

# The Siege of Kimberley eBook

## The Siege of Kimberley

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## INTRODUCTION

The famous Ultimatum had gone forth to the world. War had come at last. We, in Kimberley, were in for it—though happily unconscious of our destiny until it was revealed by the gradations of time. Nothing awful was anticipated. The future was veiled. The knowledge of what was to come was brought home to us by a gradual process that kept us permanently sane. Dull Kimberley was to be enlivened in a manner that made us wish it were dull again. We felt it from the first—the sense of imprisonment—the deprivation of liberty. But that was all, we thought—all that we should be called to endure. Nobody could leave Kimberley for a little while; it was awkward, certainly; but nothing more. How long would the Siege last? “About a week” was a favoured illusion; until reflective minds put our period of probation at a fortnight. But the higher critics shook their heads, and added—another seven days. Three weeks was made the maximum by general, dogmatic consent. Nobody ventured beyond it; in fact, nobody dared to. Suspicion would be apt to fall upon the man who suggested a month. Feeling ran high, and as we all felt the limits of our confinement narrow enough already, we entertained no wish to have them made narrower still, by knocking our heads against the stone walls of the gaol. Not then. There came a time, alas! when we reflected with a sigh upon the probability of our rations being more regular and assured if we broke a window, or the law in some way, and gave ourselves up. For the nonce, however, three weeks would pass, and with them all our woes. The idea of eighteen weeks occurred to nobody; it would have been too farcical, too puerile. That starvation must have killed us long ere the period had fled, would have been our axiom, if it were pertinent to the issue, when the ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ of the situation were being eagerly discussed on the opening days of a Siege that was to send the fame of the Diamond City farther than ever did its diamonds. A few weeks would terminate the trouble; and if, in the interim, we ran short of trifles, like salt or pepper, well—we would bear it for sake of the Flag. Kimberley is a British stronghold, with a loyal population imbued with a fine sense of the invincibility of the British army. Many people were surprised to find that they could descant sincerely and patriotically upon the might and glories of the Empire. Even the Irish Nationalist seemed to feel that it took a nation upon whose territory the sun itself could not set to subjugate his native land; and he was moved to remind his Anglo-Saxon mates that the absent-minded beggars of the Emerald Isle had contributed to the promotion of daytime all night.

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The Diamond City was in certain respects well adapted to withstand a siege. The old residents delighted to call it a city. Newcomers, who had Continental ideas on the subject, inclined to think the term a misnomer, and a reflection upon Europe and America. But although its buildings were not high, nor its houses very majestic, Kimberley was a rich place, and a large place, with a good white population and a better coloured one. It had its theatre, and it had its Mayor. Arrogant greenhorns were soon made to cease winking when we talked of the “city”; for Kimberley was a city (after a fashion), and the most important centre in the Cape Colony. The young Uitlander (just out) who described it as “a funny place, dear mother; all the houses are made of tin, and all the dogs are called ‘voet sak,’” was more cynical than truthful.

The numerous debris heaps surrounding the city made excellent fortifications, and it was not surprising that the Boers put, and kept, on view the *better* part of their valour only, when from their own well-chosen positions they looked across at our clay Kopjes. To have attacked or taken Kimberley, they would have been obliged to traverse a flat, open country; and they have an intelligent antipathy to rash tactics of that sort, when fighting a foe numerically stronger than themselves. They were reputed to believe that Providence was on their side; it was even stated that their ardour to “rush” Kimberley knew no bounds, until it was cooled by the restraining influence of General Cronje. That astute leader, though fully cognisant of the virtues of his people, had a respect for “big battalions,” and thought that the virtue designated patience would best meet the necessities of the situation. Accordingly, he and his army, well primed with coffee, lay entrenched around Kimberley, in the fond hope of starving us into submission. Artillery of heavy calibre was utilised to enliven the process—with what result the world knows.

And how were we prepared to meet the attentions of this well-equipped and watchful enemy? We had a few seven-pound guns capable of hurling walnuts that cracked thousands of yards short of the Boer positions; and a Maxim or two, respected by the enemy, but easily steered clear of. Of what avail were these against the potent engines of destruction on the other side? And as for men; with great difficulty, and by dint of much pressure, the authorities had been persuaded to send us five hundred (of the North Lancashire Regiment, and Royal Engineers) under command of Colonel Kekewich (who constituted himself Czar, in the name of the Queen)—a small total with which to defend a city—“a large, straggling city, thirteen miles in circumference,” as Lord Roberts subsequently observed, that he could hardly have thought it possible to defend so long and so successfully with the forces at our command, that is to say, with five thousand men; for such was the strength of the garrison when the shop boys, the clerks, the merchants, and the artisans had stepped into the gap with their rifles.



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In anticipation of trouble, a Town Guard had already been formed when the Federal forces invaded the Cape. The noisy and discordant hooters of the mines were to signal the approach of the foe, and to intimate to the members of the Guard that they were to proceed to the redoubts of their respective Sections to prepare a greeting. Over at the Sanatorium, facing the suburb of Beaconsfield, the movements of the enemy were being closely watched. A conning tower soared high above the De Beers mine, from which coign of vantage a keen eye swept the horizon for signs of their advance. At the Reservoir, a look-out was on the *qui vive*. The Infantry were encamped in a central position, ready for instant despatch to wherever their services might be needed most. The Kimberley Regiment of Volunteers had turned out—to a man—for Active Service. War was certain; its dogs, indeed, were already loosed. The Boers, by way of preliminary, had been cutting telegraph wires, tearing up rails, blowing up culverts, and had taken possession of an armoured train at Kraaipan. Our defences were being strengthened on all sides. The enemy appeared to be massing in the vicinity of Scholtz's Nek. Such was the condition of things on the fourteenth of October (1899). Next day (Sunday) the siege of Kimberley had begun.

## THE SIEGE OF KIMBERLEY

### ITS HUMOROUS AND SOCIAL SIDE

## CHAPTER I

*Week ending 21st October, 1899*

The news relative to the tearing up of the railway line, and the cutting of the telegraph wires at Spytfontein, spread fast and freely on Sunday morning. Rather by good luck than good management there happened to be an armoured train lying at the railway station, and into it, with a promptitude that augured well for his popularity, the Colonel ordered a number of his men. The train had not proceeded far when it was discovered that the rails had been displaced at points nearer home than Spytfontein. They were soon relaid, however, by the Royal Engineers, and the train in due course reached its destination. A number of residents in the neighbourhood were taken on board for conveyance to the beleagured city. These included the local stationmaster, whose services were not likely to be in demand for some weeks,—three as we conceived it. It shortly became evident that there were Boers in the vicinity who had been watching the progress of operations, and had deemed it prudent to sing dumb until the train made a move for Tiome. They then opened fire and hurled several shells at it; but though a carriage was struck by the fragments, no serious damage resulted. In appreciation of the compliment, the invisible soldiers sent back a disconcerting volley, which led, as excess of gratitude often does, to some confusion. It proved, indeed, to be a kindness

that killed one burgher and wounded half-a-dozen. The armoured train steamed back to Kimberley in triumph.



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Meanwhile the excitement in town was great. The situation, in all its bearings, was being eagerly discussed by gesticulating groups of men and women. Intelligence arrived that the enemy had cut off our water supply; and the public were commanded to use what remained in the reservoir with circumspection, and for domestic purposes only. The public became duly alarmed, and just retained sufficient presence of mind to take a drought by the forelock, by filling their buckets, crocks, and cooking utensils with water. It was one of many little contingencies that had not been bargained for; the idea of water evaporating while there was yet tea to brew with it was both ridiculous and appalling. But there was not much danger of such a calamity; the reservoir was yet half full, and when it was empty, ways and means could be devised—with the permission of De Beers—to fill the tea-pots. The ladies were reassured.

Huge posters, proclaiming Martial Law, adorned the dead walls, and were being eagerly scanned by the populace. The publicans of the town had been noting events with the composure of men who had already made their “piles”; but they were, nevertheless, smitten with sudden fury when they read that all bars and canteens were to be shuttered each evening at nine o’clock. They showered anathema upon the Colonel, and gave expression to opinions of his administrative capacity which were at variance with the views of people outside the “trade.” Pedestrians were warned against walking out *before* six in the morning, or *after* nine in the evening—under pain of a heavy penalty. All persons not enrolled in the defence forces, the proclamation went on to say, were to deliver up whatever arms and ammunition they possessed. This was an article of much significance and importance. We had in our midst a number of people, enjoying the rights and privileges of British subjects, whose “loyalty,” in the minds of the authorities, was an uncertain quantity. Their sympathy with the Boers was natural enough; but it was at the same time too deep—in the eyes of Martial Lawyers—to be compatible with the duty due to the Queen. A house to house visit was inaugurated by the police—the sequel to which was the lodgment of some twenty persons within the solid masonry of the gaol. The most prominent of the prisoners was one employed as a guard in the mines. De Beers had always been credited with a desire to observe strict impartiality in their choice of servants, and the prisoner had hit upon a curious way of demonstrating his appreciation of such a policy. Ever since they had learned to handle an assegai the pugnacious natives shut up in the compounds had been spoiling for a fight; and, having heard of the Ultimatum, they were just then particularly restless, and keen on expediting a Waterloo. The obliging guard had thrown open the gates to gratify the “niggers”—on condition that British heads *only* were to be hit! The natives itched to hit somebody, and could not afford to let slip so good a chance by dilly-dallying over details. They agreed to the terms; but were fortunately herded together again before they could strike a blow. It may have been only a slip of the tongue on the guard’s part; but the canons of martial law held such “slips” to be unpardonable. The one in question lost a man his liberty for two years, and his billet for ever.



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The public were enjoined to hold no communication with the enemy, and to give them no direct nor indirect assistance. Finally, the proclamation informed us, a Court of Summary Jurisdiction had been established, armed with power and authority to hang traitors until they were dead; to confiscate their property; to lash them (when they escaped death); and even to deal severely with Imperial persons who failed to comply with the various regulations set forth in the plain English of one who had the advantage of being only a *Martial* lawyer.

It was not until eleven o'clock—during the hours of Divine Service—that the hundred thousand ears adorning the anatomy of the human population were first shocked by the horrisonous banshee wail of the hooters. The music was awe-inspiring, and ineffably weird. It seemed to portend the cries of the dying; and it was small wonder that the people subsequently endeavoured—as they did successfully—to have a more tuneful instrument employed. The immediate effect of the alarm was to send members of the Town Guard running from their respective homes and churches to the Town Hall, and thence, in orderly squads of four, with grim and stern faces, to the redoubts. Non-combatants, in compliance with the proclamation, went reluctantly to their houses. Tram-loads of scared women and nonchalant babies were hurried in from Beaconsfield. The streets were soon deserted. There was no panic; but many a poor woman felt that the life of a husband, a father, a lover, or a brother was in jeopardy, and many a fervent prayer went up to heaven.

The battle, however, did not begin. Large commandoes of Boers had been seen hovering about, and by boastful display had given us the impression that they purposed attacking the city. It was merely display; the wily Boer did not yet mean business. He eventually betook himself to coffee as a more profitable way of spending the afternoon. Late in the evening the Town Guard entertained some similar ideas with respect to tea, and were permitted to go home and drink it there.

Next morning, the armoured train was out early; but the Boers discreetly connived at its effrontery—having, doubtless, still in their minds unpleasant recollections of its volley-firing. At Modder river, twenty miles away, the enemy, it was said, were making prisoners of inoffensive persons, and blowing up the bridge. Bridges seem to have been their pet aversions everywhere. At Slipklip one was blown sky-high; and artistic skill was displayed in the picturesque wreck that was made of Windsorton Road Station.

The town, preparing for anything that might happen, presented a scene of bustle and confusion. What with strengthening and extending the defence works, levelling native locations (which might possibly prove advantageous to the Boers as a cover), and finding new homes for the evicted, Kimberley looked a stirring place—though train and telegraph services were suspended.

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The ranks of the Town Guard were being augmented daily; fresh men were coming up in batches to be “sworn in.” There was no medical examination, nor any such bother. Anybody in trousers was eligible for a hat, a bandolier, and a rifle; and lads in their teens affected one-and-twenty with the *sang froid* of one-and-forty. Camp life, and, mayhap, a little fighting, would be a novelty—for three weeks. Certain employers were at first disposed to keep their employees exclusively to the work they engaged them to perform; but the most obtuse among the captains of industry were soon made to realise that such an attitude, if persisted in, would scarcely pay. This truth was brought home to them so forcibly that they forthwith developed the fighting spirit, and became the most blood-thirsty entities in, the service of the Queen. All were needed, and When afterwards a merchant found himself “officered” by his *factotum*, he enjoyed (after a fleeting spasm); the humour of the revolution as much as anybody.

The manner in which the drills were muddled through at the beginning was primitive and amusing. The agony depicted on the faces of the “raw”; the *hauteur* of the seasoned campaigner; the blunders of the clerks; the leggings of the lieutenants: made spectators risk martial law and laugh in the face of it. Ever and anon, the butt of a rifle would come in contact with some head other than that of him who carried the gun, and the victim—not the assailant—would be sharply reprimanded for omitting to “stand at ease.” The marching and the turning movements were comical, too; but practice did much to make perfect the amateur soldiers in mufti. They, naturally, desired a little target practice. With many of them experience in the use of arms had been limited to a snowball, a pop-gun, or a bird-sling; and they were not only dubious of their marksmanship, but fearful that their rifles in the rough and tumble of war’s realities would “kick” to pieces their ’prentice shoulders. The authorities, however, could not allow ammunition to be wasted; it might all be needed for actual warfare. This only tended to make the men anxious to try conclusions with the Boers—or, better still, the foreign officers who, it was supposed, directed operations “from behind, when there was any fighting,” like the Duke of Plaza Tora in the play.

The De Beers Corporation continued with untiring energy to do what in them lay for the further protection of the town, and on Monday offered to provide the military with a thousand horses. The offer was gladly accepted. It was decided to form a mounted corps of men who could ride well and shoot straight. We had a good few denizens of the Rand in our midst, and there was no difficulty in finding men proficient in both accomplishments to place on the backs of the horses. There came into being, accordingly, the famous Kimberley Light Horse—a corps destined to play an heroic, a tragic part in defence of the

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Diamond City. To the refugee the pay was convenient, the work bracing and congenial, and the prospect of “potting a Boer” not at all bad. With the Light Horse were soon to be associated some hundreds of the Cape Police (who came in from Fourteen Streams); and the combined forces inflicted considerable damage, and were a perennial source of irritation to the enemy all through. De Beers came out strong in another direction by heading the list of subscriptions to a Refugee fund which had been opened. The amount subscribed ran up to four figures. Much distress prevailed, and the Refugee committee set about distributing the fund to the best advantage. The ladies came out strong here, and gave yeomen service—scooping out flour, meal, tea, and sugar to the needy, and in sifting and rejecting, with rare acumen, the bogus claims of the “Heaps” who affected humble poverty.

The Summary Commission sat for the first time, and with a courageous disregard for the despotism of red tape, proceeded to business. The first case called was that of one, Pretorius, whose open and vehement condemnation of the war, and the policy that led to it, had rendered him an object of suspicion. A search of his house had resulted in the discovery of a revolver and two rifles, with ammunition to suit all three. The Proclamation had been very clear as to the seriousness; of this offence, and the penalty it entailed. The Court pronounced the accused guilty, and sentenced him to six months' imprisonment. The cases of minor offenders were postponed, and some of the prisoners awaiting trial were released on bail. The fate of Pretorius was paraded by mischief-makers as something which had produced a salutary effect in the Dutch element at large. It induced them to cultivate a remarkable reticence; but reticence is not essentially a product of good government.

On Wednesday, the Boers—in so far as their demeanour could be gauged from a distance—betrayed a tendency to wax indignant with us and our determination to fight. Large numbers of them perambulated to and fro, keeping nicely out of rifle range. A section of the Town Guard went out to the Intermediate Pumping Station, and sought to entice them into battle; but they were not to be drawn. The Beaconsfield Town Guard was afterwards deputed to try its powers of persuasion—to no purpose. The armoured train was finally resorted to as a decoy; but beyond eyeing it from a distance—and if looks could smash, it would have been reduced to small pieces—the Boers made no attempt to catch it. So far from being lured or wheedled by us, they rather conveyed by their wariness that green had no place in their eyes.



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A copy of a Boer proclamation, which had been wafted into Kimberley by a cynical breeze, gave rise to much astonishment and criticism. In substance, it presented the Transvaalers with all territory north of the Vaal river; the Free Staters with the Cape Colony; and the British with—the sea! The Colonel read and appreciated the excellence of the joke, but thought it politic to give people who lacked a sense of humour a little illumination. He, accordingly, issued a counter-proclamation which made the “point” of the other clear: it was not to be taken seriously. The British element, which largely predominated, found scope for their humour in the Boer proclamation; that the enemy should limit his pretensions to portions of a single continent was surprising. *Punch* subsequently published a cartoon which represented President Steyn artistically painting all territory south of the Equator a pleasing Orange hue. Oom Paul, looking on in dismay, enquires: “Where do I come in?” “Oh,” Steyn replies airily, “there is the rest of the British Empire.”

But to return to the proclamations. Colonel Kekewich had yet another to draft; the conduct of the natives compelled it. Many of the aborigines were addicted to drinking more than was good for them of a species of brandy—a fiery concoction, with a “body” in it, called Cape Smoke. They staggered through the streets, rolled their eyes, flourished big sticks, and sang songs of Kafirland in a key that did not make for harmony. So the Colonel reasoned that he might as well write out another proclamation while he was about it, and had pen and ink convenient. He restricted the sale of “smoke,” and decreed that all Kafir bars and canteens were to remain open between the hours of ten and four o’clock only. He also provided for the imposition of heavy penalties upon all and sundry who dared to disobey.

The bar-keepers, it need hardly be said, were angry; it was going rather too far, they thought. Was it the province of a military man to advocate, still less to enforce, temperance? Had not the “black” an “equal right” to quench his thirst? The canteen-men thought so; some of them, indeed, were sure of it, and went so far as to defy “despot sway,” by ignoring it. They continued ministering to the needs of the horny-handed sons of toil. But the police—miserable time-servers—*would* do their duty; they were forced to uphold the Colonel’s law, and to requisition the services of the celebrated local “trappers.” The rebel Bonifaces were thus duly indicted, arraigned before the Summary Court, and heavily fined or deprived of their licenses.

The death of a sergeant of the Diamond Fields’ Artillery threw a gloom over the city. He was mourned for as one who, indirectly, had sacrificed his life in defence of Kimberley. It was our first casualty; and made us wonder how many more there were to be—or rather, if there were to be any more.

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Friday came, and with it came two English prisoners who had made good their escape from the Boers. Their story was interesting. They carried Martini-Henry rifles, but (as they explained) given a choice in the selection, would have chosen Mausers. Their friends, the enemy, had presented them with the weapons—conditionally; all they had asked in return was that the recipients should join the Republican ranks. The Englishmen scratched their heads, hesitated about striking a bargain, and were promptly commandeered. They determined, however, to get the best of the bargain at last; they escaped; and here they were in our midst, easing their consciences with expressions of their intention to restore the rifles to their rightful owners when the war was over, and as much of the ammunition as possible, on the instalment plan, while it lasted.

They had heard pitiful tales of the straits to which we had been reduced. Imaginative natives had assured them that there was “no more Kimberley”; the “fall” of Mafeking, forsooth, had staggered us so much that we did not want to fight. We were in our last gasps for a drop of water. Terrible guns were being wheeled to the diamond fields, to scatter it to the four winds of heaven. The diamonds were first to be blown out of the mines, and with them the local “imaginative” shareholders; while the *Verkleur* was to be unfurled Over the City Hall. All the perishable property was to be confiscated, and consumed as a sort of foretaste of what was due to the proud invaders’ valour. Such was the romance dinned into the ears of our visitors. Happily, they made allowances for Bantu palsy, and did not hesitate to ignore it.

Saturday proved altogether uneventful, and prolific in nothing but outrageous lies. One item of news, however, was but too true: the good folk of Windsorton had surrendered to the Boers. Intelligence of a more agreeable nature followed soon after. Cronje’s repulse at Mafeking, and the British victory at Glencoe, made us hopeful at the end of a week, the beginning of which had looked so ominous; and nearly all things were to our satisfaction on Saturday night when the third part of our “time” had formally expired.

## CHAPTER II

*Week ending 28th October, 1899*

After a hard and anxious week, Sunday was indeed a day of rest. We enjoyed it because we felt instinctively that an enemy who sincerely believed that Providence was necessarily on his side, would leave us unmolested on the Sabbath. We were therefore justified in feeling a sense of immunity from stray shells and bullets. We enjoyed the day, too, because it gave us time and opportunity to look about us; to make a general inspection; and to pronounce the arrangements for the city’s defence satisfactory. The volunteer forces had assumed gratifying proportions, and their eyes were all “right.” Walls and buildings on the outskirts of the town, which

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might serve as a cover for the invader—in the improbable event of his drawing so near—or that might stand within the zone of our gun-fire, had been ruthlessly levelled to the ground. A high barbed wire fence surrounded the various camps, and the vigilant piquet had orders to shoot down anybody who attempted to cross it. Every imaginable precaution had been taken to hold the fort at all costs. The rumour-monger had formally made his *debut*, and was busy drawing upon the reservoirs of his excellent imagination, and disseminating information gathered from a mystic source known only to himself. He knew the exact day and hour of the entrance into Kimberley of the British troops; he could detail their plans to the letter, and a lot more than anybody else (including the British troops) concerning them. The rumour-monger became a character, a siege character, an adventitious celebrity, destined to receive attention from a facetious press and the tongues of men. So the day passed, with plenty to encourage, plenty to talk and laugh about, plenty to predict about, plenty to see and hear, and as yet, thank goodness, plenty to eat and drink.

Early on Monday morning, a mounted detachment, accompanied by the armoured train and two hundred men of the Lancashire Regiment, went forth to reconnoitre. The procession was an imposing one; at least the Boers encamped at Scholtz's Nek appeared to think so; they made no attempt to interfere with it, and thus debarred the procession from interfering with them.

But meanwhile domestic concerns were getting serious, and absorbing the minds of the people. The grocers of Kimberley are a respectable and, in the aggregate, a public-spirited body of citizens; they are men of substance; most honourable; most humane, too; and, as events were to show, most human. With fine foresight they detected in the conflagration of patriotism which consumed the consumer, a chance of bettering themselves. Having a constitutional right to do it, they took this tide in their affairs at what they (rather hastily) conceived to be its flood. Actuated by motives of the new ("enlightened") self-interest, they had proceeded to run up the prices of their goods by nice and easy gradations of from ten to twenty, thence to fifty, and were well on their way to a hundred, per cent., when a thunderbolt, an unexpected projectile, smashed the ring. It was a pity, in a way, for the process of welding the ring, so to speak, had been carried out with admirable skill. Rich folk, whose balances at the bank ran into six, and seven, figures, had commenced operations; they were buying up supplies of all and sundry, and hanging the expense. People with a thousand or two were nowhere in the aristocratic rush, and they waxed indignant; they could buy a quantity of provisions, to be sure; but semi-millionaires could buy so much more—a shop or two, perchance. Thus it was that the "comfortable classes" deemed it their duty to protest. And right royally



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did the common people, who had only the sweat of their brows, join in the protest. The public, in fine, were thoroughly roused, and denounced in unmeasured terms the conduct and the “enterprise” of the grocers. The women were much alarmed; they collected together in wrathful groups to enquire where the matter was to end, and with peculiar unanimity, not to say satisfaction, to prophesy a revolution. This bound in the cost of living brought us nearer to a state of panic than ever did the sharp practice of the Boer artillery. The Colonel heard of it—what did he not hear? Deputations waited on him; his intervention was solicited; he agreed to intervene. And then came a splendid exhibition of the autocracy of Martial Law. We had not yet seen all that it could do (far from it!), and it was a pleasure, in the circumstances, to see the Colonel put his foot down, since the step was highly approved and ratified by the people.

Forth from Lennox Street, accordingly, another popular proclamation was launched, A whole page of our local newspaper was commandeered for its insertion. By virtue of the powers reposed in him, Colonel Kekewich fixed the prices to be charged for “necessaries,” such as tea, sugar, coffee, meat (the butchers also had been brushing up their Shakespeare). Goods were to be sold practically at ordinary rates; and if any storekeeper charged more, or affected to be “sold out” of this, that, or the other, the Colonel was to be told, and he would talk to the storekeeper. There followed, of course, a grand slump. The combination of the “upper” and “lower” middle-classes was irresistible. The Commanding-Officer’s prompt action was highly esteemed, and even those who afterwards inveighed against him most severely (for other actions) never denied him credit for it.

Paraffin oil is worthy of special mention. Coal not being much in evidence in the diamond fields—where the sun is ever shining with all its might—paraffin was an important factor in the culinary sphere. When, therefore, a few gentlemen formed a syndicate, to vaunt their loyalty in a crisis by cornering all the kerosene in town, another outcry followed. They bought all they could lay hands on at market price (sixteen and six per case), and next day imperturbably continued buying at twenty-five shillings. On Tuesday the wide-awake vendors asked fifty shillings, and were paid it cheerfully. Another sovereign was added to each case of what remained on Wednesday, and the seventy shillings was put down without a murmur. How much farther the bidding would have gone will never be known, for a vicious little bird must needs tell the Colonel all about it. That gentleman happened to be engaged in his favourite (proclaiming) pastime; he sat ruminating on the high price of coal, and evolving schemes to bring wood back to its proper level. The latter article was what the poorer classes used as fuel. The Colonel had no scruples about dotting down a reasonable figure for coal; but



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wood was new to him; he sympathised with the woodman, yet could not spare the tree. Water (sold in casks) had evinced propensities to bubble over, and to prevent consequent waste it was necessary to make it simmer down to its normal tepidity. Having settled these little difficulties, the worried autocrat was about to affix his signature to the magic manuscript, when the little feathered informer alighted on his shoulder and warbled "*wacht-een-beitje*, what price oil?" The Colonel had no hesitation in pouring it on troubled waters, by making eighteen shillings the maximum charge per case.

What the feelings of the syndicate were is not recorded. There was only one thing certain, the deal was not a profitable thing—for the *buyers*. Rumour had it that one gentleman, "with a pigtail," had paid fifty shillings each for two hundred cases. The story was false—rumour is never quite right; the man wore no pigtail. A Celestial speculator indeed he was, but he had long since discarded, if he had ever sported, his national plait.

The afternoon brought a fight—a fight at last. Nothing less sensational could explain the wave of excitement that set men, women, and children struggling in a wild scramble for the debris heaps, which commanded a view of the match. Yes; a battle at last, was the cry on all sides,—varied with divers witticisms *apropos* of the "beans" the Boers were sure to be given. The military critic, perched high above everybody else, held his glass to his eye, giving expression the while to a paradoxical longing to be "blind," *etc.* He criticised, candidly, the tactics displayed by both sides—but this chapter would never be finished if I reproduced, in their entirety, the banalities of the military critic.

The railway line had been torn up again, and a patrol of mounted men under the command of Colonel Scott-Turner had been out since early morning to superintend repairs. The repairs were soon effected, and after the patrol had rested at Macfarlane's Farm it meandered in the direction of Riverton. A large body of the enemy shortly became visible to the right of Riverton, and after a little seductive manoeuvring on the part of Turner's men, they were drawn within range of Turner's rifles. The rifles went off; a few Boers toppled from their horses, while the rest drew rein and rode back at a goodly speed. Reinforcements, however, were galloping to their assistance, and soon a lively duel was in full swing. Colonel Kekewich, who was an interested spectator away back on the conning tower, thought he detected a movement on the enemy's part to surround Turner; and to frustrate this design, he forthwith despatched a "loaded" armoured train. The maxims (in the armoured train) came into play, and spread confusion in the Boer ranks. Their Commandant was killed and left behind on the field. The rifle duel was maintained with dogged perseverance on both sides for some time afterwards.



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We were not without losses—three men having been killed and nineteen wounded. The enemy's casualties were estimated to be thirty. Our men had conducted themselves throughout with conspicuous courage and coolness, though many of them were quite new to the game of war. To the Boer, too, a meed of praise is due; for, contrary to popular tradition, he could—and did—fight a good fight on the open veld. Turner's force returned to the city, well satisfied with their first brush with the enemy. The news which appeared in a special edition of the *Diamond Fields' Advertiser*, relative to the successful dash of Atkins at Elandslaagte (Natal), added to the enthusiasm that prevailed during the evening; and made optimists—there were no pessimists—more sanguine than ever in regard to the speedy capitulation of the Boers.

Our men, on Thursday, patrolled in different directions—alert for a second encounter, if the fates were propitious. But the foe declined to oblige; he lay low all day, presumably imbibing coffee. In the afternoon, heavy rains, which made piquet duty none too pleasant, came down in torrents. Tents had just been pitched at our redoubts in the nick of time. The three men killed on Tuesday were buried with military honours. The funeral was large—the Colonel, his staff, and several sections of the Town Guard marching in processional order.

Meanwhile a detachment of the Cape Police were endeavouring, with all due prudence, to lure the Boers into battle. But they did not succeed. It was advanced as an explanation of this singular inactivity that the nerves of the enemy were shattered—since Tuesday. It was rumoured, too, that a number of our “friends” had gone off on a recuperating pilgrimage to Windsorton and Klipdam—two villages which had been taken without the waste of a cartridge and placed under the *Verkleur*. Looting operations, it was said, were being carried out on an extensive scale, and property was being destroyed. Such was the local estimate of Boer shortcomings—based on flimsy data, or no data at all. In Kimberley, we only laughed at looting, and if the Boers effected an entrance we had no objection to the exercise of their talent for vandalism. We *said* so; because we were profoundly confident of our collective capacity to keep them *out*. Cynicism was the fashion. There was so much to say on the great topic, and so little to read about it. The evenings seemed so long; at half-past five, when the shops were closed, it appeared to be much later. Nice people exchanged visits as usual, albeit they had to be home at the disgustingly rural hour of nine o'clock, sharp. It was amusing sometimes to watch the abnormal strides of fat men and women, and to see them dodging the night patrol when they had to do a ten minutes' walk in five. The patrol was not a policeman. Oh, dear, no; he was far more stern, and had banished his politeness for three weeks. If at nine-fifteen you wished



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to be directed to Jones Street, you would be shown the way to the gaol instead. No explanations would be accepted, no protests heeded, no excuses listened to; no consideration for persons, no bank-balance however huge, would soften the inflexible patrol. "I did not read the proclamation," would not do; you must have heard of it. You might swear you had not, or *at* the insulting sceptic, but he would neither yield nor apologise. He was always armed with a rifle, and accompanied by three or four men with ammunition. It was a common experience with us to wake up during the night and list to the same old hackneyed dialogue. "Halt!" in a voice of thunder, "who goes there?" "A friend," would be the invariable response, the tone, pitch, and temper of which would be regulated by the "pass" the friend had or had *not* in his pocket. "Advance, friend, and give the countersign," Excited families would by this time have their heads thrust through the windows to watch the *denouement*. Satisfactory explanations would generally follow the final command; but occasionally a babel of recrimination would ensue, and become gradually indistinct as the poor law-breaker was hustled off to prison.

The people, for the most part, sat on their steps, discussing the events of the day, the paucity of news, the doings of the army, the destruction of the Republics and the probability of its easy accomplishment by Christmas (1899). They would break off now and then with a reference to the activity of the searchlight. The searchlight was of powerful calibre and shed a brilliant radiance which, revolving, illuminated the surrounding country. Needless to say, it shone all night; a surprise visit from the Boers was out of the question. We felt light-hearted on Saturday, and profoundly satisfied, that we were too intrepid for the enemy. Our patrols kept vainly seeking to provoke a quarrel. At the camps the "Death of Nelson," and "comic" melodies not less doleful, were rendered with much feeling. At the hospital, the wounded were doing well, and one man was quite himself again. They were extremely well tended, and thanks to public solicitude, were the recipients of countless delicacies, including *bottled* cheer.

Thus two weeks were over—well over, it was affirmed. Alas! we had another sixteen to put behind us; but no; nonsense! what am I saying? Even the wags, and everyone was inclined to be waggish in the first great fortnight of faith, never put the number higher than eight, lest their jokes should lose point or their wit its subtlety.

### CHAPTER III

*Week ending 4th November, 1899*

The day of opportunity for reflection was with us again, and since so little occasion for action presented itself we talked about war in peace. The man in the street—omniscient being!—discussed it threadbare on the pavement. A man who knew the



Boers was the man in the street. He knew the British army, too, though; and was sanguine of its ability to go one better—the shrewdness of which view was loudly applauded. And he really did much to make morbid people easy, and to lighten the burden of weak minds. The man in the street was respected. It was deemed a privilege to chat on the situation with this exalted personage, whom it took a rare and great occasion to make.



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On the Stoep, after dinner, the history of the 'eighty-one struggle was reviewed and punctuated with commentaries on the character of Mr. Gladstone. The probable date of the relief column's arrival was settled, and the consequent discomfiture of the enemy laughed at. The talk was all of war. The children on their way from Sunday school halted the passer-by to enquire "who goes there"; they formed fours, stood at ease, and shouldered sticks enthusiastically. The natives shut up in the compounds eulogised the sword in their own jargon; they were filled with ambition to lend an assegai in the fray, and to have a cut at the people who treated them as children—with the sjambok!

It was remarkable the unanimity of opinion which obtained among Kimberley men at the beginning of the campaign with reference to the attitude of the Free State. They were in the first place convinced that war was certain, inevitable, unavoidable; Great Britain would enforce her demands, and the Boers would "never" give way to them. So much was agreed. But the idea of the Free State joining hands with the Transvaal—to stand or fall with it—was ridiculed as a monstrous proposition. England had no quarrel with the Free Staters, and they were not such "thundering fools" as to pick one with England, or to be influenced by shibboleths bearing on the relative thicknesses of blood and water. When, however, we learned how very much mistaken folks may be, the "villainy" of President Steyn was—rather overstated, and the continued independence of his country pronounced an impossibility.

This was all very well; but it involved some inconsistency, in that we had veered round to the belief that the Transvaal would never have faced the music *alone*, and without the aid of the neighbouring State! That is to say: war was certain from the beginning; the Free Staters were equally certain to be neutral; but since they were not neutral, responsibility for the war was theirs, and theirs *only*. Perhaps it was; but how was the view to be reconciled with our previous positiveness to the contrary? As a fact, few were conscious of any weakness in their way of laying down the law, and *they* (tacitly) admitted their fallibility.

On Monday the enemy betrayed signs of activity in the building of a redoubt opposite the Premier Mine. This was disappointing; it looked as if the purpose was to place a gun in the redoubt—to shy shells at the Premier. A special edition of the *Diamond Fields' Advertiser* lent colour to the assumption. The Boers, the special stated, had a gun fixed up at Mafeking, and had actually trained it on that town. The shells, we were assured, had not burst; but (flying) they could hit a man in the head, we thought. Whence they (the Boers) got the gun was a puzzle to not a few; and how they managed to make it "speak" was beyond the comprehension of others. "They might have another gun," these people exclaimed in horror! They might indeed; the question soon ceased to be one of speculation, for when a body of the Light Horse attempted to cross the Free State border, the boom of "another gun" was unmistakably real. Shell after shell was burlled at the Light Horse; none of them were hit, and not having bothered bringing artillery with them, they were unable to retaliate.



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Later in the day an express rider made his way through the Boer lines. The most interesting news he was able to impart was summed up in the Proclamation he carried in his pocket. It bore reference to the prohibition by the Governor of the sale of arms and ammunition throughout the Cape Colony. It was feared that the Afrianders might buy the goods and throw them across the border; it had been done. But information in disproof of this was forthcoming when the story reached us that a number of the Cape Dutch had risen in rebellion and needed the weapons for themselves! Kimberley's voice at once favoured the extreme penalty—death for high treason! Even moderate men, who allowed for racial sympathies, held that neutrality was in the circumstances the proper attitude to assume. But the local extremist—and he was the man of the hour—argued that the object of the rebels was to sweep the English into the sea, and to make Africa the exclusive privilege of the Afriander. In the evening, a terrific explosion was heard; a dynamite magazine had been blown up at Dronfield. It was stated that some people went up along with it; but that part of the story has yet to be verified.

All this made Wednesday an interesting day, but the gallant Colonel had yet to crown it with his quota. Having previously omitted to fix a charge for meal and flour, he now brought back to their normal modesty the prices of the two commodities. The two hardly provided sufficient material for a proclamation, but with some stretching they were made to do so. It was easy to discover a disparity in the relative quantities of the two foodstuffs in Kimberley; we had a great deal of the one, and comparatively little of the other. Thus when Kekewich in his wisdom deemed it prudent to take precautions, the populace did not object. We knew in *our* wisdom that precautions were superfluous, but we approved, in a general way, the principle of prudence. The proclamation accordingly ordained that every loaf baked in future should be three parts meal and one part flour. The bakers were given the recipe gratis, with instructions to sell it (the bread, not the recipe) cheaply, namely, at three pence per loaf. Theoretically, the new loaf was to prove a palatable change; practically, the wry expression of countenance it evoked in the process of mastication demonstrated the contrary. The bread was light “khaki” in colour, and only in this respect was it fashionable;—not too fashionable, because “Boer meal” was its chief ingredient, and racial prejudice was strong. The sweetness of the old-fashioned white loaf was wanting, and we soon clamoured for its restoration. But the brazen baker would talk of colour-blindness, and insist that yellow was white. And when we hit upon the plan of demanding brown bread, the fellow would argue that yellow was brown! When black was asked for—well, we did not ask for that. But there was no option in the matter; the Colonel's prescription had to be accepted. The sensible

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course was to try to acquire a taste for it; and we did; we succeeded—too well!—until at last we could not get *enough* of the dough. The unkindest cut of all, however, did not come until pies, pastry, and sweet cakes of all kinds were pronounced indigestible. The refined cruelty of this revolutionary decree was bitterly resented; not only by the confectioners, whose shop windows were works of art, but also by the public, who loved art. Even gouty subjects and folk with livers protested. As for the ladies, the war on sponge cakes almost broke their hearts. Pastry was to many of them a staple sustenance, and conducive—besides being nice—to a, wan complexion. Five o'clock teas lost prestige; the tarts were gone. It was a case of Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark. The propriety of a deputation to the Colonel, to test his gallantry, was mooted; but the proposal, strange to say, found no seconder. Meanwhile, he (the Colonel) was on the trail of the butcher again. Prior to the promulgation of the eight-penny regulation the butcher had been in his element, charging what he liked, and liking generally a shilling. The small people in the trade had sold their cattle to their richer brethren who now made hay in the “ample sunshine” with great ardour. Their prices, it is true, had been limited by proclamation; but they still catered for the wealthy classes, and the “greater number” suffered much in consequence. Some people could get no meat, and when the Colonel awoke to the situation he suddenly limited the allowance of each adult to half-a-pound *per diem*. A howl of indignation followed, and Kekewich was denounced as a “high-handed vegetarian.” To be limited to less meat in a day than a man was accustomed to “shift” at one meal, was at once “too much” and “too little.” Even this restriction worked badly. Coaches and fours were driven through the proclamation; the well-to-do got good weight, and the toiler—shinbone! The system of meat distribution was a source of trouble to the end.

Friday morning was one to live in our memories, it brought the execrable hooters again. No pen-picture can be drawn of their effect on the nerves; their unearthly melody must be heard. It sounded incidental to carnage, and wailed forth that the enemy was at last about to grapple with us. The shops were promptly closed; employers and employees rushed off in carts, on bicycles, or on foot to their respective redoubts. It was admirable: the readiness, the despatch with which every man hurried to his place. Women and children—liable to arrest—hastened to their homes. Soon the streets were completely deserted, save by the alert constable who walked his 'beat'—ready wherever he saw a head (outside a door) to crack it. All ears were strained to hear the first shot; and the suspense was probably more poignant than in later times when we had grown accustomed to the cry of wolf.



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But there was no first shot; the cautious Boer had not made up his mind to beat us just yet. By a series of elaborate movements he had affected to gird his loins for a swoop that nothing could withstand, and adroitly managed the while to capture some oxen and horses—the property of our local Sanitary Conductors. When this was discovered, a batch of mounted men were deputed to ride out and question the legality of the proceedings. The enemy, nothing loth, opened the arguments themselves with a pungent volley, and when our side proceeded to reply, through a similar medium, the other would not listen. Later in the afternoon the Light Horse went out again, and got near enough to unlimber their guns and to plant a few shells among the Boers who guarded the route to the Reservoir. In this skirmish one of the Cape Police was killed—a regrettable circumstance which brought our list of deaths up to five.

The enemy still kept showing signs of activity, and of resolution to make it not only impossible to get out of Kimberley, but also unpleasant to live in it. They brought a gun as close as they dared to the De Beers Mine, and impudently endeavoured to shell it. They seized a second position at Kamfers Dam, and placed a second gun there. We had good people in Kimberley who asserted that the gentle Boer knew not how to use a gun; that he considered it so much lumber, an incumbrance. These were apart from the school given to postulate that the farmers had *no guns* to use. No need to say that both theories were dispelled, by sight as well as by hearing. Much attention was devoted to Otto's Kopje—our most exposed position—and many missiles dropped dangerously close to it. They burst, too, though nobody was hit. But they burst; and that was a visible fact that astounded a host of knowing people. There was a story in circulation about a respectable refugee from Johannesburg who, irritated by the fallacies that passed for facts in regard to Boer armaments and resources, always made it a point to speak the truth on the subject. He was an Englishman, quite loyal, and stimulated by a glass of beer was one evening in his boarding house unfolding the facts of the case. He discoursed fluently on the calibre and the accumulation of modern instruments of warfare he had beheld in Pretoria with his own eyes. His candour nettled his listeners, and on going outside he was threatened by one with pains and penalties if he did not curb his tongue and be careful. Another gentleman indulged in some vigorous criticism of spies and traitors in the abstract; while a third produced a pocket-book and took down the name of the frank offender, with a view to having him arrested. They went on in this strain until quite eight or ten muscular men had formed a cordon round the transgressor. "What did I say?" he enquired, plaintively. "You said a lot too much," was the crushing retort. One Ajax finally removed his coat and invited the Radical to a fistic encounter in the garden—if he felt aggrieved. The challenge was declined, more in sorrow than in anger, and the clamour subsided.



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Contempt for the Boers, their methods of warfare, and their resources, was so marked that facts—traitorous things—were best left unspoken.

We had been informed that the ranks of the enemy had been largely augmented by commandoes from the north. Thus when on Saturday morning an alarm was raised we expected a tug-of-war for sure. The Boers were apparently massing for a concentrated attack on Wesselton, which was situated a couple of miles from the city proper. The day was particularly ugly; a dust storm blew with blinding fury. The portion of the Town Guard on duty the previous night had just settled down to slumber when they were obliged to jump out of “bed” and betake themselves in hot haste to their posts. But the Boers were only joking; they retired after an out-of-range demonstration of pugnacity. The citizen soldiers went back to “bed,” but ere their winks had totalled forty they were again roused by the sacred goose-cackie of the hooters and again running to their trenches. The scenes in the streets were pretty similar to the pictures of the day before. We waited six hours, in expectation that “the hope which shone through them would blossom at last.” It was all in vain; the Boers—incurable humourists—would not be serious, or draw close enough to be shot at. It was suggested that the hooters told them a march was not to be stolen on us; hence so many postponements of the “fall” of Kimberley. The sound, the weirdness of the hooters in itself, would keep back a braver foe. We wanted them silenced, however, and were beginning actually to desire a fight. All the hardships of active service, *minus* its real excitement, were ours; and the cadets of the Town Guard—who cared not whether they lived to be one-and-twenty—were dying to fire and definitely to learn from the “kick” of a gun whether there was really “nothing like leather.”

Other things contributed to the eventfulness of Saturday; the Boers continued to display the same ominous energy, digging trenches, erecting forts, and making themselves generally comfortable—pending our submission to the inevitable like practical men. To emphasise the wisdom of surrender on our part, it was freely stated that the town was to be bombarded from Kamfers Dam. There was a feeling—it was in the air—that mischief was brewing. In obedience to a sudden order, the women and children of Otto’s Kopje and the West End were hurried into the city for better protection. Finally, a letter from the Boer Commandant was received by the Colonel, the contents of which went far to justify the feeling of anxiety which was abroad.



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The Commandant was a Mr. Wessels—and a very courteous gentleman his note proclaimed him. After some conventional preliminaries, he commenced by suggesting how natural it would be if the Dutch families living in Kimberley desired to betake themselves to more congenial surroundings. The Colonel thought it would be natural. Mr. Wessels would take it as a favour if said families were permitted to trek. Mr. Kekewich would gladly grant the favour; but the people concerned could not take a natural view of the matter at all; they decided to remain where they were. Mr. Wessels next graciously proposed that *all* women and children, irrespective of race, should be expatriated. The Colonel was still anxious to oblige, but the women, unfortunately, were not. They scouted the proposition. Its impertinence had attractions, but they declined to leave. It was *too* ridiculous; living in a desert as they were, with railway communication cut off on every side. They never heard the like! The surrender of the entire city was the final little favour solicited by the Commandant; and lower down it was hinted that the bombardment of Kimberley would be the painful alternative to a refusal. Here all courtesy was brushed aside, and Wessels was challenged to “take it—if he could.”

In the evening a “special” was published which contained a few vague assurances of the satisfactory progress of the war in Natal; also some items concerning Mafeking, and the philosophic pluck of Baden-Powell. “The British troops,” the special protested, “were rapidly arriving.” At the redoubts the news was enthusiastically digested to the strains of “Rule Britannia,” “Tommy Atkins,” and kindred national ballads. The troops were arriving, but had not yet reached Kimberley. The prophets were false; the three weeks were over; but not so the siege. One, two, aye, three weeks more of it distinctly stared us in the face.

## CHAPTER IV

*Week ending 11th November, 1899*

The three weeks were over, and there was nothing to show that our inspirations in regard to the duration of the siege might yet prove to be substantially true. No immediate prospect of relief was observable, and our thoughts mechanically took a gloomy turn. How sanguine we had been, to be sure. Hardened sinners there were, of course, to sing that fine old chorus, “I told you so!” They never did! Nobody had ventured to tell us anything so inexplicit. The three weeks dogma had never been questioned. It was not, however, the detraction from our repute as prophets that saddened us, so much as the wearing off of what was novel in our beleaguered state. It was beginning to pall a little. The day was beautiful, and notable for an absence of dust. In the morning, the Colonel sent out a patrol to have a look around. He also issued some stringent regulations, affecting the privileges and liberties of persons residing outside the town’s barriers.

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These good people were thenceforward obliged to submit to the indignity of being searched, as a condition precedent to permission to come or go like ordinary mortals. The right to read their newspaper across the breakfast cup was also denied them; the duty had to be performed in town, lest the wind should blow the local journal into the hands of the enemy and reveal—nothing at all. The position of the barrier guard ceased to be—if it ever were—a sinecure, and he was kept busy picking pockets, examining bills, perusing love-letters, written in all sorts of prose, and in verse which was homely, if not exactly Homeric.

As already pointed out, the day was fine, and the Boers were silent; so that, recent disappointments notwithstanding, there was little credit in being jolly on such a Sunday. The Tapleys of the city had accordingly no great trouble in inducing us to amuse ourselves. The united bands of the Kimberley and Lancashire Regiments were to give a concert in the Public Gardens; and at four o'clock some thousands of people, arrayed in their best, had gathered there. The Gardens were crowded; cares were forgotten; the Boers were chaffed; while the strains of the melodists were awaited with pleasurable anticipation. At the psychological moment the music began. The tune was not unfamiliar; we had heard it before—and prayed that we might not hear it again! It was not from the bandstand the discord was wafted; when I say, in a word, it was the hoot of the hooters, sounding the alarm, it will be understood how far from soothing was its spell. The exodus from the grounds was a treat to watch; the ladies in their finery made a dash for home, while the gentlemen rushed for their rifles with equal despatch. The bandsmen laid aside their lutes for more deadly instruments, and prepared themselves to give the Boer as much music as he cared to face. It was altogether a magnificent dissolution, rapidly accomplished. And, of course, it was as usual, all for nothing. Wessels was a wag.

Monday morning revealed the Boer clans foregathering in force on the south side of the city. The citizen soldiers were quietly directed to get behind their sandbags, while a mounted body was ordered out to anticipate events, and, if practicable, to knock over a few of the clansmen. But it was only bluff again. Our women folk, although they dreaded a *fracas*, were particularly impatient of this time-honoured game. During the day, a good many shells were expended on the Premier Mine. The mines, it may be said, were the objectives of special bombardments until the end; but, so far, we were not inclined to think highly of the enemy's marksmanship. The shells fell a long way short, albeit not so short as at first; the aim was improving. Given time, the Boer would yet hit his target; but of course he would not get time.



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Practice was resumed next morning at an hour sufficiently preternatural to deprive us of a portion of our legitimate sleep. We rose early in Kimberley—long before the lark—to our credit be it sung; but four o'clock was too far removed from breakfast time, and four was commonly the hour chosen by the churlish Boers to commence operations throughout the tedious months of our investment. The whiz and the explosion were not invariably audible, but the boom was always heard. Our “friends” rarely missed making a noise, and, to secure proper rest, this break-of-day *penchant* sent people early to bed. A big gun had been placed by the enemy on the top of Wimbledon Ridge, wherefrom—as our Garrison Orders grandiloquently stated—“the strength of the fortress of Kimberley was tested.” The shells landed safely on the bare veld, and even when the dissatisfied gunners brought their gun closer, no harm was done. Wimbledon was three or four miles away, and we were not therefore in a position to reciprocate the attentions we received from it. Another assault was subsequently made on the Premier fort. Our seven-pounders were this time able to do a bit of bowling, and a ball was hurled at the enemy’s wickets that stopped play for the day.

There was considerable elation in town at the non-success of the Boer as an artillerist, and the belief was entertained that his stock of ammunition would soon be blown to the winds. Nearly a hundred shells had been thrown at us, without angering or damaging anyone or anything save—a cook and his cooking-pot! The cook resided in a redoubt; his pot had had the lid broken, and worse still, the stew it covered driven through the bottom of the utensil, to be incinerated in the blaze beneath; and he vowed—well, the profanity entwined in his vow of vengeance will not admit of its publication. The whole bombardment was a grand joke. In the Law Courts, where the Criminal Sessions were being conducted in the ordinary way, the lawyers waxed witty. The witnesses responded. Even the prisoners laughed sorrowfully as each abortive boom rang out. It was a superb joke. The judge let fall some funny things and the jury smiled—without prejudice. His lordship said it was a novel experience for him, as indeed it was for all of us, who were to live and learn that—the last laughter laughs best.

The results of the Colonel’s mild and forbearing efforts to keep the natives in check were not satisfactory. The exuberance of the Kafirs knew no bounds; they continued to glory in intoxication, and to “do” the *breadth* of the streets, like the gay Bohemians of more advanced civilisations. They did more; they defied authority, and varied their pleasures with occasional bouts of house-breaking and burglary. They appropriated such property as they could lay hands on in the sequestered houses of the West End, and played tug-of-war with mahogany that lacked the merit of being portable. An epidemic of looting prevailed—and fine sport it seemed to offer.



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But Colonel Kekewich did not think it a time for sport, and lost no time in ventilating his thoughts on the subject. Drastic measures were adopted to suppress the fun. Another proclamation adorned the dead walls—decreeing that native bars and canteens were to be closed altogether. To deal effectively with the hooligan school stern methods were necessary, and total prohibition was the initial step—a step highly lauded by the public in general, and by the *white* toppers of the city in particular. The coloured bibbers were thus suddenly reduced to water, and some twenty of them—caught red-handed in crime—were lashed and sent to prison for two years. One or two got off with a caution, and with instructions to preach to the locations on the heinousness of hooliganism, and of the power of Martial Law to hang “boys” for less than murder—as the next roost-robber would learn to his cost. No remarkable curiosity to be learned in the “Law” was afterwards manifested for some time.

As for the aggrieved liquor people, the Colonel’s proclamation well-nigh broke their backs. Their feelings must be left to the sympathetic imagination of the reader. That thirty thousand of her Majesty’s subjects should be “by law forbid” to quench their thirst was incredible. That men in the “trade” should by consequence suffer financial loss, and have the sweat of their brows, as it were, confiscated, was an evasion of the Constitution (superseded though it was by Martial Law) which outraged the name of liberty. It was a bitter pill to swallow; but it had to be swallowed under pain of penalty for even a grimace. Some of the patients could not let the purgative down; they deliberately let nature take its course—the sequel to which was the mobilisation of the Trapper Reserves for active service. And still the slimness of the native contrived to dodge the wiles of civilisation. With the assistance of some Coolie shop-keepers (who acted as middlemen) he yet managed to drink a fair share. But the middlemen, too, were hauled over the coals. A few Indians went so far as to establish without license little canteens of their own, thereby outraging all law, civil and military. In such cases the canteens were confiscated. The Summary Court had altogether a busy time, and the Official Interpreters, Dutch, Kafir, and Indian, were “sweated” at last.

Wednesday was quiet; so also was Thursday, our peace being marred by neither shells nor hooters. The hooters, indeed, were never to do it again—a graceful concession, for which we gave thanks; their cat-calls had been so nerve-shaking. The monotony was relieved on Friday by some shells which came right into the city—as far as the Post Office. They omitted to burst. The boom of a gun, which had been wont to play havoc with the nervous, had come to be regarded as of no consequence, a mere tap on a drum, eliciting a *nonchalant* “Ah, there she goes,” and nothing more. Everybody was alive for fragments of the dead missiles; curio-hunting

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was a craze, and hundreds of people were ever ready to pounce upon the projectiles that wasted their sweetness on the desert air. The tiniest crumb of metal was treasured as a valuable memento. The shells fell and broke as would a tea-pot, a brick, or an egg of the Stone Age. No explosion followed; no fragments flew to hurt one's ribs, or to play the dentist with one's teeth. The missiles declined to burst.

It was natural that much speculation should arise as to the cause of this anomalous state of things; and there were people to doubt its being so much due to obstinacy on the part of the shells as to inexperience on the part of the Boers. One wiseacre held that the missiles were antique and obsolete relics of the 'eighty-one struggle. Others questioned whether "the Boer" then knew that shells were invented. A lot more contended that "the Boer" was unacquainted with the mysteries of a fuse, and knew as little about "timing" a shell as he did about discipline. One or two suggested, tentatively, as a solution of the puzzle, that "he had forgotten to put the powder in." Another argued that he did not know how; while there were a few who doubted whether "the Boer" considered powder in any sense explosive. There was a garrulous "bore" (from somewhere over-sea, not Holland) who advanced a still clearer elucidation of the mystery. "What was Rhodes doing in Germany for twelve months," he cried, "tell me that?" The relevancy of this rather startling query was a little obscure, but somebody replied: "He was visiting the Kaiser." This was too much for our interlocutor; he pitied our ignorance of the world, lamented our neglected education, and, as if our weakness in arithmetic was peculiarly discreditable, deplored our inability to put "two and two together."

Alarms were now nightmares of the past, and the people could pursue their avocations undisturbed and undistracted. There was little firing in the afternoon—nothing more deafening than a rifle-shot. A Boer, on sniping bent, was hit by one of our sharpshooters; three men approached, and two only were observed to rush back *with* their shields. Of what the British troops were doing we knew nothing. Thousands of them, it was said, were congregated at Orange River (seventy miles away), and we were curious to know when they were to "move on"; only curious—not impatient. The summer was yet in its infancy (as also was the siege) and our patience was destined to be lost soon enough. Meanwhile, we had not much cause for complaint in the matter of food. Meat, some said, they found it hard to procure; one young lady asserted positively that her family had had no meat for dinner on Sunday, and that she herself had to dine off "tea." She was the daughter of a public house, too! Just fancy the daughter of a public house having to do with "tea" for dinner! Hers, however, would have been a case of exceptional hardship; there was the "half pound" for everyone who went shopping in time.



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We were startled from our slumbers at an early hour on Saturday morning by the booming of artillery and a succession of very distinct explosions. The shells fell broadcast, and whistled—while we sought vainly to see them—with a disconcerting whiz above our heads. Their contact with mother earth resulted in a loud crash; it was hard to believe that the theorist who opined that the Boers had “forgotten the powder” (before) was a clever fellow. They had remembered it this time; its odour was everywhere. It was our first real taste of a bombardment, and a nauseating taste it proved. Men and women had a vague belief that hundreds must be dead. Consternation reigned; and when it was reported that a woman had been killed in Dutoitspan Road, the excitement was at its height. The fatality sent a thrill of horror through the people, who awaited in dread anticipation the news of further massacres. The victim was a poor washerwoman, and the possibilities it conjured up before the mind’s eye made her death doubly unfortunate. But, happily, no further damage to life or limb was to be recorded. A good many houses were hit, though not injured materially. A shell entered the Gresham Bar, and it was surprising that so few glasses should have been smashed; more marvellous still that the fair bar-tender should have remained fair; she was merely frightened. As for the proprietor, he held up fairly well. There was a hole in his roof (I don’t mean his head), but he made the price of a decent patch in ten minutes. The men about town flocked in to have a laugh at the mess, and were amazed to find a bottle intact, or a bigger utensil to drink from than a “thimble” indeed.

Feeling against the Boers grew strong. Enquiries about the British troops, their movements, their dilatoriness, were sternly renewed; it was reckoned time to “clear the border.” That Colonel Kekewich was angry goes without saying; he despatched two mounted forces in opposite directions to record a general protest. One of these, led by Colonel Scott-Turner, rode towards Otto’s Kopje. The enemy, however, were apparently prepared for Turner; they opened fire with a gun, and endeavoured to cut him off. In this they failed; they drew rather too near, and so far from intimidating the fighting Colonel, enabled him to register his protest very forcibly. Nine Boers were shot down; three on the British side were injured. Meanwhile the force under Major Peakman was protesting at Carter’s Farm. The enemy there made a bold effort to silence Peakman. But a Maxim gun has a remarkable gift of the gab; the Major had one with him, and he let it do all the talking—with results that quickly drove the Boers beyond the range of its Phillipics.

Notwithstanding these castigations, or perhaps because of them, the bombardment was resumed in the afternoon. Wesselton was assailed; a few shells also fell into Kimberley, with no serious consequences. Silence reigned at six o’clock. It was an exciting *finale* to the week. The morrow would be Sunday, and glad we were to hear it. And still relief was deferred; but the troops *were* at Orange River, and seventy miles, they told us, was a trifle in darkest Africa. That they (the troops) would soon arrive did not admit of a doubt. And then?—and then the Boer would run away or die.



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### CHAPTER V

*Week ending 18th November, 1899*

Sunday again! the most popular day of the seven; pre-eminently so since the war began. The peace that marked an occasional week-day was the certain accompaniment of the Sunday. The conditions of life were normal on Sunday; its advent made us happy. Following upon the unpleasant experiences of the previous day it was peculiarly welcome, albeit, mayhap, the herald of troublous times. The death of the poor washerwoman had opened up a world of possibilities; morbid forebodings were conjured up by morbid people, and nobody dreamt of measuring future fatalities by so low an average as one per day. But yesterday, we were as safe as if we were "in Piccadilly." A great man had said so—a great man and millionaire. His name was Rhodes, Mr. Cecil Rhodes, Chairman of the De Beers Corporation, and "no mean judge of a situation," our newspaper stated in substantiation of his Piccadilly peccadillo. He had come up specially for the siege, it was said by some who, had they but half his foresight, would have "specially" gone away for it. Well, Mr. Rhodes, felt safe and we, too, had felt safe until the sad event of Saturday rather neutralised the confidence inspired by the shrewd, but human, millionaire. There was a minority, indeed, who could not logically look for aught but ruin and disaster as a sequence to the shock of Saturday. "Look at the narrow escapes so many had," the minority argued. There were plenty of stories. Legends of hairbreadth escapes were legion. They were well told by fluent liars, by such raconteurs as *talk* of prodigious things in fishing, and *catch* nothing but colds. The narrow escapes were yet to come. Our wounded in the hospital were doing well; some of them had already been discharged. *Their* escapes had been narrow enough, in all conscience; but they were not romantic; they occurred on the field of battle.

The enemy apparently "slept it out" on Monday. There was no firing until eight o'clock when a beginning was made with Wesselton. A number of shells fell in the vicinity of the mine; but, as a lady afterwards reported: "they did not hit even a dog." Some missiles fell also on the Bulfontein side, and were buried in the debris heaps. A more serious assault was subsequently opened on the town itself; for several hours shells came pouring in from Kamfers Dam and the Lazaretto Ridge. The firing did not cease until upwards of seventy missiles had burst in the streets. In the market square a horse was killed—one of two attached to a Cape cart. The other animal remained alive, very much alive, as its kicking testified. The driver of the vehicle, a Dutchman, received a wound in the arm. Another Dutchman, curiously enough, was injured slightly while injudiciously exposing himself on top of a debris heap. Happily, no more serious casualties occurred. The Municipal Compound and the Fire Brigade Station had to bear the brunt of the bombardment, but the damage done was small.



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Despite the real element of danger now attending the mania, the thirst for souvenirs was unquenchable yet, and the masses of struggling humanity that seemed to drop from the clouds simultaneously with every missile to be in at its dismemberment, were as fierce as and *more* reckless than before in the fight for fragments. When the shells had been wont to crumble accommodatingly, as would a clay pipe, the winning of a curio had—I mix the metaphor advisedly—merely involved participation in a football scrimmage. But since the ball had, as it were, begun to turn “rusty” the popularity of the game, so far from diminishing, increased. All day long its devotees “scrummed” and “shoved” for the coveted trophies. Quite a brisk trade was done in souvenirs, the smallest scrap of iron fetching a ticky (threepence), and so on in proportion to weight and size as far as half a sovereign. These souvenirs included sundry nuts and bolts which had been kicked about the neighbourhood of De Beers workshops for a quarter of a century. Whole shells, intact, were sold for a couple of pounds each, and the hundred or so received up to date circulated a good bit of money. One of the funny spectacles of the bombardment was a local entomologist, who had a sense of humour, endeavouring to catch the missiles with his butterfly net; the “buzzing,” he said, attracted him. This humourist is still alive—he caught nothing.

Healthy folk who lived to eat were at this stage beginning to complain of hunger, and to assert—not quite truthfully—that they got but “one meal a day.” Eight ounces of meat was not enough for them; they could devour it all at a single sitting; they were slowly starving. Little sympathy was felt with these uneasy gourmands. Our sources of supply were by no means inexhaustible, and the Colonel’s restriction was intelligible to all reasonable men. The Boers, on the other hand, appeared to possess more live stock than they needed, and it was upon this hypothesis that the plan of confiscating a portion of the one to equalise the other was conceived by the artful and gallant Colonel. No sooner thought of than done. From among the coloured fraternity whose love of looting had occasioned trouble in the past he selected the most expert, and commissioned them to resume their bad ways. On the Monday night operations were commenced, and carried out successfully. By dint of much patience and caution, the trusty looters were enabled (unperceived) silently to segregate some seventy oxen and drive them into Kimberley. Splendid animals they were, too, and an addition to our depleted flocks and herds which gave us solid satisfaction.



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Whether it was that the enemy was engrossed in a vain search for the missing cattle—if they were missed at all—he gave no expression to his indignation next morning. Not until lunch time had we any indications of annoyance. The vials of Boer wrath were then let loose in earnest, and from the Lazaretto Ridge we were peppered furiously. The shells fell thickly in the principal thoroughfares—eighty or ninety of them—one for every bullock “pinched.” Fortunately again, the assault was unattended by loss of life. The tin walls of Saint Cyprian’s Church were perforated by pieces of shell. Another hissing monster dropped in Dutoitspan Road in front of a tobacco-shop, but thanks to the picturesque array of pipes and pouches in the window the missile, as if it had an eye for art, refrained from bursting; instead it made a little grave to the depth of several feet and buried itself with honour. Three or four buildings were struck, and a funny man spread an alarming rumour relative to the loss of *eighteen* lives in the Queen’s Hotel! On enquiry it transpired that *two* cats had met their doom. The victims had been serenading in an out-house when the fatal missile (very properly) slit their throats. The dear people of the neighbourhood affected little sympathy for the slain whose orgies had kept them awake at night. Indeed a wish was expressed that a few more of the cult might get hissed off the world’s stage. And curiously enough a second shell *did* fall at the hotel; but the feline minstrels were out of the way—and their well-wishers so much *in* it that they made peace with the cats at once.

The night had been dark, with vivid flashes of lightning to brighten it now and then, and nature’s artillery had rolled until the Boers on Wednesday morning took Up the refrain with theirs. One poor old man was wounded in the arm as he lay sleeping in his bed. Houses here and there up Newton way were damaged, the occupiers escaping injury. The firing went on for several hours until heavy rains came down and put a stop to it.

A further note was received from Mr. Wessels. The Dutch folk in our midst were fairly numerous and not only as liable to laceration as the British, but, judging by our records so far, rather more so. They had experienced rank bad luck altogether, and a little bird may have whispered it to Wessels. However that may be, the Commandant reiterated his former request in their regard. Now, Colonel Kekewich was only too willing to accede to the request, in proof of which he wrote up a special proclamation on the subject. But the Dutch adhered to their first determination; there is no place like home; leave it they would not. Mr. Wessels, they insinuated, would not find them new houses and gardens; nor too much to eat—not even half a pound of meat (perhaps). There were only three or four families prepared to pack up and with more reluctance than exultation take their departure.



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The possibility of springing something in the nature of a surprise upon the enemy was a thought which had long exercised the mind of Colonel Kekewich. The idea culminated in a stiff fight on Thursday. Three or four hundred of our mounted men had remained up all night, and two guns of the *Diamond Fields' Artillery* had no sleep either. It was still dark when the cavalcade fell into line and proceeded noiselessly along a ridge leading to Carter's Farm (occupied by the Boers). Daylight had not yet broken when the men in khaki reached their destination—reached it, because owing to the recent rains a thick mist obscured the landscape, and the invaders found themselves in closer proximity to the Farm than they desired to be—in fact they were right among the “Grabbers.” The surprise was complete—far too complete, for the attackers were as much astonished as were the yawning Boers. Both sides, however, retained sufficient presence of mind to shoot at each other; and they did. The enemy roused from their slumbers had their vision clarified effectively, an operation which had the drawback of enabling them the better to see their visitors. The battle waxed fierce, and when re-inforcements came galloping to the assistance of the Boers it looked as if the Light Horse must be worsted. But the artillery was behind them, and from it was belched forth a hail of shrapnel which compelled the re-inforcements to draw rein and “pant to the place from whence at first they flew.” Our guns away back at the Reservoir also contributed to this result. Thus it was that the task of evicting the Boers was in the end a comparatively easy one. Thirteen of their number lay dead or wounded on the Farm. We had one killed and three severely wounded, seven others, including Major Peakman, getting slightly hurt.

That a bombardment would follow these events was to be expected: nor were we disappointed. The town, its thoroughfares and houses were left alone for the nonce, while the guns were trained on the redoubts. This was a precedent we could have wished to see followed oftener; but it was mainly the heart of Kimberley that was assailed at all times. The new departure did not prove successful; no great harm was done, for the shells lighting on the soft veld were kinder than the shellers, and generally failed to burst. As for the citizen soldiers, they received these attentions with a *nonchalance* that would reflect credit on older campaigners. They did not get enough of them; there was money in the missiles; and the local army had a way of appreciating a good cigar, with a puff of “Cape Smoke.” A barter in souvenirs would admit of these things, and their indulgence would not be the less sweet because payment of the damage would really fall upon the *producer* (President Kruger).



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It was at this stage in the vicissitudes of our siege existence that the authorities and the public were confronted with a fresh difficulty and made to feel the presence of a new danger. The outbreak of hostilities had sent a large number of natives from the adjoining districts into Kimberley, and these added to the permanent coloured population increased our responsibilities. There was not sufficient work for so many. This idle host was a menace to the maintenance of law and order, and unless something was done for its internal trouble of a serious kind was sure to arise. These men had no money wherewith to buy food, and although they could not get liquor to drive them to deeds of desperation, hunger would soon supply an impetus. And so it came to pass that the philanthropic spirit was awakened in the breasts of philanthropists and simulated by others who loved themselves only. That work must be found for the coloured horde was the unanimous verdict of the Upper Ten. It was a problem, peculiarly complex at a time when the "first law of nature" (in a restricted sense) was so stern in its exactions. But it was a problem which had to be solved and which puzzled everybody until—Mr. Rhodes entered the breach with a solution. He had been relieving distress in a quiet, unostentatious way, and he now settled the native question with characteristic celerity. He held a short conference with the Mayor; evolved a scheme of road-making; had some thousands of men employed next day; and, in fine, completed arrangements to pay away two thousand pounds per week with as little fuss as another man—or millionaire—would make about a collar lost in the wash. Indigent "whites," also, were provided for; Mr. Rhodes made himself responsible for the formation of an auxiliary Fire Brigade for the behoof of refugees more accustomed to a pen than a pick. The Colossus had some enemies in Kimberley; but they were less severe—less numerous, perhaps—from that day onward.

Our defences were by this time in thorough ship-shape, and the connection of the several redoubts by telephone had just been completed. From the reservoir another brand new searchlight beamed down upon the Boers. The Town Guard had taken up permanent residence in the camps. Its members were supplied with soldiers' rations; also with professional cooks—who knew better hotels—to cook them. The camp cook was quite a character, much deferred to and patronised, and was ever eager to drop his ladle in favour of the refrigerator which he kept ready to make cold meat of the cool Boer who ventured within range of it. The *chef* whose cooking-pot had been scuttled was particularly thirsty for "the vengeance blood alone could quell."



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On Friday a party of the enemy approached the reservoir, presumably to see if there were water in it. But when our gunners metaphorically advised them that there was danger of falling in, the party took the hint and retired. Later on, the Boers advised us with numerous tokens of their good-will. While this was being done a large force of the enemy were massing at Alexandersfontein, as if they had finally decided to take Kimberley without more ado. They deployed in battle array, preparatory to sweeping all before them. The hooters had been relegated to oblivion and already, swan-like, sung their sad, sweet song. Whether the silence of these atrocious mimics induced the Boer to fancy that he might surprise us, is not known. Certain it was that we did see him, and were awaiting his coming with composure. It was a long wait. The mounted men got tired sitting in their saddles, and were ordered out to query the delay. They broke up into skirmishing parties and shook their fists at the foe. But it was all to no purpose; the foe declined to be caught with chaff, and decided "to fight another day."

The townspeople expected a sensational sequel to the affair and assembled in thousands to greet the returning horsemen. Mr. Cecil Rhodes, attired in duck pants, a slouch hat, and a necktie, happened to be passing in a cart at the same moment, and to his profound disgust was greeted with cheers. He raised his hat, however, and smiled, with a sigh.

Saturday, contrary to expectation, was quiet. There was the capture of a lot of cattle to avenge. A good haul had been made on the Friday night—of fine corpulent cows, worth a deal of money, dealers said. They were worth a deal of beef, and that was the feature about them of most immediate interest. We had had no news from anywhere for a long while; despatch riders, we conjectured, must have fallen at or into the hands of the enemy. No matter; the British Army, colloquially speaking, knew its way about. Thus when the shades of night were falling, the general disposition was one of willingness to wait. The food, to be sure, lacked something of its wonted excellence; but it served (in the summer), and we did not grumble. The shelling, too, had fallen somewhat flat. Mafeking was more out of the way and in a worse plight than Kimberley. Reflections of this kind begot condescension and a noble willingness to wait.

## CHAPTER VI

*Week ending 25th November, 1899*

The commandeering of cattle was an industry now well established. It was a pleasing spectacle, on Sunday morning, to behold the results of the preceding night's operations as they were driven through the streets, and to witness the unconcern with which the languid quadrupeds suffered the loss of their independence. Nor was the calm indifference with which their drovers received the compliments shouted at them by passing Imperialists one whit less admirable.

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The sight of the enemy's preserves excited a degree of interest which might be equalled—not surpassed—by the phenomenon (in pre-war days) of a procession of white elephants. And in the general chorus of favourable criticism—favourable because they were cheap, probably, if not exactly “gift” animals—nobody looked the cattle in the mouth. Very popular were these confiscations; and in view of so many augmentations of the stock at Kenilworth, it was not too much to hope that the ravenousness of the public appetite would be allowed its wonted scope. No longer was there meat for breakfast, not even on Sunday morning when we had leisure to masticate it. To tell anybody, to hint the heresy that eight ounces of meat sufficed to preserve health, would be indiscreet. To suggest that an extra plate of porridge with a few sardines thrown in (that is, to follow) might make up the deficiency, would be rude. Tinned sardines, salmon, crawfish, brawn, and such eatables were not reckoned fish at all; they were eaten—to stave off starvation—but they did not appease. As for butter; we had none for our bread! Fresh butter was unprocurable. Even the salted unguent sold in tins was hard to get, and only a very good customer could buy a tin, at a huge price, from his grocer. The hens stood the test of the times better, and laid their eggs generously as if nothing had happened. But their numbers were small, and not sufficient to provide for local consumption at any time—still less so since chops had been proscribed. The owners of the birds, sad to say, were in many cases small, too—mentally; they ate more eggs, in lieu of butter, on toast than was necessary. The price of eggs kept daily moving up by sixpences and shillings, and they were yet comparatively cheap at elevenpence each (each egg!). But it was some comfort, however cold, that money *could* buy eggs. They were indubitably fresh, but beyond the reach, too “high” (at elevenpence) for the average man, or even for men of substance opposed on principle to eating money. Ham and bacon, also, were expensive. The local pork had never been highly prized. The African pig is more noted for his *speed* than for the rashers he offers when his race is run; he is tough, and grunts vapidly; his tail corrugates rather than curls; he eschews jewellery—his nose is free; and the land also being free, he pays no rent. But the ox was “off” (in large measure), and the pig, hitherto despised, had come to be looked up to as an asset and a “gentleman.”

In the afternoon a heavy hailstorm passed over the town; the clatter of hailstones—of enormous size—was unprecedented. It furnished a new and refreshing topic of conversation, and the war was dropped for full five minutes—while the shower lasted. Rumours Of a meditated attack on the enemy's fortifications were the subject of much speculation; that the morrow would be a big day was the general feeling at bedtime.

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The big day came round in due course; we had a big thunderstorm, but in no other respect was Monday large. The Boers signalled the occasion by the inauguration of a new plan of campaign, which, if the gods were kind, would soon compel the surrender of the Diamond City. The plan—like all great plans—was simple; a dozen guns were trained on Kenilworth, where browsed the precious bullocks upon whose safety hung the fate of Kimberley. To kill them all was the end in view. Inspired by the thought of the hunger and the “fall” that would follow, the enemy poured forth a liberal fusillade upon Kenilworth. The cattle-guards, exposed to grave danger, never shirked their duty. It was not until the Boers had well warmed to their work that we managed by the play of a Maxim to cool their ardour. The new departure was a failure. A most incomprehensible bombardment was subsequently opened on an isolated place, called “the Brickfields,” where no animate thing above the bite of a mosquito lived, moved, or had its being.

The exigencies of our position necessitated the cultivation of early rising; but the Boers had, so far, invariably set the ball rolling; they had acquired a knack of irritating us in their choice of unexpected moments for starting operations day by day. On Tuesday the practicability of reversing this order of things was tested by our gunners. The effect was not clearly apparent, but our shell excited commotion—it wakened somebody, for the Boers could be seen moving about. Retaliation soon followed; on the Brickfields again, a choice of objective which was quite inexplicable. There was nothing there to hit but bricks. The enemy—perhaps obsessed by the thought that he had filled us with terror—may have assumed that the place was being used as a refuge. Some believed that the Town Hall was *aimed* at, for our confidence in the skill of the Boer gunners had yet to ripen fully. The firing was continued for some hours until the venue was changed to Kenilworth, with no better success than before.

We had a fair supply of ammunition for such guns as we possessed, and in order to make it last as long as possible, economy was rigorously observed. One day, however, De Beers astonished the Colonel by offering to *manufacture* shells, *ad lib*. The Colonel smiled; he was inclined to regard the proposal as a joke of the Company’s Chairman. But he was persuaded to permit the test of a few samples made in the workshops, and lo!—to his infinite astonishment the results were all that could be desired. The missiles conducted themselves properly, and—contrary to “expert” opinion—burst at the right moments. There being plenty of the requisite raw material, a hundred shells were made in a day. This was a great advantage and was appreciated to the full. Mr. Rhodes knew the Boers loved him, and, by way of reciprocity, he had engraved on the base of each shell: “With compliments from C.J.R.” His initials sufficed; the Boers knew him well. The conceit excited much mirth in town, as it doubtless did among the enemy.



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Another letter in the afternoon; from the Boer General to Colonel Kekewich. It concerned the Dutch again. The Colonel—patient man—intimated in reply that the families in question had already twice refused to leave him, and that he could not force nor drive them. The Boers, we gathered from their envoy, were sick with typhoid fever, sick with dysentery, sick of the war altogether—so sick, indeed, that part of our visitor's mission was to borrow medicines and a doctor. That we should have proven so obstinate in our resistance had not been anticipated. Well, the Colonel could not refuse the medicines; he sympathised with the sufferers; but in view of the fact that the borrowers had already commandeered a doctor, he could not see his way to lend another.

We had set the ball rolling with such success in the morning that it was determined to give it the last kick in the evening as well. To make certain of this, a gun was charged and "sighted" while there was yet light; and at nine o'clock a shell was sent hurtling through the shades of night. Its effect, of course, was not observable; but if it were to startle the enemy as much as the gun's boom did the whole of us, C. J. R. and his unseasonable "compliments" must have fallen foul of some "remarks."

Next morning the gift was not at all gracefully acknowledged. The unfortunate brickfields were pelted again; it was enigmatical; that Mr. Rhodes should be reckoned "a brick," by Boers, was improbable; rumour had it that his blood was hungered for. Some shells were hurled also at the grand stand of the race-course. Finally, the enemy appeared to suspect that the cattle might have had a hand in the despatch of the nine o'clock missile, and he bombarded Kenilworth with great gusto.

The houses of a number of our citizens were built immediately outside the city boundary; and a strong feeling existed not only against permitting these dwellings to be occupied, but also against allowing some of their occupiers (who were Dutch) to remain outside the gaol. A section of these people made no secret of their sympathy with their kindred across the Vaal, nor of their belief that the war was being waged on false issues. They were thus tempted to lend the Boers a little practical assistance. Nor were they long in finding ways and means to negotiate the loan; they arranged a code of signals which enabled them to communicate with their friends. They had precious little of importance to tell—unless the siege value of eggs could be so classed. Anyhow they were caught signalling one night, and on the following morning were arraigned before the Summary Court.

This was the popular version of the story. How far it was true, I am not in a position to say; but the charge was not sustained by the evidence. The prisoners were acquitted, and ordered to find accommodation *within* the city. The Court took advantage of the occasion to throw out a general hint about the inadvisability of permitting anybody to reside near the borders of a beleaguered town.



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We had held a grand review of our forces on the opening days of the siege. The Regulars, the Light Horse, the Town Guard, *etc.*, had filed past the Colonel and the Mayor, amid the plaudits of the people and the music of the band. The afternoon brought recollections of the demonstration. The Boers appeared to be holding a pageant of their own—for *our* edification, no doubt. For several hours they were marshalled on the veld with a demonstrativeness that seemed to say: “You might as well give in at once; look at the size of us!” Their size was certainly impressive; more so than their proficiency in drill. We beat them hollow at drill; so hollow that we laughed arrogantly and loud. The Boers could shoot well; but what was that—without drill!

On Thursday morning we were still laughing when the guns of Wimbleton proceeded to query our hilarity. Wimbleton Ridge, unfortunately, was rather far away; we were unable to respond. Whether it was that the revels of our risible faculties were ultimately attributed to the cattle-stealing of Wednesday night, an energetic assault was suddenly opened on Kenilworth. It is true, we had affected a tidy confiscation; but that joke was now old—too old to laugh at. We had some “snipers” all day endeavouring to worry the Boers. A mounted patrol, also, worried them. In the afternoon the rain came down to complete their misery, and the imperturbable oxen were let browse in peace.

And from another quarter there was coming worry, to shatter the dreams, the hopes, the “castles in the air” of Kimberley. The Relief Column was approaching; this time for certain. We had heard like legends before, but they were *only* legends (before). The Column was really coming. A native had come in with the news. Now, of a white man’s reliability a doubt would not be tolerated; but the native!—well, the native had acquired a reputation for bad, bold mendacity that was altogether too unscientific to be appreciated by a close and subtle aristocracy. Still, the story was nice; we liked to believe it. There are natives and natives—there is even a *Booker* Washington—all men are not liars. The Press, too, attached credence to the tale, and that went far to convince us of its truth. A glance at the paper next morning established the veracity of the Bantu.

“We are authorised to state that a strong force has left Orange River, and is moving forward to the relief of Kimberley.”

Such was the message. The joy was universal. In a few days the column would be with us. Kimberley would be free. The siege was over! Hurrah, the people shouted with an enthusiasm only transcended in degree by the resolute contempt with which the reported approach of French was greeted in the following year. The Queen was sung of with rare earnestness and lung power. The Colonel was toasted and praised at the bars. Baden-Powell was promised help; the Mayor was patronised. The column was drunk

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to, not wisely, but too well; while Tommy Atkins' glories as a soldier and a man were chorussed in unmeasured terms—and time. For the rest—we were generous—the Boers we could forgive. But they must all be captured; in the interests of the campaign it was not expedient that one should escape. Where should they be housed? The gaol was not large enough. The Town Hall was suggested. But the mines were finally selected—with exquisite irony; for we little dreamt that the thousands destined eventually to be driven there should be—our friends, indeed, but not our friend the enemy!

Friday was quiet, and a very jovial day in town. The Boers—in blissful ignorance of their approaching doom—occupied themselves in disfiguring the railway line still more. It was not easy to do; but it was done. In the afternoon two tremendous explosions were heard. “There go the culverts,” was the expression in every mouth. And so it was; the culverts were blown to pieces.

The Colonel and his officers were getting weary of the cautious methods of warfare of which the enemy never seemed to tire; and the opportunity of inflicting a good and stunning blow was a consummation devoutly wished for in military circles. The Column was coming, and nothing in the way of a telling stroke had yet been struck—nothing worthy the vaulting ambition of a soldier accomplished. Fighting is a soldier's profession, and the peculiar opportunities afforded by a siege, for the acquirement of fame and distinction, were too rare to be let pass unseized. How much the Commander and his staff may have been influenced by considerations of this kind, is not easy to say. But signs were not wanting that a serious endeavour was to be made to induce Mahomet to meet, as it were, the Mountain half way. The Regulars were looking to their bayonets; the Light Horse were being equipped with brand new steel; and—to make a long story short—at break of day on Saturday morning a large body of infantry (composed of Regulars and Irregulars) under the command of Colonel Chamier set out in a southerly direction, towards Carter's Farm, with general instructions to make things hot for trespassers. The enemy in possession of the Farm were thus to be debarred from assisting their *confreres* at a point where another British force was to operate with more serious intent. To ensure the success of this ruse, the services of a section of the Town Guard were requisitioned for out-flanking purposes on the one side; while the geographical position of the railway line permitted the utilisation of the armoured train for similar service on the other. The infantry kept steadily advancing until they secured a position which enabled them to rattle with their rifles to some purpose—the artillery behind them also helping. Their object was soon achieved; the Boers were forced to devote their energies exclusively to their own defence. They sat tight—obedient to the number one law of nature—engrossed in blazing at the foe before them, which was precisely what the foe before them wanted.



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In the meantime the real game was being played on the western border. All our available mounted men, led by Colonel Scott-Turner, had crossed the Lazaretto Ridge, and actually drawn close to a Boer camp—unobserved. When the sentry *did* open his eyes and had challenged our advance agents no verbal response was made; but a rifle went off, and the sentry fell. The Boers were of course instantly aroused by the report; they rushed to their trenches, and a fierce rifle-duel ensued. From the muzzles of the Mausers a withering volley came. Some of Turner's men fell from their saddles, but the rest, nothing daunted, pressed their advantage and charged pell-mell upon the foe. The Boers fought gallantly, but were unable to resist the fury of the onslaught; some of them threw down their arms; others made a dash for liberty; while not a few fell fighting to the last. Thirty prisoners were taken; also a large quantity of rifles. Seven Light Horse men were killed; twelve were seriously, and fifteen slightly, wounded. Colonel Scott-Turner, who was hit in the shoulder, had his horse shot under him. Thus ended the most serious sortie of the siege—so far.

The townspeople had assembled in concourse to welcome the warriors home. Cheer after cheer rent the air as they passed, intermingled now and then with a murmur of pity, suggested by the sight of a riderless horse. Scott-Turner was the recipient of a special salvo, which nearly unsaddled him again; and the other officers were bored to death bowing their acknowledgments along the route. Privates with bandaged eyes or arms were also singled out for vociferous greeting, only they passed the bowing, and were not a bit bored. The Mayor himself, smoking a cigar, came along in his own goods van! There was no mistaking his identity; it was the Mayor—the Mayor of the Diamond City in a wooden chariot! not indeed in his robes of State, but—in the flesh! A flaming Red Cross waved above the Mayoral van, and a long string of vehicles, adorned with like emblems, followed. It was to the credit of the merchants generally that they had voluntarily placed their horses and wagons at the disposal of the military. Had all the combatants been stricken *hors-de-combat* there were facilities on the spot for their immediate conveyance to hospital.

The prisoners, who followed in the wake of their conquerors, were the great objects of curiosity and interest. One or two spectators started groaning; but a nudge, or failing that, a kick sufficed to correct their bad taste. A weary, travel-stained group the captives looked—with their unkempt locks and unshaven faces. No need to throw mud at them. The universal feeling was rather one of sympathy, even of admiration, for brave men whom fortune had omitted to favour.

## CHAPTER VII

*Week ending 2nd December, 1899*

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Three and three make six weeks. We were not yet free—not quite. Our period was doubled. The wary seers who “told us so” had triumphed; and they exploited their intuition for what it was worth, or rather for a great deal more, since clearly it was not worth much. They had triumphed (by a short head, so to speak), or said they had. What matter. They were minor prophets; and the nearness of Methuen and his Column enabled us to bear the trumpet-blowing with equanimity and good humour. The monster head-lines of the *Advertiser*—delightful paper!—proclaimed it “the last week of the siege!” It was placarded on the walls. The newsboys shrieked it abroad. The man in the street confirmed it. The populace believed it. The grocer beamed, and the haberdasher made bold definitely to state the date on which a particular reel of cotton could be purchased. It even stimulated the hotel-keepers to discover hidden spirits. The last week of the siege! how comforting it sounded; and what potent influence it possessed to soothe temperaments unadaptable to siege life.

The funerals of the brave men who had fought their last fight on Saturday took place in the afternoon. A funeral is a mournful thing always; but here were six young men, cut down in the heyday of their lives, being conveyed to their last resting-place. Most of them had been esteemed citizens of the town in defence of which they died. It was this, the circumstances under which they fell, the feeling that it was for the preservation of the homes of the people they had given up their lives, that evoked so much sympathy and sorrow. Thousands of mourners attended to pay the fast tribute of respect to the dead. The various sections of the Town Guard in processional order followed the coffins to the cemetery.

Many things occurred in the course of the day to enhance our satisfaction with the prospect of emancipation. At eleven o'clock an alarm was sounded, and the services in the churches were in consequence cut short. The half of the Town Guard enjoying their day off had their relaxation cut short, too—unnecessarily, as it turned out. Fifty or sixty Boers were prowling about, a powerful glass enabled the zealous look-out to explain. It was a mere storm in a teacup, not by any means the first that had raged in that fragile utensil. This capped all past tempests, and made the men who had been off duty exceedingly angry, and the men who were on, exceedingly gay. Mafeking, however, was fighting on still; and many Boers had been killed in Natal. The *piece-de-resistance* was the last to come. It concerned our own Relief Column, whose progress the enemy had had the temerity to impede at Belmont. How their hardihood had been rewarded with “cold steel”; how they had quailed before it; how they had fled before the conquering Methuen: these and other details, in all their charming vagueness, were received with rapture. It was fine news; and wounded men in the hospital, about to die, changed their minds and lived when they heard it.



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We had a visitor—an emissary from the Boers—on Sunday. And though he turned out to be a Scotchman!—so brimful of hope and good humour were we that the circumstance detracted little from the cordiality of his reception. He was a doctor, the doctor whose services had been commandeered by the practical Boer. Some of us felt disposed to doubt his nationality; but the gentleman talked Scotch—that is, English—dialectically and broad; and when he shook hands familiarly with a few local members of his profession, the sceptics were silenced. Show me your company, *etc.*, did not apply. The main point, however, was, his business. What did he want? He wanted medicines, surgical instruments, and things—a request which occasioned much shoulder-shrugging *apropos* of the medico's "nerve." That he served the Boers in his professional capacity *only*, was evidenced by the candour with which he opened his heart when queried as to the fortunes of the family who had taken a loan of him. He admitted a loss of one hundred killed and wounded Boers in the recent fight. This was rather higher than our own estimate—and we were not given to minimise on the *wrong* side. It was wonderful. Whether the learned doctor exaggerated—but why should he (a Scot) in such a case?—unless indeed the canny one desired to please and make sure of his medicines. Anyhow he got his medicines (including a personal prescription, from his "ain country"), and with a bow of gratitude departed.

The *Diamond Fields' Advertiser* was quite readable on Monday. It contained news, and less of the fiction (culled from old magazines) with which it had been regaling us for weeks. On Monday we read of modern London, and of transports, fights, *etc.* (in the present war). We were engrossed in the news when the Boer guns began to play. Three shots were fired, and we had to admire the impudence of an enemy who acted as if the coming Column gave him no concern. The missiles hit nobody, although one was facetiously alleged to have winged a locust. These insects swarmed the land—it was difficult to avoid hitting them—and one was not missed. We got more shells in the afternoon, but they did no harm whatsoever.

The predominant and all-absorbing subject of discussion was the Column, its coming, its movements generally. We felt a little disappointed at the delays which the opposition it had encountered rendered unavoidable. But we were not despondent, nor hyper-critical—not yet. The bombardments might be written down a fiasco, and what after all did it matter whether relief came to-morrow, or not till the day following. Still, these delays upset plans and calculations. They upset bets and wagers, and the "bad losers" who villified both Briton and Boer with delightful impartiality. They upset diary-writers—prospective meteors in the firmaments of literature—and they upset the magnates of the De Beers Corporation, whose annual meeting had been fixed for that day. The meeting had to be postponed until Thursday, in order that the dividend declared might immediately be cabled, in accordance with custom, to the shareholders throughout the world. The wires were bound to be in flashing order by Thursday. It was re-assuring to find oneself in agreement on that head with a rock of common sense like Mr. Cecil Rhodes.



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Ten more shells were pitched at us on Tuesday, only one of which reached its destination; the other nine went off at a tangent somewhere else, to the chagrin of curio company promoters. It would have been more tactful of the Boers, we thought, to have reserved their ammunition for a more aggressive foe. No great attention, however, was paid to their extravagances, and from anything in the nature of repartee we refrained. There was more serious work in hand; preparations were going on apace to open up an avenue for the Relief Column. The Town Guard were ready; the Light Horse, the Imperial troops, and the armoured train were also to the fore. This formidable combination was soon on its way to the Schmidt's Drift Road, where it found shelter behind some friendly ridges. The Boers occupied Spitzkop and were looking across at us with curiosity—not unmingled with uneasiness, we felt sure. They maintained a rigid silence, and made no attempt to interfere with our arrangements until the armoured train came into view. The ridges we occupied were afterwards shelled, and the *Diamond Fields' Artillery* responded. While this not too bloody duel was in progress, a body of mounted men had received instructions to take up a position away to the right of Spitzkop.

It grew dark eventually, and we decided, or rather got orders, to remain where we were for the night. Given a choice we would have done nothing of the sort; it was chilly weather outside canvas; we had not come prepared for a bivouac, and we had no great coats nor blankets. But they were subsequently sent out to us. To satisfy the pangs of hunger, which were asserting themselves with increasing importunity, we tried (advisedly) the pockets of the coats, and there found the goods required. There were belated "Guards" who got blankets *only*. How they fared is not recorded, but I believe they asked for more! The firing had by this time ceased on both sides; but the impression was that it would be resumed early next morning; that a battle was imminent, and a sleep desirable but not at all imminent. Our "beds" were too strange and cold for sleep—as in the case of peaceful people when travel necessitates a departure from feathers to planks of straw. We watched the play of the searchlight, and were interested observers of a responsive gleam from Modder River. The Column was there for a certainty. We had been listening all day to the booming of guns, but had yet no idea that it was connected with the battle of Modder River. Ultimately we ceased chattering, and charmed *Morpheus* at last—all unconscious of the sad morrow.

For a sad morrow it was. The most tragic day of the siege! A rumour ran riot that Scott-Turner had been killed; but the people *would not* believe it. Colonel Scott-Turner dead! It was hard to convince the populace of the fate of the gallant Colonel; harder still to inculcate that over with him to the great majority had passed twenty-four of his followers. But so it was. Of the survivors thirty were wounded!

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Some seventy or eighty mounted men had attacked the Boers in possession of Carter's Farm (which had been re-taken), and had carried the Farm in the face of a withering fire from the enemy—who fell back upon a stronger position. Nothing daunted, our men brought up their guns and prepared to repeat their success. The Boers resisted fiercely, but were eventually driven back to a third line of defence. Night was rapidly descending, but this notwithstanding, the Light Horse were ordered to complete their victory. It was in this last rush that their daring leader was struck down. The third position was actually taken; but the disappearance of the light rather handicapped the gunners. The enemy was re-inforced, and the remnants of the Light Horse were obliged to evacuate the ground that had cost them so much.

These are the bare facts of the affair—the facts which came to light. Contradictory opinions as to whether there had been a blunder were freely expressed. On the conflicting theories advanced I refrain from commenting. It did not, for the moment, concern the people at large upon whose shoulders the blame rested. Twenty-four dead! and Scott-Turner one of them. Seventeen of the number had been well-known and respected citizens. The *Diamond Fields' Advertiser* commented on the fight as a “triumph” for British arms. This point was, to put it mildly, debatable. The feeling uppermost in the mind of the plain man was that nothing had been accomplished that could compensate for the loss of so many brave men. The consoler who argued that the losses on the other side exceeded ours did not console. Nor did the vapourings of him who prated of what we, acting in conjunction with the Column, would presently give the Boers. The disaster enkindled a distrust of the military which remained inextinguishable to the end. Wherefore the need of risking so many lives, at such a moment, with a Column outside, on its way to set us free? That the critics—and they were legion—should search for motives was inevitable; and the tactics of the military were promptly attributed to a desire for glory (here below). This may have been an erroneous, a wild conclusion; but it was jumped to with great satisfaction. Theoretically, the idea of getting in touch with the approaching troops was good; but it was a premature effort—how awfully premature we knew at last. Our defenders were few enough to defend the perimeter of the city. How were we to hold the positions we had sought to get possession of? To this and much more (*after* the event) the public demanded an answer. They asked in vain; for under the “Resolute Government” of Martial Law, public opinion is an Irishism.

The funerals made a most impressive spectacle. The troops and Volunteers with the bands of their respective regiments headed the cortege. There was profound sadness in the faces of the vast assemblage that crowded the streets. The twenty-four coffins were lowered into the graves, amid a solemn silence broken now and then by the Ministers of religion who read the burial services. It was an awe-inspiring scene, that will be long remembered in the Diamond City.



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The signalling went on as usual in the evening. Heavy fighting, we were told, had taken place at Modder River, with considerable loss on both sides. That was all; it was enough; news of that nature was not satisfying. The De Beers Directors assembled to hold their adjourned meeting, and to adjourn it again. Mr. Rhodes acknowledged that he had been wrong in his calculations. Everybody was wrong, but nobody except Cecil played the candid friend.

Friday was peaceful; an opportune occasion for reviewing our losses. All told, forty lives had been lost. The recent disaster brought down upon the military authorities a chorus of adverse criticism. It had been discovered, too, that it was not the *first* disaster; and for the losses sustained in the earlier sorties the Colonel and his advisers were also condemned. This was hard on the military, whose conduct of previous operations had been extolled by the men in the street who now inveighed against it. There were, of course, fair-minded people who were too honest not to remember this; but they could not *forget* their meat allowances; and they wrathfully connived at the hard sayings without going so far as to join in their dissemination. But, indeed, what with regrets, tragedies, dry bread, and indifferent dinners—their combined effect was not to lift us high above ourselves (later on, the altitude was better). Down at the railway station extensive preparations were being made for the revival of traffic. Hundreds of men were employed laying down new rails, and widening the *terminus*—to provide space for the miles of trams in the wake of the Column. The Royal Engineers, accompanying the troops, were repairing the line as they advanced. Other people, who knew better, had it that a new railroad through a circuitous route was being made. This was asserted with a positiveness, a clearness, as it were, of second sight that cowed all promptings of common sense. But it was not of supreme importance by what route the train came, if it only came soon. Not a few were indifferent as to whether it ever came (in); they would be satisfied with a seat in a truck going *out*. We were anxious to know what was going on in the world. An intense longing for a glimpse of Stock Exchange quotations existed in some quarters; others were dying to “back” horses; and there were guileless people whose sorrows were epitomised in a sigh for a letter, or two, (or a dozen) from home, and corresponding assurances that all was well there. We speculated a good deal on the probable depth of the piles of correspondence accumulating for each of us. The letter-sorters were not enjoying their holidays; we hoped—we knew they would soon end. Had we dreamt that they were to lengthen into another seventy days, the dream would assuredly have killed us. But, thank goodness, in the watches of the night our sleep was not haunted by the spectral truth. Seventy *hours* assimilated better



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with—our dreams. There was the Column busy signalling and settling it all with the Colonel. The Colonel was certainly a reticent man; he gave us precious little *data*, to supplement our faith. But the *nearness* of Methuen was *data* enough for us. It did not do, it was foolish when it was useless, to be too curious. It was puzzling, to be sure, to watch the movements of the Boers, or rather their lack of movement. That they saw the signals and knew what to expect went without saying. And yet they perversely showed no signs of running away. On the contrary, they kept improving their defences and generally indicating that they had come to stay. We liked the *hardihood* of this attitude; but were on the whole inclined to pity the poor beggars. Defiance, in the circumstances, could only mean annihilation for them. Kimberley reasoned thusly: Kimberley reasoned well.

Saturday made it still clearer that the ineffable enemy, so far from being frightened, was obdurate yet. Large commandoes of Boers had joined the besiegers during the night. All day long they toiled like Trojans, digging trenches. At Oliphantsfontein they erected a new camp and made their fortifications unassailable. We could only conclude that they purposed making a stand. The fatuousness of such a course was clear to us; for with the aid of the Relief Column we would presently be in a position to attack the Boers from many sides; to hem them in; to cut off retreat; and to kill or make prisoners of them all. It was a bold conviction; we still viewed things through Napoleonic glasses.

It was stated that President Steyn was outside, to stimulate the burghers with his presence and eloquence. The news was interesting, and the hope was fairly general that no worse fate would be his than that of a prisoner of war. There were also some particulars of the Modder River fight; the Boers had been driven from their kopjes; hundreds had been shot; thousands made prisoners; and whips of guns captured. This was not quite a proper version of what happened at the Modder (it is questionable whether we were ever made acquainted with the actual facts); but we believed it all; it sounded well. One of the funny features of the siege in its earlier stages was the readiness on the one hand with which a practical community swallowed good news, however false; and the stern disinclination evinced on the other to be “taken in” by the truth when it chanced to leak out and happened to be disagreeable.

Such was the condition of affairs when forty-nine long days had crept by. As to the brightness of the immediate future no misgivings existed. The days would soon shorten to their normal duration, and be all the happier for the antecedent gloom. Relief could not in the nature of things be very far away. Ah, no; it never was; that was the pity of it—the irritant destined to deepen our disgust—to nourish our discontent. At Mafeking they were spared at least the galling



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consciousness of relief so near, and yet so far. The irritation, however, was not to be felt yet. We looked confidently to an early release—so confidently that the decadence of dinners did not distress us. We considered it of relatively little consequence that provisions were becoming scarce; they would last another fortnight “in a pinch,” we thought. As for luxuries, we talked of them, and promised shortly to make up for lost time. The anticipated reunion between bread and butter was a sustaining thought. The Column might be trusted to carry with it a sufficiency of firkins to achieve that glorious end; and we were meanwhile content to be fastidious in our choice of jams, and to be the bane of our grocer’s existence.

### CHAPTER VIII

*Week ending 9th December, 1899*

For such comfort as preserved fruit could shed over the soul was still ours. It was not classed as a “necessary,” and the retailers being free to charge freely for it could sell it at a price too “long” for the purses of the many. Dry bread is an unpalatable thing, and the new “Law’s” loaf was superlative in that respect. The grocer was beginning to discriminate, so far as he dared, between his friends (his customers) and the casual purchaser, whose affected cordiality did not deceive the shrewd old wretch. Butter had ceased to be practical politics; fruit and vegetables were sorely missed. When existence is rendered trying by the scorching rays of a Kimberley sun, fruit and vegetables are essential to the preservation of health; but there was none preserved in the summer of the siege. Grapes grew in corrugated green-houses outside the doors of the houses, but there were no vineyards to speak of. The quality of the fruit, too, was poor; and though it was yet far from being ripe, it was guarded with a vigilance that made robbing a garden a suicidal proceeding. The indefatigable coolies—our not too green green-grocers—did contrive to get hold of a species of wild grape, no bigger nor sweeter than haws, and to sell them for two shillings a pound! Two *pence* could in normal times procure the best product of the vine; but these of course were siege grapes, and siege prices were charged for them, as in the matter of siege eggs, siege drinks, siege potatoes, siege everything—that the “Law” allowed. Morning lemons were never so badly needed; oranges would hardly suit the purpose—but they, too, were gone. Apples were out of the question; water-melon parties had ceased to be. The absence of the “Java” (guava) broke the Bantu heart. “Ave a banana” was (happily) not yet composed, and gooseberries—Cape gooseberries do not grow on bushes. Small green things which lured one to colic were offered by the cool coolies for twopence each—a sum that would have been exorbitant for a gross had they not borne the hall-mark of siege peaches.



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For vegetables, too, our livers waxed torpid, and our blood boiled in vain. The potato was gone; the benefits conferred on posterity by Sir Walter Raleigh were at length realised in a negative way. Miniature “Murphies” fetched four pence halfpenny *each*, while an adult member of the *genus* at ninepence was worth two of the little ones. Mr. Rhodes may have luxuriated on potatoes (*cum grano salis!*) but few others were so very Irish. The De Beers Company owned a large garden, and that this should have been given over to the hospital was a delicate consideration of which even the dyspeptic could not complain. Cabbages were a dream. Of cauliflowers a memory lingered. Soft words buttered no parsnips. Onions were “off”—so we went on weeping. Everything in the garden but some wizened carrots had withered away. Such carrots! small, cadaverous, brick-coloured things, no bigger than a cork, as dry, as masticable, and, still like a cork, with little save a *smell* to commend their indulgence. But like the donkeys that we were, we ate them every time!

Talking of corks reminds me of bottles, and the precious little that was in *them*. We had no whiskey; think of that, ye Banks and Braes! There were nice crystal brands in the hotel windows, but—I shall be dealing later with *oils*. Sceptical tipplers, whose every feature spelled whiskey, were reduced to the painful necessity of diluting their sodas with lime juice; and so strongly did the “claret” taste of timber that the beverage was adjudged a non-intoxicant with *extraordinary unanimity!* Port and sherry, being beyond our reach, were despised, like our neighbour’s sour grapes. The publican, however, had good spirits still; Cape brandy (or “Smoke,” as it was called) found a market at last, and swelled heads enormously. But if the signs and portents of a drought in beer and stout were to be trusted, the unkindest cut of all was yet to come. And it did come. In the thirsty clime of Kimberley the consumption of the brewer’s goods was large; and in the restaurants, with bars attached, good meals were sold cheaply to facilitate the sale of the beer which “washed” the food down. When the drought came the proprietors of these delectable taverns promptly raised their charges by fifty per cent., albeit the value and the variety of the victuals had lessened. Men in receipt of good wages loved beer and indulged the passion freely. The addition of the Imperial allowances to their incomes had intensified their thirst. Then there were the unusual conditions under which they lived, the paucity of provisions, the great heat—all these things tended to damage temperance and to exalt the flowing bowl. A multitude suffered when beer and stout gave out. The tipplers grew pale and visibly thinner; nature made her exactions with unwonted abruptness. A certain degree of sympathy was felt for the Bacchanals, by none more sincerely than by the druggist—artful

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old quack! It was to him the sufferers had to turn, to such straits were they reduced. Drugs were booming, and the druggist, not satisfied with the normal hugeness of his profits, slipped into the fashion and fleeced all round with unprecedented flagrancy. A purgative proclamation—classing pills as “necessaries”—was called for, but it never came. Obese folk, fearful that their flesh was falling off in lumps, drank freely of cod liver oil. On the other hand, fragile creatures of delicate mould thought black tea not only cheaper but ever so much nicer. Of course, the poor chemist was not responsible for tastes. He had much to answer for; but he was really sorry for the nerves and the penury of the poor.

With Monday came three despatch-riders who reported that heavy fighting had taken place—somewhere; the authorities declined to tell us where. The Boers remained docile all day; the heat was oppressive, but their silence was more generally attributed to a tardy realisation of their position. The military were unusually alert and watchful. The public graciously approved of this watchfulness, but pooh-poohed the danger of invasion. We were tired hearing day after day that an attack on the town was to be made “to-night”; it was to be “taken” six nights out of every seven, the last being, if I mistake not, the one on which General French was feted at the Kimberley Club.

Elaborate arrangements were made on Tuesday for the better protection of our cattle. The quadrupeds, Dutch and English, were on the best of terms—a happy augury, surely, for the amity which would unite the bipeds of the land when the war was done. We had a batch of natives employed digging trenches for the cattle-guards. A patrol was at hand to nip in the bud any interference with the work which might be contemplated. If the Boers did interfere, so much the better; interference would involve a fight, and from a friendly tussle in the sun the patrol was not averse. On the south and west sides the enemy still laboured at their fortifications. We knew not what to make of this; it nonplussed us. We had ceased ascribing it to want of knowledge: for we had, reluctantly, let it down on us that the Boers knew as much of the Column’s movements as we did ourselves. But of course we also knew that the Boer was a child in such matters as generalship and tactics.

Every afternoon, at this period, the “child” delighted in trying to hit the head-gear of the Premier Mine. Whether it was the red flag that floated at the top or the thing itself he sought to tatter is uncertain. At any rate, it was no easy matter to hit the head-gear, as the gunner had long since discovered, nor, could he hit it, to smash it. Hundreds of shells were thrown at it, but it was never struck, and to damage it materially it would be necessary to strike it more than once. Its substance was tough—what Bismarck would have called iron painted to look like wood. Another object of

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Boer wrath was the searchlight. Night attacks were supposed to be the enemy's *forte*, and it was only the difficulty of extinguishing the candle that delayed *our* extinction. And so perhaps it was; we never knew for certain, for the difficulty of applying the snuffers remained insuperable to the end. Numberless missiles were shot at the searchlight, but its radiance was never dimmed for a moment.

The most important of the thousand and one rumours circulated on Tuesday was that a place called Jacobsdal had been taken by Methuen. We were not pleased to hear it. Being anxious to give Kimberley away to his lordship for nothing, we were at a loss to know why he should go out of his way to lay hold of a town when a city offered. There were, however, extenuating circumstances, in that a vast quantity of provisions had been seized at Jacobsdal. Provisions were now in our eyes of greater value than diamonds even! On Wednesday the *Advertiser* corroborated the rumour (*re* Jacobsdal); it gave details of the whole brilliant achievement, and sundry absorbing items anent the digestiveness of the confiscated supplies. All this was highly interesting; but unfortunately it was all untrue; it was discovered to be fiction. It was not the first lie (not quite), but none other had been so quickly, so frankly exposed. Our newspaper had been misinformed, and candidly told us so.

The De Beers directors, looking a little emaciated from anxiety rather than want of nourishment, assembled in Stockdale Street to hold their adjourned meeting. But the Column had not yet come in, the Chairman announced. The public, who were growing sarcastic, opined that the Kafirs imprisoned in the compounds knew it! Mr. Rhodes suitably explained how sorry he was to disappoint again; the fault was not his; he was not (he confided) in the confidence of Lord Methuen. A further postponement was unavoidable, and the meeting dispersed for a week. The period was significantly long.

The happiest section of the community was the composite collection of human units that constituted the Town Guard, and lived in the camps. There were to be found representatives of all nationalities—English, Dutch, Irish, Scotch, German, Norwegian, French, *etc.* With the local (Kimberley) variety there intermingled all sorts and conditions of refugees. Men of wealth, of high social standing and education were there, sleeping in the same “bed,” playing cards and competing in “anecdoteage” with the sons of toil. From the very beginning of the siege the Town Guard had had to “rough it” in rations. It was black tea or blacker coffee for breakfast; sorry soup and meat (the osseous joints that made the soup) for dinner; the breakfast again for tea—that made up from day to day the dreary *menu*. The Mayor, indeed, had for a little while managed to administer currant buns (it was not easy always to find the currant) for supper; but even prior to the official proclamation of their

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indigestibility they had gone the way of all luxuries. The generosity of the public, however—the female portion of it especially—must not be forgotten. Substantial presents, which were always acknowledged through the columns of the Press, came frequently to the camps. The cynics detected astuteness in this rush into print; but while they mourned the frailty of human nature, as instanced by the vanity competitions in the papers, they humbled themselves to the Greeks so far as to partake of such gifts as were offered. Tobacco, cigarettes, and other dainties were received, and consumed with rude rapidity. Every man was supposed to be responsible for the safety of a tin pannikin, out of which to scald himself drinking hot tea (for it had the merit of being hot—if a black draught has any). But there were soldiers who denied having been supplied with “cups”; whose appeals for pannikins were persistently flouted by the military utensil-keeper-in-chief. The “tape” of the Service could not tie up mendacity! The lives of honest martyrs were thus spent in an eternal borrowing quest, and the petty larceny of pannikins was a common and popular crime. Many a heated, yet amusing, quarrel, many a storm in a porringer relieved the monotony of camp life.

Concerts did it, too, at frequent intervals; and fine concerts they were. At the Reservoir camp they were particularly excellent, not the least interesting “turns” being the sanguinary “sword speeches” of the Officer Commanding. Comic and melodious songs were rendered with equal gusto; the Royal Artillery rivalled the D.F. Artillery, and Tommy Atkins, the merchants, shopboys, clerks, and “civies” generally. The services of an Irishman—*born* great, by virtue of the brogue with which he kicked Off to Philadelphia—were in great demand at all the halls. One night the Chair was occupied by the Senior Officer, surrounded by his staff, in a halo of cigarette smoke. He (the Chairman) had a box in front of him, doing duty as a table; a rough programme lay before him, and two candles, with long beer bottles serving as *candelabra*, threw sufficient light on the “table,” and lit the cigarettes. The president had bottles in front of him, containing something still more illuminating than tallow (judging by the hue of the faces privileged to sample it), from which the ring round the “table” from time to time regaled itself. Many an envious glance was shot at the ring; and by-the-by it was wonderful the celerity with which the diffidence so marked at the outset disappeared when it was observed that vocal contributors (soloists) were by courtesy entitled to a “pull” from the bottles. Everybody wanted to sing, and dismal howlers who, ordinarily, would die first, were driven, tempted, lured, impelled to howl for drink. The liquor, *generously* diluted with minerals, was served out in pannikins; and when the concert ended the National Anthem was taken by storm, as also were the empty bottles to squeeze, lick, and drain to the dregs.

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The Boer guns continued to sing inexplicably dumb; Wednesday was dull. The ladies, who had been pretty free in their criticisms of the Boers, were saying hard things of people nearer home. They had a grievance against the butcher and his manipulation of the meat. The clamour at the shambles of the butcher despot was growing in volume. Hungry masses crowded the shops, and that some should emerge meatless from the melee was inevitable. Nepotism was reputed to be much in vogue. The Colonel had curbed the meat vendors in the matter of price; a strictly limited number of oxen were slaughtered daily, but the number was sufficient to provide everyone with his or her half-pound of flesh. This arrangement, however, was to some extent rendered nugatory by cute people who had what was pithily termed “a leg” of the butcher. Thus a “friend,” or a monied acquaintance, could get as much meat as he could eat (a good deal!)—which amounted to the legitimate share of perhaps half a dozen starving creatures who had cash in the bank! In practice the system of distribution did not work well; the State interference was no doubt a blessing; but it was a mixed blessing.

On Thursday a mounted force re-visited Carter’s Farm to entice the Boers into battle. In pursuance of this purpose some shells were expended; but the Boers disregarded the challenge. The rumour-monger, who had an explanation for everything, interpreted their silence to mean that the guns had been requisitioned to oppose the advance of Methuen, who did not seem to be making great headway. One of the sights of Thursday was a *khaki* horse! We were in this connection accustomed to such diversity of shades as black, grey, white, and brown; but a painted quadruped had never before been seen in Kimberley. The authorities were responsible for the painter’s assault on the lily. It would appear that a high percentage of white and grey horses had been shot in the several sorties; hence the necessity of varnishing the survivors. The white animals were more discernible to the eye behind a Mauser. Cond’s Fluid was the “varnish” utilised; and curious to relate, one noble steed was, not khaki, but *green* after treatment. Perhaps he wanted to be shot.

A fund for the benefit of the families whose bread-winners had fallen in the defence of Kimberley was opened on Friday. The right man put the collection in motion; Mr. Rhodes, on behalf of De Beers, headed the list of subscriptions with ten thousand pounds. The Diamond Syndicate followed with two thousand. The Mayor, with the sanction of the Town Council, gave two hundred; and the citizens’ “mites” were very decent indeed. It was also decided to erect a memorial in honour of the dead; for this object seven hundred pounds was subscribed. The Refugee Committee continued to perform their duties with unabated energy. It was creditable to all concerned that nothing was left undone to lighten the burden of the poor; and the deftness—not to speak of the charity—of the ladies in the scooping out of meal and sugar was admirable.



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Saturday was heralded in by the music of the Column's cannon, which verily had charms to soothe our savage breasts. It was lyddite melody; the lyddite shells were singing. It was a siege article of faith, a siege truism, that the Boers could not long stand up to a British bombardment; and it was an accepted dogma that lyddite was the article utilised to knock them down. We had read and heard (and magnified) much of what lyddite could do; our ideas of its decimating powers were elephantine—and *white* at that. Sometimes we pitied the Boers; but were not cognisant, of course, in such weak moments, of the disinfecting qualities of bottled vinegar; we did not then know that a portable cruet formed part and parcel of each burgher's kit. It did not need a protest from General Joubert against the use of lyddite to confirm our impressions of what it could do. The local Press was alarmingly eloquent on lyddite; we read not only of what it *could* do, but consistent accounts of what it had actually *done*. At a certain battle, for example, a lyddite shell fell among seventy Boers; and when the smoke cleared away only eight remained alive, seven of whom were asphyxiated by the fumes! We were glad that one escaped. Many similar tales were printed for our delectation, and our credulity—being of the siege order—was pathetically fine.

In the afternoon we opened fire with our big gun. The Boers retaliated with unusual fury, and, I am sorry to add, with unusual effect, for in the duet, which lasted several hours, a missile killed Sergeant-Major Moss and wounded six men. The death of Mr. Moss caused very general regret; like many who had gone before him, he was a well-known townsman; like others, too, he left a wife to mourn him. The body of a white lad who had disappeared some weeks before was discovered on Saturday; and these two additions brought up our total of deaths to forty-four. It may be well to explain that the list included three or four natives. The natives are human beings; but some people cannot see it.

So closed the fifty-sixth day of the siege. Two months had rolled by, at traction engine speed. Some impatience manifested itself; the food was all wrong. But we looked forward, and were sustained by the ultra-jolly Christmas that would be ours. The few who had promised themselves an Antipodean Yuletide in the frost—or slush—of merry England could not keep their words. The most would have to be made of the coast towns. What an exodus it would be! To sniff the salt air; to fight our battles over again; to fondle the missing (gastric) links that would litter the Christmas table! The “greater number” could not of course go far from the Diamond City. But Modder River was near. There were the time-honoured annual excursions to that modest watering-place and now famous battlefield to excite the imagination, where “shells” could be gathered of more historic value than the “common” ones by the sea.



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## CHAPTER IX

*Week ending 16th December, 1899*

The pleasures of Sunday were on the wane. The outbreak of war had detracted little from its peace; but its dinners were—oh, so different! Sunday had formerly been in the main an occasion of abandonment to the joy of eating. The propriety of such a custom may be open to question; but we had turned over a new leaf—until the perusal of the old one would be feasible again. Our bad habits were compulsorily in abeyance: the “good tables” were gone. The Simple Life is a splendid thing, but unless *voluntarily* adopted it sheds all its splendour. Delicacies had long been falling victims to galloping consumption, and at this date had totally succumbed to the disease. Worse still, the “necessaries” were more or less infected, and disposed to go the way of the dainties. Meat troubles maddened everybody. The beef was *all* neck. Everybody said so. Not one in ten, it seems, ever managed to secure a more tender morsel from the flesh of these remarkable bovine *phenomena* (for they *were* oxen, not giraffes!) The meat was indiscriminately chopped up in the shambles, and the odd one (in ten) who had not his legal complement of “neck” allotted him was just as likely to be given for his share—to take or leave—a nose, his due weight of tail, a teat or two, or a slab of suet, as any more esteemed ration from the rib. It was laid down that favouritism had no place in Martial Law; but we were not *all* Medes and Persians in Kimberley. The rush for meat between six and eight o’clock in the morning was one of the sights of the siege: It sometimes happened that people, after a long wait, would throw up the sponge in despair and go home meatless; the odds were that they had not missed much, but their grievance was not the less real, nor their “language” the more correct, on that account. There were persons who never *tried* to get meat; and they were probably the wisest—‘the world knows nothing of its greatest men.’ In the scramble for precedence a fight occasionally ensued. The special constable did his best to keep order; but he had only a truncheon; he had no other weapon, not even a helmet—that awe-inspiring utensil!—to cow the multitude. Numbers of people deliberately transgressed the “Law” by turning out at *five* in the morning to make sure of their meat; and the Summary Court was kept busy fining these miscreants ten shillings each, with the usual “oakum” alternative. One lady (in a letter to the Editor) drew a vivid picture of the rush for meat. She had travelled a good deal, she told us, and had “roughed it” on Boxing nights; she had been (unaffectionately) squeezed to suffocation in London. But nowhere outside the Diamond Fields had she encountered the rudeness that springs from ten thousand empty stomachs! Who now shall say that hunger is good sauce?



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There were, besides meat troubles, minor grievances increasing every day. A plate of porridge was a thing of the past; and milk of course was an *antediluvian* quantity! All the tinned milk had been commandeered for the hospital. Nobody objected to the priority of that institution's claims; but it was complained that the quantity commandeered was excessive, unnecessarily large. Eggs were one and a penny *each* (each egg!), which sum few could afford to pay, and a number, whose economic souls revolted at it, declined to pay, through sheer respect for proportion. There was nothing to fall back on but "mealie-pap," an imitation porridge, made of fine white mealie meal; the very colour of it tired one; white stirabout, connoisseurs opined, was not a natural thing. There were scores who would not touch "mealie-pap" with a forty-foot spoon. But they changed in time; "I am an acquired taste," cries Katisha; so is "mealie-pap." We acquired the taste for it, just as people do for tomatoes (where were they!) or a glass of vinegar and water. This hew porridge was not new to the natives; they dissipated on it three times a day, and were satisfied so long as they had sugar to make it doubly fattening. It was all so unlike the piping times of peace! Sunday was now a bore, productive chiefly of *ennui*. On Monday one could at least scour the town in search of something to eat; and many a coolie shop was invaded by bluffers, dressed in the "little brief authority" of a Town Guard's hat, who endeavoured to bully the coolie into unearthing hidden stores. But to no avail; the coolie was not to be frightened, nor even excited, by hat or pugaree. His stock of good things had indeed been reduced to lozenges, sugar-sticks, and other dental troubles.

Nothing startling was expected on Monday; but we were disappointed. The noise sounded like the roar of thunder; we had heard similar sounds emanate from Modder River; but these were undoubtedly louder and nearer. It soon became evident that they could not be thunder-claps; they were too continuous and unceasing. We listened for six hours to the incessant booming of British artillery—the finest in the world! What else could it be! Would there be a Boer left, we asked ourselves, would one survive to depict the carnage around him. The guns in action must have numbered forty or fifty. Soon a great rush was made for the debris heaps on the Reservoir side—whence, through a glass, the shells could be seen bursting in rapid succession at Spytfontein. Strong though the position admittedly was, its defenders could never resist a cannonade so awful. It was the famous, disastrous battle of Magersfontein that was in progress. But of that we then knew nothing. We knew not that hundreds of the Highland Brigade lay dead, nor that while Kimberley was brimming over with enthusiasm at the prospect of immediate freedom, dismay was rampant everywhere else. There we were, twenty miles from the scene of slaughter, looking on, not only ignorant of the truth, but entirely mistaken in our assumption that it was what we wished it to be.



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The sight of what appeared to be a balloon (and we soon discovered that it was nothing else) excited tremendous interest. It ascended and descended repeatedly during the battle, apparently for the purpose of locating the enemy and directing the fire of Methuen's guns. We had been inundated with narratives of the extraordinary strength of the positions into which Boer ingenuity had converted the kopjes of Magersfontein. No further attention was paid to these tales, for lyddite was a terrible thing—that could move kopjes. It was but a matter of hours until the Column would be with us, unless, indeed, it paused for rest. The next day, we felt, would end the Siege of Kimberley, and bring again into vogue good dinners, buttered bread, and—something to drink.

When firing ceased at length, the Beaconsfield Town Guard determined to make a noise on their own account. The easiest way to do it was to sound the alarm; and they did sound it, with right good will. They had observed a large party of the enemy clearing out of Alexandersfontein, and were possessed of an hallucination that it portended an attack on Beaconsfield. These wolf-cries, however, were venial faults; they denoted watchfulness; we were not disposed to take umbrage at small things; it was a day of victory. No suspicion of the truth flashed through our minds to upset our comfortable conclusions. Our ignorance was bliss; the folly of wisdom was to manifest itself all too soon.

The *Advertiser* had news at last—authentic news and fresh; and forth from Stockdale Street was launched a three-penny “Special,” to tell of the balloon “we” had seen and of the cannon “we” had heard. That was all. We put down our tickets without a murmur. In the fulness of our hearts we said the paper had to live. The revenue from its advertising columns was a cypher, since there was so little to advertise about, and so little need to advertise anything that *was* about. The “ads.” had fallen off only in the sense that they were no longer paid for. They were still printed (to fill up space); and very annoying reading they made. Before, there was *some* truth in them; now, there was none. How we sighed for the times of extreme individualism.

In the afternoon a football match was played. The gate-money was handed over to the Widows' and Orphans' Fund. Our happy speculations on what happened at Magersfontein served a good purpose here in stimulating the generosity of the spectators. A team of our visitors (the Lancashire Regiment) lined up against the pick of the Citizen Soldiers. The game was well contested, but the superior discipline of the Colonel's lot told, and they won.



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At break of day on Tuesday the Column's guns were at it again. This was disappointing, inasmuch as it led us to infer that some Boers were yet alive at Magersfontein. And our ardour was further damped by the De Beers directors who instead of formally dispersing until the next day, once more adjourned their meeting—*sine die*. What did it mean? A Special was shortly forthcoming and was bought up eagerly, while many eyes were being strained to catch a glimpse of Lord Methuen's legions in the distance. The Special gave us news of a fight, indeed; but not of *the* fight; it was Modder River over again. In fine, we were sold again, for the Modder River fight was—if not quite ancient history—as remote from our thoughts as the “famous victory” at Blenheim in ages past. Despatch riders had been coming and going, we knew all about the River battle, and after an interval of fifteen days an ambiguous “slip” was slipped upon a too confiding *clientele*! It was sharp practice; and its employment at a moment when suspense had thrown us off our guard was superb. We bristled with indignation, but the *coup* (as such) was splendid. We, the victims, were not entirely blameless; we had had ample experience of the risk attached to speculation in Specials. It was ever thus. An ancient number of the *Cape Times* would drop from the clouds, and for weeks the news it contained would be administered in homeopathic doses to the public at three pence per dose. It was good business. “Slip” was the appropriate appellation bestowed upon the Special. Sometimes two or three “Slips” would be issued on the same day. One would come out early, after which a huge blackboard, intimating in chalked capitals that “important news” was to appear in a later edition, would be carried round the town by two black boys. And though the news was never important, the enterprise was a success. To the smart sets the limited reading matter the “half sheet of notepaper” contained was a positive recommendation; and at afternoon (Natal) teas there was many a “Slip” between the cup and the lip.

Time passed; and still the Column came not. We felt disgusted rather than distressed; we were yet confident of the Column's invincibility. Various tit-bits of secondary interest were served out to humour us, and a startling rumour was put in circulation—a rumour round which clung no element of justification to soften the wrath it aroused.

A meeting composed of the Military authorities and a few leading civilians had been held some days before, and the subject of its deliberations had at length come to light. It was proposed and debated at this meeting that—when railway communication had been restored—all women, children, and non-combatants should be sent away to the coast! This would mean some twenty-seven thousand whites, together with natives, coolies, *etc.*—about forty thousand people. The idea behind all this was to make Kimberley a garrison town, to stock it well with provisions, and afterwards to allow the Boers—if they were so disposed—to re-mutilate the line to their hearts' content. The “Military Situation” would not admit of the employment of a host of men to guard it.

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The scheme was immediately howled down. The ladies, it need hardly be said, were well in the van of opposition. They foregathered in the streets, and with arms fixed resolutely akimbo denounced the contemplated outrage as a monstrous tyranny—enough to make them “turn Boer,” indeed, as one lady luridly put it. Whither would they go? Would the “Military Situation” answer whither? There were women of mature years who, given a choice between hanging and a whirl day and night through the Karoo, would almost favour the suspension of the constitution! But apart from physical inconvenience, the idea of forsaking their homes and husbands was too ridiculous. The notion of living in tents on potted beef and adamantine biscuits was shuddered at. The whole project was voted a wild-cat scheme (and Mr. Rhodes agreed). After the spartan bravery they had displayed for two months, the ladies regarded this new and wanton strain on their loyalty as inhuman. Their protest was loud and dignified; and when the women are concerned in a public protest the men are—oh, so mere! And the men in khaki were no exception to the rule; they were cowed, with all their munitions of war. They had decided on no definite course of action; or said they had not—to save their face. Their plans were essentially tentative; and, besides, the railway train—an important factor—was not just yet able to carry far a scheme of compulsory migration.

Thursday came; but not so Methuen. It was allowed that the Noble Lord could hardly be expected to gauge accurately the violence of our hurry; nor to conceive, however noble his imagination, that our hens laid eggs at eighteen pence apiece. We got another glimpse of the balloon to cheer us, and were also edified in the course of the day with news of the *Belmont* battle. The Belmont battle was a stale story when the Modder River fight was fresh, and the latter was now in all conscience stale enough. Of Magersfontein, not a word. This reticence in regard to Magersfontein intensified our curiosity; it was the parent of a pessimism that was to thrive. Common sense and the dictates of reason *would* clamour for recognition. Between the struggle at Modder River and the publication of its result there had been no interval to speak of. The fight of Belmont had occasioned no departure from the exercise of the “new diplomacy.” We had heard of the collision and of the victory at Graspan almost simultaneously. But we were not yet acquainted with the sequel to the clash at Magersfontein; it was a solemn secret. There was news that Cronje had decamped from Mafeking and was at Modder River with an augmented force; but this did not for the moment interest us. In his (Cronje’s) alleged quarrels with the Free Staters we had no immediate concern. What they told us of his inglorious retreat from the north was not to the point; it was enough that he had been wafted south by an ill wind that might blow us no good luck. All these tit-bits made news in the abstract, but were foreign to the mystery surrounding what happened at Magersfontein. Something was wrong; but the policy of prolonging the suspense was not right. Every nook and cranny in the hospital were being held in readiness for the sick and wounded (presumably accompanying the Column), and a vague fear was entertained that all the nooks and crannies might be needed. Who could tell?

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More news in the afternoon—the wrong sort again. A faded (pink) copy of the *Cape Argus* was mysteriously smuggled through. Not a line of it alluded to Magersfontein. A screw was loose somewhere; our distrust of the Military increased. Could it be, was it conceivable that Methuen had been worsted at Magersfontein? That indeed was a reasonable conclusion to draw from the reticence of our Rulers. But it was not *strictly* logical, and besides—we liked it not. We preferred to attribute the silence to a way they have in the army; to the Colonel, who did not take tea with our Editor (it was said)—for Special reasons. We sympathised with the boycott; but the conduct of the “sojers” tended to cause a reaction in the Editor’s favour. Our paper would tell the truth and shame the devil if the Censor, who was also a “sojer,” did not unblushingly forbid it. We were oddly ingenious at times when the monotony clamoured for variation.

But to return to the *Argus*. It was affecting in its puffery of the beefsteak pudding that ninepence purchased in Cape Town; and poignantly prolix in its conception of how Horatius held the bridge of Modder River some five-and-twenty years ago (*sic*). The Boers, we gathered, had been knocked about at Ladysmith, and Mr. Morley had sympathised with them in London. All this would have been entertaining, even exciting, *before* Magersfontein; but after? it annoyed us.

On Saturday a sort of “boiling oil” turn was given by the rumour-monger. We heard wild stories concerning the annihilation of the British army. The air was red with blood. No importance was attached to these ghastly theories—they were nothing more—but their effects were depressing; they threw an atmosphere of gloom over the city, which was reflected in a thousand faces. What was once a “frigid falsehood” had been modified to mean a “gross exaggeration.” This connoted a slight departure from sentiment, a tendency to reason, to think more dispassionately. Anxious as we were to get again in touch with the world and what it could offer to eat, we could no longer evade the sorrowful conclusion that siege figures, like every other, make four of two and two.

In the distance the cannon kept booming intermittently; nothing but boom. Our besiegers’ guns were being used to check the advance of Methuen. There remained only one piece of ordnance, nicknamed “Old Susannah,” to keep Kimberley in order. The Premier Mine was the recipient of some lumps of love from this amorous gipsy; but nobody was smitten by her charms.

The death of the Mayor of Beaconsfield was announced in the afternoon. In him the Town Guard lost a capable captain, and Kimberley a worthy citizen. Saturday was Dingaan’s day—a sad reminder of the rejoicings associated with the anniversary, and which had to be skipped for once. Despite the prevailing glumness, however, the populace turned out to patronise a gymkhana entertainment at the Light Horse camp. The bands of the two regiments contributed musical selections; admission was free (which accounted for a packed “house”); but when the hat was artfully passed round for our charity we winced, and were only partially satisfied that it was at our discretion surreptitiously to put in it what we would from a button to a shilling.



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Amid such *gala* surroundings the week ended. We were still in the dark, the doings of the Column were yet enveloped in mystery. The thunder of its artillery had lost its charm, and indeed a great deal of its noise. Dame Rumour, the lying jade, was saying nasty things, but downhearted—what! not much! The last flash on Saturday night was from a *manufactured* gem. The Boer Army was in Cape Town, if you please!—with their guns on Table Mountain—and all the Britons in the sea—swimming home to dear old England! Well, no matter; Kimberley would fight on, constitute a “new Capital,” perhaps, or fall, if fate ordained it, with its face to the foe.

### CHAPTER X

*Week ending 23d December, 1899*

Everything was going from bad to worse, and though the tropical weather was not conducive to heartiness of appetite the dishes on our tables were distressing. To attempt to compute the countless creature comforts missing at this stage of our sorrows would be ridiculous; nor do I propose inflicting on the reader a reiteration of what remained to keep body and soul together. Discussion on the Column and its catering potentialities had come to be proscribed, and lamentations over the sufferings of the inner man were as bitter as if all hope of alleviation had vanished for ever and hunger was to be our portion for all time. Indeed, when matters became worse a better spirit of resignation was manifested. To the seasoned campaigner roughing it on the Karoo our fare, plenty of it, might seem good, luxurious even; but to us, with very little of it, surrounded by the civilising influences of knives and forks, serviettes, plates, teapots, no end of pepper and *insufficient* salt—it wore a different aspect and seemed anything but luxurious. Yet that was our position day after day, Sunday after Sunday, and the irony growing grimmer all along with unfailing regularity. At the camps the *menu* was practically the same, but the graces of civilisation were happily less in evidence there. There were fortunate possessors of aviaries, and people who owned hens that produced no protoplasmic fruit, who could have a bird for dinner occasionally. A brisk business in fowls was done in the streets. The birds fetched enormous prices. Very young ones of sparrow proportions, not long out of the shell, were slaughtered wholesale, to pander to the palate of—perchance a member of the Society for the prevention of cruelty to animals. And here a tribute is due to him or her who, rising above the selfishness—the siege selfishness—of the majority, invited a friend now and then to share their good fortune. There were such noble souls; their numbers were few—not ten per cent, of those in a position to be hospitable—but all the more precious for their rarity. It was a sight to fill one with envy to see the cherished chickens being carried through the streets as carefully



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as if they were worth their weight in gold—as indeed they nearly were. Ever and anon the bearer of a bird would be saluted by a passer-by who would desire to know its price. On hearing it he would enjoy a good laugh, or relieve his feelings with a good oath in deprecation of avarice so naked. Another would pause and say nothing, but with a baleful gleam in his eye would set himself to measure the proportions—not of the chicken, but of him who carried it, while he mentally calculated his chances of success in a tussle, and shaped in his mind a desperate resolve to enjoy one good meal and then die, or perish, anyhow, in the attempt. All the provision shops were still open, but there was nothing for sale in half them. Tinned meats had given out; this was considered the last straw, even by the fastidiously clean, and the toxicologist who liked his salmon fresh. Five, ten, twenty shillings, any sum would be given for a tin of anything, and such bribes (despite Martial Law) were frequently placed in the hollow of a merchant's hand, the while he was beseeched in a whisper to slip a friend a can of something carnal. But the grocer was adamant every time; he could not do it; and a display of principle is easy when it springs as much from necessity as from good emotions. The Military Authorities had been commandeering goods of all sorts—"bully beef" among the rest—and storing them away in the catacombs of Kimberley. Now, the public were anxious to know the meaning of the corner in "bully beef"; but nobody could explain it. A vast quantity of cigarettes had been commandeered, too; but nobody could explain that either. Most of the "paper," it may be said, was not smoked; it was handed back to the tobacconists when the siege was raised, and possibly some canned things were surrendered as well. The hospital was certainly pretty full; care was taken that the invalids were not neglected, and many things were being preserved for their exclusive use. This was only as it should be. But "bully beef" was not reckoned just the ideal food for invalids; and wicked people accordingly found solace in suggesting that the military looked suspiciously well-fed. It got abroad, too, that there were tons of provisions (consigned to Mafeking) lying at the railway station, and the populace wanted to know why *they* were not commandeered, and sold at a profit that would go far towards covering the *then* estimated cost of the war. The possibility of forwarding them to their destination was out of the question; how were they to be sent out of Kimberley? Or how *into* Mafeking? The military had the power to let us eat these things, but they would not exercise it. They preferred to allow the butter—think of it!—to melt and ooze through the chinks of the boxes; the cheese—great gorgonzola!—to wax almost too high; and the potatoes—O Raleigh!—to rot ere they decided to annex them. When these facts were made known the indignation aroused was very general.



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Our prejudice against the khaki grew stronger than ever. Who was Gorle? The Army Service Corps had come into prominence, and much of its bad management was rightly or wrongly attributed to a Major Gorle. But the Military did not put their feet in it firmly until they reduced the cattle-looting wage from a pound to half a sovereign. The natives engaged in this hazardous occupation had been hitherto in receipt of twenty shillings for every animal captured; and they not unnaturally resented the curtailment of their commission. They declined to jeopardise their lives on half pay, and went out on strike. From that day onward the cow-catching industry languished; and though some of us held that the Colonel personally was in matters monetary above suspicion, like Caesar's wife, we did not forget that he was also an Absolute Monarch, like Caesar himself.

It was reported in the afternoon that news of Magersfontein had been gleaned at last, but that owing to the presence of spies in our midst efforts were being made to keep it secret. We gathered, however, that the Highland Brigade had been sufferers in a sanguinary struggle. That was all—except the usual accompaniment—the essential corollary to every recorded battle—that the Boer losses had been numerically frightful. Definite official reports were not forthcoming; nor confirmation of rumour. But we were satisfied that Methuen had been checked; we were constrained to confess, we consented to believe that he had at least been checked.

Next day we were more fully convinced; the terrible truth was revealed at last. All our sympathies went out to the brave men who had tried to fell the barrier that blocked the way to Kimberley. Their failure was a blow to our hopes; but personal considerations were for the moment taboo. And, curiously enough, although the world was ringing with criticism of Methuen we in Kimberley blamed nobody. Even the "Military Critic" was dumb. Lord Methuen rose in our estimation to the level of a hero, who had driven the enemy before him from Orange River, to fail only in the last lap. Even now, perhaps, the people of Kimberley, looking back at the events of the past, would be reluctant to join in the criticism his name evokes. The facts, of course, speak for themselves; and it did seem strange to see soldiers like Buller and Warren being arraigned, and Gatacre getting recalled, while others passed through the fire officially unscathed. Speaking of Gatacre, we—having just been made acquainted with the Stormberg affair—were saying nasty things of him. Monday was altogether a miserable day, with the outlook far less bright than our fancy had painted it.

On Tuesday the muffled booming of the British guns at Modder River was heard again. It was hard to credit the evidence of our senses, that Methuen had retreated. Still, we were not to be entirely disheartened while there remained the possibility of a drive to the sea for Christmas. At a meeting of the Town Council a new Mayor (Mr. Oliver) was chosen for the year 1900. General Clery, we were informed, was getting towards Ladysmith; the news was vague, but we were glad to hear it. Any news not bad was

good. The old proverb is wrong; for who would dare after all the suspense we had endured to put “no news” in the “good” category.



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The shopkeepers—wise men—had found comfort in hard work, and were making elaborate preparations for Christmas. The jewellers cut a fair show, and the drapers, too, But the grocer took, or rather would have taken, the cake if the “Law” allowed it to be baked. His enterprise knew no limits; his display of holly (and indeed of everything else) was unprecedented. The collection of odds and ends exhibited was picturesque to a degree (no more can be said for it). There were no jellies, no tempting hams, no imported puddings nor nude poultry, none of the solid, savoury things associated with the festive season. There were none of these; but holly, mistletoe, and Chinese lanterns made a fine phantasmagoria. There were neat and compact packets of starch, interspersed with tins of mustard, to tickle the palate of the hungry passer-by; while scented soaps, in lovely little wrappers, intermingled in malodorous profusion. Bottles of sauces never heard of by the present generation, and which yet bore traces of the solidified cobweb of half a century, were much in evidence. So, too, was Berwick’s baking powder, as a sort of satire on the absence of such essential constituents as eggs, milk, flour, whiskey, raisins, *etc.* (we had plenty of suet). Reckitt’s blue was there in abundance—a finger-post, as it were, to the shade of the entire exposition. Condy’s Fluid was not the least appetible thing on show. Bottled parsley and kindred mummied souvenirs of pre-historic horticulture, half buried in heaps of shrapnel bullets (ticketed sweet peas!) and other ammunition of a like digestive kind, were also to the fore to sustain the fame of Christmas. But starch was the all-pervading feature of every shop-front. In one window a solid blank wall of starch was erected, with a row of sweet-bottles on top. One would think that our linen at least should have been irreproachable; but it was not; because the Town Council happened to be experimenting on the practicability of establishing Municipal Wash Houses, with a view to economising water—*not*, as the actual results suggested, to the saving of *starch*.

Lieutenant-Colonel Peakman had succeeded the lamented Scott-Turner, and on Wednesday long before daybreak he led a picked force towards Webster’s Farm, to steal a march on the napping enemy. The napping enemy, however, was alive to the propriety of utilising but one eye in the lap of “Nature’s soft nurse.” He could not see much with the open optic, but he could hear with the one ear he had taken the precaution of keeping open also. Of the good sense of this precaution Mr. Peakman was somewhat abruptly apprised by the crack and blaze of a hundred Mausers. Nothing daunted he returned the salute right gallantly, and with a doggedness that obliged the Boers to retreat, firing as they went. The enemy’s gun at Oliphantsfontein soon chimed in with some well-directed shells, one of which failed to burst and was secured intact as a valuable trophy. Nobody was hurt, and the force got back to town without further molestation.



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A concert was given in the evening at the Reservoir camp, the takings (L20) going to the Widows' and Orphans' Committee. There was no lack of entertainment at all the camps, although the men did not feel so cheerful as their comic singing was intended to denote. Numerous presents continued to find their way to the redoubts. Cigars and tobacco, fruits from the De Beers horticultural department, and an odd pint of wine from the casks of the Colossus were periodically received to brighten the lives of the citizen soldiers. An odd bottle, or rather an odd dozen, of "Cape Smoke" found entry at times. Impure though the commodity was—there is no smoke without fire—a little of it on a raw morning was not amiss. Some erred, unfortunately, in not confining themselves to a *little* of the lava. Eruptions often ensued. One gentleman, on a certain occasion, was so inflamed with martial ardour after a too copious indulgence in the "brandy" that it resulted in his discharge from the Town Guard—for over-doing his duty. He was one night on sentry duty and challenged an officer, one officer, whom he failed to identify, or compute—"in the dark," as he explained. Having courteously yelled out to the intruder to halt, and on being quietly assured that "a friend" went there, the alert sentry presented arms and called in solemn, stentorian accents upon his friend to "advance within six inches of the muzzle of this rifle and give the countersign!" It was due to a lucky accident that the officer knew the countersign, and was not buried next day. Another genial tippler disported himself during business hours in less serious fashion. He was not so fastidiously exact about killing his man by inches. On the contrary, when his "friend" had proclaimed himself a friend indeed, he was superciliously informed: "You have got to say 'Tiger' before you come in here!" "Tiger" was the countersign; and it was only the humour of the incident that enabled the worthy sentry to keep the Marshal's baton in his knapsack.

Under the direction of Major Gorle, the Army Service Corps was extremely energetic in the general regulation of foodstuffs. Colonel Kekewich seemed bent on starving us. Now, if there remained no less drastic alternative to surrender he could have starved us by consent. To the *principle* of the ordinance there was no open opposition. But it was ridiculous to start starving us so soon, and we were far from imagining that it should ever be necessary to start at all. The *Commissariat* was being largely extended, and the Colonel had drafted another proclamation. He had already taken care that the flour should be made to stretch for years—the colour of the bread never permitted us to forget that—and he now commanded that all the tea and coffee in town must be submitted for analysis. Every ounce of chicory in the city, he proclaimed, must be handed over to the *Commissariat* within twenty-four hours; or, by Jingo!—Martial Law! The



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ladies clung to their caddies and protested; but in vain. The gallant Colonel insisted—reluctantly; he had a heart; but he had also, so to say, a partner (Mr. Gorle)—as inexorable as the “Mr. Jorkins” whom Dickens has immortalised. This arbitrary conduct on the part of Kekewich and Gorle did not stop at tea and coffee; it was only a beginning, a preliminary step in the military dispensation. How far the transactions of the firm would extend we were not yet to know; but the details of the massacre at Magersfontein, which kept pouring in, indirectly suggested that the business might extend very far indeed. The losses sustained at Magersfontein were more appalling than we were at first led to believe. They were a bitter sequel to the memorable cannonade of ten days before. How inappropriate had been our jubilation! The citizens forgot their personal woes in sorrow for the brave men who after a series of brilliant successes had perished in the final effort. Magersfontein hit us hard, though we knew nothing of the “blazing indiscretions” connected with that fatal assault on positions of peculiar strength and impregnability. Its consequences meant another delay, perhaps a long one. Meanwhile our resolution grew stronger to hold Kimberley though the heavens should fall. Eating, after all, was a habit—a bad habit with some of us—which we could not give up in a day. But the story of Magersfontein diverted our thoughts from provisions. Let the Boers but come within range of our rifles, and then, ah, then there would be squalls! But would they do so; would they screw their courage to the sticking point? It was feared not, more particularly in view of the supposed existence of dynamite mines around Kimberley. The train was laid; the fuse was there to ignite the powder that would blow up a hostile army. The mere suggestion of such a *contretemps* was enough to make the Boers think twice before drawing near enough to be shot at. Belief in the existence of these mines was widespread. How far it was warranted, it is hard to say. The enemy had heard something of them, and burning though was his desire to blow up the diamonds he did not quite court a flight towards heaven in their company. He had seen what dynamite applied to culverts and bridges could do, and doubtless fully measured the indignity of so disintegrating, not to say violent, a manner of quitting this world for a good one.

On Friday a party of the Lancashire Regiment went out to cut off a Boer water supply at Curtis Farm. A body of the Light Horse with guns accompanied them—as a hint to the enemy that intervention would be resented. The Boer ignored the hint and lost no time in lodging his protest against our infringement of “the game’s” rules. The “Lanks.,” however, were not to be deterred; they stuck stoically to their work until their object was accomplished. Our guns had meanwhile kept hurling defiance at the enemy; but there were no casualties on either side.



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These aquatic operations seriously inconvenienced the Boers; they compelled them to make wide *detours*, to travel a long distance for water around the great ring which encircled Kimberley; the short cuts were dangerous. A sad thing happened when night came. A corporal in charge of a piquet went out to inspect his men. Unfortunately the sentry on duty was unaware of the fact, and on the corporal's return he was mistaken in the darkness for a marauding Boer—with the pitiable result that the sentry shot him dead.

In the morning we had news again. It was simply the *truth* concerning Colenso; fiction could not improve a deal on the loss of ten or twelve British guns. We were unaccustomed to so much candour in the matter of reverses, and this brutal revelation of the truth overwhelmed and astonished us—though we could scarcely pretend that we had not *asked* for it. A “Slip” unfolded the tale in all its naked veracity. It was *news*, fair and square value for the “thruppence,” as siege value goes; but we were in no mood to appreciate the novelty of that; the circumstances were too distressing. Buller was roundly abused, and his staff also were included in a comprehensive denunciation; so that whoever was at fault in the Colenso collapse did not escape the wrath of Kimberley. As one of the Pitts (was it one of the Pitts?) has aptly said: “there are none of us infallible, not even the youngest of us.” Not even Lord Methuen, as we had sadly discovered. The brightness of our Christmas prospects was beginning to fade.

It faded a great deal when typhoid fever broke out in the Light Horse camp. The outbreak was attributed to the uncertain water we had to use, since the purer supply had been cut off. The new water was none too good. We had been repeatedly warned to boil it before drinking it, and were now adjured to do so. A large number heeded the warning, but the perverse majority heeded it not; they did not find it convenient to spare fuel to boil what was not essential to the creation of the “cup that cheers” when there is milk in it. Scurvy was playing havoc with the native population. These trials and tribulations did not enhance our festive dispositions on the eve of Christmas. A programme of sports attracted all the Tapleys; but there was little until evening, when the scramble for the good cheer that was *not* in the shops had begun, to enable one to remember that Yule was nigh.

The scene was one that will be long remembered in the Diamond City. It was only the very large stores that had anything to sell. Before the war broke out Abrahams and Co. had purchased an immense stock of foodstuffs; but a great hole had been made in it, and it was to be much greater *after* Christmas. It was at Abrahams', therefore, that the multitude swarmed. The traffic in sweet peas, jams, and raisins was heavy. Boer meal with imported raisins in it was the richest possible pudding! The sale of sweets was unprecedented—so



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unprecedented that toothache was an epidemic until French relieved it. How the shop assistant clung to his reason is a mystery which has yet to be solved. Behind the counter he was hampered by the local *elite*: Judges, Doctors, Directors, *etc.*, who would never say die (from hunger) while they lived. Outside the counter the madding throng felt likewise. But the great ones were able to help themselves; they inspected the shelves, perused the labels of every antiquated sauce and pickle bottle in stock since the “early days,” and placed the best of these relics of a pre-consolidated era in heaps aside for Monday’s dinner. There were special constables on duty within and without the store, which was as full as an egg; and when after a while it was apparent that this congestion retarded business, the hundred Christians nearest the door were hustled into the street with all the “good will” in the world. But the relief came too late; the clock struck nine ere half the multitude were served—or even formally satisfied that blood is not in turnips. Of the merry season we were wont to enjoy, the busy throng was the sole reminiscence. Its good things were absent. But that bitter truth did not make less keen our hunt the slipper pursuit of Christmas fare.

## CHAPTER XI

*Week ending 30th December, 1899*

Christmas Eve—a memorable day in its own way—dawned in due course. It was not the siege alone, with its attendant inconveniences, that made it memorable. It was not that the season accentuated the want of *enough* to eat; nor was it the absence of the time-honoured turkey that tried us most. There was something else besides, namely, the capers of the sun. Thermal phenomena are of course not strictly pertinent to my story. But I feel impelled to digress for a little and warm, as it were, to this new element of discomfort, provided doubtless as a Christmas Box by the thoughtful clerk of the weather. To those of us who were enjoying our first taste of a sunny southern summer the heat of the day was excruciating; it literally took one’s breath away. A man could not even read; he tried to, in the hope of falling asleep incidentally. But in vain. ‘Nature’s soft nurse’ was not to be cajoled by artifice. There was no air, no breeze to fan her softness. The thermometer registered on its imperturbable face one hundred and seven in the shade, at which experts who had passed the whole of their summers in the furnace of the Diamond City inveighed against the slowness of the instrument and its lapse from the path of rectitude. The cant of the day ordained the twenty-fifth of December the “hottest day of the year.” Well, the newcomers felt that if it were to be redder than the twenty-fourth they might jump into the Kimberley mine, without danger of landing on their feet, and enjoy a better pudding in a better and (perhaps) cooler world. It was a day to make one fed in all seriousness



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that life is not worth living; and to a man fresh from over-sea the association of Christmas with such weather—to say nothing of the victuals!—was the acme of satire. There is no whiteness in the African Christmas, and for the first time in their lives the newcomers sighed for a “green” one! A “green” one would cool the atmosphere, and a cooler atmosphere would content us. We would gladly let the turkey and the pudding pass if the Turkish Bath would go too. Had the shade of *Santa Claus*, or the flesh and blood of anybody, come loaded with poultry for our “stockings,” we should not have said, thank you. Our appetites were gone. They were gone, and all we asked was that they should be restored for Christmas Day—just as if *Claus* had indeed made amends for the cruel kindness of the “Clerk!” It was kind of Sir Alfred Milner to arrange a congratulatory flash of compliments (by signal from Modder River) and to wish us all sorts of luck. One sort would have sufficed: the kind contained in a record output of rain. Would it come? First it would—and then it would not. A duststorm intervened by way of compromise; it was a breeze—hot, choking, blinding, but still a breeze. We got thunder and lightning, too; but the rain hesitated—as if it knew there was little left to soak in Kimberley. It ultimately relented, however, and came down in torrents through the night.

Christmas Day itself! It had come, cool, delicious; the change, the metamorphosis in the weather, the disappearance of the azure sky was strange and lovely. Those shifting, hustling clouds, how pleasant they were to look at. The day was the antithesis of its predecessor—the mildest we had had for a long, long time. It was a relief to find that the “hottest day of the year” was a figurative expression used to denote the middle of summer. Our fears of cremation were entirely dissipated—as sometimes happens in the case of passengers to the Cape who, sweltering in a broiling sun *outside* the tropics, marvel how they are to toe the *Line*.

It thus came to pass that our interest in breakfast was after all considerable. I shall confine my congratulations to the genius of one resourceful landlady who furnished, in addition to “mealie-pap” allowed by “Law,” some illicit tit-bits of meat, as a surprise! But she did not cease staggering humanity until a small dish of butter was produced. Real butter!—the lady’s character made her word sacred. It was an astounding phenomenon in itself, but the sharing of it in a season of famine with poor relations like her boarders was the kindest cut of all. Butter it was; we remembered the taste, and there was the circumstantial evidence of our eyes. We had once been taken in by dripping; but there was no mistaking the species in the dish on Christmas morning. There it was in all its luscious sallowness, and the smacking of our lips betokened an appreciation of all that we had lost in the weeks gone by. Many, alas! missed more than



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their butter. Speaking generally, the 'Xmas breakfast consisted of black tea, khaki bread, and golden syrup—an appetising rainbow on a “merry” morning. The *menu* at dinner was little better; it stirred up sad recollections of the past. Pudding (worthy of the name) was nowhere. We had imitations; apologies for puddings, plain—and hard—as a pikestaff, were everywhere. They were not essentially cheap, because eggs, the chief ingredient, were fabulously fresh. As for the geese that laid not, well, they did not cackle either; their bones had long since been mumbled. But there were self-denying citizens who actually preserved some beer and stout for Christmas Day! These good stoics—stoical only to be epicurean—were proud of their will-power. Indeed they ostentatiously affected intoxication and horrified everybody—with their bad acting.

For the men who were obliged to spend the day in camp there was not much to live for in the eating line. So everyone thought, at least, when the fight for leave of absence had begun. But Mr. Rhodes, with characteristic thoughtfulness, sent a lot of nice things to the camps, which changed the situation and made men regret their anxiety to spend Christmas at home. The quantity of what was styled Cape brandy consumed in camp baffles computation. The effects of the swim were bad, too—not because there were so many drunk—Christmas comes but once a year—but because of the awful aftermath. Numbers were ill, very ill, indeed; and it was a blessing, all things considered, that none were dead. In the camps, life, although boisterous, was not exactly merry; but it was a Christmas, as was afterwards declared with chivalrous unanimity, than which nobody had ever spent a better. Nobody had ever felt so sick the next morning, and that was most likely the standard by which the measure of the merriment was gauged.

His Excellency's congratulations were the innocent cause of a little friction. Had it not been for *his* example the “compliments of the season” might have been left unsaid; good taste and good sense would have conspired to let them lapse. There was something incongruous about wishing a man a happy Christmas. Let a man be ever so sympathetic and cordial; let him mean—not wisely but too well; let his accents ring true as steel: it was still difficult to convince one that there was no suggestion of sarcasm in the greeting. But the Governor had changed the situation; he had set the fashion—had reminded us that the fashion with its conventions and courtesies was an element, a blessing, of our civilisation; and that we were not permanently outside the pale. It was nevertheless trying to be taken by the hand and wished “a merry Christmas” by every brazen Napper Tandy in the town. It was, as I have said, all the fault of the Governor; the custom was adhered to in deference to His Excellency rather than with *malice prepense* on the part of a friend to indulge in



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wanton candour. There *were* monsters who out of sheer, crass good nature did offend; but even they took care to couple with their “remarks” an apologetic laugh, which was intended to convey that the joke, though carried far, was just a joke. The wags—the species was not yet extinct—were especially felicitous. They treated the subject as a very original piece of humour indeed. Their treatment of it gained them an occasional cuff in the ear, and they had to be discriminative in their choice of victims. Everybody was not to be wished “returns of the day” with impunity.

The happiest people in the world on Christmas Day were the wise and simple natives. They foregathered in the streets and revelled to their hearts’ content. All day long they sang, danced, and laughed; they held orgies (in honour of the Colonel) and *corroborees* of the kind described by *de Rougemont*—the Washington of France. The antics of our dusky tragedians and comedians made a striking spectacle, and were quite as entertaining as the performances of the highly rated Harrys, Irving and Lauder. There was a moral in the orgies—though we did not draw it. The natives were happy; short commons did not trouble them or mar their enjoyment in the slightest. With us it was far otherwise; we had anticipated a different Yuletide; the natives had not. The natives made the most of theirs; we the least of ours. Some of us had dreamt of dining in Europe. Others of us had visions of beer drinking at the coast. A great many would fain have taken the waters of Modder River. But all were disappointed, dour, and sorrowful—all save our true philosopher, the native.

The twenty-sixth of December is proverbially a sad day. It was so with us, but not sadder than the day before. A few shells were sent out among the Boers to ascertain how they got Christmas over them; and they by way of reply made some good practice on the Premier Mine. A water-pipe was mutilated, and a man standing near had the pipe knocked out of his mouth by a piece of shell. A good deal of desultory firing went on for several hours. The enemy’s guns were obviously handled by men who knew what they were about, and we soon afterwards definitely learned (what we had long suspected) that there were French and German experts behind them. The remainder of the day was dusty, stormy, and uninteresting.

Lord Methuen’s guns made a noise on Wednesday. Their booming, with intervals of silence, went on all day; from Kimberley shell after shell could be seen bursting in all directions. Our confidence began to revive; indeed it had never waned so far as the capabilities of the Column were concerned; and we were satisfied that a second assault on Magersfontein would be crowned with success. The excuses advanced on behalf of those most responsible for the failure of the first attack were legion. That they had not been given half enough men for the job was a favourite



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plea; and Buller (who had his hands full in Natal) was reviled for not supplying more. The indications of a renewal of active hostilities, however, which Wednesday brought, enkindled hope again and promised a happy New Year. It was still a sore point with us to see the exchange of signals going on night after night; to think that we—the people!—should be kept in ignorance of their meaning. But it was in harmony with the Military methods in general; and some people vowed that if ever the hat went round for the Colonel they would not put a cent in it, so help them! How much the Colonel was perturbed by this dire threat there was no evidence to show. But a Proclamation was soon forthcoming—which would certainly not conduce to the filling of the hat. His (the Colonel's) proclamations had for the most part made us swear by him; the one of which I now speak made us swear *at* him! And our language will be pardoned when I explain that the decree struck at the one commodity it was in our power to get enough of. There was such a commodity, and that was bread. Until this atrocious edict saw the light it had been our privilege to, enjoy *carte blanche* in bread. It was the last of our privileges—too simple and sacred, one would have thought, for even an autocrat to have dared to trample on.

Flour, meal, Kafir corn, mealies, *etc.*, were also to be controlled by the socialists (they had red flags up); but the main insult, added to the injury already inflicted by the quality of the State loaf, lay in the suggestion that we ate too much bread, and that we were in future to be limited to *fourteen ounces per diem*! Already limited to nothing at all in vegetables and to a glorified *bite* of beef, it was not surprising that an angry chorus of protest was raised against the Government. People asked, in their indignation, if they really lived in a British Colony? Could such an interference with the freedom of the subject be brooked for five minutes? Of course the query was beside the question, but everybody was beside himself with rage. Where was the Military despotism to stop? In the meantime, while men in the street raved, shrewd housewives were acting. At the first note of alarm they had started scouring up their pans and determined to encourage thrift by baking their own bread. They would thus supplement their allowance of the readymade article, and by the same token snap their fingers at that “ass” *in excelsis*—Martial Law. But they reckoned without their host; there is nothing asinine about *Martial Law*; a closer perusal of the proclamation would have taught them that Kekewich and Gorle were old soldiers; that anybody buying meal or flour could not buy bread, and *vice versa*. Even “mealie-pap,” *ad lib.*, we had perforce to forego; the “Law” allowed it but once a day. Then there was a worse feature than this limitation indicated. “Mealie-pap” without milk was bad enough; minus sugar it was unthinkable.



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But the “Law” would not permit us to sweeten the “pap” any more—that is to say, the reduced allowance of sugar was all too little for neutralising the insipidity of black tea. We were also restricted to a fixed complement per unit of tea and coffee—as much as we required in any circumstances, but, ironically enough, a little more than we required of the stimulants in their undiluted nastiness. An elaborate system was set up garnished with red tape, and a large clerical staff filled the Town Hall for the purpose of receiving affidavits, affirmations, and of issuing “permits” to all and sundry who might feel averse from succumbing to a sudden, in contra-distinction to a slow, starvation. The possession of a “permit” entitled the holder to purchase the “regulation” quantity of provisions for one week, at the expiry of which period he or she would be required to have his or her “permit” renewed, if he or she desired a renewed lease of life. The tumult at the Town Hall was remarkable; the people swarmed there like locusts; the ordeal one had to undergo for a “permit” involved cruelty to corns. Matters improved when the excited multitude were at length persuaded that one representative of each family sufficed to conduct negotiations in respect of their right to vegetate. No storekeeper could supply more than the exact quantity specified in a “permit,” nor dare he refuse to sell on a false plea.

All these drastic changes were the outcome of the Colonel’s proclamation. His action was pronounced grossly unconstitutional. What our Rulers meant by it, what such arbitrary interference with the liberty of the stomach portended, we could not tell. Some ascribed it to pure “khaki cussedness”; others maintained that the Military aimed at stretching the duration of the Siege to six months—that they might be lifted by a short cut to promotion. Such were our views of collectivism; and if the Military left ear did not tingle it must have been frost-bitten.

Mr. Rhodes liked the latest inscription on the Statute book as little as anybody else. On Thursday he contributed one thousand pounds to the Widows’ and Orphans’ Fund. We liked this liberality, and there was a consensus of opinion that the *Colossus* was a “wonder.” During the day a Despatch Rider brought him a bundle of newspapers, which he rather indiscreetly handed to the *Advertiser*, to dole out at retail rates on sheets of notepaper. Thus ‘news much older than our ale went round’—but no; the papers were dated only three weeks back, and we had had no ale for at least a month. Any intelligence of the outside world, however, was interesting (save what we read of Belmont). The details of Buller’s repulse at the Tugela did not make good reading. What we read of streams of transports laden with troops was better; as also was the item that Warren—who knew much of Boer wiles—was steering through the Karoo. We took it that he was to join Methuen, but were afterwards annoyed to learn that his destination

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was Natal. The situation in Natal appeared to be serious. Still, our opinions of our spoonfeeders remained unaltered; we still assumed that they suppressed or minimised the seriousness of things in Kimberley. Our attitude was perhaps uncharitable, and deserving of the rope—of half-hanging at least; but the weather was so hot; we felt so hungry and thirsty. There was no need to starve us, to deny us bread; we believed that we might be safely granted a slice or two more—until the British flag was hoisted in Pretoria. We had, it is true, rather hugged the delusion that it would have been up for Christmas Day. But even in the light of that error of judgment we could appreciate the puerility of conserving supplies as if the dogs of war were to go on barking until doomsday.

A special meeting of the City Council was held in the afternoon; and although opinions were divided as to the precise form its protest against the new order of things should take, nobody doubted that it was for such a purpose the meeting was convened. We were all wrong. It was simply resolved at the Town House to wish the Queen a Happy New Year; and thereby demonstrate not only the unswerving loyalty of her distant subjects, but their *sang froid* also in days of stress and danger. It was an excellent idea; the taking off of hats to the Queen was general. The Colonel signalled to Lord Methuen; that gentleman communicated with Sir Alfred Milner; and he in turn cabled Kimberley's sentiments to Her Majesty. There was no mention of the bread; it was an omission; but it might have sounded "conditional," irrelevant, or even have detracted from the value of our good wishes; and it was hardly worth risking being suspected of loyalty to one's bread—unbuttered! Besides, our friend the enemy (the Colonel, not the Boer) personally supervised the despatch of messages, and he was quite artful enough to suppress reference to eating matters if he thereby served the "Military Situation."

Friday was quiet—in the cannonading line; the wind and dust were bellicose enough. Fodder was scarce, and the animal creation was sharing with us the privations of a siege. Hundreds of horses were turned out to "grass." To be reduced to dependence on Karoo grass was a sad fate for the poor quadrupeds. On a billiard table they could have feasted their eyes at least on green; but the veld could not offer even that ocular consolation. Hay and straw were at a premium; the "fighting" horses had first call, and they were numerous enough to make hard the lot of the steeds of peace. The poor cart horses were sadly neglected; it was pitiful to behold their protruding ribs, their forlorn looks. Every sort of garbage was raked up to keep them alive—second-hand straw hat mashes being the most notable repasts in vogue. Cab-men were obliged to descend from their boxes and face the dignity of labour with a pick and shovel. The dearth of fodder brought down the prices of beasts,



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and thenceforward they were sold for songs—ditties to the tune of thirty shillings. Half-a-dozen horses were on one occasion sold for seven pounds—animals that were worth a great deal more each. The purchasers took risks of course. But the booming of cannon was still to be heard in the land—it boomed all the afternoon—and the possibility of keeping the quadrupeds alive until the Column came to the rescue was not yet despaired of.

Saturday was the seventy-seventh day of our investment, with relief not yet in sight. True, it was within hearing; but so it had been three weeks before, on Magersfontein day. We were weary of this interminable thunder, which showed us no results. Colonel Kekewich was as reticent as ever. Of guesswork there was plenty. Had Methuen not had time sufficiently to augment his forces to cut his way through. The troops were in the country; we were placated with the information that they were “falling over one another in Cape Town.” This comforting gem glittered less in our minds as the days sped past, and the prospects of a speedy liberation receded correspondingly. The delay was to us incomprehensible. We fell back on our old theory, that the more protracted the Siege the greater the fame and honour for the men to whose 'prentice hands had been committed the destinies of a free community. It was hard to believe that these armed martinets could play with their responsibilities in such a crisis. Did they realise its gravity? Were facts being withheld? Was the true and actual condition of the city as regards provisions and the contingencies to which their scarcity might lead—were these things being properly represented to the public and to Sir Redvers Buller? In our wisdom we feared not. Scepticism and suspicion, born of disappointment, were in our hearts. Our conclusions may not have been sound; we lacked a proper knowledge of the difficulties confronting the army; but we *did* feel that if the real state of affairs had been explicitly indicated to the Commander-in-Chief, a column would have reached Kimberley sooner. We were not so far away from Orange River, where thousands of troops had been massing for weeks. We were not so far *out* of the way as Mafeking. Nor were we like the defenders of Ladysmith entombed within towering kopjes. No; to snap *our* bonds was a relatively easy task. Little provision had been made for a prolonged investment, and we had fifty thousand stomachs to cater for. So much was plain. If Kimberley were to be sacrificed to the “interests,” forsooth, of the campaign, British honour would be tarnished. Such a procedure would be not only brutal, but a tactical blunder as well. We felt strongly that the relief of Kimberley was an indispensable preliminary to success, and, by reason of our proximity to the Free State border, the way that would soonest bring the war to a successful issue—



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But hark! Wherefore that wild halloo. Ah, there was news, charming news. Lord Roberts had set sail for South Africa, to take over supreme command. Hurrah for good old "Bobs!" We felt instinctively, or somehow, that the little General could be trusted to dig for diamonds. The news of "Bobs" made a chink in the cloud and disclosed its silver lining. Kitchener, who accompanied Lord Roberts as Chief of Staff, had shown in his generation some skill as a pioneer of deserts; the Karoo would be child's play to him. The Soudan was a region in which our interest was rather academic; but the killing of the Khalifa was announced and applauded with the rest. Oom Paul's political extinction would soon follow, and Kimberley would emerge with a whoop from captivity.

### CHAPTER XII

*Week ending 6th January, 1900*

The last day of the year and the distant thunder of artillery burst upon us simultaneously. That the peace of the Sabbath should be broken by music not exactly sacred (or melodious) was strange. The old year would be rung out in a few hours, in company with our Utopian expectations. All our hopes of a rare New Year were, like our Christmas phantasies, dashed to the ground. The morrow promised to be rare enough in a melancholy sense, but it would not be New Year's Day. There was but one ray of comfort to sustain us, namely, the approach of the hero of Candahar; for although a certain period of waiting had yet to be endured—ere *another* famous march could be accomplished—the coming of Roberts disposed us to think kindly of Job. At the same time we prayed that the need for patience would not last too long. Any nonentity—be he General or Private—who could bring relief to Kimberley would eclipse the fame of a bigger man than "Bobs."

Passing by the Town Hall one could not fail to be struck by the contrast between its desolate appearance on Sunday afternoon and the bustle of its precincts on week days. The building had only recently been erected and was situated in the centre of the Market Square. The Square itself was an exceptionally spacious one, and the Hall added an ornament to the city, which was the more imposing and conspicuous in that it practically stood alone as such. It was a magnificent structure, quite new, as I have stated; but it probably saw more wear and tear during the Siege than it would otherwise have seen in the course of half a century. A few days prior to our investment the building had been completed, and, immediately after, a two days' holiday had been proclaimed by the Municipal Authorities—dear old servants of the people! No Czar's writ ran in Kimberley then. Amid the plaudits of the democracy the Hall had been duly declared "open." The Mayor, in the blazing dignity of his Magisterial robes, surrounded by the wealth and intelligence of the city, had delivered an historical address. The Councillors had followed, and the several ex-Mayors since the



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year of one had expatiated felicitously on the architecture of the “Ornament,” the merits of the architect, and the enterprise of the contractors. “There was a sound of revelry by night”—for two consecutive nights. Two awfully fancy dress balls were given; and had the shade of the Duchess of Richmond waltzed from the heavens to the waxed floor of the hall, it would have assumed flesh and blood again on beholding the picturesque costumes of every age and court presented to its spectral view. I will not prolong a description of those halcyon days of Municipal splendour in these of common khaki. Let it suffice to add that the “lamps shone o’er fair women and brave men.” The “cannon’s opening roar” was soon to be heard in the land; but all unmindful of the nation of farmers the “shopkeepers” tripped it on the toe.

Well, we were besieged; and the great Hall was adapted to very different uses. It was made headquarters. Within its walls the Town Guard were formally “sworn in,” and supplied with hats, rifles, bandoliers, and ammunition. Hundreds of distressed refugees congregated there, for one of the Offices of the building had been transformed into a benevolent grocery shop, presided over by benevolent ladies. There also did mass some thousands of natives to gather their picks and shovels and pay. The Town Hall was the pivot round which revolved all sorts and conditions of men. Overrun inside and outside by roadmakers, citizen soldiers, and municipal officers (whose military dignity had raised their souls above scavenging), it was bad enough. But when the rich and poor of all classes and sexes were forced to join in the scramble for a bit to eat, it was worse. Until the “permit” system had come into vogue, money could buy much (of what was going); but the “permit” system lowered mammon to his rightful level. Money for the moment had lost its value; a “permit” was all-important—even Croesus himself would have starved without one. To procure these useful scrips all sorts of formalities had to be entered into, and the amount of time lost in waiting to prove one’s right to live was provocative of many an oath, at the expense of the British army. Kafirs, coolies, Europeans of all nations, the wealthy the poor, and the lowly—all struggled to procure the precious “permit,” as if they were at all hazards determined to gain one week’s respite before finally succumbing to hunger’s pangs. It must be owned that the work was carried on more smoothly when the black sheep were separated from the white, and when different days were assigned for attending to the residents of each of the respective wards into which the town was divided. The incompetence of the military in civil affairs added to the grievances of the people; complaint against the administration of the “Law” was as loud as the clamour against the “Law” itself. The bother entailed in the procuring of authority to purchase food, and in the purchase of it, was extreme. The food was not worth it; but life is precious (or

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was then), and one had in a very literal sense to live. A man had sometimes to stand from six to eight o'clock in the morning to buy his paltry bit of offal, hoof, or fat, as the case might be, and after he had rested on his feet for two hours his turn would come to draw his miserable allowance—if somebody else had not drawn it for him. Such accidents happened often enough to make a good many foreswear meat altogether. Usually, however, the unfortunate would be consoled with a "precedence ticket"—for next day! so that he could live on the certainty of a succulent morrow. From ten o'clock to four might be passed in waiting for one's grocery ticket; and, finally, from four to six could be whiled away at the crowded store in a frantic effort to catch the State assistant's eye. Oh, it was a happy epoch in our lives—an epoch during which vows were registered against being "let in" for such happiness again, or against living it through while a 'bare bodkin' was left unconfiscated.

It was the last day of the year, with nothing to elate us but the coming of Bobs. Hope deferred maketh the heart sick; ours were so ill that but for Bobs they must have ceased to beat. It was disconcerting to learn that Warren was in Natal, for it had been stated that Methuen was merely waiting Sir Charles to join him ere again attempting to fight his way to Kimberley.

New Year's Day! New Year's Day, indeed! Our Scotchmen sighed. Black tea for breakfast on New Year's Day was too much for them, and not a few of them (and others) felt constrained to take kopje dew instead. They drank brandy—so labelled in the tavern, but more widely notorious as "lyddite" in the town. Brandy had crimes committed in its name, and lyddite was a happy and appropriate appellation. Even *vinegar* could not counteract the effects of lyddite (i.e. bottled lyddite). As for the materials used in the manufacture of this explosive, well—necessity is the mother of invention; and the invention was well protected. It was only noted that methylated spirits and certain chemicals were scarce; and a suspicion prevailed that these were lyddite ingredients—a suspicion which afterwards proved to be well-founded when publicans were prosecuted for using them as such. One of the peculiarly lamentable features of the Siege was a certain tendency on the part of men, who drank little or nothing in normal times, to dissipate in desperation on this unique brand of brandy.

It was dry bread with many on New Year's Day. Even syrup was extinct. Nothing remained, to be taken or left (they were generally left), but a few jars of treacle. Dripping graced the table, but nobody touched it; it was too ghastly pale for a substitute, too unctuous for anything. The poor Native's breakfast was of "mealie-pap" exclusively; and from a hygienic standpoint he was perhaps better off than any of us.



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Many things occurred to make the day interesting, or say, rather, out of the common; but the palm was easily carried off by the Colonel's "gift." I have had occasion to allude to the parsimonious action of the military in curtailing the allowances paid to natives for captured cattle and thereby paralysing the incentive that usually induces humanity (black or white) to face danger. This untimely experiment in economics had discouraged the Natives and practically sent them out on strike. There were no cattle coming in, and so the Colonel thought it would be a good thing to reduce our meat ration from half a pound to a *quarter*, and that of little boys and girls with capacious stomachs to two ounces! I must leave to the imagination of the reader the effect of this proceeding on the part of the man who made and administered Martial Law. The promulgation of the half-pound regulation had been resented as an injustice; but now the "Military Situation" demanded a still more drastic fast. The Military *regime* became more and more unpopular; it was declaimed against with finer gusto and eloquence. The new enactment was too much even for the "Law's" apologists; it alienated their sympathies, and afforded them excuse and opportunity to associate themselves at last with the rightful indignation of their fellow-citizens. As for Kekewich, we—or as many of us as might survive his snacks—determined that he should be made explain himself to the Queen. It was a glad New Year altogether, with every probability of its gladness continuing "all the year round."

As if he had got wind of the Colonel's *coup*, and looked on it as a menace to the success of *his own* starvation policy, the Boer (on Tuesday) by way of expediting things opened fire on the cattle at Kenilworth. A supreme effort was made to wipe them out. The effort was futile; the cows chewed the cud under fire with inimitable nonchalance, while the goats, our whiskered pandoors, with fine satire sagaciously cocked their horns. Not that we cared. The non-success of the bombardment was if anything disappointing (I say it advisedly). What substantial difference was there between four ounces of ox's "neck" and nothing at all. None to speak of. Besides, we suspected the law-givers, who doubtless deemed themselves, like royalty, above the "Law." Did not the Colonel represent the Queen? Nay, more; could he not exclaim with the great Imari in the play, "It is the 'Law,' I made it so." In short we had a notion that the Colonel and his staff did not *weigh* their *own* rations. So that if the Boers had succeeded in slaughtering the cattle there would have been satisfaction in the thought that the military had had to suffer with the rest and been served right indeed. Eggs were too expensive, to be thought of; two shillings each (egg) was their market value in the New Year. They were fresh of course, beyond yea or nay they were fresh (since none could be imported); and to be *sure*, absolutely sure, of that was delightful—to millionaires and roost-keepers. The exactions of the local egg-layers formed the subject of much adverse criticism, but they excused their medicinal charges on the plea that they had nothing save eggs to sell.



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Soon after the issue of the new four ounce edict a learned doctor delivered a public lecture and eloquently assured us that we ate *too much* meat! He urged us to eat less of it, for our health's sake. Now, the doctors of the Diamond City were hard worked during the Siege; so much so that they were still allowed (by special arrangement) the half-pound ration. This was right and proper. But there was none the less a piquant irony in the principles of a propagandist who was eating twice as much beef as anyone else and could stand up to utter precepts so strikingly at variance with his practice! The good doctor no doubt knew that new-laid missiles were too costly, and too *fresh*, to be thrown away; but he deserved them; the audience did not say so; but their eyes blazed kindly.

On Wednesday sports were held at Beaconsfield to cheer up the children of the township. Sweets, ginger-beer, and tea (neat) were served out, and were relished by the little ones who were too young to be particular. It may be said that cricket, football, and smoking concerts went on as usual, though how the players and the comic songsters managed to spare wind (on the diet) for such strenuous recreation is a mystery. Football on four ounces of fat was a strain. No doubt our open air life did some of us a world of good, and in many instances it was not easy to recognise in a bronzed civilian soldier the erstwhile sallow clerk or shop-assistant.

It was at this stage of our travail that the Basuto Chief (Lerothodi) followed up the fashion of the day by launching a proclamation of his own which commanded all his people to return at once to Basutoland. Now, we had shut up with us in Kimberley some thousands of this worthy tribe. They received their Chief's command and set about preparing for instant departure, with the Colonel's blessing. We white folk were not at all sure that the Boers would be so gracious with *their* blessing. The process of starving us into submission was in full swing (and succeeding, alas! but too well). It was thus obvious that a reduction so substantial in the gross total of stomachs to be catered for would not tend to starve us the sooner. But the enemy did not deem it politic to attempt the task of driving Basutos and Britons to the sea together. The sympathies of the powerful Basuto chief were not on their side, and it would have been unwise to have risked offending him. So it was that the natives were permitted to pass unmolested to the kraals of their childhood. The enemy did not like it—any more than did King John when he signed the Great Charter—but it had to be.

In the meantime some news had come in to which the Colonel was pleased to give publicity. It was astonishing all the trifling tit-bits we did hear; and they occasionally excited interest—until discovered to be of home manufacture—the distinctive work of local genius. On this occasion, however, the tit-bit was "Official," and to the effect that the rebels at Douglas had been routed by the Canadian volunteers. This was gratifying; we blamed the rebels for our own beleaguered state, and the moral lesson of the rout at Douglas might hasten the discomfiture of the gentlemen who surrounded us. I have yet to learn that it did in any shape or form.



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It was triumphantly proclaimed in the afternoon that our patrols had brought in a host of Republican cattle; and when almost simultaneously with this announcement *two* proclamations were issued from Lennox Street, it was more than hoped, it was assumed, that the meat ordinance was to be relaxed. But it was not so. The first of these monuments to circumlocution had a final rap at the canteen. There were a few bars and canteens outside the barriers of the town; the Colonel said they should be closed, and closed they were—the proprietors, strange to say, assenting with a will. This alacrity was not consistent with their earlier diatribes against military despotism; but the fact was that since “lyddite” had been found out the experts were chary of making it, and the public still more chary of drinking it. There was some risk in selling it, too, so—clear the course for the “Law.”

The second proclamation was all of wax and tallow. It commanded that all lights must in future be extinguished at half-past nine. We were thus considerately given half an hour to undress and lie reading books in bed after having been turned away from a perusal of the stars. We might have liked a little time for supper—but what am I saying!—there were no suppers; at least nobody was expected to commit a capital offence. But such miscreants existed, and kept their heads. It must in fairness be explained that they were for the most part possessors of obstinate hens that *would not* lay eggs. Eggs were firm at twenty-five shillings a dozen, and the hen that remained so contemptuous of mammon, so unredeemed by cupidity, so unmoved by the “golden” opportunity, most certainly deserved death. Therefore it was that an odd tough member of the feathered tribe was now and then discussed in secret. There was little conviviality about these gatherings assembled in back rooms where the light could burn with impunity. The unsuspecting night-patrol would pass blindly by, oblivious of the illegally illuminated junket within.

But indeed it must be confessed that few people took seriously the wax and tallow proclamation. The boarding-house keepers, of course, championed it and its author’s wisdom (for reasons)—with a zeal that contrasted strangely with their condemnation of grander enactments. Landladies apart, however, the populace pooh-poohed the Gilbertian decree. Some regarded it as a mere precaution against a surprise visit from the Boers. But this was wrong, for the proclamation permitted the use of electric and acetylene lights at all hours. It was purely an economic question with the Colonel. Cynics opined that we should later on be offered the tallow to eat; and that the prohibition of the use of starch in our linen would be the precursor of some *stiff* emergency rations. The public, I say, disregarded the candle law, and the night patrol was kept busy dotting down in the light of the moon the numbers of a thousand houses. Unfortunately for the ends of Justice



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(!) the transgressors were so outrageously numerous that the heavy undertaking of arraigning half the city was not thought feasible. Only a few particularly refulgent “criminals” were hauled up and fined. Where sickness darkened a house the “Law” allowed a candle to light it, the whole night, if necessary, and invalids were accordingly as thick as leaves in Vallombrosa! An epidemic of all the ills that flesh is heir to raged in the land. Hypochondriacs moaned with their tongues in their cheeks in the presence of the prying night-patrol. Fevers flourished; multitudes were prostrated by influenza; the *pleura* played the devil with innumerable lungs. Anybody who was not a malingerer was voted a fool, an altruist. A magistrate, commenting on the great plague and the manner in which the majesty of the “Law” (the majesty of Martial Law!) was being outraged, averred that from his own doorstep every night at eleven o’clock he gazed at hundreds of illuminated houses. It was true; and we used to wonder which his worship was—an invalid, an altruist, or an owl!

We held a position at Otto’s Kopje from which our men occasionally made things unpleasant for the Kamfers Dam Laager. The Boers, naturally, did not like this, and they in turn sometimes harassed the defenders of the kopje. But Kamfers Dam was shortly to be made quake, for it had just leaked out that a gigantic gun was in course of construction at the De Beers workshops; that men who knew their business were sweating at it day and night. Opinions were much divided as to the probable utility of this instrument. Some were disposed to pity the poor Boers when it was ready for action, while others were not less inclined to lament the fate of the poor Briton who would sit behind it, to get blown to pieces by a botched piece of mechanism. The withering criticisms passed on this prospective product of De Beers were anything but re-assuring. It was useless to try to impress on the morbid critic that there were skilled Woolwich men engaged in the manufacture of the gun. The argument would be crushed by that expressive figure, “rats!” The scorn with which these rodents were slung by the tail in the face of anyone who believed in “Long Cecil” (the gun had been so named out of compliment to Mr. Rhodes) was conclusive. Where was the necessary material to come from? Oh, De Beers had the material, the optimist would reply. But optimists, once so ubiquitous, were now as rare as radium. Our prophets had for their reputations’ sake altered their tactics. Experience had taught them that the roseate view of things was the least likely to be sound, and they now revelled in predictions of an otto—*not* of roses. They prepared us, with a vengeance, for the worst. “To-morrow” was ever to be a day of tragic enormity for Kimberley. The local *Armageddon* was to begin (daily) at day-break; the enemy’s guns were always being augmented; the town was to be razed to the ground, and, unless surrender was prompt, all its inhabitants with it. Thus did a spirit of despondency continue to depress the people and the prospect of emancipation grow dimmer and dimmer.

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Besides the prophets of evil there was a set of cynics who sneered at all things, the incapacity of the Town Guard, its Officers, *etc.* For a long time the favourite boast of these gentlemen was that they had refused commissions in the Town Guard. It was true; and it is worth recalling why. At the beginning of the Siege little coteries were formed, “rings” were established, private meetings held—at which gatherings it was settled who was to be Captain of this Section, who Lieutenant of that, and so forth. All these matters were amicably fixed up, to the satisfaction of all concerned—including the vintner. It was assumed that the scale of pay would, as in the Regular Army, be in accordance with rank. The consideration was of course a minor one; but still the disgust of the coteries was profound when it was announced that the Imperial allowances to Town Guards were to be uniform; that a Captain was to receive for his services no more and no less than a Private. It was a disconcerting sequel to some skilful wire-pulling, and the martial ardour of the wire-pullers dropped in a trice to *zero*. Their dignity demanded their resignations, and their dignity’s ruling was bowed to. These injured people would not be led into action by a raw volunteer; and they confided to every ear that would hear that the citizen soldiers could be trusted in a crisis—to shoot each other! But imagine the discomfiture of these veterans when at a later stage an army order, retrospective in its operation, was issued which cancelled the original monetary conditions of service for Officers and non-commissioned Officers, and increased the rates of pay to which their respective ranks entitled them. This order was only less effective than a bombshell in crushing a dignity already injured; and the gusto with which the Colonel and the Civil Commissioner were relegated to Connaught was excusable.

A good deal of rumbling was heard on Friday; it might have been thunder, or perchance artillery. Some said it was nature; others that it was guns’ work. But nobody seemed to think that it mattered a great deal. We had grown tired of noise, nothing but noise. The whistle of the armoured train, which kept patrolling the line (the bit that was left of it) was more interesting, sometimes an innocent soul would allow his fancy to beguile him into hoping that the whistle portended the approach of a Cape Town train, with food and mail-bags, and he would march off to the station on desperate speculation to meet it.

In pursuance of an idea which had long occupied his thoughts the Colonel despatched a mounted force to cross the border into Free State territory—at which we could look across with the naked eye. What good purpose the visit was to serve was not obvious; but it was attributed to a desire on the Colonel’s part to win the distinction of being the *first* to invade the enemy’s territory. At any rate, the distinction was won. The men



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had not far to travel; and they did not go far when they crossed over, for the Oliphantsfontein camp blocked the way. The Boers were awake, but the audacity of the raid would appear to have deprived them for the moment of their visual senses. The Light Horse drew quite close ere the propriety of halting was suggested to them. The suggestion was naturally expected to issue in the first instance from the cannon's mouth; but the guns said nothing, and their silence emboldened our fellows to persist in their breach of etiquette until they made a startling discovery, namely, that the guns had been removed. This unexpected slice of luck so inspired the invaders that they advanced rapidly and drove out the enemy, whose resistance was feeble. A general inspection followed; the pantries and cupboards of the houses around were the objects of a special scrutiny, but not a bone, not an egg, not a crust was found! In one house a Boer lance with a white rag for pennon was picked up. This curio was carried back to town, and ultimately became the property of an enterprising curiosity shop-keeper, who cut artistic bullet holes in the pennon with his scissors—thereby adding largely to its curiousness. The bullets that made the holes were also a good line, and “sold” well (in fact, everybody). Nothing else occurred to make Friday noteworthy.

Saturday completed the round dozen weeks of siege life. How many more were to follow? Alas! our seers were discredited. They were silent; but hollow though time had branded their vaticinations the silence of the seers was not exactly golden. The prevailing pessimism was heart-breaking. At a critical stage, when a cheerful optimism was almost essential to the preservation of one's mental balance, we were tactlessly stuffed with the “lone lorn” lamentations of a Mrs. Gummidge. But Roberts was coming, and he was a “great” soldier—far greater than Wellington, or even Napoleon (a mere Corsican!) We hungered for news of his plans. Roberts, we took it, was not the man to sanction the alleged intentions of his subordinates—the callous mediocrities who would let Kimberley work out its own salvation. It was reported at this time—for the better security of our peace of mind—that a grand march was to be made on Bloemfontein, while Kimberley was to live on air and fight away.

In the afternoon a balloon appeared in the air. It attracted much attention, and set everybody speculating on what its business in the air precisely was. Our nautical experts (who had been at sea for three weeks anyhow) opined that it was “steering” for the Diamond Fields. It must have collided with a “Castle,” for it never came into port.



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Balloons, indeed, were seen very often, and a great deal of time was devoted to the study of their movements. In the silence of the night a practical joker would rush out with a field-glass in his hand and shout "balloon!" at the top of his voice. The desired effect—of bringing the whole street out of bed to see the balloon—was easily produced. The star-gazers would thus spend an hour or so minutely examining all the stars in the firmament in their endeavours to select the one that most resembled a balloon. This was not easily done—the stars being much alike to the stupid naked eye—but they would near the point of agreement on the question; and then the confounded night-patrol would come along with his gun, and the observers would have to rush for the cover of their blankets. When it was thought that the patrol had passed two thousand yards there would be a general sneak back to begin over again the search for the needle in the great haggard of the heavens. Everybody had his or her own particular planet to minimise. The brightest planets were naturally the more general choice, albeit distance might in the circumstances be expected to lend a dimness to the view. *Venus* was essentially a very nice balloon; numbers swore by *Jupiter*; *Mercury* had a heavy following. *Taurus* was indeed a "Bull"; and Mars! talk of *Mars* being inhabited; we identified its inhabitants as being necessarily British. There were *thirteen* signs in the *Zodiac*. Anybody who called a star a star was called an ass. "That's no star," your exasperated kinsman would retort, "do you take me for a blind fool." And it only required a fixed, steady gaze of ten minutes, without winking, to convince the most sceptical that it was indeed "no star"; that it did "move"; that it was "too large" for a star; that it was absurd to consider it *not* a balloon. The *Milky Way* (as per diverse opinions) was one vast creamery of balloons, undiluted by the "poetry of heaven!" In fine, among all the things that twinkled there were only some half dozen that hushed the voice of controversy. It was certain there remained at least five luminaries, five unmistakable stars, to wit, the Southern Cross. Paul Kruger once expressed astonishment that the British had not annexed the moon, if it were inhabited. Well, the moon, though there is a man in it, was, shall I say, too large, too obviously itself, to deceive the Imperial eye. We left the recluse in the moon alone, to smile in dreary solitude; interference with him would spoil the moonshine.

## CHAPTER XIII

*Week ending 13th January, 1900*



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The rumour-monger and the quidnunc—to whom only brief allusion has so far been made—had come to be regarded as distinct public nuisances. I have hitherto refrained from commenting often on the actions and the utterances of these monomaniacs in our midst. Any attempt to summarise their mendacities would be foredoomed to failure; the output of rumours would exceed the limits of an ordinary tome. There were indeed some enterprising spirits who did embark upon the task of collecting these rumours, but they dropped it in despair, before economy in foolscap was even thought of. These fanciful canards grew more nauseating as the Siege advanced in seriousness, until anything in the nature of news was deemed of necessity a lie. A local scribe, “The Lad,” took the romancers severely to task in a series of pithy articles, which the *Diamond Fields’ Advertiser*—domiciled though it was in a *glass* house—did not scruple to publish. The “lovely liar” was hanged, drawn, and quartered. The “Military critic” was satirised, too; he was the lynx-eyed gentleman who had detected the Lancers approaching Kimberley at a fast gallop two hours after the Column had departed from Orange River. We had strained our eyes for weeks on the strength of that man’s eyesight, for ‘hope springs eternal in the human breast.’

But all these far-seeing mortals had fallen discredited from their high estate; and it was at this pregnant turning point in our fortunes that the need of a little originality (for their credit’s sake) appeared to strike them. They set themselves to weave a romance as weird, as diabolical, as their perverted ingenuity could suggest. And a masterpiece it proved to be.

They began to tell us of horseflesh, to recite legends of how under conditions similar to ours it had been eaten, positively eaten, in the past by human beings, who without it would have died, and who *did not* die when they ate it! For our part, we should have elected to die first—but I must not anticipate. Gradually and tentatively—just as a man who saw virtue in cannibalism would hem and haw before he advocated its practice—the subject of horseflesh was furtively discussed in whispers, which ultimately developed into audible commentaries in regard to its odour, taste, and general nutritiousness. A plea for cannibalism could scarcely encounter fiercer opposition or evoke greater disgust than did the mere suggestion of horseflesh, even as a last resort, a possible infliction, an alternative to surrender. In no circumstances would we tolerate it. The very name of such a diet was revolting to our conservative tastes, and filled us with horror; it was bad form to mention it. If the British army ever brought us to such a pass terrible things would happen; loyalty would be a memory of the digestive past; wholesale forswearing of allegiance to the Queen would be the patriotism of the day. Horseflesh indeed! The dish was hounded down as something too utterly inconsonant with the culinary decencies of civilisation.



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So strong and bitter was the feeling against the horseflesh fable—for fable, our anger notwithstanding, we insisted it was—that thinking meat-eaters began to look upon it as a bad omen, and to wonder why a baseless rumour should stir up so much indignation. Tales of this kind, whether or not they tallied with probability, had come to be pooh-poohed, to be treated with disdain. Hence it was rather odd that an anecdote so racy should excite so much ferocity.

Meanwhile, the enemy, unaware of our internal troubles, had placed three new guns on Wimbledon Ridge. This was ominous; it brought about an armistice; that is, a cessation of hostilities in the war of words against Gorle and his hippophagous designs. A bombardment was expected; and as we might easily have our teeth incapacitated by the shells, the absurdity of bidding the hoofed gentleman good-day before we met him gave us pause in our campaign against his friends. But the assault was directed to Kenilworth; the cannon rattled all day with a view to killing the cattle sheltered there. Our guns, after a while, took part in the firing, and when the smoke cleared away the kine were still there—on their feet. A second contingent of Basutos had taken their departure in the morning, and as they did not return we presumed they had passed in safety through the Boer lines. This accommodating spirit, while their policy of exhaustion was doing so well, must have gone against the Boer's grain; but then Lerothodi was a sleeping dog; it was important that he should be let lie.

The vindication of the *fama* was completed on Monday when horseflesh in all its naked iniquity was offered for sale, as horseflesh, at the Washington Market. Its virtual effect was to reduce our meat ration by a quarter; the authorities with rare consideration refrained from extremities, and started us with small doses of *one* ounce added to three of ox-flesh. Perhaps some credit was due to the military for horse-feeding us by degrees; but certain it is, they never got it. The people generally declined to intermix their curtailed rations with "strange food" of any kind; and the strange food accordingly remained in the shambles to do service another day—when means could be employed, if need be, to exorcise the demon of fastidiousness that had taken possession of us.

Our historians, our booky men, were on Tuesday glib to inform us that the Siege had now extended to eighty-seven days—the exact duration of the Siege of Lucknow. The tribulations of Lucknow were comparatively short and sweet; for our troubles, horseflesh made us feel, were only about to begin. Our clamour for relief had abated, and, except for an occasional spasmodic outburst, Methuen was left in peace. Agitation in the wilderness was futile; it could not hasten emancipation from the thralldom of Martial Law. We developed a lethargy on the broader (Imperial) issue. The guns still threshed the air, but with



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an increasing feebleness suggestive of the Column's return by easy stages to Orange River. Our disappointments had been manifold, and whispers with reference to the ultimate terms of surrender were not uncommon. Not that there was in any mind a disposition to give in until it was humanly impossible to hold the fort. But it was coming to that stage. Horseflesh on the top of other trials had implanted the canker of despair in more than one sensitive soul. We had a great deal of horseflesh of the tram and cab kind, and much as the obligations of Empire might induce us to perform, it was *too* much to expect us to rise to the occasion on foreign food. The physical needs of the moment demanded something less repulsive to the palate. No wonder the gloomy picture of digging trenches for the Boers obtruded itself on our mental vision. Opinions conflicted as to the aggregate quantity of meal and flour in the military stores; most people held the view that it was much less than was actually the fact. The scarcity of fodder, too, was felt acutely, and necessitated the curtailment of the tram and cab services. More horses had to be unharnessed and sent out to graze on the veld!—to live, as it were, on their wits. It was even rumoured that some Indian members of the community were inviting tenders for a supply of cats, and were prepared to pay for them as much as two shillings per puss. No evidence, however, in support of this tale from the Hills was forthcoming; nor was it in any event likely to prove a remunerative venture, since *rabbit pie*—ever a convertible term—would be the last delicacy to inspire trust where *all* animal food was suspect.

In the afternoon, two visitors entered the city. One had little to tell, but the other made amends for his companion's taciturnity with a graphic, Othellonian description of the dangers he had passed, and his wondrous experiences for many days and nights. He had, it appeared, a regard for Mr. Rhodes, (who is less popular in the Free State than in Kimberley), and the Government across the border had arraigned him on the charge of being "a Rhodes man" (whatever that is). For this high crime and misdemeanour he had been sentenced to three years' imprisonment. But the Rhodes man resented the injustice, and, with his friend, contrived to escape. After a series of peripatetic adventures they were more dead than alive when the head-gear of De Beers burst upon their view. The spectacle revived them, and with a desperate rally they crawled undetected through the Boer lines, to an asylum in which they were glad to find even horseflesh to eat.

Wednesday was in no way eventful; lassitude had gripped the people. This was the more noticeable in that our friends outside appeared to be uncommonly vigorous. They devoted great attention to their redoubts, to strengthening them, and conducted themselves like men who were sanguine of the fall of Kimberley. They bombarded us lightly in the afternoon, on the chance of stretching *hors-de-combat* a unit of the garrison—not more than one or two, as they had no special desire to prejudice the appeal they felt sure we must soon make for food. They did not want that consummation delayed a moment longer than was necessary. It would leave them free

to establish railway communication between Kimberley and Bloemfontein; they had such a scheme in contemplation.



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All these things, however, were now of secondary interest; it was the horseflesh peril that held the field. The masses were still determined never to submit to such an ordinance on the eve of the twentieth century; the innovation was too horrible. But the military, undaunted by popular opposition, were bent on making the horse acceptable; and their next move was to *equalise* the proportions of the two species that constituted a ration. The effect of this little twist of the screw was to reduce our meat ration (nobody allowed that horseflesh was meat!) to two ounces. The ounces from the ribs of the tougher animal were left severely alone—by the majority of the people. On the other hand, controversialists of strong anti-vegetarian views were forced to experiment. Their verdicts differed. Some of them knew a *little* about cooking, and *they* were “not surprised.” Others, who knew nothing of cooking, re-harnessed the horse at once; while a third school, expert in the culinary art, triumphantly overcame their prejudices, but were afraid openly to smack their lips. Unanimous approval or toleration was never forthcoming, and, for myself, I am most inclined to respect the judgment of the heretics who pronounced the equine dish “as good as the *meat* that was going.” It was certainly not better, and to make it universally acceptable it would require to have been very much better.

On one “point” agreement obtained; it was admitted on all sides that the horse tasted sweet. One might suppose the adjective to be a recommendation; but it was not so; quite the contrary (the nearer the bone, *etc.* does not apply to a saddle of horseflesh). And yet there were people who liked their *porridge* sweet! who, after wasting their allowance of sugar in it, would go running about the streets to borrow a little sugar for their tea. Had it been practicable to utilise a little horse-essence for the tea, all would be well. But it would hardly do. Nobody ventured even to hint at the adoption of such a course to a neighbour; with borrowing rampant it was undesirable to be on other than amicable terms with the lady next door.

Time passed, and our antipathy to horseflesh abated not a jot. It did not improve on acquaintance, we were told by those who tried it, while the self-respecting persons who would not so demean themselves were no less bitter in their diatribes. It was useless to argue that the horse was a “clean” animal. He was deemed too useful, too tough, too sinewy, too hard-working to be digestible. We could not connect a horse-chop with what was fit for human consumption. Most of us indulgently spared the butcher the trouble of weighing it; we preferred—with an air of dignity—to take the two ounces that civilisation sanctioned, and to forego the rest. And there were numbers who did not consider it worth while enduring a certain jostling for the *right* half of their ration; it was not worth it—and



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they might get the *wrong* half! The meat man did not like the boycott at all; he wanted to get rid of his surplus sirloins, and the asceticism of those who preferred to thrive on black tea enabled him to invite the unparticular people to pick and choose the rib—the equine rib—they liked best. The authorities, to do them justice, had acted straightforwardly in differentiating between the two animals; no deception in the way of palming off the one for the other was permitted. But in the confusion things got mixed; and the poor butcher, who was only human, succumbed in spite of himself to strong temptation. Whether he was governed by the motive of doing a little wrong for sake of a great right is beside the question. The great right was done. In veterinary circles the meat dispenser was relished as a rather daring “perverter,” while hundreds of smart people began to enjoy their *pseudo*-beef. And when afterwards informed of the “mistake” they did not seem to care, but went on serenely pandering to the butcher’s genial ambidextrousness.

On Thursday a good many shells fell in the neighbourhood of Scholtz’s Nek. With an energy which few had hitherto been disposed to give him credit for possessing, the enemy continued to engross himself in establishing, as it were, a fixity of tenure. This growing feeling of security which animated our friends was most depressing. True, it was something to hear that the Boers at Ladysmith had been repulsed with heavy loss—if it were true. It was something; but it was not much. Privations had developed our bumps of Provincialism; the claims of Empire took a secondary place, as also did the fortunes of Ladysmith. One authority stated that forty-five thousand Boers had been killed or wounded in Natal. But these figures, to be correct, would necessarily have embraced the warriors outside Kimberley—who were much alive! The figures were afterwards reduced to four, and eventually to two. But these important amendments were not proposed and carried for weeks after the events to which they related, by which time we were so deep in the slough of despond over something else that we could not sink deeper. We were still in the dark as to the progress of the campaign. No accurate accounts of the disasters, mishaps, and reverses that marked its opening stages were placed before us. Brief and garbled references to Stormberg, Colenso, and Nicholson’s Nek were allowed by “Law” to illumine the columns of the Press—getting lightly treated as trifles of no consequence. There existed a small, astute minority who hazarded unpleasant opinions of these “trifles.” Our Teutonic friends candidly expressed the view that England, to save her Empire, must shortly sue for peace; but though they were just as anxious as anybody else to see the Column come in, too much weight was not attached to what foreign fellows said. The *Advertiser*, too, though ever sanguine in its editorial columns, was sometimes indiscreet in its humour. It gave



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us, for example, an anecdote anent the utterances of a certain prominent Boer, which was in no wise calculated to allay the unrest prevalent since Magersfontein. The Boers, he said, were willing to make peace at their own price, and that price included a full recognition of their Independence, an indemnity of twenty millions of money, and a perquisite in the shape of Natal for the Transvaal. For the Free State it was stipulated that the border should be widened to admit Kimberley back to the fold. These were extravagant terms; they were amusing, as amusement goes—or might go in the ordinary trend of things. But when coupled with other symptoms—the misfortunes of the army, the reticence of the authorities, the uncanny demureness of the fourth estate—they were not conducive to peace of mind. Had there been aught that was good to tell it would have been proclaimed with glowing candour; the “new diplomacy” would have exercised its sway in riotous triumph. The Military, it was conceded, knew everything. Unanimity obtained on that point. But it stopped there. On the question of the Colonel’s reticence, its cause, effect, wisdom, or unwisdom, discord was rife. Acute ones had hit the nail on the head, but they could not drive it home. Every man, or set of men, had his or their own peculiar theory to expound. The army, some said, was marching on Bloemfontein with a view to expediting our relief by forcing the Boer back to defend his own State. Against this it was maintained that Kimberley was outside the *ambit* of the army’s high and mighty consideration. Others argued that the Colonel’s policy of “mum” was mainly intended as a protest against the traffic in “Specials.” We were all weary; the strain was weakening our mental faculties; the most sensible and philosophic cherished the queerest thoughts. As a cynic observed, one night at *souchong*, it took a siege to test one’s intelligence—and it tried the cynics as much as the non-intellectual. All honour to those gentlemen—lay and clerical—who by dint of hard work and in doing good preserved their equilibrium. We had, on Thursday, an instance of their worth in the establishment of a cook-house to supply the native population with *cooked* rations. This was a praiseworthy innovation, for wood and such fuel as *Mars* permitted to be combustible were extremely scarce. The native had been cured of his weakness for the dismemberment of mahogany; indirectly the cooking-depot warded off a “relapse,” and was altogether an Institution creditable to its founders.

Friday came and went unmarked by incident of note; but no; we were told—it was something new to be told anything—that a Cape *dorp* called Kuruman had thrown up the sponge. The place had been poorly garrisoned, and the end was not unexpected—in Official quarters. We protested against the military habit of publishing things we did not want to know, while all knowledge of more important events was kept



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hermetically sealed in one or half a dozen heads. We were not altogether consistent in this, but—no matter. Saturday wound up the unlucky thirteenth week of our sorrows. It saw us emaciated, thirsty, and filled to satiety with the romance of isolation. It found us irascible, contumacious, with an aptitude for fluent swearing at the tales (of how light we had grown) unfolded by the weighing-machine. It found us in lucid intervals conjuring up visions of a beer saturnalia when—alas! when the barrels were full again. It heard us howling against horseflesh and the devilish ingenuity of him who discovered a precedent for roasting it; it heard the chorus, “where is the Column?” and the mocking echo answering “where!” It heard many divergent opinions as to what the Column was going to do; some contending that it was waiting to be re-inforced by the “Sixth Division”; more dictating with fiery rancour that it was for the “Seventh Division” the Column waited; another insisting that the “Seventh Division” was operating a thousand miles away—and *all* of us knowing about as much of the Sixth or Seventh Division’s movements as Plato did of ping-pong! The need of Army reform was much felt and talked of. But there was behind this conflict of tongues a weary but firm determination to keep unfurled at all costs the flag of no surrender.

### CHAPTER XIV

*Week ending 20th January, 1900*

It was an illustration of the people’s enduring pluck, this dogged resolution of no surrender. Not that they felt conscious of any particular heroism; the thought of capitulation as a means of escape from discomfort suggested itself to nobody. In moments of mental depression it might have crossed an ultra-pessimistic mind and been brooded over as a consummation that no Spartan bravery could enable us to avert. But to the masses the notion was unthinkable; the idea of surrender would not bear discussion; it was never discussed. Against Martial Law as such we did not so much complain; it was an evil, but to some extent a necessary evil; and however prone we were to find fault, however scathingly we condemned the machinations of the “Law,” or the stern “will” of its maker, the possibility of yielding to the *other* enemy was never entertained for one moment. No proposal of the kind was ever made.

And when it is remembered that the nature and extent of the things they endured had at this period increased beyond the mere inconveniences of Siege life, it will be conceded that the citizens of Kimberley played a worthy part. They saw disease and death busy in their midst; they saw the natives succumbing to the ravages of scurvy and kindred ills; they saw sickness playing havoc with the white population; they saw their families in sore need of the necessities of existence, and young children—hardest of all—dying from want of nourishment. The infant mortality was truly heart-rending. It is recorded that thirteen



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babes were buried in one day. The authorities had adopted measures to conserve milk for the young and the invalided, but with only partial success. When matters were at their worst a further effort was made to induce the privileged few who could still call their cows their own to send milk to a central depot for distribution among the children of the poor and middle classes. And the appeal was not a vain one; the response was generous; it lessened the mortality. To-day, the men of the Diamond Fields can look back and laugh at their harsh judgments, their not too sweet reasonableness towards the "Law" of the land. They acquitted themselves well on the whole; for an imperturbable spirit covers a multitude of foibles. The citizens held Kimberley in spite of everything, and never swerved from the fulfilment of what they felt to be a sacred duty.

Sunday brought a dreary repetition of a siege Sunday's monotony. The situation had been discussed threadbare, and there was little else to converse about. The dust outdoors was blinding, and the people for the most part dozed over books. That was the cardinal mercy vouchsafed us; we had books to read, and never were they so ravenously devoured. Reading was much in vogue; it was a siege innovation—a very good one, too. Persons who had never hitherto believed in the pleasure to be derived from books were disillusioned, and driven, as it were, to cultivate a taste for literature—as men in gaol often are. It may therefore be set down as portion of the good resulting from evil, this teaching of people to value mental nourishment. The importance of the physical variety was only too well understood.

On Monday many shells fell into the west end of the town. Our West End was not like London's; there were few houses in it, and they were unoccupied. Mafeking, it was said, had driven back the besiegers, and, it was added, had "possibly" been relieved from the north ("possibly" was thought distinctly good). It may have been so; but we did not believe it. There had all along been a great deal of chopping and changing anent the position of the Mafeking garrison. We were at one time told that Mafeking "fell" before our Siege began. We could, and always did, take a more dispassionate view of Baden-Powell's plight than we could or would take of our own.

Tuesday morning brought the 'signal sound of strife'; no day brought any more. The belching of the guns sounded nearer than on the Monday, but that was small consolation, for it had sounded near and afar off alternately for many days. There is a modernised game of blind man's buff in which the blind one is set to find a hidden ping-pong ball, and is aided in the search by a *fugue* played on the piano. The nearer she (or he) approaches the object of her (or his) search the louder grows the music (the *fugue*) and *vice versa*. It seemed to us that Methuen not only knew the game but was passionately fond of it. It was our privilege



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in the afternoon to behold the twinkling of a balloon. It being broad daylight the stars were not visible. Still, sceptical wiseacres refused to come outside to see the sight; they guessed it was "the sun." A variety of colours were to be seen about the balloon; the sceptics said it was a rainbow. But there was no mistaking it in the light of day; the thing was really a balloon. The rumour-monger seized his opportunity and circulated all over the city that portion of the Column were visible, or had halted, rather, at Kraalkop, where they ought to be visible. Kraalkop accordingly was watched intently for eight and forty hours, but no sign of a human presence rewarded the vigil. The Boers, meanwhile, evinced no signs of scenting danger from any quarter, and with their usual nonchalance kept leisurely shying shells at Kimberley. These missiles were intended probably for the redoubts, as they fell mainly on the outskirts of the town. They exploded on the hard roads, and suggested plenty of melancholy speculation as to the precise number of them that would be needed to double up for ever the entire population. Fever continued to play havoc with both natives and Europeans. The Siege was growing warm, insufferably warm, and the weather that nature gave us was in all conscience hot enough. In our fourteenth week of hunger and thirst matters were as bad as they could be—until the meat Directorate proceeded scientifically to confound the fallacy in their own peculiar way.

The half and half regulation had been in operation some days—a few eating all they got—others only half of it—more again touching no meat at all lest they should (horrible thought!) mistake one half for the other. This state of things did not satisfy the Authorities, and they proceeded to push the horse—practically down our throats. The feelings of the civilised citizens of the Diamond City can be better imagined than described when they read in the daily *bulletin* at the Washington Market that they would get—not *all* horse indeed, but, in the words of the song, "it was near it." It was decreed that our ration should henceforth consist of four-fifths horse-flesh and one-fifth meat proper. This reduced our allowance of solid (familiar) food to less than one ounce, or in other words to the dimensions of a small cake of tobacco *minus* several pipefuls! It may well be doubted whether Gilbert has ever conceived anything so quaint. I will not dwell on its whimsical side, nor on the feelings its realism stirred in the breasts of the suffering multitude. In effect it caused a serious secession from the ranks of the party who had abstained altogether from horseflesh. For when it came to a choice between no meat at all on the one side, and Boer bread and porridge *exclusively* on the other, it occurred to the seceders that even horse blood is thicker than water; so they passed under the yoke of hippophagy with perfect composure. Still the party that suffered this defection lost

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neither *prestige* nor numerical strength, for the four-fifths' standard made vegetarians of many who had tolerated—while it lasted—the principle of equal rights, or two ounces of each animal. A transposition of parties occurred. But none abstained from opening the floodgates of their wrath on the authors of the latest *menu*. The authors' apologists, for—tell it not in Gath!—they had apologists still, argued that there were restaurants in Paris where cooked horse was a speciality. But special pleading so palpable only aggravated the prevailing resentment to the dish. There were a great many customs in Paris equally foreign to our, shall I say, Imperial ways; together with a plethora of scientific *chefs* who could metamorphose anything—rats as well as horses. There were revolutionaries in France in sufficient numbers to make traffic in gruesome dietary pay; and plenty of fodder, besides, with which to “fatten” beasts. All this gammon respecting Continental precedent and taste was beside the question; it only invited gratuitous vituperation of the French nation. An ugly feature of the traffic was suggested by the fact that horses were dying from sheer starvation. The Sanitary Authorities had become experts in the use of the revolvers with which they expedited the demise of the poor beasts. Everybody has doubtless known of the repulsion one feels against partaking of the flesh of a cow that dies a *natural* death. All of us, perhaps, have unconsciously relished it at one time or another, when butchers were above suspicion. But when it was a question of a horse—well, I will not conjure up the horror of the situation. The horses used for food were all *slaughtered*; but the suspicion existed that they might not have been, and to lay the bogey in minds governing old-fashioned stomachs was not easy. These old Whigs argued that the meat we ate was “dead” meat, from “dead” animals (which was indisputable). All this apart, however, it was manifest even to the devil-may-care fellows who are usually satisfied with *enough* of a thing, that the horses were “too thin.” The Authorities kept inviting owners to sell their beasts for “slaughtering purposes”; good prices were offered for “fat horses.” Advertisements (in huge capitals) to this effect disfigured our newspaper for a long while, and though we did not regard it as such it was a nice piece of humour. The “fat” horses were all too few for fighting, and were reserved for fighting. The artfulness of “slaughtering purposes” can be appreciated accordingly.

Wednesday was interesting, Colonel Chamier having persuaded Kekewich to let him off on a little expedition. He took with him a small battery of guns, a picked force of mounted men (on “fat” horses), and wended his way towards Alexandersfontein. On the journey he divided his force and left half of it with a Maxim at a Mr. Fenn's farm. The jolly Boers had evidently, and not unnaturally, assumed that they had cured us of our weakness for

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meanderings. An attack was the last thing they looked for, and Chamier got well within range of the great camp unobserved. And then the battle began. The enemy, taken by surprise, suffered much in their efforts to regain their trenches. In the meantime a large party of Boers from a neighbouring arc of the circle that encompassed Kimberley were endeavouring to cut off Chamier's retreat. But it was with tactics of this sort that the men at Fenn's were instructed to deal; and they did deal with them, effectually. Unconscious of hidden danger, the unsuspecting Boers in the course of their operations drew near to the farm. And it was then, and not till then, that into their midst came a shower of bullets that spoiled their plans. In the *melee* a Boer horse (a plump one) was triumphantly captured and preserved for dissection. The men shortly afterwards returned to town, having learnt all that they wanted to learn, and inflicted more damage than they had hoped to inflict. They were bombarded on the journey home, but their casualties were nil.

On their entrance into Kimberley they met an enthusiastic baker (with his breadcart), who was not in a position to confer V.C.'s all round; but he bombarded each member of the force with something quite as precious, namely, a loaf of bread. The "regulation" allowance was only a paltry fourteen ounces, which the lightest of Light Horsemen was capable of demolishing for breakfast. The generous baker—Martial Law and proclamations notwithstanding—could not resist the opportunity of throwing the beam of a good deed on this naughty world; and when he found he had not sufficient loaves to go round, so far from regretting his quixotic rashness, he galloped back to his bakehouse for more. It was a graceful act—reckless, heroic—and the recipients of the dough were not lacking in gratitude. But, alas! the *Commissariat* were; they bristled with anger! How dare a baker be generous in the teeth of the penalties attached to kindness and such weaknesses. How dare he flout so outrageously the canons of Martial Law. Who was Czar! Was Kekewich king! Was Caesar (*Imperial* Caesar) dead and turned to—flour! The offence was unprecedented in its heinousness. Threats of prosecution followed; but the offending baker apologised; and though the more rigid of our disciplinarians, given their way, would have roasted him in his own oven, the flexible ones deemed shooting too good for him, and accepted his apology by way of compromise.

But Wednesday will be remembered for more than a sortie, and the baker's rebellion that ensued. On that day was formally established our celebrated "Soup Kitchen." Among the sheaves of suggestive letters to the Editor, for the better management, economy, and distribution of supplies, the epistles relating to the need of a soup department had attracted most attention. The idea was not a bad one; it was practicable, and had much to commend it. But still the feeling of the people was that so long as they were allowed an *unmixed* ration of the roast beef of old England or young Australia (same Empire) it was preferable that they should be permitted to make their own soup—a poor thing, perhaps; but their own.



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The advent of a joint more accustomed to shafts than to skewers, however, was a horse of a different colour; so different, in fact, that all the virtues of a great common kitchen, the saving it would effect, and the good side of Collectivism generally, dawned simultaneously upon everybody by some magical inspiration. The advantages of a Soup-house were at once recognised, and the wisdom of such a creation was immediately acclaimed by a host of astute correspondents. The idea took root, germinated, "caught on," so to say, as the one and only panacea for our ills. So strongly was the scheme approved that arrangements for the flotation of a semi-philanthropic, semi-military company were settled forthwith. All the best names available (for reasons which will be more obvious in due time) were placed on the list of Directors. Mr. Rhodes, the millionaire, would not lend his name for inscription on a *prospectus* that was not *bona fide*; and such respected signatories as Mr. and Mrs. Maguire, Doctor Smartt (who also was "well," bedad), and other public personages of high character and probity were a good guarantee for the quality and purity of the State Soup; while the skill of Captain Tyson (who undertook the duties of honorary *chef*) was incontestable. All these names were easily procured. It was laid down with solemn emphasis, as a primary article of faith, that the soup was to be made from oxflesh, and nothing but oxflesh. The horse was to be banned! That was the cardinal condition of the success anticipated for the venture; and the guarantees on this head were, in view of the *status* of the guarantors, accepted unreservedly. Mr. Rhodes, indeed, went a step further than the rest; he guaranteed a contribution of vegetables from the De Beers garden; and the Colonel, not to be outdone, permitted the soup to be thickened with mealie meal. The allowance was to be at the rate of one pint per adult, at three-pence per pint. That the value given for the humble "tickey" was good the success of the scheme proved beyond contention. Hundreds of pints were disposed of—the Directors in person superintending the sale and wielding the ladles. The supply did not at first correspond with the demand; thousands who had assembled with their jugs were turned away disappointed. The great things expected from the Kitchen were realised; the excellence and the flavour of the broth surpassed expectations. The ordinary meat ticket sufficed, and its presentation at the Kitchen entitled the holder to as many pints of soup as (and in lieu of) the number of meat rations for which the ticket was good. The fame of the broth travelled far. Egg-cup-fuls of the liquid were exultingly passed round to the wary, suspicious ones; and these proud sceptics by extending to it the charity of their silence most eloquently admitted the groundlessness of their horsey apprehensions.

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The visit of an envoy from the Boer camp aroused a good deal of curiosity. What did he want? The Colonel would never tell. But there was much sinister speculation abroad which, taken in conjunction with the unabating activity of the Boers, was the reverse of comforting. The unconditional surrender of the town had, it was whispered, been demanded in explicit terms, and with equal explicitness refused. The consequence of this refusal was the thought uppermost in every mind. The gentlemen outside were numerically stronger than ever, and more at ease, too. They had—if report ever spoke truly—intimated to the “Volunteer” camp, in some way not explained, that they had just returned from their Christmas holidays; that their absence accounted for the “quiet time” we had been enjoying; but that they would presently be giving us “beans.” They certainly know how many make *five*; and their facetiousness in close proximity to a large British Column was beyond us.

There was yet another pronouncement to complete the eventfulness of the day, and to cause a lull in the domestic warfare waged against the Colonel and his Ironsides. By dint of hard work day and night the great thirty-pound gun constructed by De Beers was finished at last. Big things were expected from it; the surprise and consternation it was likely to create was a pleasing reflection. The construction of such a piece of ordnance in the middle of a desert was considered something to be proud of, and that reflected credit on the genius of Mr. Labram, who had planned it. Long Cecil (as it was called), in all its pristine perfection, was submitted to the public gaze, and was at once the cynosure of all eyes. On Friday it was tested, with complete success. The boom, at close quarters, was loud and alarming; and it required the despatch of a second shell to satisfy non-spectators that the gun had not been blown to pieces by the first. A few missiles were sent into the Intermediate Station, a couple of miles distant. Whether anyone was hurt did not transpire, but the moral effect produced was unmistakable. A panic appeared to ensue, and vehicles of all sorts were hurriedly requisitioned to enable the Boers to get away with their goods and chattels from the Intermediate to a more healthy station. Private letters were afterwards unearthed in which no attempt was made to conceal the alarm occasioned by this unexpected visitation.

But the new gun was only a diversion, while the stream of invective against horseflesh went on like the brook for ever. It is an ill wind that blows nobody good; the truth of this was well exemplified in the luck of the dogs. The poor animals looked shockingly thin and wasted, and had for a long time been unable to move about with their wonted agility in pursuit of locusts and mosquitoes. The mongrels that had any fight or vitality left in them would engage in a terrific struggle on the streets at night for the contents of the refuse buckets which our primitive



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sanitation laws permitted to obstruct the pathways until morning. It need hardly be said that there was not much in the way of crusts, scraps, or bones to appease canine hunger, and the resultant keenness of the competition made the night extremely hideous. This snarling struggle for existence had gone on night after night to the supreme annoyance of martyrs who would fain have slept, and who urged (in letters to the Editor) the wholesale destruction of the snarlers as a work at once humane, essential, and congenial. This was in pre-horse food days, when the ox was paramount on our tables.

But now all was changed, and every dog had his day indeed! The brutes—not knowing the difference—revelled in horseflesh. The people who could not look at it gave it *all* to their dogs; while the most enthusiastic equine meat-eater invariably left a trifle behind him. Canine gluttony was a source of much amusement, envy, or disgust (according to the individual temperament); and the ubiquitous cynic reminded one of a good time coming when the horse would be locally extinct and “fat dog” the daintiest of diets. The irony of it all was that there were still at Kenilworth some hundreds of oxen, in perpetual danger of being “sniped”; and the populace argued (not unreasonably) that to force on us irrational rations was in the circumstances a callous thing. There were doubtless considerations to palliate this procedure on the part of the Protector, but we would not see them. The cattle were there in sufficient numbers to feed us until relief arrived. True, relief appeared to be remote, but our view was that (if a calamity were to be averted) it *must* come within a month at the outside. And what a pretty *denouement* it would be, we said, if, through thrusting “strange food” upon us until the Column came in, there were left a monster herd of jubilant bullocks to swell the chorus of welcome! And, if I mistake not, they did actually swell it. At any rate, General French was reported to have been highly indignant when informed of how much more useful than palatable the horse was, and to have ordered its exclusion from the abattoir forthwith. We had to continue vegetating on Siege rations for two weeks after the arrival of French; but from the first moment of his entry the nightmare of horseflesh troubled us no more.

Those dark days were not without their humours withal; and there was a piquancy in the very imperviousness of our risible faculties to their correct appreciation. Asses and mules—it was said—were butchered in common with horses, and discussion was wont to be rife on the relative merits of the three animals in their new sphere of usefulness. The difficulty involved in distinguishing a steak of one from a steak of another was no small one; but donkey was reputed to taste sweeter than common horse—a questionable recommendation!—and the advocates of this theory were called cannibals. The mule had its backers, too; it was the gentler animal, they

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contended in sustinment of their preference. But all three beasts had acquired a fresh interest, notoriety, and dignity; and it was edifying to watch men, not noted for their sporting proclivities, eyeing an animal with the knowing look of a *connoisseur* that seemed to say: "I wonder what he would taste like." Whether it was that, being so cheap he might be regarded "gift horse," or for some less occult reason, the points of a beast were never looked for in the mouth. His age, for example, might strike a thinking person as an important factor to be remembered in the summing up of a horse's fitness for the grill. But the people generally never thought of that, and were mainly influenced in their judgments by the spareness or fleshiness of the animal's hindquarters. On Saturday the atmosphere was thick with rumours of imminent trouble. The precise terms of the Boer ultimatum we did not know, but that an ultimatum had been received was not denied. We heard of a fifty-pound gun (bigger than ours!) being put into position on the Free State border—with a view to instilling in us the wisdom of recognising the inevitable. The less formidable instruments of torture nearer home were also being augmented. There was a feeling that events of an uncommon character were on the march. People talked of presentiments—one being that the Baralongs outside Kimberley were being armed to assist in our annihilation. The much debated topic anent the likelihood of the Sixth Division being sent to join Methuen was settled at last—to our chagrin. It had gone off at a tangent somewhere else. Who knew that the Seventh Division would not follow suit? In any case, weeks had to pass before the Seventh (being still at sea) could get anywhere. Our prospects of speedy liberation were therefore none too excellent. The Empire was passing through a crisis, and if Kekewich had had only the statesmanship to make known to us the truth, the plain unvarnished truth, we might have been less captious in our criticisms of things both local and Imperial. Even the new gun, in common with the times, was out of joint and undergoing repairs at the workshop.

Nutritious food of any sort was now a rarity in real earnest. Eggs were hard at a price per dozen that purchased a *gross* in the not too cheap days of peace; while ducks and drakes, no bigger than crows, but worth their weight in diamonds, were too heavy for the patrons of paste. The military people had an extensive variety of precious birds stuffed away *in* their own selected aviaries. They had also seized upon all the cigarettes in town. Now, this was held up as a well-grounded and specific grievance against the military. It was conceded that the sick and wounded had first claim on our humanity; and the chicken monopoly, had it stood alone, would not have invited criticism. But the cigarette appropriation was reckoned a scandal. There was an abundance of matches in the military stores—but



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nowhere else. The tobacconists were selling off, at quadrupled rates, quantities of ancient, nasty-smelling “safety-matches,” which but yesterday, alas! they would have paid us to bury somewhere! Of course there were wide possibilities of economy in this direction—the one match often putting the kettles to boil in half a street. The waste in the matter of pipe-kindling had to be modified, and the mediaeval makeshift of flint and steel restored. The fierce rays of *Sol*, through the *media* of our monocles, were also utilised to light cigars. What else on Saturday? Yes, Mafeking, they said, was fighting on still; and Generals Buller and Warren had forded the Tugela, *en route* to Ladysmith. That their plunge might stimulate Methuen to burn his boots and brave the turgid waters of the Modder, was the fervent wish of Kimberley at the end of fourteen weeks of irksome, emaciating duress.

## CHAPTER XV

*Week ending 27th January, 1900*

The whirligig of the enemy (time, not the Boer, not the “Law”) had again carried us to the beginning of another week. The Sundays were now exceedingly dull, and on the particular Sabbath with which I am dealing little worthy of record came within the sphere of my observations. I shall therefore—in the absence of matter of graver import—take advantage of its Sunday silence to say a word or two about the *Diamond Fields’ Advertiser*. The views of the besieged in regard to their local print had undergone a change. They had at one time been proud of their paper. It had formerly been conducted on well-defined principles; and it was its departure from these principles to the *status* of an “Organ” that preached, but which at the frown of a Draconic Colonel practised not its articles—it was this that brought down upon its head the wrath of the local democracy. The authorities had for a while permitted the paper to publish war-scrap; but whether it was due to a tendency on the Editor’s part to expand these allowances, the privilege was withdrawn and scraps were proscribed. Even the fiction in the columns of our journal was subjected to a rigid censorship; and when the Public had expected it to be voicing their protests against the Russian government of the day, the paper was virtually in Slavonic hands and controlled by the *Czar* himself. Its eight large pages had been reduced to four small ones, which became better known as the “Official Gazette” of the district. But though we read in it garrison orders from time to time, the three-penny novelette of the town would have been a more fitting designation. It had once quoted from a London contemporary a statement to the effect that hundreds of lives had been thrown away at Magersfontein in an attempt to rescue Cecil Rhodes! Our “Organ” was then independent enough to retort that there was, besides Mr. Rhodes, the fate of thousands of British subjects to be considered. But now it was far otherwise; the independence of tone had vanished. Instead of dignified sarcasm, we were apologetically regaled with parallels of all the sieges in the world’s history—Troy,

Plevna, Sebastopol, Paris, *etc.*—and calmly assured that our tribulations weighed lightly in the balance with what was suffered in the brave days of—“wooden” horseflesh!



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Still the journal, though it evoked the displeasure of its quondam admirers, doubtless acted for the best in a difficult situation; and there were many who might have overlooked the “parallels” were it not for the advertisements. For through the advertising columns we were perpetually being pressed by the merchants of the city to come in and buy everything that makes life worth living! All the dainties an aspirant to gout could wish for were, according to our “Official Gazette,” to be had for the asking. At the hotels, “Highland Cream Whiskey” was for ever arriving; and “O.K.” (another thistle!) kept “licking ’em all” with monotonous invincibility. Iced beer was on tap; the champagne was sparkling; the wine needed no bush. The cheese was still alive (on paper). Cakes, hams, jams, biscuits, potted fish, flesh, and good red herring were, so to speak, all over the shops. This was the sort of pabulum our morning sheet supplied by way of breakfast for inward digestion, and there was an irony in the meal which its uniqueness did not help to make palatable. Absent-minded people still went shopping for luxuries gone but not forgotten; to provoke a premature “April fool” from the startled grocer, who was powerless to make real the chimeras that haunted the jungles of the shoppers’ imaginations. Even practical (new) women would sometimes think of Bovril, and rush off to buy it all up, only to find that it had been bought up long ago, and that not for nothing had so much money been expended in the booming of that bullock in a bottle! Our boarding-house tariffs were ridiculously low (the paper said) at seven or eight pounds per month; while the allurements of the boating and the creature comforts of Modder River, and the balminess of its breezes, were dangled before our eyes with aggressive cynicism. The shipping agents were most attentive to detail in regard to the departure of vessels from Cape ports—just as if the availability of aerial tugs, to convey us to the coast, went without saying. Such were the irritating features of our morning paper. Their humour was utterly lost on us; they only served to sharpen the unhappy appetites of all whose fatal misfortune was ability to read.

Nasty stories had been told with reference to the reign of terror to be inaugurated on Monday. But they did not materialise; the rule of Martial Law—bad to beat—remained unbeatable. The *expected* rarely happened, and peace was oftener than not the characteristic of the prophets’ red-letter-day. Such occasions gave us scope and opportunity to discuss the *Kabal* that ran her Majesty’s writ, and to wonder whether it (the writ) should ever again be pacemaker to the people’s will. The spectacle of a number of Union Jacks floating on the breeze was the most startling incident of the day. What did the transformation mean? A wild conjecture seized us; it was a moment of unalloyed joy when the fond thought of Kimberley’s relief having been accomplished during the night flashed across our minds. But our jubilation was short-lived, for the Boers presently fired a salute with intent clearly to tatter rather than honour the Flag—in defence of which Long Cecil, tattered itself, was unable to play a part.



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The echoes of a heavy cannonade were the feature of Tuesday. This led us to infer that the much-vaunted “siege train” (which was the talk of the city) had begun its work of devastation. The inspiration of itself would not have been the harbinger of consolation—we were long listening to sound and fury, meaning nothing—but we were quick to associate it with the unfurling of the Flag, to put the two “straws” together—and sigh!

“The Column,” our Gazette asserted, “had made a most successful *reconnaissance*.” But experience had taught us how to estimate a bald, non-committal statement of that kind. Our faith in the Column had been shaken; so much so that cynics hummed, with impunity, that the “little British army goes a long, long way.” We dared to doubt the bellipotence of the Column. The wisdom of self-help was brought home to us at last. We were fast learning to put not our trust in Columns, and to ponder the possibility, handicapped though we were, of hewing from within a way to freedom.

Meanwhile Long Cecil, successfully treated, was again in the arena. A few “compliments” were jerked at the Kamfers Dam Laager; the Boers were made to feel that they had a foeman to deal with worthy of their lead. The success of the gun and the skill of him who made it were on every lip. The theme occasioned as much enthusiasm as could be expected from hearts saddened by disconsolation. And the man in the moon, too far distant to betray the grimness of his smile, looked silently on. Favourable accounts of the progress of events in Natal conduced to the serenity of the evening. The night was so still and grand that it seemed almost a pity to seek refuge in repose; and when ultimately we did persuade ourselves to retire it was to dream of Long Cecil and his potentialities—a sanguine dream of self-reliance and ability to burst our bonds.

But, oh! what a change came over its spirit in the middle of the night; when startled from our slumbers by the hissing of shells in the streets we awoke to a sense of what was real. In the blackness of the early morning it was hard to connect the booming of cannon with reality. The shells were falling and bursting in rapid succession. It was the inauguration of a nerve-ordeal; the prelude to a terrible day; the beginning of a bombardment long-sustained and fierce.

Not for long did the guns blaze in vain. A young girl lay dead, struck down in the privacy of her bedroom. Shell after shell came whistling through the air, jeopardising the reason of scared women, in terror for the safety of their children. Men rushed about everywhere seeking shelter for their families. A gentleman walking in the Dutoitspan Road had his hat unroofed, and a young lad was prematurely put out at elbow by a piece of shell which passed through the sleeve of his coat. Half a score of guns poured forth a heavy fusillade until eight o'clock, when a short interval for breakfast was conceded.



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Fast and furious fell the instruments of destruction into every street and alley that throbbed with human life—smashing tables and delfware, ripping up floors, and spreading alarm abroad in the land. The Public Library was the recipient of a missile that played havoc with a hoary tome. Public buildings and churches were peppered indiscriminately. Saint Cyprian's—ventilated before in the same accidental fashion—was holed again. All Saints' fared little better. The Catholic Cathedral was slightly damaged. Saint Augustine's was hit; and, judging by its battered walls, the Dutch Reformed Church went nearer to demolition than any other. No structure with any pretensions to size escaped. The Town Hall was subjected to a fierce assault; for into the Market Square, to the right and left of the hall, in front and in rear, the shells fell in abundance. But the solid walls of the building were not tested, which was strange in view of its exposed position and the large area it covered. Inside, the busy officials were hard at work, pandering to the needs of the hungry throng who sought dispensations from starvation, and who dared not venture out again lest they should die hungry withal. The Town Hall towered impregnable—impervious to the myriad battering-rams that yearned to lay it low. As if it had occurred to them that the chances rather favoured finding the Mayor at home, the Boer gunners subsequently launched through the roof of his store in Jones' Street a shower of shrapnel which riddled the occupants of a compartment in the upper storey. The Mayor, fortunately, was not one of these; when the smoke cleared away it was found that the injured consisted of some handsome wax figures. At Beaconsfield a youth was struck, and another projectile went so near to putting a poor old woman, who lay upon a sick bed, beyond the borders of eternity that her feeble limbs were deprived of the couch's solace. An Indian subject of the Queen had his bungalow shattered. Not even the hallowed sanctuary of the "Law's" guardians was held sacred, for a missile telescoped a policeman's helmet—which, happily, was off its head at the moment.

All day long existence was made well-nigh unendurable. None knew the moment when an account of one's individual stewardship might be demanded. It is in trials of this kind that mankind is most vividly impressed with the reality of being in life and death simultaneously. That these trials surpassed any that had hitherto ruffled the noiseless tenor of our way was a truism. But coming at a moment when our nerves were sufficiently unstrung by the dearth of tonics, they were doubly enervating. Stomachal grievances were forgotten, and few ventured to desert the imaginary security of their homes to face the risks the redress of grievances would entail. Thus did the hours creep on until darkness with its interregnum of peace had fallen on the city.



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But the interregnum was of brief duration, for, to our unspeakable horror, the bombardment was resumed at nine o'clock. If in the clear light of day the shells were trying, what were they in the night! A ghost story well told in the daytime perturbs a superstitious mind; but to feel queer at its recital in the night one need not necessarily be superstitious at all. This new departure intensified the strain and went far to make faint many a heart that had until then remained stout. The guns were fired with longer intervals between the shots; the shells did not follow on the top of one another as in the day; but one nocturnal projectile excited as much terror as did ten when the sun was shining. Far into the night—for hours after midnight—the war was waged, and sleep denied the pleasure of steeping our “senses in forgetfulness.” To sleep was nearly impossible, and at the first peep of dawn to recline on a bed at all was not easy, so fierce and sudden was the energy with which a dozen guns commenced to bark in chorus.

And with sad results. The men in the redoubts enjoyed comparative immunity from the dangers of the bombardment; it was mainly the women and children in the houses who had to bear the brunt of the assaults. A lamentable instance of the pity of it was only too soon forthcoming. In the house of a Mr. Webster (who was in camp with his regiment, the Volunteers) his wife and children were at breakfast, when crash! through the roof came a shell on top of the tea-pot. The mother sustained fearful injuries, to which she subsequently succumbed. Her six-year-old child was also killed; her second son had his leg and arm broken; while her youngest child—a little girl—was badly bruised. The stricken family were removed to hospital amid a shower of shells, which continued with unabashed fury to seek whom they slaughter. Nearly all our public buildings were hit, and the places of worship were again a mark for the vandal. Houses everywhere were damaged, and extraordinary indeed were the escapes of their distracted occupiers. No less gracious was the kindly fortune that shielded those whom duty, caprice, or foolhardiness brought into the streets. One family stuffed away in the ostensible security of a coal-hole vegetated there all day. They were grateful for their modern ark, but outraged nature disapproved and caused a shell to pierce it. Nobody was hurt, remarkable to relate, and the frightened household ascended with alacrity to take their chances in a purer atmosphere. In every part of the town the shells kept falling. Beaconsfield appeared to be the most favoured hunting ground, for its *Sanatorium* was not only a colossal structure but the home of the Colossus himself. Hundreds of shells dropped in its vicinity, while the millionaire went round the city in a cart, to all outward seeming as little concerned as the most penurious of men. Some weeks before a grazier who had fallen into the hands of the Boers had been assured that it was Rhodes they wanted—not Kimberley. Such a revelation in the case of a personality less notable or less esteemed might have made things awkward for him.



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Forty-five minutes were allowed for lunch—an interval which the Boers considered long enough for them—and no doubt for us, too, since they might fairly assume that we did not get much to eat. But on our side there was the trouble and delay involved in the getting of it. To jostle about in a crowd for an indefinite period of time for sake of a scrap of flesh meat—and such meat! such flesh!—required rare ravenousness of appetite; and the bursting of a shell in the midst of a surging mass of humanity was so certain to be attended by fatal results that it was only the very healthy who bothered battling for so little.

The forty-five minutes were of brief duration, and the assault was promptly renewed when the clock struck two. First came the boom; then the warning whistle; next the boom of a second gun almost before the bursting crash of the first shell had proclaimed its contact with *terra firma*. It was not the numbers of the killed (because they were marvellously few) that awed the people so much as the possibilities of the situation. The guns were fired at long range, and ten or fifteen seconds had to elapse ere anybody could be sure that his turn had not come. Had a closer range been feasible the bombardment might have been more destructive, but the suspense would have been less trying. The shells fell thickly the whole afternoon. Never, hardly ever, was there a lull as the iron roofs of the houses continued to be fitted for service as rough observatories which enabled us to see balloons indeed. Several mourners attending a funeral on its way to the cemetery narrowly escaped dismemberment, by a missile which dropped behind the hearse. The Fire Brigade were alert and ready for contingencies; the brigade station at the Municipal compound was singled out for attack; and it looked as if the skill of the Boers in picking out and disabling the *Officers* in the field extended to the town, for the Chief of the firemen was struck while standing on his own doorstep. He received a few ugly cuts, as also did two of his children.

And where all this time, it may be asked, where was Long Cecil? Long Cecil had been doing its best, but with the odds so long as ten to one against, its best was a negligible quantity. It sent shell after shell in one direction, then in another, but the enemy heeded it not at all; and though it may have irritated the Boer a little and done all that one gun of its calibre could do, it did not mitigate the perils of the populace. That it had done its best was undeniable, but it sank in the public esteem for other reasons. It was reputed to have killed two women in the Boer camp with its “compliments.” I cannot vouch for the truth of the story, but it was seized upon to intensify the growing aversion to the whilom bepraised product of Colonial enterprise. The report converted hostile headshakes into voluble “I told you so’s,” and swelled the feeble chorus that had prophesied ill of Long Cecil from the beginning.



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Why did the Military insist on aggravating the enemy? This was our new shibboleth. We had, practically speaking, been left unmolested until Long Cecil sounded its timbrel. Hence the bloody sequel! Now, all this would have been in better taste had not those of us loudest in the gun's condemnation been equally boastful anent the fear it was to put into the hearts of the Boers. They were to be taught that Long Cecil was a thing to conjure with. In fact, Long Cecil had accentuated what is known in vulgar parlance as the Jingo spirit. But it had failed to come up to expectations, and all that was left—the dregs of our chivalry—was gone; and perhaps the highest form of chivalry extant now-a-days is consistency. The forty-eight hours' bombardment had been threatened long ere Long Cecil emerged from the workshop in the panoply war. But it was enough for the nonce to have even an inanimate scape-goat with which to relieve our grief—in the absence of something mellow to *drown* it in.

Firing ceased at six o'clock, and many families, waiving the discomforts of the trek, had already betaken themselves to the redoubts, away from the centre of assault. They remained there all night, needlessly, as it happened. Friday was not looked to with any particular pleasure; but apart from some deliberate attempts to snap-shot the *Sanatorium* we had little to disturb us. The device of fixing the lens on the local library was next resorted to; a shell dropped on its doorstep, and Beaconsfield church had a like experience. One or two guns kept firing irregularly all day. A shell entered a kitchen and made a complete wreckage of its culinary appliances. Long Cecil, at this stage, made some excellent practice, upsetting presumably the kitchen at Kamfers Dam, as several women were among those who fluttered hither and thither for shelter. Long Cecil was a surprise to the Boers; they had heard of the gun, and inclined to regard its existence as a myth. They had laughed at the visionary who had tried to piece it together; and there were not a few among ourselves who had shared their incredulity.

The proceedings of the previous two days had banished any timidity that had existed hitherto in the ranks of the town's defenders. They were eager for a fight. The sweetness of revenge was appreciated in some measure, and those who might in other circumstances have shirked personal danger, or collapsed in its presence, had their nerves steeled for a fair and square encounter. Our defences were never tested; we were beginning to wish they were. A determined and persevering effort on the Boers' part might have made them masters of Kimberley. The victory, however, would have been of the *Phyrric* order.



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Saturday came. The common trials of the great bombardment had lulled the food warfare, and the thoughts of all were directed to the provision of adequate protection for life and limb. The erection of forts and shelters was going on everywhere. The work had been inaugurated when the bombardment was at its height, and the muscular energy it brought into play was magnificent. The “boys” (natives) were kept at it like *Trojans*, under the personal supervision of their respective white chiefs; and the chiefs themselves, unaccustomed though they were to an implement less mighty than the pen, perspired beadily and willingly with the pick and shovel. Even the ladies, regardless of blisters and the snowy whiteness of their hands, revelled in the role of navvy. Hallowed little garden patches were ruthlessly excavated; converted into “dug-outs”—disagreeably suggestive of the grave—and these were covered over and hedged in with sacks of earth. The apartments thus improvised were excellent in their way, but somewhat damp and dismal. They were not strictly well ventilated, but the atmosphere without was so redolent of smoke and powder that sanitation had lost in importance. Moreover, one could always stick one’s head out of the burrow to inhale the outer air if it were considered fresher than what saluted the nostrils within. Of course these shelters did not offer so much security from danger as their occupiers fancied (I have already instanced how the recesses of a coal-hole had not been proof against invasion); but they were splinter proof. If husbands and fathers *did* magnify the protection they afforded, their motives were kind.

In the meantime we were not left entirely unmolested. The Beaconsfield *Sanatorium* continued to be the chief object of Boer solicitude. Smokeless powder was being employed, and the boom of the particular guns in action was not audible, or, if audible, so faintly as to be mistaken for the Column’s artillery. We had a man placed on the Conning Tower whose duty it was to blow a warning whistle at sight of the flame of the enemy’s fuse. But the whistle—not always heard—was only too apt to be connected with a policeman in distress.

The forty-eight hours’ ordeal was not repeated, and interest in eating matters was soon revived. The comparative calm of Saturday incited us to have recourse to all sorts of tricks to unearth what was eatable. The Soup Kitchen was a huge success, and had they not been already well endowed with this world’s goods the distinguished waiters in charge of the department might have waxed rich. Thousands of pints were served out daily; indeed there was never a supply sufficient to feed the multitudes that swarmed round the cauldrons containing this delicious *elixir* of life. One of the most remarkable sights of the Siege was, not the gravity of doctors, lawyers, directors, *etc.*, presenting tickets for soup—*that* was piquant enough—but the number of young ladies, votaries of fashion, who emerged from the *melee* bedraggled and flushed with their pails of *nectar*, to all appearances not only forgetful of the *convenances*, but beaming with smiles of triumph. It may have been because their charms were enhanced, artful wenches! Enhanced, in any case, their charms were.



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The Kitchen was booming, but the generality of people had in their enthusiasm so far failed to observe that the quality of the soup had sadly deteriorated. It had been degenerating day by day. Condiments were no longer available; mealie meal was withheld, and the soup had thus become thinner and less seasoned. But the trade had been established, and business continued brisk. There was no competition (unfortunately), and our newspaper kept assuring us with unnecessary gush that horseflesh was excluded from the Kitchen, and that accidents were impossible. The meat used was strictly orthodox. The Press dilated speciously on the economy practised under the system and on its general advantageousness. Universal confidence was reposed in the Soup Directorate.

But, alas and alack! one fatal day an evil-minded fellow got a lump of something solid in his jug, and instead of holding his peace he held a *post-mortem* examination and essayed to prove by some Darwinian process of reasoning that the opaque thing was more apish than orthodox! Prior to the date of this inquest, however, people had grown so habituated to the soup that they could not give it up if they would. They went on dutifully consuming it—just as everybody still does his beer, the recent poisoning revelations notwithstanding. They ate all they could get of it; it was in truth an indispensable necessity. The Kitchen was a blessing—in disguise, the wits said—and the most aesthetic, though not without misgivings, in the end gave the broth the benefit of the doubt. Only a small band of martyrs elected to bleed at the shrine of principle; they declined to stultify their stomachs with “horse soup.” This was a reckless assumption, indicative of a shocking disbelief in human nature; an inexpedient conclusion. They were all honourable men on the Kitchen Committee. What! all? the reader may exclaim. Well, all but one, perhaps—who told an interviewer in London that “horseflesh made excellent soup!” But that was long afterwards; and, moreover, proved nothing. The gentleman in question no doubt acted discreetly, before unbosoming himself, in placing six thousand miles of sea between him and the Kitchen. For that matter greater iniquities than his have been condoned to give prejudice a fall.

The Italian and American Consuls had protested on behalf of their respective governments against the recent indiscriminate assault upon non-combatants. We were pleased to hope that the protests were not unavailing. They were in conformity with the spirit, if not with the letter, of International Law; and it was stated that the Boers desired to stand well with any and every nation that might possibly make real their Utopian dream of European intervention. Of course, they were doing well alone; it is conceivable that they now felt less the need of extraneous assistance. Their energy and enterprise betokened self-reliance; the will with which they used their picks and shovels



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was enigmatical to the British mind. They seemed metaphorically to defy all Europe and America. And the reply received by the Consuls was quite in accord with a consciousness on the Boer side of “splendid isolation.” It suggested that they (the Boers) would esteem it a privilege to provide the protesters with an escort to convey them to a place of safety, if that would satisfy. It did *not* satisfy, and there the correspondence ceased.

It was thus the week ended—the enemy active, vigorous, supercilious; while we in Kimberley felt fretful, hungry, and sick at heart; but too thoroughly inured to hardship to shrink from or even to question the duty of fighting the battle to the bitter end.

### CHAPTER XVI

*Week ending 3rd February, 1900*

The fierceness of the assault to which we had been exposed was the great subject of discussion, but it was not until the sluggish pendulum of Siege time had again swung round to the Sabbath that we freely and without dread of interruption gave full expression to our feelings towards the foe. The inconsistency of a nation so profuse in Christian professions was much discussed, and ignoring our own shortcomings in the same respect, to say nothing of the essential cruelty of all wars, we readily requisitioned our best resources of invective—to show what charity really was. We had been living in stormy tea-cups for a long while; our fury was usually more ungovernable than this or that grievance warranted; but we had never before given way to such rhetorical excesses, against not only the Boers, but the Military, as well—Lord Methuen, the Mayor, the Colonel and his Staff. Even Lord Roberts was snapped at. They were all in turn metaphorically tarred and feathered.

But these, after all, were old offenders; their faults and idiosyncrasies had been reviewed often. The occasion demanded a new scapegoat; and we determined to find him. We looked across the broad expanse of veld and bitterly reflected on a destiny that circumscribed our freedom within the barriers of a town; that denied us even the wild freshness of morning uncontaminated by the *miasma* of city streets. In this frame of mind we easily drifted into speculation on first causes. We began to ask ourselves upon whose shoulders the blame primarily rested for conditions which made such slavery possible; how it came to pass that a few toy-guns and a handful of soldiers had been deemed sufficient to protect Kimberley; and finally to vote the error of judgment incompatible with good administration. And then we remembered that the Bond was a powerful organisation, that a Bond Ministry was in Office. The needed scapegoat, in the person of the Prime Minister, was thus easily discovered. He it was who pooh-poohed

the necessity of *arming* Kimberley, and we accordingly lost no time in setting him up in the game of Siege Aunt Sally as a popular



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target for our rancour. And pelted he was with right good will. The genial Mr. Quilp, when he found himself deserted by his obsequious flatterer, Sampson Brass, cried out in the seclusion of his apartment at the wharf: "Oh, Sampson, Sampson, if I only had you here!" and he was considerably consoled by his operations with a hammer on the desk in front of him. The feelings of Mr. Quilp were understood, if not respected in Kimberley.

The name of the Prime Minister had not been long added to our "little list" when a local liar led off mildly with intelligence of the Premier's resignation. We improved on this by assuming that his resignation was obligatory—that he had been "dismissed." That he had been arrested was the fiction next resorted to; and finally it was blazoned forth that he had been dismissed from the world altogether. After that he was let rest, and we returned to the misdemeanours of men, in and out of khaki, whose turns had not yet come. Let me observe in passing that the Prime Minister was—as we learned subsequently—more sinned against than sinning. His *apologia*, and the extent to which he had been wronged and misrepresented are matters outside the scope of these memoirs. But they shed a lurid light on the picturesque *canards* we swallowed—and digested with an ease that any ostrich would envy.

While engrossed in these denunciations of everything and everybody, Sunday glided by—glided, for the pendulum was not so slow on Sundays. We prepared for the worst the Boers could do on the morrow—rumour said it was to be very bad—and were in no way disposed to be comforted by the message, on the seriousness of our position, which the Colonel was credited with having despatched to Lord Roberts. We were unenlivened by the talk we heard on all sides as to the probable effect of the Foreign Consuls' protests; in optimistic quarters it was felt that the protests would lead to "intervention" of a kind rather different from that bargained for by brother Boer. The war, it was asserted, might stop "very suddenly." Well, of course, it might stop in certain eventualities, or it might not; the sky might fall, but we might easily die (on the diet) *before* it came down. The Boers toiling at their trenches outside cherished no illusions on these points. Their magazines had been blown up, but, the road to Bloemfontein being clear, they could replenish them. Plumer's proximity to Mafeking (notified in the afternoon) would have been of more significance in our eyes had not experience prejudiced us against faith in proximity value, Methuen's proximity to Kimberley, for example, aggravated our sorrows in a very special way.



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On Monday Lord Methuen kept telling us from the wilderness that he was there and still alive. The vitality of the enemy, however, concerned us more. Operations were started early; three shells presumably intended for the *Sanatorium* landed in Beaconsfield. The first two fell harmlessly, and the charm associated with the third was no less disappointing—to an outsider. The charm surrounding the life of Mr. Rhodes was more tangible; it appeared to extend to the roof that covered him. The greater part of the day was peaceful; but the Military were the Military, war was their profession; and a fight with the foe being for the moment impracticable, they ingeniously set about renewing the strife with their erstwhile friends—who, like *Sancho Panza*, clamoured merely for something to eat. Our recent experiences had tended to moderate our claims in this regard; we had become inured to bad living; our constitutions had had time to wax weak; our appetites were less hearty. Matters appertaining to the stomach had reached a sad pass. Mealie meal, *ad lib.*, was no longer possible, and porridge—well, the good that it had done lived after it, though we had never acknowledged the actual *doing* of it. Rice was issued to Indians exclusively, and, albeit they got nothing else, they had on the whole rather the better of Europeans. The exhaustion of our golden syrup made the children—young and “over-grown”—weep. We had been reduced to the ignominy of cultivating a toleration of what was called treacle, and even that nauseous compound was drifting towards extinction. They were hard times for all who could eat their soup; they were harder still for those whom the look of it satisfied. To these latter a tribute of praise for consistency is due, whatever may be said of their sense. The pathos of it all was that we got plenty of tea. We had no milk, and because we needed in consequence all the more sugar we were given less; and as “mealie-pap” had pride of place on the *menu* the day’s allowance of sugar was only too apt to be recklessly monopolised in giving *that* a taste. We were observing a protracted lenten season, a more rigorous fast than any Church prescribes. The local Catholic Bishop appreciated the gravity of the situation when he suspended the Church’s law against the use of meat on Fridays. Eat it when you can (which might be only one day in the week, Friday as likely as any other), this edict amounted to in effect.

But we had yet fourteen ounces of bread to preserve us, the whole of which ration was sometimes polished off by mid-day meal time. There could be no modification in that direction. Fourteen ounces of bread was needed to sustain life. But the Military apparently thought otherwise; they suddenly intimated that we must endeavour to keep its lamp aflame on “ten!” The *Commissariat* reckoned it possible; so the new “Law” was set in motion without compunction. A number of Fingoes preferred to die at home for choice,



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and with leave of the Colonel made an effort to get there. Unhappily, they were not allowed a choice; the Boers drove them back “to die with the English.” Unlike the Basutos, the Fingo tribe was not physically or geographically in a position to make reprisals for such indignities. Besides, the English, the Boers knew, would be bound to share their last crust with their black brethren, and they wanted us to get to the last crust stage at our earliest convenience.

Contrary to expectation, nothing exciting occurred on Tuesday. The enemy again concentrated their fire on the *Sanatorium*; they evidently esteemed starvation, however expedient as a means for shuffling off the common herd, a little too good for a thinker in Continents. According to documents which had been found in the pocket of a Boer prisoner, Mr. Rhodes was awaiting a favourable opportunity to escape in “a big balloon!” This strange idea may have been responsible for the efforts made to lay the great balloonist.

A cricket match was played in the afternoon by twenty-two disciples of Tapley; and sundry flashes of congratulation—adulatory of our gallant stand—were exchanged between our Mayor and Port Elizabeth’s. These messages were soothing, but none of us acknowledged it. Soft words, alas! only reminded us of parsnips. And soon we should be without bread. The bread question was the topic of the hour, and gave rise to more acrimony than had any antecedent injustice. Such unwonted severity in the administration of Civil affairs was a strain on the loyalty of a people self-governed since they were born. The view was stoutly maintained that the situation was not so bad as to warrant the adoption of such drastic measures. They were straining the limits of human endurance too callously. Nothing could alter our resolve to dispute with the Boer every inch of the ground we defended. So much was agreed. But the tendency to famish us displayed by our Rulers was not calculated to improve the *morale* of a civilian, or any, army. It did not bespeak the early relief of Kimberley. Actions like Kekewich’s and Gorle’s in the matter of bread fostered feelings of indifference. They would not stimulate the town’s defenders to shoot better or to fight the more tenaciously in a crisis. With troops pouring into the country, wherefore the need of so much supererogation? A hungry man capable of demolishing a ten ounce loaf—a siege product—in ten bites might well echo wherefore indeed!

On Wednesday Lord Methuen could be heard banging as usual. In the early days, the halcyon days of optimism, the banging would have been exhilarating to a degree; but the march of events had compelled us to reason better. The day was uncommonly quiet; even the diurnal fling at Mr. Rhodes was omitted. Lies, rumours, sensations, fabrications were still rampant. A poster in all the paraphernalia of Official authority, proclaiming the relief of Mafeking—four months too soon!—adorned the walls of the Town House. General Buller, we were informed, was about to unlock the door of

Ladysmith—"the key had been found." But evidently the *lock* had not, as was proven by the subsequent disastrous retreat across the Tugela.



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Business was at this period conducted in more orderly fashion at the Washington Market, partly due, no doubt, to the unmixed “meat” put up for sale. Everything was simplified; the Authorities had developed into wholehogs in horseflesh. A placard bearing the grim inscription, “horse *only*” was flaunted in the market place. The arrangement saved the butcher much troublesome computation—untrammelled as he was by bovine fractions—and injured trade agreeably. It kept off the folk who had no dogs, and others who preferred to take the State Soup, with their eyes shut. All the cattle slaughtered were exclusively for the Kitchen. The “Law” decreed it; it was in the “Gazette,” and was nothing if not in equity. The quality of the soup was poorer than ever; the quantity offered for sale was suspiciously large, and, oh! so inferior to the article served out with a flourish of ladles a week before. Many took the pledge against it (some of them broke it), but there were plenty less aesthetically constituted who could dissipate on *two* pints! We could yet buy carrots, dry, tough little things; but they were vegetables beyond question, and there is much in a *name* where horses are *cooked*. They (the carrots) were sold by the State at threepence a bunch, and the people still made wild rushes to purchase them. A force of police was always on duty at the vegetable, the carrot wing of the market, and it was interesting to watch the human nature in everybody, including strong men not ordinarily credited with much of it.

Thursday was uneventful. The *quasi*-official statement relative to the relief of Mafeking was contradicted. The peculiarity of the proceeding—of contradicting an *agreeable* canard—not the contradiction itself—occasioned surprise; it was so unusual. Some people attributed it to a desire on the Colonel's part cheaply to vindicate Official veracity in all things—not injurious to the “Military Situation!” All our little troubles and kicks against the pricks had to be subordinated to the “Military Situation.” The quality of the very horse we ate was due to the “Military Situation.” The local situation, with its alarming death roll, was a trifle light as air beside the other. Had the Colonel in his wisdom seen anything in its suppression advantageous to the “Military Situation,” the truth anent Mafeking would hardly have seen the light. The “Military Situation” was sacrosanct, supreme, inviolable! It was a fetish, a sort of idol that the “Law” commanded all creeds and classes to worship.

In the afternoon an occasional shell was jerked into the town. Kenilworth was loudly barked at for an hour; and the correspondent of the *London Times*, while driving in the suburb, narrowly escaped being bitten. But no cattle were hit; that was the pity of it. We could have forgiven the Boers much had they only killed the oxen, and provided us with something rational to eat, in spite of the Colonel and his horses.



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Friday was all excitement; we had a glimpse of the balloon again, waltzing at a high altitude in the heavens, the Column's artillery the while maintaining a continuous uproar. Soon a terrific report was heard, which was presumed to have been caused by the explosion of a Boer magazine. A lyddite missile had done the deed; no "common" shell, we argued, could have created such a noise. After an hour the balloon disappeared, and we were of the earth earthly once more. Late in the evening some harmless shells dropped into the streets, and a second catastrophe befel a Boer magazine.

Saturday again. Lord Methuen proclaimed it through the throat of his cannon. Long Cecil—pretending to deduce from their silence that the Boers imagined it to be Sunday—was most profuse in the distribution of "compliments." But no acknowledgment came back, no error was admitted, and the day dragged itself to an end, leaving little in its train to turn one's thoughts from gloomy retrospection.

It was at this time that practical people began to express amazement at the conduct of their less practical neighbours. A new epidemic had broken out. The doctrine of self-help was being practised with a vengeance. The pleasure of gardening was the newest discovery. In short, the notion of growing vegetables on our own, so to speak, since we could not buy them readymade, had come to be acclaimed as the higher sagacity. The curious feature of this departure was that it should grow in popularity as the Siege approached its appointed end. Relief or no relief, the vegetables would not be wasted. But the practical people only laughed at economic platitudes. Vegetable seeds were in great demand, and families were everywhere to be seen reclaiming their ten by ten feet patches of common-age—where *half* a blade of grass had never grown before! Some enthusiasts, to enlarge their holdings, went even so far as to pull down their untenanted fowl-houses. The soil was not so favourable to horticulture as it might have been, but the best was made of it. Inspired by a determination to live as long as possible we ruthlessly uprooted our flowers, and conjured up visions of unborn potatoes and cabbage. If the Military kept whittling down our rations, if we were to be permitted only to nibble like so many birds, the vegetables might one day serve as a *dernier ressort*. Who could tell?

The enterprise displayed was admirable; but—had we to wait till the vegetables grew? Were they to grow while we waited? This sudden zeal for the development of the land recalled the song of the condemned Irishman who took advantage of his judge's clemency, and with characteristic humour selected a gooseberry bush from which to be hanged. When the objection was raised that "it would not be high enough," he expressed his willingness to wait till it grew!



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This policy of despair irritated the landless classes, and some of them were mean enough to remind us that Martial Law forbade the use of water for gardening purposes. But the reminder only furnished the workers with a fresh incentive; it made their work a real as well as an ideal pleasure. The possibility of breaking the "Law" (with impunity) was worth a deal of productive, or unproductive, labour. The bread ordinance had not increased our respect for "benevolent" despotism. Any chance of setting at naught the *absolute* prepossessions of our legislators (with a watering-can or by judicious keyhole stuffing, to hide the light) was duly availed of.

No amount of the portentous signalling that went on night after night could resuscitate our faith in the Military. An age ago the Magersfontein misfortune had put off indefinitely the long-expected succour. We had been made to feel our insignificance beside the "Military Situation." Our population after all was mainly black, but black or white, we were nothing to the "Military Situation." Sickness might increase, and troubles multiply; Kafirs and children might perish in batches; meanwhile the "Military Situation" decreed even a tear.

### CHAPTER XVII

*Week ending 10th February, 1900*

The pen-ultimate Sunday of our captivity was notable for nothing but the average crop of rumours which had characterised every day of our Siege existence. The listlessness of the people stood out in marked contrast to their sanguine outlook when the Siege was young, and when the folly of prophesying unless one knew remained not only, as it were, unsmoked but outside our pipes altogether. Still—to pursue the metaphor—our pretensions in the role of prophet had clearly ended in smoke. Happily, the disillusioning fog had come upon us by degrees. The cheerfulness with which we had resigned ourselves to bear the first-class misdemeanant's treatment of a cut and dry "three weeks" imprisonment but exemplified, we had thought in all seriousness, the traditional sporting instincts of our race; and though it was not over-pleasing to our traditional pride, the destruction of our dogmas had not been taken to heart. Our faith in the invincibility of the British army had long continued unshaken. The interval between the expiry of the period (of three weeks) which with the collective wisdom of all the wizards we had decreed to be a synonym for the Siege's duration, and the morning of the pronouncement relative to the advance of the Column from Orange River, had had its tedium neutralised by a cheerful vituperation of Gladstone's defective statesmanship in the year of 'eighty-one and his wicked efforts at a later date to "give Ireland away too." The move from Orange River had occasioned general rejoicings. Unaccountable delay ensued. One disappointment was followed by another. Anxiety began to manifest itself. The dire stage of doubt was reached. Hunger, thirst, and horseflesh succeeded in due order; until at last we saw:—



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What shadows we are,  
And what shadows we pursue.

We pursued them no longer—in the Siege sense. “All the pleasing illusions, which make power gentle and obedience liberal,” were gone. The eating and the drinking were gone. Even the surreptitious read in bed was but a relic of joy; the penalty of burning the candle at both ends was being paid. To have a bath was a crime; a little water was allowed for tea and soup *only*. Soda-water was the sole product of the lemonade factories; but the quality of Adam’s ale tasted worse and was more suggestive of typhoid in that form than in any other. Made into tea it was better, until the Military, with fears for the nerves of the “Military Situation,” indirectly curbed our excesses in the cup that does *not* inebriate. A proclamation was issued which actually went so far as to establish by “Law” the number of ounces of fuel to be used by householders! Expert landladies declared the number (six ounces) insufficient; the cynical boarders said it was *too much!* The medical men had been entreating us—vainly, for the most part—to boil the water before drinking it in any form, and had proclaimed it inimical to health in its raw state. But the “Military Situation,” bless you! could not be compromised by microbes, and if extravagance in fuel involved a possibility so awful it had to be crushed with an uncompromising hand.

Such were the anomalies prevailing; taken in conjunction with the ever-increasing seriousness of our position they were hard to bear with patience. Our hopes of relief were at *zero*. “Three months more” would sum up a fair consensus of opinion in regard to the further continuance of the Siege. Oh, it was said, the food would not last so long. But it had been undergoing such a process of stretching; who knew how much farther it would not be carried. The authorities were capable of anything. A death or two (or twenty-two!) from starvation would not soften hearts obsessed by an elusive “Situation.” Surrender, however, was out of the question; having gone so far we could not turn back. The Flag, too, whatever the Standard-bearers might be, was worth keeping aloft. Exacting too much it was; but there was no alternative, save surrender, to the lowering of it.

Our mental machinery being thus rusted for want of the oil of contentment it is not incomprehensible that the bulk of the people should have come to regard the Siege as a thing interminable; and faith in miracles was not the average citizen’s predominant characteristic. The mere mention of the Column provoked a jeer. Numerous philosophers came into being. Shakespeare was never so highly appreciated, nor so famous; never reckoned so “clever,” nor quoted so generally; scarcely heard of before, indeed, by some of the new philosophers. His Hamlet’s soliloquy (which accorded with our mood) was considered very good.



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Monday came and went quietly enough, the enemy's attention being given entirely to Kenilworth. It made no difference to us whether the cattle lived or died; we regarded the assault as a waste of energy. A few horses—the irony of it!—were slaughtered by the shells intended for the oxen. The mutilation of the latter would have been far more advantageous to the *Civil* "Situation," and—how nice if the Boers had been better shots!

Throughout Tuesday a good many interchanges took place between the rival artilleryists. Long Cecil made some excellent practice, while the Boers occupied themselves with Beaconsfield. A few raps were attempted at the *Sanatorium* hall-door, as an intimation that a special eye ogled the visitors; and some projectiles which fell in the rear of the Kimberley Club indicated that the same vigilant optic was alive to the fact that Rhodes lunched there. It may here be mentioned that Mr. Rhodes often brought his lunch—fresh eggs and the like!—to the hospital to give to some wounded soldier with unimpaired digestive mechanism. Otto's Kopje was assailed during the day, and havoc was played with a few trucks—rusted with ease—at the railway station.

The inevitable calm which precedes a storm was felt on Wednesday. The morning passed quietly. Whispers of imminent woe were painfully common. Rumour, subordinating love, ruled "the Court, the camp, the grove." It was not literally defined, this surpassing evil; its exact nature was locked up in the breasts of the Authorities. Hours rolled by; dinner-time (the *time* for dinner) passed; sufficient for the day is the evil thereof; we were beginning to think that we had received the day's allotment, when a boom rang through the startled air! Now, a boom (in warfare) is not an harmonious note; but one gets accustomed to discord as to most other things. It was not the boom that was strange; it was the loud, unearthly chord it seemed to strike; the dread whiz which followed; which blanched faces, and sent the timid housemaid diving beneath the bed out of harm's way. Was it an earthquake?—the buildings shook. A fearful crash dissipated the notion. A fearful crash, indeed; but a material sound—a relief from its weird, unnerving prelude. Individuals living miles apart asserted that the missile had seemed to shoot past their ears. Yet one shell had caused all the tumult. The awful whiz was repeated again and again. The great six-inch gun from Mafeking had started its work of destruction. The crisis had come. The last and bloodiest act of the tragedy had begun—with no knowledge on our side that it was the last, to sustain us.

It had come without warning; when the heat was insufferable, and the town a veritable Sahara as regards facilities for quenching thirst; when the tension was at its worst; when sickness, disease, and death were busiest. It had come, in fine, with a crown for the sorrows of Kimberley.



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From an artist's point of view a town with high stone buildings would have offered better raw material for picturesque ruins. In Kimberley we had but one substantial building that would meet the necessities of the case, *viz.*, the City Hall. It was the only imposing structure we could boast of, and was by consequence the harder to hit, albeit some creditable tries were made to hit it. Large holes were dug in the Market Square, in which process of grave-digging by storm a little girl was injured—not by a shell, but by the volley of small pebbles it displaced. This class of buckshot—apart from the missiles themselves—did a good deal of light skirmishing about the calves of people's legs, and threw dust in their eyes with the force and fury of a "south-easter." One gentleman, meandering in the Square, narrowly evaded dismemberment, and was fortunate in getting off with a slight bruise. Another hissing monster went tearing through the roof of the Buffalo Club, upsetting a billiard table, and laying it out a disordered heap of firewood on the floor. Fire-wood was worth something; and since chips of his anatomy were not in the heap—perchance to be utilised in the cooking of horseflesh for somebody else to eat—its grateful proprietor conducted himself with resignation.

Meanwhile the scattered fragments of the same mischievous projectile careered gaily through the air. One piece—no bigger than a Siege loaf—with sardonic humour embedded itself in the stomach of a horse and killed it instantaneously. This was pitiful, for the animal had been fed, and was in the very act of being shod. The smith escaped unhurt. Another missile tested the metal of a boiler, in a house in Belgravia, by smashing it into scrap-iron. Whether the shell was intended for a batch of bread in the adjoining oven is uncertain; the satisfactory fact remained that the bread was unbroken. Buildings which had been but imperfectly ventilated by the smaller shells had proper port-holes made in them, and chimney-tops went down like nine-pins. We were, in short, in a couple of hours afforded a grim conception of what modern munitions can do. To that extent the assault was instructive. But that extent was small and did not impress our common sense—which, by the way, was small, too, and not at all common.

At six o'clock the firing ceased, and the "Mafeking terror" was allowed to cool. I might as well explain here that our surmise was entirely wrong. The gun came from—nobody knew where; but everybody *said*, from Mafeking. We said more; the Cape Government (the Bond Ministry) had purchased it in England for the Transvaal, in furtherance, as was implied, of the projected sweeping of the English into the sea. This was a hugged delusion until some fool dispelled it by discovering the gun to be a "*creuzot*" which had been purchased in *France* by the Transvaal. But it mattered little where it had been purchased; it was a tangible



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reality, a presage of sanguinary import. It was a time for action; and maybe the picks and shovels did not rise to the occasion! Fort-making was the rage; the men worked with a will—the women acting as hod-carriers—to make the graves in which they hoped to live as deep as possible. All over the city the navvies—amateur and professional—sweated and panted, so successfully that unless the shells were to levy *direct* taxation on the people in the forts, well, the pieces might skim their heads but they could not cut them off. The little garden patches were pitilessly disembowelled of the vegetable seeds so recently planted. We had lived to see them grow, but up they had to come lest we should be planted ourselves.

In the meantime our friend the enemy—more intimate and candid than ever—appeared to be fully sensible of the havoc the new weapon was capable of causing. All ears were strained to catch the first sound of the Kamfers Dam monster. It was sighted at low range, and the boom, whiz, and crash seemed to jumble all together. The comparative corks with which we had been assailed hitherto used to shoot high into the air, whistling several bars of music before touching *terra firma*, and by careful attention to time it had been to some extent possible to dodge them. So at least it was stated. The day waned, and the attack was not renewed. It was suggested that perhaps the gun had “bust”; but the straw was too thin to be worth catching at.

It was quite four o'clock in the afternoon ere the first shell hurtled through the air. The heat in the open was suffocating, and the rush to the underground atmosphere was not the less brisk on that account. A constant assault was maintained for two hours. Shops, boarding houses, and private dwellings were battered indiscriminately. A studio in Dutoitspan Road was broken up; the Central Hotel was struck; and two little children were slightly hurt. But the saddest incident of the day was the death of a young man—an employee of the Standard Hotel—who was struck down at his work mortally wounded. One or two persons had their shins kicked by passing fragments. Numerous wonderful escapes were heard of. What with the vibrations of the demoralising water-melons and their hap-hazard propensities in the choice of victims, it is difficult even vaguely to convey an idea of the test to which the mettle of the people was put.

The bombardment was to have a dramatic termination, for the last heavy projectile hurled into Kimberley landed in the capacious premises of Cuthbert's Boot Store. Nobody was hit; but not many minutes had passed when dense volumes of smoke followed by flames issued through the windows—until at last the building had developed into a mighty bonfire. What everybody long feared had at length happened. The excitement was intense; hundreds of men, women, and children flocked to the burning pile. The Fire Brigade used the hose for what it was worth; but to no avail; the house was doomed, and finally was completely gutted. When the blaze was at its height a few small shells fell amid the gesticulating throng of sight-seers. A stampede followed; but

nobody was struck, *mirabile dictu*; and there was a general alternative run away and sneak back as each missile exhausted itself.



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There was an element of romance, more startling than the fire itself, in all this. It was thought that the building (Abraham's Store) adjacent to the one in flames was in grave danger, and the united exertions of the firemen were ultimately directed to the task of saving it. Within its hallowed walls was collected the bulk of our confiscated food! It had been stored away by order of the Czar, and was guarded day and night by a strong detachment of well-armed Cossacks. This circumstance lent, it need hardly be said, a piquant and absorbing interest to the progress of the blaze. It was of supreme importance—to the "Military" as well as minor "Situations"—that the supplies should be preserved. What a glowing page it would be in the war's history that the enemy three miles away had compelled surrender by burning our provisions! For ourselves, we got so little of the provisions to eat that we should not have been particularly broken-hearted by the *contretemps*. Familiarity breeds contempt, and we were familiar with the "Military Situation"; its exactions were so absurdly impalpable. It was natural, therefore, that the activity of the Military should have provoked a certain amount of chaff from the multitude of hungry civilians. The chaff went round, anyhow, whether it was natural or not. Officers tripped over officers in the wildest confusion, ordering, shouting, swearing, and directing the shop-boys, the soldiers, and the Kafirs who toiled like demons to throw the threatened foodstuffs into the street in an impossible space of time. The men tumbled and staggered in clusters, while the advantages of being a native unencumbered by the collars of our celestial civilisation were conspicuously apparent. We had our eyes wide open for all possible pickings; but so also had the rascally Cossacks. Only one gentleman (a most respected citizen) got off with a case of—candles! Barrels of oil were rolled into the streets (between files of soldiers, lest anyone should roll a barrel home), to the indignant surprise of the people thus afforded ocular demonstration of the extent to which the commandeering mania had been carried; it was worse even than they had thought—which is saving a great deal! When everything had been finally heaped outside, steps were taken forthwith—to carry them *in* again. All danger of their ignition had long since vanished; and the mob dispersed in a wild rush as the clock chimed nine.

What a day Friday was! Beginning at six in the morning the firing was kept up unceasingly until night-fall. All day long the death-dealing projectiles swept like a hurricane through the city, terrorising, killing, lacerating, surpassing previous visitations by odds that were long indeed. We had had sufficient evidence to judge of what the great gun at Kamfers Dam *alone* could do. But on Friday we were pelted from all directions with a fury unknown hitherto. The first bulletin to send a thrill of horror through



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the people—huddled away in holes—contained intelligence of the deaths of a well-known lady and her infant child; they had been struck down as they emerged from their shelter for a breath of fresh air. In Woody Street a huge missile went clean through the roof of a house, shot past the heads of a lady and gentleman seated on the stoep, fell on a soft patch in front of the door, and burst with a deafening thud five feet under ground. With the aid of a pick and shovel the fragments were exhumed and pieced together in the presence of the pallid spectators; and had the next shell fallen on or near the same spot (as sometimes happened) the results would have been more calamitous. Many persons had an idea that they were safer in the streets than in houses where the additional danger of flying furniture was ever present. Several exciting escapes were witnessed in the Market Square, and shells fell thickly in the vicinity of the fire station. A telephone pole had a semi-lunar lump neatly cut out by a passing missile. With undiminished fury the bombardment proceeded, battering down walls and gables, and filling hearts with a desire, a longing for vengeance, to be duly indulged when the fates were propitious.

It was growing late on this tragic Friday when a profound sensation was caused by a rumour which excited universal awe. George Labram had been killed by a shell at the Grand Hotel. It sounded incredible, so improbable and astounding, that he of all others, he who had achieved greatness in adverse circumstances by constructing a large gun, the famous Long Cecil—that he should be a victim. Labram dead! Was it a fabrication? Alas! no; it was true; a sad, a lurid incident, hardly needed to mark the day memorable. There was a pathetic strangeness in the fatality that gave rise to philosophic reflections.

Emboldened by a conviction that we should presently be glad to supplicate for food and quarter, the enemy relaxed not their energy. It must not be supposed that our guns were idle all this time. Long Cecil plied pluckily to hit back, and succeeded in frustrating the ambitious efforts of the Boers to draw their guns still nearer. They were rather too close as things were, however, and with the aid of the Maxims we successfully besought the enemy to fling away ambition. To that limited extent we defeated Boer designs. Lord Methuen's sympathetic coughs in the bed of the Orange River were heard at intervals throughout the day, the long, enervating day which did terminate at last. Worn out by its trials though we were, sleep was not easily coaxed to weigh our eyelids down; like other "necessaries," it was rare indeed.



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Contrary to expectation, the ferocious assault was not resumed on Saturday morning. It was a blessed interlude, too; there was so much to whistle about with unbated breath. The prejudice against the Boers and the arrogant gentlemen who led and fed us was at its fiercest. How was it all going to end? A feeling of desperation, engendered by the sufferings of their families, permeated men's hearts and filled them with a readiness to dare much, to sacrifice a great deal. The situation was critical, and many a reckless plan to ease it emanated from minds normally prudent. The outcry against the Military rose to a high pitch; the air was reeking with denunciations *apropos* of their culpability for—things in general. Their manipulation of the victuals, as I have endeavoured to show, did not pre-possess many in their favour, and fresh complaints in this connection were constantly forthcoming. Information was being suppressed, we cried; our actual condition and circumstances were being misrepresented; the notoriety of individuals was being purchased at the expense of the "greater number!" Of course, these charges had been in the air for a long while; but after Friday they, though still much in the air, matured in intensity. Dissatisfaction was expressed on all sides. We—some of us—were willing to admit the necessity of Martial Law, its rigours, severity, and discipline; but it was too much to expect us to stand mutely by while the Military gabbled of the "Military Situation," and (as we suspected) inwardly built temples of fame in the air, in which they would merit a prominent niche when, say, half a year had passed; when the last horse-chop had frizzled on the pan; and when incidentally numbers had been killed, maimed, or starved!

The clamour developed. No fuel was needed to feed the spreading flame of resentment. None was needed, but it was supplied all the same—and from a most unexpected quarter, namely, the *Diamond Fields' Advertiser!* It was a startling *denouement*. The chains that bound the "mighty engine" were burst asunder. The spell of militarism was broken; the people's paper was itself again, and the people took it to their hearts as the champion of their rights and privileges. Its leading article on Saturday summarised the situation in a nutshell. It is too good to pass. Commenting on the version of our sorrows supplied by signal, the sturdy organ in a manner after our own hearts let flow the following deluge of consoling truths:—

"... What are the facts? We have stood a Siege which is rapidly approaching the duration of the Siege of Paris; we have practically defended ourselves with citizen soldiers; for, thankful as we are to the Imperial garrison, their numbers have condemned them to play a secondary role; we have raised a large body of mounted troops, who have on two occasions attacked the enemy's strongholds with the most magnificent gallantry; and through the genius of Mr. Labram—whose



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tragic death yesterday has sent a thrill of sorrow through the whole community—we have been able not merely to supply ammunition for the pop-guns sent to Kimberley, but also to produce in our workshops the only weapon capable of minimising the terrible havoc and destruction caused by the enemy's six-inch gun, throwing a projectile weighing 100 pounds broadcast over the town at range of three miles. They shout to us, 'Have patience!' Will they remember that we have fought alone and unaided for four long months? Will they remember that we are situated practically in the centre of a desert, 600 miles from the coast, and have been compelled from the beginning to depend on our own resources, and that our lives are daily and hourly exposed to danger? Is it unreasonable, when our women and children are being slaughtered and our buildings fired, to expect something better than that a large British army should remain inactive in the presence of eight or ten thousand peasant soldiers? Surely the time has come to put in plain English the plain truths of the situation. We have been influenced in the past by various considerations, notably a desire to avoid compromising what is called the 'Military Situation.' We have now come to the conclusion that respect for the 'Military Situation' merely means deceiving our own people. The Press correspondents cabling to the London papers are actually not permitted to mention that Kimberley has been bombarded by a six-inch gun! This is indeed the last straw, and if only for the sake of future record we take this opportunity of placing the naked truth before our readers."

Lively indeed was the satisfaction which greeted this unexpected change of policy. But there was little time for jubilation, for after breakfast the shells came whistling through the air. They were delivered in a desultory fashion, and in the afternoon at still less frequent intervals. Happily, little damage was done and firing ceased at sunset. It was over for the week; the prospective respite of thirty-six hours was a pleasing thought; the morrow would be Sunday, and Sunday was sacred. Precedent and our sense of the fitness of things alike justified the assumption. But it did not occur to us that the chimes of midnight were yet many hours off, nor that from eight o'clock to twelve the unkindest cut of all was to be administered.

There was something terribly unearthly in the sound of the whizzing destroyers as they careered across the houses in the blackness of the silent night. This was the hardest strain of all, and more trying to the nerves than anything they had to endure in the clear light of day. It was a never-to-be forgotten ordeal in the lives of the good folk of Kimberley. From his high and dangerous perch on the conning tower the bugler ever and anon blew his bugle, suggesting to the scared housemaid the psychological moment for a plunge beneath the bed. On each application of the fuse to Long Tom the bugle rang out in clarion tones its warning to seek cover. It made plaintive melody in the nocturnal stillness, bespeaking the death-knell perchance of many. Nobody was abroad, excepting a solemn procession of men wending its way to the cemetery with all that was mortal of George Labram. Cannon in front of them volleyed and thundered—to avoid which the late hour had been chosen for the burial.



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Thus closed the long and dreadful week. Over-wrought women and children emerged from their sodden refuges to court a long-deferred rest, if they might, for after the events of the night anything might happen. Who was to tell what the morning might not show?

### CHAPTER XVIII

*Week ending 17th February, 1900*

We awoke on Sunday morning with fears of what had happened during the night. It transpired, however, to our infinite relief, that most of the shells had fallen on the soft earth of the Public Gardens. One poor soldier had his leg completely severed from his body, while the escapes of his nonchalant bed-fellows were hairbreadth. A house was set on fire and reduced to ashes. Another missile entered the hospital, but did no great harm beyond rudely extinguishing a lighted lamp. A lady who resided in a house close by went as near to the borders of eternity as was possible without crossing them. She was seated on a folding-chair, and had momentarily altered her position to find a bunch of keys required by her servant when right through the spot on which she would have been still reclining but for the timely intervention of the girl a huge projectile came crashing. The shock was fearful, and though, the missile failed to burst both women had an escape from death unprecedented in its narrowness. A native was seriously injured; and, finally, it was ascertained that a Malay canteen had been invaded, the sequel to which was the destruction of an army of—empty bottles! There was a negative satisfaction in the fact that they *were* empty which the hapless Malay was not venal enough to appreciate.

In the houses, the streets, the camps, the all-engrossing topics of discourse were the terrors of the week so dramatically closed when churchyards yawned on Saturday. Excited groups were talking everywhere, and questions of hunger and thirst, supremely acute, were subordinated to the more urgent public importance of the new situation, its dangers, and its gravity. The feeling grew, the belief gained strength that the weight of the Siege cross was being officially minimised. The outside world, Lord Roberts included, knew nothing of its actual heaviness. This revelation was tangible and distinct. The gun story narrated by our newspaper only too clearly exemplified the meagre information sent out concerning the public larder, the public health, the parlous pass altogether to which the public had been reduced. No confidence could be reposed in the men at the helm; in pilots who betrayed unwillingness to steer for harbour; who preferred recklessly to exploit their valour for the sake of a selfish notoriety. To these haughty, arbitrary men, accidentally armed with authority, was attributed much that was avoidable. Their conduct stirred our invective powers to rich depths of condemnation. Not that from this candid declamation we expected good to flow; it only served as a salve for our tortured dignity.



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It was the last Sunday of the Siege! But no advance ray of light that was to come illumined our mental horizon. We expected nothing; chimeras had ceased to satisfy, and were not the less sternly because tacitly taboo. It was sought indeed to placate us with *talk* about “imminent developments.” They told us that a meeting of leading citizens had been held under the presidency of Mr. Rhodes; that the naked truth of things had been telegraphed to the Commander-in-chief; that the Commander-in-chief had on receipt of the message sent a flying Column to relieve us. All this was circulated to soothe; but it failed abjectly in its purpose. We were not to be fooled “the whole of the time,” by cant about flying Columns—whose wings, like those of Icarus, were only too likely to get detached in the heat of the Karoo. Such was the temper, the inflexible pessimism of the people; the much-talked of change that was to come over the scene was voted a delusion and a fraud.

Business was of course entirely suspended; and further projects to ensure immunity from danger for the women and children were being discussed. It was confidently expected that the bombardment would be resumed with surpassing fury at midnight. An underground dwelling had been constructed at the railway station, and under the bridge great walls of sandbags had been erected for the protection of pedestrians. In all parts of the town gangs of men were excavating the debris heaps and converting them into habitations in which thousands, irrespective of colour, social status, or nationality, were henceforth to commingle and waive all distinctions of class. To the redoubts, where wonderful contrivances in the way of chambers had been fitted up, some men brought their families. Shelters and “dug-outs” sprang into being everywhere; and the troubles of the inner man, in reality more poignant than ever before, were relegated for the moment to the limbo of forgotten tribulations. Reliance on relieving expeditions was considered foolish; all our thoughts and energies were centred in a desire to stay the slaughter of the innocents, and thus in a manner to spike the enemy’s guns.

A wild craving to spike them in a more concrete fashion pervaded the minds of hundreds. The cavil against the Colonel abated not a jot; the epithets hurled at his devoted head were as picturesque as of yore. But side by side with this domestic hostility there had developed a deeper, less noisy feeling of resentment against the dear Boers themselves. Volunteers in plenty were ready for any deed of daring that would enable them to give back blow for blow. Not the least enthusiastic in this regard were the Regular soldiers; they wanted to destroy or capture the gun at Kamfers Dam, recking not the wildness, the impracticability of the enterprise, but eager for a try—to be heroes in the strife. Colonel Kekewich was waited on for his sanction; but he argued that the expedition would entail certain destruction for half



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of the proposed attacking force, and would result in failure. The fortifications of the enemy, he maintained, were too strong, the gun was too well guarded. In the excitement prevailing a practical view of this kind was apt to be misconstrued, as indeed it was. The Colonel's position was a delicate and responsible one; but, ignoring that, his refusal to countenance the proposed assault lowered him in the minds of individuals bursting to do something desperate, as well as in the valorous estimation of others who merely wanted to see it done.

It was the last Sunday of the Siege! It was not stated; no credence would have been accorded to the suggestion. The day advanced, and blood-curdling legends—appertaining to the arrival of batteries from the north, to assist in the completion of Kimberley's subjugation—abounded on all sides. The rumour-monger excelled himself; not one but four six-inch guns were to sing on Monday; our past experiences were to be proved but a foretaste of worse things in store. The Mines had been talked of as a place of refuge, and when the *hour* at which we lunched (when luncheons were) was reached the dead walls of the city were placarded with great posters, inviting all women and children who desired perfect security to take up their residence in the caverns of De Beers! The drastic nature of the prophylactic was objected to; it was feared by the quidnuncs that the treatment might prove more injurious in its ultimate effects than the ills it was intended to ward off. But this element was silenced, and soon was witnessed a procession of people with bundles of bedding and crockery on their shoulders wending their way (in a thunderstorm) to their deep-level homes. From all parts of the city streams of families were converging towards the "Kimberley" and the "De Beers" mines. There were a few bejewelled dames whose ideal of good form and adoration of the conveniences would not allow them to entertain such a "fall"; it was asking too much; what would Mrs. Grundy say? There was again a timid set whose notions of a pilgrimage to the bowels of the earth were peculiar; who associated with it all the dangers attending a balloon adventure—*plus* the probability of asphyxiation. But as time wore on the crowds grew thicker and thicker, until the outstanding minority began to feel lonely, then to waver, and finally to take their places as martyrs in the "Lift" that was to lower them into regions infernal. It was a striking *ensemble* that mustered at the mouth of the mines. All grades of society were there, and specimens of almost every European nation, mingled with the Kafir the Zulu, the Hottentot and the countless shades and depths of duskiness that make up the coloured classes. The process of lowering the "Lift" began at four o'clock. It was tedious work. Only eight or nine persons could be let down at a time, and some of the trippers had so many rugs, mattresses, cushions, antimacassars, and like lumber along with



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them as to make the downward flight of eighteen hundred feet a pleasure-trip distinctly *modern*. With exemplary patience the emigrants waited, until it suddenly dawned on them—so slow was the progress made—that there was every possibility of the dread hour of twelve anticipating them. And then the pushing and the shoving commenced. It was past eleven, and there were yet hundreds to go down when “house full” was shouted. Arrangements were hurriedly made to domicile the surplus in the debris heaps. Midnight came; not a gun was heard. Morning dawned; and the weak and young were safe from the ravages of shot and shell. Thus had closed the last, eventful Sunday of thralldom. The work achieved did much to ease men’s minds, to revivify their hope, and to strengthen their readiness to immolate themselves, if need be, on the altar of duty.

Monday was awaited with calmness and a determination to meet the worst with fortitude. The carnage predicted, and painted in such sanguinary colours, was slow to begin. It was not until the respectable hour of seven that a commencement was made. Several untenanted houses were damaged; four were set on fire at Kenilworth, and though the Brigade were on the spot as fast as they could be conveyed from Kimberley, the conflagration was inextinguishable, the houses were burned to the ground. The intervals between the coming of the shells were much longer than heretofore. This was due to the fact that a number of our best marksmen had at length managed to make themselves felt. They had gone out on the Sunday night and secured cover so close to Kamfers Dam as to necessitate the exercise of caution on the part of Long Tom’s manipulators. The “snipers” lay alert, invisible, and ready when they saw a head to hit it. It was alleged that the polls in which the marksmen were interested had the Red Cross—a useful talisman—waving over them, the better to enable the gunners to devastate Kimberley with impunity. Whether this was true is not certain; at any rate, the *finesse* did not deceive; every cranium that loomed upon the horizon received a volley. Sometimes the gun would be fixed partially into position, and, as the bullets whistled by, lowered, jerked up again, and fired. Even these hide and seek tactics did not long nonplus the “snipers”; their adaptability was equal to the occasion. Rumour spread it that two or three of the Kamfers Dam gunners had fallen; one victim was certainly vouched for by a number of people who had seen him throw up his hands, in the very act of firing, and disappear from view. The success of the “snipers” was the talk of the city. It was tactlessly conveyed to the bottom of the mines and made some of the women anxious to get to the top—to breathe gunpowder in preference to brimstone. Reports went to show, however, that all was as well down below as could be expected in a “settlement” so new and so congested.



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What a spectacle the town presented! Business, as I have stated, had been entirely suspended since the Friday; but it was not until Monday that the last vestige of life appeared to have passed away from Kimberley. Meandering the streets for curiosity or in futile search of corporal sustenance, it was not until then that the hush of the thoroughfares struck one in its full intensity. The whole machinery of man's work and operations was at a standstill. The shops were closed; no car rattled o'er the stony street; no throb of life was anywhere. A belated cat, a stranger to milk and mice, and with tail still erect as a lamp-post to accentuate the body's decay, would now and then cross the tile-line. The houses wore a funereal aspect. The cabs, enrobed in Red Crosses, awaited an unwelcome fare—a mangled pedestrian. Spectral horseman rode hither and thither in pursuit of shells, to aid the victims of their wrath. A stillness, weird, uncanny, hovered like a pall above the Diamond City.

... now the sounds of population fail,  
No cheerful murmurs fluctuate in the gale,  
No busy steps the grass-grown footway tread,  
For all the bloomy flush of life is fled.

The plucky manner in which “we” had risked our necks for our readers' sakes had won golden enconiums for the *Diamond Fields' Advertiser*. Monday's issue was awaited with unwonted eagerness, interested as we were in the gauntlet flung at Lennox Street. But the gauntlet had been taken up; there was no paper forthcoming; it was suppressed; the “Military Situation” proscribed its freedom. This was not altogether unexpected; but a more prudent counsel would have let the Press alone. Several stories appertaining to Saturday's outburst were in circulation. One was that the Editor had been handcuffed and conveyed to gaol—presumably for seditious libel. But Mr. Rhodes, it was said, had intervened and offered himself as a “substitute.” He would take responsibility for the famous article; if anybody was to be punished *he* would act as criminal. The story ran, however, that he was let off with a caution—a sentence at once magnanimous and supremely prudent.

Another night assault had been considered probable, but there was no firing until Tuesday morning when the bombardment was briskly resumed. Throughout the day the attack was well sustained, despite the strategy of our “snipers.” Shells crashed in close proximity to vacated houses; half a dozen were broken into; and the *Sanatorium*, where a strong impenetrable fort had been constructed, was well attended to. But there was really a better chance of finding Rhodes in the open, for he peregrinated here, there and everywhere, too much of a fatalist, or too fond of fresh air to be intimidated by what was flying in it. It was rumoured that the heel had been knocked off one of his boots; and fabulous sums were forthwith offered in the souvenir market for the heel. The story had no foundation in fact—though not for lack of likely heels; *they* were as numerous as the pieces of shell that had killed George Labram. The multiplicity of these fatal fragments was one of the marvels of the Siege. A single piece had struck Mr. Labram, but the commercial legend pointed to a score!



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The shells continued to tear up the streets until mid-day; after which all was peace for some hours. The information reached the ears of the ladies in the mines; and the inevitable consequence was an exodus of the bolder spirits therefrom, to get a glimpse of the sky; for (as the poet says):—

... the sky we look up to, though glorious and fair,  
Is looked up to the more because Heaven lies there;

and had a superlative fascination for people doomed to deplore their nearness to “another place.” The ladies granted interviews with almost disconcerting alacrity; their narratives of life down below, its joys and drawbacks, its good intentions, its climatic conditions and difficulties, were glowing and diversified. Some were happy and cheerful, while others, fastidious and accustomed to feathers, would never be happy until they were—dead! The chorused howling of so many young ladies and gentlemen, ranging in ages from a fortnight to three or four (years, not fortnights) kept reasoning people awake o’ nights, it was protested; and other inconveniences like the water—tributaries of the Styx—in the mines made the atmosphere, and the blankets sometimes, rather humid. These little discomforts, however, were felt only on one or two floors; and the fair sex in the main were grateful for the efforts made to make things cosy for everybody. Sanitation was of course the paramount difficulty; but altogether to their eternal credit must redound the indomitable energy and labours of the floor managers, the mine employees generally, and even the directors, in their new sphere of caterers for half the population. It was a heavy task, all things considered, but it was done. Through the long, sweltering day the men wrought and perspired. Many a missile hissed near them; many a risk they ran; but they went on doing their duty with unflinching devotion. What was chivalrous in their nature was stirred, and the good, latent in most men, shone out brilliantly in all. The ladies acknowledged it freely. Unexpected little dainties—sent down in the “Lift”—were supplied them to strengthen their toleration of a home in a warm corner. Baskets, with the “compliments” of Mr. Rhodes, bunches of grapes, more precious (and softer, too) than the encrusted gems around, were relished down in the mines and worth going still deeper for.

The horrid whiz of the ostrich eggs from Kamfers Dam was heard again, and back to the “Lift” flew the ladies. Not a few preferred to wait until ‘night was again descending’ to descend along with it. One or two sturdy amazons refused point blank to be terrorised into descending at all; they expressed a preference for surface risks. This attitude was not by any means unintelligible. The babel down below was incessantly audible; as was the subdued roar of machinery; the heated competition entailed in the pegging out of claims; the high words excited by the petty larceny of pilferers who borrowed



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utensils to break, or keep as souvenirs. Yet no wayward fragment of shell contributed its quota to the perpetual din of gem-land. Better still, no exterior sound could be *heard*; no boom, no faint intonation of the shocks that blighted the earth's surface ever ruffled its centre. It was the solitary advantage the centre (as a residence) had over the surface; but it was a substantial advantage, though rather testily appreciated.

The town was as hushed as a cemetery; and it was not easy to gather knowledge of the damage done, or of its extent. The hospital was the recipient of a grant-in-aid, which a gentleman resident in its vicinity participated in—his face getting chopped by some startled pebbles. One young lady who had left the mine, who could better hear the shells above than the confusion of tongues below, was penalised with a gash—happily slight. A little boy was wounded in the leg. A number of empty houses were battered; and the headgear of the “Kimberley Mine” was hit by a passing missile, which occasioned not a little consternation among the families who, finding no room at the bottom, were quartered at the top of the shaft. The Opera House was again struck; and at the Presbyterian Church a dextrous effort was made to discover the “lost chord,” which resulted in the organ's being for ever incapacitated to shed the soul of any music whatsoever. The caves dug out of the debris heaps were all inhabited; the teething community never let us forget it. A number of the mine emigrants had returned to their native land and joined their friends in the debris heaps. The protection of the debris heaps was not quite so good as that afforded by the mines, and the music of the cannon the troglodytes had always with them. But there was more liberty and comfort in the caves, which were dry as dust and—no slang intended—not too dusty.

Signs and portents of the approaching revolution were not wanting. Rumours transcended in sensationalism all past products of inventive fertility; but though men of weight were beginning to respect the fama the populace hi the mass were too “*ware*” to fondle her. With the women hi the mines it was different; their newly-acquired appreciation of “Home, sweet home” had induced symptoms of their primeval predisposition to believe all they heard—and they heard all sorts of loving lies. The enemy, it was noticed, evinced signs of uneasiness at last; he cast furtive looks behind him, as if some danger lurked unseen. The traditional stoicism of the Boer was perturbed, and an air of violent agitation was conspicuous in the portion of the cordon nearest to Modder River. The “star” shining down on the Free State suggested an undesirable destiny; it was filled with reconnoitring Britons. For ourselves, we noted the point from which the balloon had ascended, and the obvious confusion in the Boer ranks, with curiosity; and though we still resolutely adhered to belief in the folly of expecting relief, instinct whispered *nil desperandum*. From out the camp at Alexandersfontein the enemy appeared to be clearing—all of which *phenomena* were the more mysterious because of the silence that prevailed.



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The next day to dawn was Saint Valentine's (Wednesday). The valentines were delivered by an early post, but the intended recipients had happily changed their addresses and were not at home to be caricatured. The *Sanatorium* received a batch of compliments—as a kind of satire on its pretensions to salubrity—one of which played havoc with its bakehouse, and, what was still more serious, a batch of bread in process of baking. The City Fathers, as per immemorial custom, were not forgotten. One of them had his house and furniture damaged; another missile struck Mr. Bennie's dwelling; while, at Beaconsfield, the beauty of Councillor Blackbeard's verandah was marred, as also nearly were the persons of half a dozen workmen close by. A few shells shot appallingly close to the bugler perched on the summit of the headgear. The "sniping" still went on, but the Boers at Kamfers Dam appeared to be little affected thereby, or by the signs of alarm betrayed by their fellow-besiegers at other camps. There was, alas! to be yet one more fatality ere emancipation was to burst upon us like a thunderbolt. In the afternoon, while making his ablutions at a tap outside his bakehouse door, an unfortunate baker was struck down and killed.

Meanwhile proceedings pregnant with meaning were taking place at Alexandersfontein. The evacuation of the position was going on apace, and was being watched with bated breath by the Beaconsfield Town Guard. The numbers of the enemy ensconced at Alexandersfontein had diminished so materially that Major Rodger with a picked force of one hundred men ventured to try conclusions with the residue. A sharp, decisive fight ensued; the few Boers left to defend the place were so startled that they soon fled, leaving bag and baggage behind them. A few on the Boer side were killed (or wounded) and half a dozen were taken prisoners. Of the Major's men, two were injured. Despatches found in the pocket of a prisoner went to show that Alexandersfontein had been used partially as a women's laager; and I regret to have to record that a woman and a young child were severely wounded in the battle.

But it was the sequel to this remarkable fight that roused the people from their torpor. Large quantities of provisions were found not only in the camp but in the hotel and houses of the neighbourhood. The news spread like wildfire, and a great paeon of triumph went up from a thousand throats. From the various redoubts the citizen soldiers, regardless of risk, hastened in carts to the scene of confiscation. The early birds got butter! there was no doubting it, for however impaired may have been our sense of taste, our dilated eyes were right. Some folk carried away large sacks of meal and flour—satisfied to enjoy *carte blanche* in bread without butter. Others, again, bore off bags of potatoes in contented triumph; while not a few went home with onions in their pockets and a tear and a smile in their eyes.



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And when later in the day a drove of half a hundred oxen, horses, and mules, with their forage behind them, entered Kimberley they were greeted with a tumult of applause never meted out to royal pageant or conquering biped coming! A little whiskey, it was said, had been unearthed; but there was no evidence, circumstantial or oscillatory, to confirm this. Minor windfalls in the way of half-sovereigns, five pound notes, Kruger coins, and trousers buttons had also been picked up and appropriated as a matter of course.

When Major Rodger had officially apprised the Colonel of his glorious victory, gyps and re-inforcements were immediately despatched to assist in the holding of the acquired position. It was soon strongly garrisoned, and though theatrical preparations for its recovery were not wanting, no serious attempt was made to re-take it. From the adjacent ridges (a mile off) an odd shell came hurtling; and thus was an avenue opened up for the Column that was always coming, and never came. Cheering auguries there were in plenty, but we guardedly declined to be cheered, and pretended to snigger sceptically at the auguries. It might be that the Boers *had* been “driven out of Colesburg,” but we did not believe it, on principle. From the same source we learned that Cronje was a prisoner; but he was *not!* so that our incredulity was in a measure justifiable to the end. It was conceded, it was being made manifest daily that the housing of so many people for any length of time in the over-crowded mines was opt of the question. But that was a consideration to which the “Military Situation” could not reasonably be expected to play second fiddle.

Despite, therefore, the concrete evidence of impending developments; despite the distant dust-clouds which only Cavalry, and a good many of them, could cause; despite the chaos reigning in Boer circles—we still declined to be hoodwinked on the never-to-be-forgotten morning of Thursday, the fifteenth of February. On the night previous the sounds of a heavy musketry duel had been heard. A force had been sent out to frustrate Boer encroachments and the fury with which (as per expectation) the lost Alexandersfontein was to be regained. This force effected a *coup*, and by a series of tricks alarmed the enemy contiguous to Alexandersfontein into a belief that a bayonet charge in strength was contemplated, the consequence being that they (the Boers) beat the air with bullets for full three hours. Three guns had been trained on our new “possession.” To dislodge its garrison, however, more vigorous measures were called for; and desperate though they continued to grow, the Boers had no bayonets, without which it was hardly possible for them to achieve their purpose. Long Tom at Kamfers Dam was too far off to communicate with the proud usurper; it had perforce to content itself with the city streets, into which the shells kept falling for some hours in the forenoon—until



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positively the last of the missiles ended its blaze with a groan at eleven o'clock! That the bombardment would be resumed when the gun had "cooled" nobody thought of doubting for an instant; and when three hours had sped, when the gun had had time to become a veritable cucumber, the rumour-monger, positive, superior, laconic to the last, attributed its silence to a "loose screw!" But, for us, the screw was never tightened; Kimberley had indeed heard the last of Long Tom. Our scepticism, however, remained robust, and would not permit us to treat with aught but ridicule the vaunted wonders with which the day was to be fraught.

The Colonel and his staff still comported themselves with Patrician dignity (as befitted their station), only condescending occasionally to utter unofficial words of cheer. But these utterances were taken for what they were worth, and the experience of four months had taught us to estimate their value at rather less than nothing. When, therefore, towards two o'clock in the afternoon the unfolding of a tale descriptive of an approaching body of eight thousand cavalry had begun, we derisively snapped our fingers at the story. With amazing persistence the narrative was shouted aloud, and with a positiveness which such angry retorts as "Am I a fool!" "Don't come it on me!" "You're a liar!" *etc.*, could not subdue. Undaunted the heralds of the oncoming Column carried their message to every ear, to be accepted or rejected. The bulk of the people stipulated to "see" the Column, and then they "might" believe; and it was hard even to induce them to get on to the roof for a view. The ladies in the mines, who, uncomfortable as they were, had a horror of being fooled any more, also perversely refused to stir until they saw the Column; it was not easy to persuade them that an adjournment to the surface of dull earth was an indispensable preliminary to the testimony of their eyes. Courier after courier arrived with the grand and glorious news; and when men on the conning tower were observed to cheer frantically, wave handkerchiefs, and gesticulate insanely, our flinty nature humbly condescended to soften. When all in turn beheld the huge body of cavalry drawing nearer and nearer to Kimberley, the tears began to roll and the pent-up emotion of four weary months was freely given way to! From verandahs, from windows, redoubts, and debris heaps the roars of welcome were sent across the veld. Advance-stragglers, exhausted and travel-stained, presently arrived, to have their buttons cut off their coats, the feathers plucked from their hats, their arms wrenched from their sockets, and to be hugged with merciless and enervating tenderness in the wild paroxysm of an ultra-Irish *cead mile failte!* The Siege was raised! The suspense and sorrow were over! The lowering, ever-darkening cloud had broken—turned inside out to dazzle with the sheen of its lining our unaccustomed eyes. We were free again; to revel



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in pastry and jam, and ham and eggs, in chops and steaks, in mealies, butter, bread, and *pate de foie gras*; at liberty to drink, to mix our drinks, to risk “swelled head” and indigestion if we so willed, as we most certainly did. It was over; we had fought a good fight; and in the conviction that it was worth going through it all for the ineffable delight of the final emergence we sent our hats into the air with an abandon and disregard of the proprieties that was very, very rude.

The Siege was raised! by French—not Methuen; Codlin was the friend, not Short! The enthusiasm never slackened, and when late in the afternoon the General with some of his officers visited the Kimberley Club, the climax was reached. Cheer after cheer rent the air and shook the trees. The hand-shaking crusade shook the spheres. Nine o'clock struck; but much we cared; the warning notes had lost their terrors; they startled not the joyous groups crowding the streets, laughing, whistling, singing, crying, dancing, or hilariously toasting French (in the saloons) on Siege soda-water! Not the least pathetic feature of it all was the length and wryness of our deliverers' faces when they sought to buy refreshments—a tin of something—cup of anything—and the loud laugh that spake the vacant wares of the gay *restaurateur* as he brokenly explained the Permit Law with all its “tape” and poms. The exodus from the mines was necessarily slow, and midnight had long passed ere the last of the refugees was restored to the glimpses of the moon.

In the meantime our friends the Boers had taken to flight. Their guns (including Long Tom) had vanished, and Long Cecil kept barking furiously to expedite their departure. The Boer positions were soon occupied by British troops; large quantities of provisions and forage which had been left behind were duly confiscated; while French's ordnance was substituted for the guns that had so long intensified the heat of a Kimberley summer. In town all was bunting and gladness. The red, white, and blue bedecked the houses, the lamp posts, the tram-cars, the barrel-organs, the monkeys, the dogs, and the horseflesh! The relief of Kimberley was an accomplished fact. The issue of the campaign was no longer in doubt.

Little now remains to be told. There is no need to speak of the rapidity with which railway communication was restored, or of how amid general rejoicings a train steamed into the city and steamed out again choc-a-bloc with passengers in cattle trucks. Nor need I pity the lot of the postal officials when the sorting of a million letters had begun. It is not for me to tell of the joy of reading them; to dwell on the Dronfield fight; the evacuation of Magersfontein; the *tableau* at Paarderberg, of its chastening effects on the “Military Situation.” Nor may I speculate on how well or wisely we ate and drank when gormandism was again in consonance with law-abiding citizenship. All these things were *after* the Siege.

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For the rest, the citizens had responded to the call of duty with a spontaneity worthy of the highest praise. They had “roughed it” in their tents uncomplainingly (sulking only on occasions, like Achilles). All honour, all gratitude to the good men and women who had spent themselves so unselfishly for the common good. The De Beers Corporation merit a meed of commendation for the manner in which they rose to a recognition of their responsibilities. An expression of regret is due to the Commanding-Officer for the impatience with which we had treated his proclamations and chafed under Martial Law. Our attitude had been oftentimes unfair. But the Colonel’s *regency* had in the main been conspicuous for high ability, considerateness, and a firmness that could have scarcely been dispensed with. Finally, Mr. Rhodes—by virtue of his beneficent, unceasing labours on behalf of the beleaguered population—stood higher than ever in the affections of the people among whom had been spent so many years of his life. This narrative may be fittingly closed with a peroration of his—since it reflects the feeling of the citizens as a whole, which has been my aim throughout. “When we look back” said the Colossus, “upon the troubles we have gone through, and especially all that has been suffered by the women and children, we have this satisfaction, that we have done our best to preserve that which is the best of commercial assets in the world—the protection of her Majesty’s Flag.”