge of the maxim, died nobly with all the men of

their gun section round them. Reed, the sergeant-major, rushed at

the enemy with his clubbed rifle, but was riddled with bullets. Major

Williams, the commander, was shot through the stomach as he rallied

his men. The gunners had time to fire two rounds before they were

overpowered and shot down to a man. For half an hour the resistance was

maintained, but at the end of that time the Boers had the whole camp in

their possession, and were already hastening to get their prisoners away

before the morning should bring a rescue.

The casualties are in themselves enough to show how creditable was the

resistance of the Yeomanry. Out of a force of under four hundred men

they had six officers and fifty-one men killed, eight officers and

eighty men wounded. There have been very few surrenders during the war

in which there has been such evidence as this of a determined stand.

Nor was it a bloodless victory upon the part of the Boers, for there was

evidence that their losses, though less than those of the British, were

still severe.

The prisoners, over two hundred in number, were hurried away by the

Boers, who seemed under the immediate eye of De Wet to have behaved with

exemplary humanity to the wounded. The captives were taken by forced

marches to the Basuto border, where they were turned adrift, half clad

and without food. By devious ways and after many adventures, they all

made their way back again to the British lines. It was well for De Wet

that he had shown such promptness in getting away, for within three

hours of the end of the action the two regiments of Imperial Horse

appeared upon the scene, having travelled seventeen miles in the time.

Already, however, the rearguard of the Boers was disappearing into the

fastness of the Langberg, where all pursuit was vain.

Such was the short but vigorous campaign of De Wet in the last part of

December of the year 1901. It had been a brilliant one, but none the

less his bolt was shot, and Tweefontein was the last encounter in which

British troops should feel his heavy hand. His operations, bold as they

had been, had not delayed by a day the building of that iron cage which

was gradually enclosing him. Already it was nearly completed, and in

a few more weeks he was destined to find himself and his commando

struggling against bars.

CHAPTER 37. THE CAMPAIGN OF JANUARY TO APRIL, 1902.

At the opening of the year 1902 it was evident to every observer that

the Boer resistance, spirited as it was, must be nearing its close. By

a long succession of captures their forces were much reduced in numbers.

They were isolated from the world, and had no means save precarious

smuggling of renewing their supplies of ammunition. It was known

also that their mobility, which had been their great strength, was

decreasing, and that in spite of their admirable horsemastership their

supply of remounts was becoming exhausted. An increasing number of the

burghers were volunteering for service against their own people, and it

was found that all fears as to this delicate experiment were misplaced,

and that in the whole army there were no keener and more loyal soldiers.

The chief factor, however, in bringing the Boers to their knees was the

elaborate and wonderful blockhouse system, which had been strung across

the whole of the enemy's country. The original blockhouses had been far

apart, and were a hindrance and an annoyance rather than an absolute

barrier to the burghers. The new models, however, were only six hundred

yards apart, and were connected by such impenetrable strands of wire

that a Boer pithily described it by saying that if one's hat blew over

the line anywhere between Ermelo and Standerton one had to walk round

Ermelo to fetch it. Use was made of such barriers by the Spaniards in

Cuba, but an application of them on such a scale over such an enormous

tract of country is one of the curiosities of warfare, and will remain

one of several novelties which will make the South African campaign for

ever interesting to students of military history.

The spines of this great system were always the railway lines, which

were guarded on either side, and down which, as down a road, went

flocks, herds, pedestrians, and everything which wished to travel in

safety. From these long central cords the lines branched out to right

and left, cutting up the great country into manageable districts. A

category of them would but weary the reader, but suffice it that by the

beginning of the year the south-east of the Transvaal and the north-east

of the Orange River Colony, the haunts of Botha and De Wet, had been

so intersected that it was obvious that the situation must soon be

impossible for both of them. Only on the west of the Transvaal was there

a clear run for De la Rey and Kemp. Hence it was expected, as actually

occurred, that in this quarter the most stirring events of the close of

the campaign would happen.

General Bruce Hamilton in the Eastern Transvaal had continued the

energetic tactics which had given such good results in the past. With

the new year his number of prisoners fell, but he had taken so many, and

had hustled the remainder to such an extent, that the fight seemed to

have gone out of the Boers in this district. On January 1st be presented

the first-fruits of the year in the shape of twenty-two of Grobler's

burghers. On the 3rd he captured forty-nine, while Wing, co-operating

with him, took twenty more. Among these was General Erasmus, who had

helped, or failed to help, General Lucas Meyer at Talana Hill. On the

10th Colonel Wing's column, which was part of Hamilton's force, struck

out again and took forty-two prisoners, including the two Wolmarans.

Only two days later Hamilton returned to the same spot, and was rewarded

with thirty-two more captures. On the 18th he took twenty-seven, on the

24th twelve, and on the 26th no fewer than ninety. So severe were these

blows, and so difficult was it for the Boers to know how to get away

from an antagonist who was ready to ride thirty miles in a night in

order to fall upon their laager, that the enemy became much scattered

and too demoralised for offensive operations. Finding that they had

grown too shy in this much shot over district, Hamilton moved farther

south, and early in March took a cast round the Vryheid district, where

he made some captures, notably General Cherry Emmett, a descendant of

the famous Irish rebel, and brother-in-law of Louis Botha. For all these

repeated successes it was to the Intelligence Department, so admirably

controlled by Colonel Wools-Sampson, that thanks are mainly due.

Whilst Bruce Hamilton was operating so successfully in the Ermelo

district, several British columns under Plumer, Spens, and Colville were

stationed some fifty miles south to prevent the fugitives from

getting away into the mountainous country which lies to the north of

Wakkerstroom. On January 3rd a small force of Plumer's New Zealanders

had a brisk skirmish with a party of Boers, whose cattle they captured,

though at some loss to themselves. These Boers were strongly reinforced,

however, and when on the following day Major Vallentin pursued them

with fifty men he found himself at Onverwacht in the presence of several

hundred of the enemy, led by Oppermann and Christian Botha. Vallentin

was killed and almost all of his small force were hit before British

reinforcements, under Colonel Pulteney, drove the Boers off. Nineteen

killed and twenty-three wounded were our losses in this most sanguinary

little skirmish. Nine dead Boers, with Oppermann himself, were left upon

the field of battle. His loss was a serious one to the enemy, as he was

one of their most experienced Generals.

From that time until the end these columns, together with Mackenzie's

column to the north of Ermelo, continued to break up all combinations,

and to send in their share of prisoners to swell Lord Kitchener's weekly

list. A final drive, organised on April 11th against the Standerton

line, resulted in 134 prisoners.

In spite of the very large army in South Africa, so many men were

absorbed by the huge lines of communications and the blockhouse system

that the number available for active operations was never more than

forty or fifty thousand men. With another fifty thousand there is no

doubt that at least six months would have been taken from the duration

of the war. On account of this shorthandedness Lord Kitchener had to

leave certain districts alone, while he directed his attention to those

which were more essential. Thus to the north of the Delagoa Railway line

there was only one town, Lydenburg, which was occupied by the British.

They had, however, an energetic commander in Park of the Devons. This

leader, striking out from his stronghold among the mountains, and

aided by Urmston from Belfast, kept the commando of Ben Viljoen and the

peripatetic Government of Schalk Burger continually upon the move. As

already narrated, Park fought a sharp night action upon December 19th,

after which, in combination with Urmston, he occupied Dulstroom, only

missing the government by a few hours. In January Park and Urmston were

again upon the war-path, though the incessant winds, fogs, and rains of

that most inclement portion of the Transvaal seriously hampered

their operations. Several skirmishes with the commandos of Muller and

Trichardt gave no very decisive result, but a piece of luck befell

the British on January 25th in the capture of General Viljoen by

an ambuscade cleverly arranged by Major Orr in the neighbourhood of

Lydenburg. Though a great firebrand before the war, Viljoen had fought

bravely and honourably throughout the contest, and he had won the

respect and esteem of his enemy.

Colonel Park had had no great success in his last two expeditions, but

on February 20th he made an admirable march, and fell upon a Boer laager

which lay in placid security in the heart of the hills. One hundred and

sixty-four prisoners, including many Boer officers, were the fruits of

this success, in which the National Scouts, or 'tame Boers,' as they

were familiarly called, played a prominent part. This commando was that

of Middelburg, which was acting as escort to the government, who again

escaped dissolution. Early in March Park was again out on trek, upon

one occasion covering seventy miles in a single day. Nothing further of

importance came from this portion of the seat of war until March 23rd,

when the news reached England that Schalk Burger, Reitz, Lucas Meyer,

and others of the Transvaal Government had come into Middelburg, and

that they were anxious to proceed to Pretoria to treat. On the Eastern

horizon had appeared the first golden gleam of the dawning peace.

Having indicated the course of events in the Eastern Transvaal, north

and south of the railway line, I will now treat one or two incidents

which occurred in the more central and northern portions of the country.

I will then give some account of De Wet's doings in the Orange River

Colony, and finally describe that brilliant effort of De la Rey's in the

west which shed a last glory upon the Boer arms.

In the latter days of December, Colenbrander and Dawkins operating

together had put in a great deal of useful work in the northern

district, and from Nylstrom to Pietersburg the burghers were continually

harried by the activity of these leaders. Late in the month Dawkins was

sent down into the Orange River Colony in order to reinforce the troops

who were opposed to De Wet. Colenbrander alone, with his hardy colonial

forces, swept through the Magaliesburg, and had the double satisfaction

of capturing a number of the enemy and of heading off and sending back a

war party of Linchwe's Kaffirs who, incensed by a cattle raid of

Kemp's, were moving down in a direction which would have brought them

dangerously near to the Dutch women and children. This instance and

several similar ones in the campaign show how vile are the lies which

have been told of the use, save under certain well-defined conditions,

of armed natives by the British during the war. It would have been a

perfectly easy thing at any time for the Government to have raised all

the fighting native races of South Africa, but it is not probable

that we, who held back our admirable and highly disciplined Sikhs and

Ghoorkas, would break our self-imposed restrictions in order to enrol

the inferior but more savage races of Africa. Yet no charge has been

more often repeated and has caused more piteous protests among the

soft-hearted and soft-headed editors of Continental journals.

The absence of Colenbrander in the Rustenburg country gave Beyers a

chance of which he was not slow to avail himself. On January 24th, in

the early morning, he delivered an attack upon Pietersburg itself, but

he was easily driven off by the small garrison. It is probable, however,

that the attack was a mere feint in order to enable a number of the

inmates of the refugee camp to escape. About a hundred and fifty made

off, and rejoined the commandos. There were three thousand Boers in all

in this camp, which was shortly afterwards moved down to Natal in order

to avoid the recurrence of such an incident.

Colenbrander, having returned to Pietersburg once more, determined to

return Beyers's visit, and upon April 8th he moved out with a small

force to surprise the Boer laager. The Inniskilling Fusiliers seized the

ground which commanded the enemy's position. The latter retreated,

but were followed up, and altogether about one hundred and fifty were

killed, wounded, and taken. On May 3rd a fresh operation against Beyers

was undertaken, and resulted in about the same loss to the Boers. On the

other hand, the Boers had a small success against Kitchener's Scouts,

killing eighteen and taking thirty prisoners.

There is one incident, however, in connection with the war in this

region which one would desire to pass over in silence if such a course

were permissible. Some eighty miles to the east of Pietersburg is a wild

part of the country called the Spelonken. In this region an irregular

corps, named the Bushveld Carbineers, had been operating. It was raised

in South Africa, but contained both Colonials and British in its ranks.

Its wild duties, its mixed composition, and its isolated situation must

have all militated against discipline and restraint, and it appears to

have degenerated into a band not unlike those Southern 'bush-whackers'

in the American war to whom the Federals showed little mercy. They

had given short shrift to the Boer prisoners who had fallen into their

hands, the excuse offered for their barbarous conduct being that an

officer who had served in the corps had himself been murdered by the

Boers. Such a reason, even if it were true, could of course offer no

justification for indiscriminate revenge. The crimes were committed in

July and August 1901, but it was not until January 1902 that five of

the officers were put upon their trial and were found to be guilty as

principals or accessories of twelve murders. The corps was disbanded,

and three of the accused officers, Handcock, Wilton, and Morant, were

sentenced to death, while another, Picton, was cashiered. Handcock and

Morant were actually executed. This stern measure shows more clearly

than volumes of argument could do how high was the standard of

discipline in the British Army, and how heavy was the punishment, and

how vain all excuses, where it had been infringed. In the face of this

actual outrage and its prompt punishment how absurd becomes that crusade

against imaginary outrages preached by an ignorant press abroad, and by

renegade Englishmen at home.

To the south of Johannesburg, half-way between that town and the

frontier, there is a range of hills called the Zuikerboschrand, which

extends across from one railway system to the other. A number of Boers

were known to have sought refuge in this country, so upon February 12th

a small British force left Klip River Post in order to clear them out.

There were 320 men in all, composing the 28th Mounted Infantry, drawn

from the Lancashire Fusiliers, Warwicks, and Derbys, most of whom had

just arrived from Malta, which one would certainly imagine to be the

last place where mounted infantry could be effectively trained. Major

Dowell was in command. An advance was made into the hilly country, but

it was found that the enemy was in much greater force than had been

imagined. The familiar Boer tactics were used with the customary

success. The British line was held by a sharp fire in front, while

strong flanking parties galloped round each of the wings. It was with

great difficulty that any of the British extricated themselves from

their perilous position, and the safety of a portion of the force was

only secured by the devotion of a handful of officers and men, who gave

their lives in order to gain time for their comrades to get away. Twelve

killed and fifty wounded were our losses in this unfortunate skirmish,

and about one hundred prisoners supplied the victors with a useful

addition to their rifles and ammunition. A stronger British force came

up next day, and the enemy were driven out of the hills.

A week later, upon February 18th, there occurred another skirmish at

Klippan, near Springs, between a squadron of the Scots Greys and a party

of Boers who had broken into this central reserve which Lord Kitchener

had long kept clear of the enemy. In this action the cavalry were

treated as roughly as the mounted infantry had been the week before,

losing three officers killed, eight men killed or wounded, and forty-six

taken. They had formed a flanking party to General Gilbert Hamilton's

column, but were attacked and overwhelmed so rapidly that the blow had

fallen before their comrades could come to their assistance.

One of the consequences of the successful drives about to be described

in the Orange River Colony was that a number of the Free Staters came

north of the Vaal in order to get away from the extreme pressure upon

the south. At the end of March a considerable number had reinforced the

local commandos in that district to the east of Springs, no very great

distance from Johannesburg, which had always been a storm centre. A

cavalry force was stationed at this spot which consisted at that time

of the 2nd Queen's Bays, the 7th Hussars, and some National Scouts, all

under Colonel Lawley of the Hussars. After a series of minor engagements

east of Springs, Lawley had possessed himself of Boschman's Kop,

eighteen miles from that town, close to the district which was the chief

scene of Boer activity. From this base he despatched upon the morning

of April 1st three squadrons of the Bays under Colonel Fanshawe, for the

purpose of surprising a small force of the enemy which was reported at

one of the farms. Fanshawe's strength was about three hundred men.

The British cavalry found themselves, however, in the position of the

hunter who, when he is out for a snipe, puts up a tiger. All went well

with the expedition as far as Holspruit, the farm which they had started

to search. Commandant Pretorius, to whom it belonged, was taken by the

energy of Major Vaughan, who pursued and overtook his Cape cart. It was

found, however, that Alberts's commando was camped at the farm, and that

the Bays were in the presence of a very superior force of the enemy. The

night was dark, and when firing began it was almost muzzle to muzzle,

with the greatest possible difficulty in telling friend from foe. The

three squadrons fell back upon some rising ground, keeping admirable

order under most difficult circumstances. In spite of the darkness the

attack was pressed fiercely home, and with their favourite tactics the

burghers rapidly outflanked the position taken up by the cavalry. The

British moved by alternate squadrons on to a higher rocky kopje on

the east, which could be vaguely distinguished looming in the darkness

against the skyline. B squadron, the last to retire, was actually

charged and ridden through by the brave assailants, firing from their

saddles as they broke through the ranks. The British had hardly time

to reach the kopje and to dismount and line its edge when the Boers,

yelling loudly, charged with their horses up the steep flanks. Twice

they were beaten back, but the third time they seized one corner of the

hill and opened a hot fire upon the rear of the line of men who were

defending the other side. Dawn was now breaking, and the situation most

serious, for the Boers were in very superior numbers and were pushing

their pursuit with the utmost vigour and determination. A small party of

officers and men whose horses had been shot covered the retreat of their

comrades, and continued to fire until all of them, two officers and

twenty-three men, were killed or wounded, the whole of their desperate

defence being conducted within from thirty to fifty yards of the enemy.

The remainder of the regiment was now retired to successive ridges,

each of which was rapidly outflanked by the Boers, whose whole method

of conducting their attack was extraordinarily skilful. Nothing but the

excellent discipline of the overmatched troopers prevented the

retreat from becoming a rout. Fortunately, before the pressure became

intolerable the 7th Hussars with some artillery came to the rescue, and

turned the tide. The Hussars galloped in with such dash that some of

them actually got among the Boers with their swords, but the enemy

rapidly fell back and disappeared.

In this very sharp and sanguinary cavalry skirmish the Bays lost eighty

killed and wounded out of a total force of 270. To stand such losses

under such circumstances, and to preserve absolute discipline and order,

is a fine test of soldierly virtue. The adjutant, the squadron leaders,

and six out of ten officers were killed or wounded. The Boers lost

equally heavily. Two Prinsloos, one of them a commandant, and three

field-cornets were among the slain, with seventy other casualties. The

force under General Alberts was a considerable one, not fewer than

six hundred rifles, so that the action at Holspruit is one which adds

another name of honour to the battle-roll of the Bays. It is pleasing to

add that in this and the other actions which were fought at the end of

the war our wounded met with kindness and consideration from the enemy.

We may now descend to the Orange River Colony and trace the course of

those operations which were destined to break the power of De Wet's

commando. On these we may concentrate our attention, for the marchings

and gleanings and snipings of the numerous small columns in the other

portions of the colony, although they involved much arduous and useful

work, do not claim a particular account.

After the heavy blow which he dealt Firmin's Yeomanry, De Wet retired,

as has been told, into the Langberg, whence he afterwards retreated

towards Reitz. There he was energetically pushed by Elliot's columns,

which had attained such mobility that 150 miles were performed in three

days within a single week. Our rough schoolmasters had taught us our

lesson, and the soldiering which accomplished the marches of Bruce

Hamilton, Elliot, Rimington, and the other leaders of the end of the war

was very far removed from that which is associated with ox-wagons and

harmoniums.

Moving rapidly, and covering himself by a succession of rearguard

skirmishes, De Wet danced like a will-o'the-wisp in front of and round

the British columns. De Lisle, Fanshawe, Byng, Rimington, Dawkins, and

Rawlinson were all snatching at him and finding him just beyond their

finger-tips. The master-mind at Pretoria had, however, thought out a

scheme which was worthy of De Wet himself in its ingenuity. A glance

at the map will show that the little branch from Heilbron to Wolvehoek

forms an acute angle with the main line. Both these railways were

strongly blockhoused and barbed-wired, so that any force which was

driven into the angle, and held in it by a force behind it, would be in

a perilous position. To attempt to round De Wet's mobile burghers into

this obvious pen would have been to show one's hand too clearly. In vain

is the net laid in sight of the bird. The drive was therefore made away

from this point, with the confident expectation that the guerilla chief

would break back through the columns, and that they might then pivot

round upon him and hustle him so rapidly into the desired position that

he would not realise his danger until it was too late. Byng's column

was left behind the driving line to be ready for the expected backward

break. All came off exactly as expected. De Wet doubled back through

the columns, and one of his commandos stumbled upon Byng's men, who were

waiting on the Vlei River to the west of Reitz. The Boers seem to have

taken it for granted that, having passed the British driving line, they

were out of danger, and for once it was they who were surprised. The

South African Light Horse, the New Zealanders, and the Queensland

Bushmen all rode in upon them. A fifteen-pounder, the one taken at

Tweefontein, and two pom-poms were captured, with thirty prisoners and a

considerable quantity of stores.

This successful skirmish was a small matter, however, compared to the

importance of being in close touch with De Wet and having a definite

objective for the drive. The columns behind expanded suddenly into a

spray of mounted men forming a continuous line for over sixty miles. On

February 5th the line was advancing, and on the 6th it was known that De

Wet was actually within the angle, the mouth of which was spanned by

the British line. Hope ran high in Pretoria. The space into which

the burgher chief had been driven was bounded by sixty-six miles of

blockhouse and wire on one side and thirty on the other, while the

third side of the triangle was crossed by fifty-five miles of British

horsemen, flanked by a blockhouse line between Kroonstad and Lindley.

The tension along the lines of defence was extreme. Infantry guarded

every yard of them, and armoured trains patrolled them, while at night

searchlights at regular intervals shed their vivid rays over the black

expanse of the veld and illuminated the mounted figures who flitted from

time to time across their narrow belts of light.

On the 6th De Wet realised his position, and with characteristic

audacity and promptness he took means to clear the formidable toils

which had been woven round him. The greater part of his command

scattered, with orders to make their way as best they might out of the

danger. Working in their own country, where every crease and fold of

the ground was familiar to them, it is not surprising that most of

them managed to make their way through gaps in the attenuated line

of horsemen behind them. A few were killed, and a considerable number

taken, 270 being the respectable total of the prisoners. Three or four

slipped through, however, for every one who stuck in the meshes. De Wet

himself was reported to have made his escape by driving cattle against

the wire fences which enclosed him. It seems, however, to have been

nothing more romantic than a wire-cutter which cleared his path, though

cattle no doubt made their way through the gap which he left. With a

loss of only three of his immediate followers be Wet won his way out of

the most dangerous position which even his adventurous career had ever

known. Lord Kitchener had descended to Wolvehoek to be present at the

climax of the operations, but it was not fated that he was to receive

the submission of the most energetic of his opponents, and he returned

to Pretoria to weave a fresh mesh around him.

This was not hard to do, as the Boer General had simply escaped from one

pen into another, though a larger one. After a short rest to restore the

columns, the whole pack were full cry upon his heels once more. An

acute angle is formed by the Wilge River on one side and the line of

blockhouses between Harrismith and Van Reenen upon the other. This was

strongly manned by troops and five columns; those of Rawlinson, Nixon,

Byng, Rimington, and Keir herded the broken commandos into the trap.

From February 20th the troops swept in an enormous skirmish line across

the country, ascending hills, exploring kloofs, searching river banks,

and always keeping the enemy in front of them. At last, when the

pressure was severely felt, there came the usual breakback, which took

the form of a most determined night attack upon the British line. This

was delivered shortly after midnight on February 23rd. It struck the

British cordon at the point of juncture between Byng's column and that

of Rimington. So huge were the distances which had to be covered, and

so attenuated was the force which covered them, that the historical thin

red line was a massive formation compared to its khaki equivalent. The

chain was frail and the links were not all carefully joined, but each

particular link was good metal, and the Boer impact came upon one of the

best. This was the 7th New Zealand Contingent, who proved themselves to

be worthy comrades to their six gallant predecessors. Their patrols were

broken by the rush of wild, yelling, firing horsemen, but the troopers

made a most gallant resistance. Having pierced the line the Boers, who

were led in their fiery rush by Manie Botha, turned to their flank, and,

charging down the line of weak patrols, overwhelmed one after another

and threatened to roll up the whole line. They had cleared a gap of half

a mile, and it seemed as if the whole Boer force would certainly escape

through so long a gap in the defences. The desperate defence of the New

Zealanders gave time, however, for the further patrols, which consisted

of Cox's New South Wales Mounted Infantry, to fall back almost at right

angles so as to present a fresh face to the attack. The pivot of the

resistance was a maxim gun, most gallantly handled by Captain Begbie and

his men. The fight at this point was almost muzzle to muzzle, fifty or

sixty New Zealanders and Australians with the British gunners holding

off a force of several hundred of the best fighting men of the Boer

forces. In this desperate duel many dropped on both sides. Begbie died

beside his gun, which fired eighty rounds before it jammed. It was run

back by its crew in order to save it from capture. But reinforcements

were coming up, and the Boer attack was beaten back. A number of them

had escaped, however, through the opening which they had cleared, and it

was conjectured that the wonderful De Wet was among them. How fierce was

the storm which had broken on the New Zealanders may be shown by their

roll of twenty killed and forty wounded, while thirty dead Boers were

picked up in front of their picket line. Of eight New Zealand officers

seven are reported to have been hit, an even higher proportion than that

which the same gallant race endured at the battle of Rhenoster Kop more

than a year before.

It was feared at first that the greater part of the Boers might have

escaped upon this night of the 23rd, when Manie Botha's storming party

burst through the ranks of the New Zealanders. It was soon discovered

that this was not so, and the columns as they closed in had evidence

from the numerous horsemen who scampered aimlessly over the hills in

front of them that the main body of the enemy was still in the toils.

The advance was in tempestuous weather and over rugged country, but the

men were filled with eagerness, and no precaution was neglected to keep

the line intact.

This time their efforts were crowned with considerable success. A second

attempt was made by the corraled burghers to break out on the night

of February 26th, but it was easily repulsed by Nixon. The task of the

troopers as the cordon drew south was more and more difficult, and there

were places traversed upon the Natal border where an alpen stock would

have been a more useful adjunct than a horse. At six o'clock on the

morning of the 27th came the end. Two Boers appeared in front of the

advancing line of the Imperial Light Horse and held up a flag. They

proved to be Truter and De Jager, ready to make terms for their

commando. The only terms offered were absolute surrender within the

hour. The Boers had been swept into a very confined space, which was

closely hemmed in by troops, so that any resistance must have ended in a

tragedy. Fortunately there was no reason for desperate councils in their

case, since they did not fight as Lotter had done, with the shadow of

judgment hanging over him. The burghers piled arms, and all was over.

The total number captured in this important drive was 780 men, including

several leaders, one of whom was De Wet's own son. It was found that

De Wet himself had been among those who had got away through the picket

lines on the night of the 23rd. Most of the commando were Transvaalers,

and it was typical of the wide sweep of the net that many of them were

the men who had been engaged against the 28th Mounted Infantry in the

district south of Johannesburg upon the 12th of the same month. The loss

of 2000 horses and 50,000 cartridges meant as much as that of the men to

the Boer army. It was evident that a few more such blows would clear the

Orange River Colony altogether.

The wearied troopers were allowed little rest, for in a couple of days

after their rendezvous at Harrismith they were sweeping back again to

pick up all that they had missed. This drive, which was over the same

ground, but sweeping backwards towards the Heilbron to Wolvehoek line,

ended in the total capture of 147 of the enemy, who were picked out of

holes, retrieved from amid the reeds of the river, called down out of

trees, or otherwise collected. So thorough were the operations that it

is recorded that the angle which formed the apex of the drive was one

drove of game upon the last day, all the many types of antelope, which

form one of the characteristics and charms of the country, having been

herded into it.

More important even than the results of the drive was the discovery of

one of De Wet's arsenals in a cave in the Vrede district. Half-way down

a precipitous krantz, with its mouth covered by creepers, no writer of

romance could have imagined a more fitting headquarters for a guerilla

chief. The find was made by Ross's Canadian Scouts, who celebrated

Dominion Day by this most useful achievement. Forty wagon-loads of

ammunition and supplies were taken out of the cave. De Wet was known to

have left the north-east district, and to have got across the railway,

travelling towards the Vaal as if it were his intention to join De

la Rey in the Transvaal. The Boer resistance had suddenly become

exceedingly energetic in that part, and several important actions had

been fought, to which we will presently turn.

Before doing so it would be as well to bring the chronicle of events

in the Orange River Colony down to the conclusion of peace. There were

still a great number of wandering Boers in the northern districts and

in the frontier mountains, who were assiduously, but not always

successfully, hunted down by the British troops. Much arduous and useful

work was done by several small columns, the Colonial Horse and the

Artillery Mounted Rifles especially distinguishing themselves. The

latter corps, formed from the gunners whose field-pieces were no longer

needed, proved themselves to be a most useful body of men; and the

British gunner, when he took to carrying his gun, vindicated the

reputation which he had won when his gun had carried him.

From the 1st to the 4th of May a successful drive was conducted by many

columns in the often harried but never deserted Lindley to Kroonstad

district. The result was propitious, as no fewer than 321 prisoners were

brought in. Of these, 150 under Mentz were captured in one body as they

attempted to break through the encircling cordon.

Amid many small drives and many skirmishes, one stands out for its

severity. It is remarkable as being the last action of any importance

in the campaign. This was the fight at Moolman's Spruit, near Ficksburg,

upon April 20th, 1902. A force of about one hundred Yeomanry and forty

Mounted Infantry (South Staffords) was despatched by night to attack

an isolated farm in which a small body of Boers was supposed to be

sleeping. Colonel Perceval was in command. The farm was reached after a

difficult march, but the enemy were found to have been forewarned, and

to be in much greater strength than was anticipated. A furious fire was

opened on the advancing troops, who were clearly visible in the light

of a full moon. Sir Thomas Fowler was killed and several men of the

Yeomanry were hit. The British charged up to the very walls, but were

unable to effect an entrance, as the place was barricaded and loopholed.

Captain Blackwood, of the Staffords, was killed in the attack. Finding

that the place was impregnable, and that the enemy outnumbered him,

Colonel Perceval gave the order to retire, a movement which was only

successfully carried out because the greater part of the Boer horses

had been shot. By morning the small British force had extricated itself,

from its perilous position with a total loss of six killed, nineteen

wounded, and six missing. The whole affair was undoubtedly a cleverly

planned Boer ambush, and the small force was most fortunate in escaping

destruction.

One other isolated incident may be mentioned here, though it occurred

far away in the Vryheid district of the Transvaal. This was the

unfortunate encounter between Zulus and Boers by which the latter lost

over fifty of their numbers under deplorable circumstances. This portion

of the Transvaal has only recently been annexed, and is inhabited by

warlike Zulus, who are very different from the debased Kaffirs of the

rest of the country. These men had a blood-feud against the Boers,

which was embittered by the fact that they had lost heavily through Boer

depredations. Knowing that a party of fifty-nine men were sleeping in

a farmhouse, the Zulus crept on to it and slaughtered every man of the

inmates. Such an incident is much to be regretted, and yet, looking back

upon the long course of the war, and remembering the turbulent tribes

who surrounded the combatants--Swazis, Basutos, and Zulus--we may well

congratulate ourselves that we have been able to restrain those black

warriors, and to escape the brutalities and the bitter memories of a

barbarian invasion.

CHAPTER 38. DE LA REY'S CAMPAIGN OF 1902.

IT will be remembered that at the close of 1901 Lord Methuen and Colonel

Kekewich had both come across to the eastern side of their district and

made their base at the railway line in the Klerksdorp section. Their

position was strengthened by the fact that a blockhouse cordon now ran

from Klerksdorp to Ventersdorp, and from Ventersdorp to Potchefstroom,

so that this triangle could be effectively controlled. There remained,

however, a huge tract of difficult country which was practically in the

occupation of the enemy. Several thousand stalwarts were known to be

riding with De la Rey and his energetic lieutenant Kemp. The strenuous

operations of the British in the Eastern Transvaal and in the Orange

River Colony had caused this district to be comparatively neglected,

and so everything was in favour of an aggressive movement of the Boers.

There was a long lull after the unsuccessful attack upon Kekewich's camp

at Moedwill, but close observers of the war distrusted this ominous calm

and expected a storm to follow.

The new year found the British connecting Ventersdorp with Tafelkop by

a blockhouse line. The latter place had been a centre of Boer activity.

Colonel Hickie's column covered this operation. Meanwhile Methuen

had struck across through Wolmaranstad as far as Vryburg. In these

operations, which resulted in constant small captures, he was assisted

by a column under Major Paris working from Kimberley. From Vryburg Lord

Methuen made his way in the middle of January to Lichtenburg, meeting

with a small rebuff in the neighbourhood of that town, for a detachment

of Yeomanry was overwhelmed by General Celliers, who killed eight,

wounded fifteen, and captured forty. From Lichtenburg Lord Methuen

continued his enormous trek, and arrived on February 1st at Klerksdorp

once more. Little rest was given to his hard-worked troops, and they

were sent off again within the week under the command of Von Donop,

with the result that on February 8th, near Wolmaranstad, they captured

Potgieter's laager with forty Boer prisoners. Von Donop remained at

Wolmaranstad until late in February; On the 23rd he despatched an

empty convoy back to Klerksdorp, the fate of which will be afterwards

narrated.

Kekewich and Hickie had combined their forces at the beginning of

February. On February 4th an attempt was made by them to surprise

General De la Rey. The mounted troops who were despatched under Major

Leader failed in this enterprise, but they found and overwhelmed the

laager of Sarel Alberts, capturing 132 prisoners. By stampeding the

horses the Boer retreat was cut off, and the attack was so furiously

driven home, especially by the admirable Scottish Horse, that few of

the enemy got away. Alberts himself with all his officers were among the

prisoners. From this time until the end of February this column was not

seriously engaged.

It has been stated above that on February 23rd Von Donop sent in an

empty convoy from Wolmaranstad to Klerksdorp, a distance of about fifty

miles. Nothing had been heard for some time of De la Rey, but he had

called together his men and was waiting to bring off some coup. The

convoy gave him the very opportunity for which he sought.

The escort of the convoy consisted of the 5th Imperial Yeomanry, sixty

of Paget's Horse, three companies of the ubiquitous Northumberland

Fusiliers, two guns of the 4th R.F.A., and a pom-pom, amounting in all

to 630 men. Colonel Anderson was in command. On the morning of Tuesday,

February 25th, the convoy was within ten miles of its destination, and

the sentries on the kopjes round the town could see the gleam of the

long line of white-tilted wagons. Their hazardous voyage was nearly

over, and yet they were destined to most complete and fatal wreck within

sight of port. So confident were they that the detachment of Paget's

Horse was permitted to ride on the night before into the town. It was

as well, for such a handful would have shared and could not have averted

the disaster.

The night had been dark and wet, and the Boers under cover of it had

crept between the sleeping convoy and the town. Some bushes which afford

excellent cover lie within a few hundred yards of the road, and here the

main ambush was laid. In the first grey of the morning the long line of

the convoy, 130 wagons in all, came trailing past--guns and Yeomanry in

front, Fusiliers upon the flanks and rear. Suddenly the black bank of

scrub was outlined in flame, and a furious rifle fire was opened

upon the head of the column. The troops behaved admirably under most

difficult circumstances. A counter-attack by the Fusiliers and some of

the Yeomanry, under cover of shrapnel from the guns, drove the enemy

out of the scrub and silenced his fire at this point. It was evident,

however, that he was present in force, for firing soon broke out along

the whole left flank, and the rearguard found itself as warmly attacked

as the van. Again, however, the assailants were driven off. It was now

broad daylight, and the wagons, which had got into great confusion in

the first turmoil of battle, had been remarshalled and arranged. It

was Colonel Anderson's hope that he might be able to send them on into

safety while he with the escort covered their retreat. His plan was

certainly the best one, and if it did not succeed it was due to nothing

which he could avert, but to the nature of the ground and the gallantry

of the enemy.

The physical obstacle consisted in a very deep and difficult spruit, the

Jagd Spruit, which forms an ugly passage in times of peace, but which

when crowded and choked with stampeding mules and splintering wagons,

under their terrified conductors, soon became impassable. Here the head

of the column was clubbed and the whole line came to a stand. Meanwhile

the enemy, adopting their new tactics, came galloping in on the left

flank and on the rear. The first attack was repelled by the steady fire

of the Fusiliers, but on the second occasion the horsemen got up to the

wagons, and galloping down them were able to overwhelm in detail

the little knots of soldiers who were scattered along the flank. The

British, who were outnumbered by at least three to one, made a stout

resistance, and it was not until seven o'clock that the last shot was

fired. The result was a complete success to the burghers, but one which

leaves no shadow of discredit on any officer or man among those who

were engaged. Eleven officers and 176 men fell out of about 550 actually

engaged. The two guns were taken. The convoy was no use to the Boers,

so the teams were shot and the wagons burned before they withdrew. The

prisoners too, they were unable to retain, and their sole permanent

trophies consisted of the two guns, the rifles, and the ammunition.

Their own losses amounted to about fifty killed and wounded.

A small force sallied out from Klerksdorp in the hope of helping

Anderson, but on reaching the Jagd Drift it was found that the fighting

was over and that the field was in possession of the Boers. De la Rey

was seen in person among the burghers, and it is pleasant to add that he

made himself conspicuous by his humanity to the wounded. His force drew

off in the course of the morning, and was soon out of reach of immediate

pursuit, though this was attempted by Kekewich, Von Donop, and Grenfell.

It was important to regain the guns if possible, as they were always

a menace to the blockhouse system, and for this purpose Grenfell with

sixteen hundred horsemen was despatched to a point south of Lichtenburg,

which was conjectured to be upon the Boer line of retreat. At the same

time Lord Methuen was ordered up from Vryburg in order to cooperate

in this movement, and to join his forces to those of Grenfell. It was

obvious that with an energetic and resolute adversary like De la Rey

there was great danger of these two forces being taken in detail, but

it was hoped that each was strong enough to hold its own until the other

could come to its aid. The result was to show that the danger was real

and the hope fallacious.

It was on March 2nd that Methuen left Vryburg. The column was not his

old one, consisting of veterans of the trek, but was the Kimberley

column under Major Paris, a body of men who had seen much less service

and were in every way less reliable. It included a curious mixture of

units, the most solid of which were four guns (two of the 4th, and two

of the 38th R.F.A.), 200 Northumberland Fusiliers, and 100 Loyal North

Lancashires. The mounted men included 5th Imperial Yeomanry (184),

Cape Police (233), Cullinan's Horse (64), 86th Imperial Yeomanry (110),

Diamond Fields Horse (92), Dennison' s Scouts (58), Ashburner's Horse

(126), and British South African Police (24). Such a collection

of samples would be more in place, one would imagine, in a London

procession than in an operation which called for discipline and

cohesion. In warfare the half is often greater than the whole, and the

presence of a proportion of halfhearted and inexperienced men may be a

positive danger to their more capable companions.

Upon March 6th Methuen, marching east towards Lichtenburg, came in

touch near Leeuwspruit with Van Zyl's commando, and learned in the small

skirmish which ensued that some of his Yeomanry were unreliable and

ill-instructed. Having driven the enemy off by his artillery fire,

Methuen moved to Tweebosch, where he laagered until next morning. At 3

A.M. of the 7th the ox-convoy was sent on, under escort of half of

his little force. The other half followed at 4. 20, so as to give the

slow-moving oxen a chance of keeping ahead. It was evident, however,

immediately after the column had got started that the enemy were all

round in great numbers, and that an attack in force was to be expected.

Lord Methuen gave orders therefore that the ox-wagons should be halted

and that the mule-transport should close upon them so as to form

one solid block, instead of a straggling line. At the same time he

reinforced his rearguard with mounted men and with two guns, for it

was in that quarter that the enemy appeared to be most numerous and

aggressive. An attack was also developing upon the right flank, which

was held off by the infantry and by the second section of the guns.

It has been said that Methuen's horsemen were for the most part

inexperienced irregulars. Such men become in time excellent soldiers, as

all this campaign bears witness, but it is too much to expose them to a

severe ordeal in the open field when they are still raw and untrained.

As it happened, this particular ordeal was exceedingly severe, but

nothing can excuse the absolute failure of the troops concerned to rise

to the occasion. Had Methuen's rearguard consisted of Imperial Light

Horse, or Scottish Horse, it is safe to say that the battle of Tweebosch

would have had a very different ending.

What happened was that a large body of Boers formed up in five lines

and charged straight home at the rear screen and rearguard, firing

from their saddles as they had done at Brakenlaagte. The sight of those

wide-flung lines of determined men galloping over the plain seems to

have been too much for the nerves of the unseasoned troopers. A panic

spread through their ranks, and in an instant they had turned their

horses' heads and were thundering to their rear, leaving the two guns

uncovered and streaming in wild confusion past the left flank of the

jeering infantry who were lying round the wagons. The limit of their

flight seems to have been the wind of their horses, and most of them

never drew rein until they had placed many miles between themselves

and the comrades whom they had deserted. 'It was pitiable,' says an

eye-witness, 'to see the grand old General begging them to stop, but

they would not; a large body of them arrived in Kraaipan without firing

a shot,' It was a South African 'Battle of the Spurs.'

By this defection of the greater portion of the force the handful of

brave men who remained were left in a hopeless position. The two guns of

the 38th battery were overwhelmed and ridden over by the Boer horsemen,

every man being killed or wounded, including Lieutenant Nesham, who

acted up to the highest traditions of his corps.

The battle, however, was not yet over. The infantry were few in number,

but they were experienced troops, and they maintained the struggle

for some hours in the face of overwhelming numbers. Two hundred of the

Northumberland Fusiliers lay round the wagons and held the Boers off

from their prey. With them were the two remaining guns, which were

a mark for a thousand Boer riflemen. It was while encouraging by his

presence and example the much-tried gunners of this section that the

gallant Methuen was wounded by a bullet which broke the bone of his

thigh. Lieutenant Venning and all the detachment fell with their General

round the guns.

An attempt had been made to rally some of the flying troopers at a

neighbouring kraal, and a small body of Cape Police and Yeomanry under

the command of Major Paris held out there for some hours. A hundred of

the Lancashire Infantry aided them in their stout defence. But the guns

taken by the Boers from Von Donop's convoy had free play now that the

British guns were out of action, and they were brought to bear with

crushing effect upon both the kraal and the wagons. Further resistance

meant a useless slaughter, and orders were given for a surrender.

Convoy, ammunition, guns, horses--nothing was saved except the honour

of the infantry and the gunners. The losses, 68 killed and 121 wounded,

fell chiefly upon these two branches of the service. There were 205

unwounded prisoners.

This, the last Boer victory in the war, reflected equal credit upon

their valour and humanity, qualities which had not always gone hand in

hand in our experience of them. Courtesy and attention were extended to

the British wounded, and Lord Methuen was sent under charge of his chief

medical officer, Colonel Townsend (the doctor as severely wounded as the

patient), into Klerksdorp. In De la Rey we have always found an opponent

who was as chivalrous as he was formidable. The remainder of the force

reached the Kimberley to Mafeking railway line in the direction of

Kraaipan, the spot where the first bloodshed of the war had occurred

some twenty-nine months before.

On Lord Methuen himself no blame can rest for this unsuccessful action.

If the workman's tool snaps in his hand he cannot be held responsible

for the failure of his task. The troops who misbehaved were none of his

training. 'If you hear anyone slang him,' says one of his men, 'you are

to tell them that he is the finest General and the truest gentleman that

ever fought in this war.' Such was the tone of his own troopers, and

such also that of the spokesmen of the nation when they commented upon

the disaster in the Houses of Parliament. It was a fine example of

British justice and sense of fair play, even in that bitter moment, that

to hear his eulogy one would have thought that the occasion had been one

when thanks were being returned for a victory. It is a generous public

with fine instincts, and Paul Methuen, wounded and broken, still

remained in their eyes the heroic soldier and the chivalrous man of

honour.

The De Wet country had been pretty well cleared by the series of drives

which have already been described, and Louis Botha's force in the

Eastern Transvaal had been much diminished by the tactics of Bruce

Hamilton and Wools-Sampson. Lord Kitchener was able, therefore, to

concentrate his troops and his attention upon that wide-spread western

area in which General De la Rey had dealt two such shrewd blows within a

few weeks of each other. Troops were rapidly concentrated at Klerksdorp.

Kekewich, Walter Kitchener, Rawlinson, and Rochfort, with a number of

small columns, were ready in the third week of March to endeavour to

avenge Lord Methuen.

The problem with which Lord Kitchener was confronted was a very

difficult one, and he has never shown more originality and audacity than

in the fashion in which he handled it. De la Rey's force was scattered

over a long tract of country, capable of rapidly concentrating for a

blow, but otherwise as intangible and elusive as a phantom army. Were

Lord Kitchener simply to launch ten thousand horsemen at him, the result

would be a weary ride over illimitable plains without sight of a Boer,

unless it were a distant scout upon the extreme horizon. De la Rey and

his men would have slipped away to his northern hiding-places beyond the

Marico River. There was no solid obstacle here, as in the Orange River

Colony, against which the flying enemy could be rounded up. One line

of blockhouses there was, it is true--the one called the Schoonspruit

cordon, which flanked the De la Rey country. It flanked it, however,

upon the same side as that on which the troops were assembled. If the

troops were only on the other side, and De la Rey was between them and

the blockhouse line, then, indeed, something might be done. But to place

the troops there, and then bring them instantly back again, was to put

such a strain upon men and horses as had never yet been done upon a

large scale in the course of the war. Yet Lord Kitchener knew the

mettle of the men whom he commanded, and he was aware that there were

no exertions of which the human frame is capable which he might not

confidently demand.

The precise location of the Boer laagers does not appear to have been

known, but it was certain that a considerable number of them were

scattered about thirty miles or so to the west of Klerksdorp and the

Schoonspruit line. The plan was to march a British force right through

them, then spread out into a wide line and come straight back,

driving the burghers on to the cordon of blockhouses, which had been

strengthened by the arrival of three regiments of Highlanders. But to

get to the other side of the Boers it was necessary to march the columns

through by night. It was a hazardous operation, but the secret was well

kept, and the movement was so well carried out that the enemy had

no time to check it. On the night of Sunday, March 23rd, the British

horsemen passed stealthily in column through the De la Rey country, and

then, spreading out into a line, which from the left wing at Lichtenburg

to the right wing at Commando Drift measured a good eighty miles, they

proceeded to sweep back upon their traces. In order to reach their

positions the columns had, of course, started at different points of

the British blockhouse line, and some had a good deal farther to go

than others, while the southern extension of the line was formed by

Rochfort's troops, who had moved up from the Vaal. Above him from south

to north came Walter Kitchener, Rawlinson, and Kekewich in the order

named.

On the morning of Monday, March 24th, a line of eighty miles of

horsemen, without guns or transport, was sweeping back towards the

blockhouses, while the country between was filled with scattered parties

of Boers who were seeking for gaps by which to escape. It was soon

learned from the first prisoners that De la Rey was not within the

cordon. His laager had been some distance farther west. But the sight of

fugitive horsemen rising and dipping over the rolling veld assured

the British that they had something within their net. The catch was,

however, by no means as complete as might have been desired. Three

hundred men in khaki slipped through between the two columns in the

early morning. Another large party escaped to the southwards. Some of

the Boers adopted extraordinary devices in order to escape from

the ever-narrowing cordon. 'Three, in charge of some cattle, buried

themselves, and left a small hole to breathe through with a tube.

Some men began to probe with bayonets in the new-turned earth and got

immediate and vociferous subterranean yells. Another man tried the same

game and a horse stepped on him. He writhed and reared the horse, and

practically the horse found the prisoner for us.' But the operations

achieved one result, which must have lifted a load of anxiety from Lord

Kitchener's mind. Three fifteen-pounders, two pom-poms, and a large

amount of ammunition were taken. To Kekewich and the Scottish Horse

fell the honour of the capture, Colonel Wools-Sampson and Captain Rice

heading the charge and pursuit. By this means the constant menace to

the blockhouses was lessened, if not entirely removed. One hundred and

seventy-five Boers were disposed of, nearly all as prisoners, and a

considerable quantity of transport was captured. In this operation the

troops had averaged from seventy to eighty miles in twenty-six hours

without change of horses. To such a point had the slow-moving

ponderous British Army attained after two years' training of that stern

drill-master, necessity.

The operations had attained some success, but nothing commensurate with

the daring of the plan or the exertions of the soldiers. Without an

instant's delay, however, Lord Kitchener struck a second blow at his

enemy. Before the end of March Kekewich, Rawlinson, and Walter Kitchener

were all upon the trek once more. Their operations were pushed farther

to the west than in the last drive, since it was known that on that

occasion De la Rey and his main commando had been outside the cordon.

It was to one of Walter Kitchener's lieutenants that the honour fell to

come in direct contact with the main force of the burghers. This General

had moved out to a point about forty miles west of Klerksdorp. Forming

his laager there, he despatched Cookson on March 30th with seventeen

hundred men to work further westward in the direction of the Harts

River. Under Cookson's immediate command were the 2nd Canadian

Mounted Infantry, Damant's Horse, and four guns of the 7th R.F.A. His

lieutenant, Keir, commanded the 28th Mounted Infantry, the Artillery

Mounted Rifles, and 2nd Kitchener's Fighting Scouts. The force was well

mounted, and carried the minimum of baggage.

It was not long before this mobile force found itself within touch of

the enemy. The broad weal made by the passing of a convoy set them off

at full cry, and they were soon encouraged by the distant cloud of dust

which shrouded the Boer wagons. The advance guard of the column galloped

at the top of their speed for eight miles, and closed in upon the

convoy, but found themselves faced by an escort of five hundred Boers,

who fought a clever rearguard action, and covered their charge with

great skill. At the same time Cookson closed in upon his mounted

infantry, while on the other side De la Rey's main force fell back

in order to reinforce the escort. British and Boers were both riding

furiously to help their own comrades. The two forces were fairly face to

face.

Perceiving that he was in front of the whole Boer army, and knowing

that he might expect reinforcements, Cookson decided to act upon the

defensive. A position was rapidly taken up along the Brakspruit, and

preparations made to resist the impending attack. The line of defence

was roughly the line of the spruit, but for some reason, probably to

establish a cross fire, one advanced position was occupied upon either

flank. On the left flank was a farmhouse, which was held by two hundred

men of the Artillery Rifles. On the extreme right was another outpost of

twenty-four Canadians and forty-five Mounted Infantry. They occupied no

defensible position, and their situation was evidently a most dangerous

one, only to be justified by some strong military reason which is not

explained by any account of the action.

The Boer guns had opened fire, and considerable bodies of the enemy

appeared upon the flanks and in front. Their first efforts were devoted

towards getting possession of the farmhouse, which would give them

a point d'appui from which they could turn the whole line. Some five

hundred of them charged on horseback, but were met by a very steady fire

from the Artillery Rifles, while the guns raked them with shrapnel. They

reached a point within five hundred yards of the building, but the fire

was too hot, and they wheeled round in rapid retreat. Dismounting in

a mealie-patch they skirmished up towards the farmhouse once more, but

they were again checked by the fire of the defenders and by a pompom

which Colonel Keir had brought up. No progress whatever was made by the

attack in this quarter.

In the meantime the fate which might have been foretold had befallen

the isolated detachment of Canadians and 28th Mounted Infantry upon

the extreme right. Bruce Carruthers, the Canadian officer in command,

behaved with the utmost gallantry, and was splendidly seconded by his

men. Overwhelmed by vastly superior numbers, amid a perfect hail of

bullets they fought like heroes to the end. 'There have been few finer

instances of heroism in the course of the campaign,' says the reticent

Kitchener in his official despatch. Of the Canadians eighteen were hit

out of twenty-one, and the Mounted Infantry hard by lost thirty out of

forty-five before they surrendered.

This advantage gained upon the right flank was of no assistance to the

Boers in breaking the British line. The fact that it was so makes it

the more difficult to understand why this outpost was so exposed. The

burghers had practically surrounded Cookson's force, and De la Rey and

Kemp urged on the attack; but their artillery fire was dominated by

the British guns, and no weak point could be found in the defence. At 1

o'clock the attack had been begun, and at 5.30 it was finally abandoned,

and De la Rey was in full retreat. That he was in no sense routed is

shown by the fact that Cookson did not attempt to follow him up or to

capture his guns; but at least he had failed in his purpose, and had

lost more heavily than in any engagement which he had yet fought. The

moral effect of his previous victories had also been weakened, and his

burghers had learned, if they had illusions upon the subject, that the

men who fled at Tweebosch were not typical troopers of the British Army.

Altogether, it was a well-fought and useful action, though it cost the

British force some two hundred casualties, of which thirty-five were

fatal. Cookson's force stood to arms all night until the arrival of

Walter Kitchener's men in the morning.

General Ian Hamilton, who had acted for some time as Chief of the

Staff to Lord Kitchener, had arrived on April 8th at Klerksdorp to take

supreme command of the whole operations against De la Rey. Early in

April the three main British columns had made a rapid cast round without

success. To the very end the better intelligence and the higher mobility

seem to have remained upon the side of the Boers, who could always force

a fight when they wished and escape when they wished. Occasionally,

however, they forced one at the wrong time, as in the instance which I

am about to describe.

Hamilton had planned a drive to cover the southern portion of De la

Rey's country, and for this purpose, with Hartebeestefontein for his

centre, he was manoeuvring his columns so as to swing them into line

and then sweep back towards Klerksdorp. Kekewich, Rawlinson, and Walter

Kitchener were all manoeuvring for this purpose. The Boers, however,

game to the last, although they were aware that their leaders had

gone in to treat, and that peace was probably due within a few days,

determined to have one last gallant fall with a British column. The

forces of Kekewich were the farthest to the westward, and also, as the

burghers thought, the most isolated, and it was upon them, accordingly,

that the attack was made. In the morning of April 11th, at a place

called Rooiwal, the enemy, who had moved up from Wolmaranstad, nineteen

hundred strong, under Kemp and Vermaas, fell with the utmost impetuosity

upon the British column. There was no preliminary skirmishing, and

a single gallant charge by 1500 Boers both opened and ended the

engagement. 'I was just saying to the staff officer that there were no

Boers within twenty miles,' says one who was present, 'when we heard a

roar of musketry and saw a lot of men galloping down on us.' The British

were surprised but not shaken by this unexpected apparition. 'I never

saw a more splendid attack. They kept a distinct line,' says the

eye-witness. Another spectator says, 'They came on in one long line four

deep and knee to knee.' It was an old-fashioned cavalry charge, and

the fact that it got as far as it did shows that we have over rated the

stopping power of modern rifles. They came for a good five hundred yards

under direct fire, and were only turned within a hundred of the British

line. The Yeomanry, the Scottish Horse, and the Constabulary poured a

steady fire upon the advancing wave of horsemen, and the guns opened

with case at two hundred yards. The Boers were stopped, staggered, and

turned. Their fire, or rather the covering fire of those who had not

joined in the charge, had caused some fifty casualties, but their own

losses were very much more severe. The fierce Potgieter fell just in

front of the British guns. 'Thank goodness he is dead!' cried one of

his wounded burghers, 'for he sjamboked me into the firing line this

morning.' Fifty dead and a great number of wounded were left upon the

field of battle. Rawlinson's column came up on Kekewich's left, and the

Boer flight became a rout, for they were chased for twenty miles,

and their two guns were captured. It was a brisk and decisive little

engagement, and it closed the Western campaign, leaving the last trick,

as well as the game, to the credit of the British. From this time until

the end there was a gleaning of prisoners but little fighting in De

la Rey's country, the most noteworthy event being a surprise visit to

Schweizer-Renecke by Rochfort, by which some sixty prisoners were taken,

and afterwards the drive of Ian Hamilton's forces against the Mafeking

railway line by which no fewer than 364 prisoners were secured. In

this difficult and well-managed operation the gaps between the British

columns were concealed by the lighting of long veld-fires and the

discharge of rifles by scattered scouts. The newly arrived Australian

Commonwealth Regiments gave a brilliant start to the military history

of their united country by the energy of their marching and the

thoroughness of their entrenching.

Upon May 29th, only two days before the final declaration of peace,

a raid was made by a few Boers upon the native cattle reserves near

Fredericstad. A handful of horsemen pursued them, and were ambushed by a

considerable body of the enemy in some hilly country ten miles from

the British lines. Most of the pursuers got away in safety, but young

Sutherland, second lieutenant of the Seaforths, and only a few months

from Eton, found himself separated from his horse and in a hopeless

position. Scorning to surrender, the lad actually fought his way upon

foot for over a mile before he was shot down by the horsemen who circled

round him. Well might the Boer commander declare that in the whole

course of the war he had seen no finer example of British courage. It is

indeed sad that at this last instant a young life should be thrown

away, but Sutherland died in a noble fashion for a noble cause, and

many inglorious years would be a poor substitute for the example and

tradition which such a death will leave behind.

CHAPTER 39. THE END.

It only remains in one short chapter to narrate the progress of the

peace negotiations, the ultimate settlement, and the final consequences

of this long-drawn war. However disheartening the successive incidents

may have been in which the Boers were able to inflict heavy losses upon

us and to renew their supplies of arms and ammunition, it was none the

less certain that their numbers were waning and that the inevitable end

was steadily approaching. With mathematical precision the scientific

soldier in Pretoria, with his web of barbed wire radiating out over

the whole country, was week by week wearing them steadily down. And

yet after the recent victory of De la Rey and various braggadocio

pronouncements from the refugees at The Hague, it was somewhat of a

surprise to the British public when it was announced upon March 22nd

that the acting Government of the Transvaal, consisting of Messrs.

Schalk Burger, Lucas Meyer, Reitz, Jacoby, Krogh, and Van Velden had

come into Middelburg and requested to be forwarded by train to Pretoria

for the purpose of discussing terms of peace with Lord Kitchener. A

thrill of hope ran through the Empire at the news, but so doubtful did

the issue seem that none of the preparations were relaxed which would

ensure a vigorous campaign in the immediate future. In the South African

as in the Peninsular and in the Crimean wars, it may truly be said that

Great Britain was never so ready to fight as at the dawning of peace. At

least two years of failure and experience are needed to turn a civilian

and commercial nation into a military power.

In spite of the optimistic pronouncements of Mr. Fischer and the absurd

forecasts of Dr. Leyds the power of the Boers was really broken, and

they had come in with the genuine intention of surrender. In a race with

such individuality it was not enough that the government should form its

conclusion. It was necessary for them to persuade their burghers that

the game was really up, and that they had no choice but to throw down

their well-worn rifles and their ill-filled bandoliers. For this purpose

a long series of negotiations had to be entered into which put a strain

upon the complacency of the authorities in South Africa and upon the

patience of the attentive public at home. Their ultimate success

shows that this complacency and this patience were eminently the right

attitude to adopt.

On March 23rd the Transvaal representatives were despatched to Kroonstad

for the purpose of opening up the matter with Steyn and De Wet.

Messengers were sent to communicate with these two leaders, but had they

been British columns instead of fellow-countrymen they could not have

found greater difficulty in running them to earth. At last, however,

at the end of the month the message was conveyed, and resulted in the

appearance of De Wet, De la Rey, and Steyn at the British outposts at

Klerksdorp. The other delegates had come north again from Kroonstad, and

all were united in the same small town, which, by a whimsical fate,

had suddenly become the centre both for the making of peace and for the

prosecution of the war, with the eyes of the whole world fixed upon

its insignificant litter of houses. On April 11th, after repeated

conferences, both parties moved on to Pretoria, and the most sceptical

observers began to confess that there was something in the negotiations

after all. After conferring with Lord Kitchener the Boer leaders upon

April 18th left Pretoria again and rode out to the commandos to explain

the situation to them. The result of this mission was that two delegates

were chosen from each body in the field, who assembled at Vereeniging

upon May 15th for the purpose of settling the question by vote. Never

was a high matter of state decided in so democratic a fashion.

Up to that period the Boer leaders had made a succession of tentative

suggestions, each of which had been put aside by the British Government.

Their first had been that they should merely concede those points which

had been at issue at the beginning of the war. This was set aside.

The second was that they should be allowed to consult their friends in

Europe. This also was refused. The next was that an armistice should be

granted, but again Lord Kitchener was obdurate. A definite period was

suggested within which the burghers should make their final choice

between surrender and a war which must finally exterminate them as a

people. It was tacitly understood, if not definitely promised, that the

conditions which the British Government would be prepared to grant would

not differ much in essentials from those which had been refused by the

Boers a twelvemonth before, after the Middelburg interview.

On May 15th the Boer conference opened at Vereeniging. Sixty-four

delegates from the commandos met with the military and political chiefs

of the late republics, the whole amounting to 150 persons. A more

singular gathering has not met in our time. There was Botha, the young

lawyer, who had found himself by a strange turn of fate commanding a

victorious army in a great war. De Wet was there, with his grim mouth

and sun-browned face; De la Rey, also, with the grizzled beard and

the strong aquiline features. There, too, were the politicians, the

grey-bearded, genial Reitz, a little graver than when he looked upon

'the whole matter as an immense joke,' and the unfortunate Steyn,

stumbling and groping, a broken and ruined man. The burly Lucas Meyer,

smart young Smuts fresh from the siege of Ookiep, Beyers from the north,

Kemp the dashing cavalry leader, Muller the hero of many fights--all

these with many others of their sun-blackened, gaunt, hard-featured

comrades were grouped within the great tent of Vereeniging. The

discussions were heated and prolonged. But the logic of facts was

inexorable, and the cold still voice of common-sense had more power than

all the ravings of enthusiasts. The vote showed that the great majority

of the delegates were in favour of surrender upon the terms offered by

the British Government. On May 31st this resolution was notified to Lord

Kitchener, and at half-past ten of the same night the delegates arrived

at Pretoria and set their names to the treaty of peace. After two

years seven and a half months of hostilities the Dutch republics had

acquiesced in their own destruction, and the whole of South Africa,

from Cape Town to the Zambesi, had been added to the British Empire. The

great struggle had cost us twenty thousand lives and a hundred thousand

stricken men, with two hundred millions of money; but, apart from a

peaceful South Africa, it had won for us a national resuscitation of

spirit and a closer union with our great Colonies which could in no

other way have been attained. We had hoped that we were a solid empire

when we engaged in the struggle, but we knew that we were when we

emerged from it. In that change lies an ample recompense for all the

blood and treasure spent.

The following were in brief the terms of surrender:--

1. That the burghers lay down their arms and acknowledge themselves

subjects of Edward VII.

2. That all prisoners taking the oath of allegiance be returned.

3. That their liberty and property be inviolate.

4. That an amnesty be granted--save in special cases.

5. That the Dutch language be allowed in schools and law-courts.

6. That rifles be allowed if registered.

7. That self-government be granted as soon as possible.

8. That no franchise be granted for natives until after

self-government.

9. That no special land tax be levied.

10. That the people be helped to reoccupy the farms.

11. That 3,000,000 pounds be given to help the farmers.

12. That the rebels be disfranchised and their leaders tried, on

condition that no death penalty be inflicted.

These terms were practically the same as those which had been refused

by Botha in March 1901. Thirteen months of useless warfare had left the

situation as it was.

It had been a war of surprises, but the surprises have unhappily been

hitherto invariably unpleasant ones. Now at last the balance swung the

other way, for in all the long paradoxical history of South African

strife there is nothing more wonderful than the way in which these two

sturdy and unemotional races clasped hands the instant that the fight

was done. The fact is in itself a final answer to the ill-natured

critics of the Continent. Men do not so easily grasp a hand which is

reddened with the blood of women and children. From all parts as the

commandos came in there was welcome news of the fraternisation between

them and the soldiers; while the Boer leaders, as loyal to their new

ties as they had been to their old ones, exerted themselves to promote

good feeling among their people. A few weeks seemed to do more to lessen

racial bitterness than some of us had hoped for in as many years. One

can but pray that it will last.

The surrenders amounted in all to twenty thousand men, and showed that

in all parts of the seat of war the enemy had more men in the field than

we had imagined, a fact which may take the sting out of several of our

later mishaps. About twelve thousand surrendered in the Transvaal, six

thousand in the Orange River Colony, and about two thousand in the Cape

Colony, showing that the movement in the rebel districts had always been

more vexatious than formidable. A computation of the prisoners of war,

the surrenders, the mercenaries, and the casualties, shows that the

total forces to which we were opposed were certainly not fewer than

seventy-five thousand well-armed mounted men, while they may have

considerably exceeded that number. No wonder that the Boer leaders

showed great confidence at the outset of the war.

That the heavy losses caused us by the war were borne without a murmur

is surely evidence enough how deep was the conviction of the nation that

the war was not only just but essential--that the possession of South

Africa and the unity of the Empire were at stake. Could it be shown, or

were it even remotely possible, that ministers had incurred so immense a

responsibility and entailed such tremendous sacrifices upon their people

without adequate cause, is it not certain that, the task once done, an

explosion of rage from the deceived and the bereaved would have driven

them for ever from public life? Among high and low, in England, in

Scotland, in Ireland, in the great Colonies, how many high hopes

had been crushed, how often the soldier son had gone forth and never

returned, or come back maimed and stricken in the pride of his youth.

Everywhere was the voice of pity and sorrow, but nowhere that of

reproach. The deepest instincts of the nation told it that it must fight

and win, or for ever abdicate its position in the world. Through dark

days which brought out the virtues of our race as nothing has done in

our generation, we struggled grimly on until the light had fully broken

once again. And of all gifts that God has given to Britain there is none

to compare with those days of sorrow, for it was in them that the

nation was assured of its unity, and learned for all time that blood is

stronger to bind than salt water is to part. The only difference in the

point of view of the Briton from Britain and the Briton from the ends

of the earth, was that the latter with the energy of youth was more

whole-souled in the Imperial cause. Who has seen that Army and can

forget it--its spirit, its picturesqueness--above all, what it stands

for in the future history of the world? Cowboys from the vast plains of

the North-West, gentlemen who ride hard with the Quorn or the Belvoir,

gillies from the Sutherland deer-forests, bushmen from the back blocks

of Australia, exquisites of the Raleigh Club or the Bachelor's, hard men

from Ontario, dandy sportsmen from India and Ceylon, the horsemen of New

Zealand, the wiry South African irregulars--these are the Reserves whose

existence was chronicled in no Blue-book, and whose appearance came as a

shock to the pedant soldiers of the Continent who had sneered so long

at our little Army, since long years of peace have caused them to forget

its exploits. On the plains of South Africa, in common danger and in

common privation, the blood brotherhood of the Empire was sealed.

So much for the Empire. But what of South Africa? There in the end we

must reap as we sow. If we are worthy of the trust, it will be left to

us. If we are unworthy of it, it will be taken away. Kruger's downfall

should teach us that it is not rifles but Justice which is the

title-deed of a nation. The British flag under our best administrators

will mean clean government, honest laws, liberty and equality to all

men. So long as it continues to do so, we shall hold South Africa. When,

out of fear or out or greed, we fall from that ideal, we may know that

we are stricken with that disease which has killed every great empire

before us.