

With Steyn and De Wet eBook

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Page 1

THOMAR

Here in the quiet old convent of Thomar, the Convento de Christo, the strife of the past months seems like a dream. Wandering through the long corridors, with their bare, empty apartments, gazing by the hour on paintings faded and torn, the work of long dead and forgotten masters, dwelling on marvels of ancient architecture, resting the eyes on peaceful landscapes and hearing the sweet murmur of falling waters, the scenes of war seem distant and remote.

The heart but so lately harrowed by the devouring emotions of anger, hate, and the lust of blood, now soothed by the sympathy of the kindly Portuguese, is lulled into harmony with the surrounding scenes of peace and beauty. Only the thought of our ravaged country, struggling still for dear life, though forced upon her knees, brings back the claims of duty and the yearning to be up and doing, to enter once more the ranks of the foemen and strike another blow for liberty.

Hopeless! Yet where is the Boer—prisoner, exile, or renegade—even he!—who does not dream by nights he feels once more the free veld air upon his brow, lives again the wild night rides beneath twinkling stars? He feels once more his noble steed bound beneath him, grips again his comrade's welcoming hand, and awakens with a bitter sigh.

Some consolation, then, to recall blows already struck, and duty fairly done.

THE ELEVENTH OF OCTOBER

When war appeared inevitable the spirit of the Boers rose to support them in their hour of trial, and only sentiments of patriotism and defiance were felt and expressed. Joy at the opportunity of proving once and for ever their ability to defend themselves and consequent right to independence, regret for friendships about to be severed—these were the chief emotions of the younger generation. The elder thought of past wrongs, long cherished, and silently took down the rifle from behind the door.

The women, ever strong in national spirit, lent the aid of their encouragements and prayers. Sons wept that they were too young to accompany their fathers on commando.

Yet there came a moment when for the space of a minute a mighty shadow seemed to brood over the land, and the cold chill of coming evil struck the nation as if from the clouds. A message had been despatched from Pretoria to every corner of the country. One word only: War!

The blow had fallen. Nothing could avert a sanguinary struggle. Well the burghers knew the overwhelming strength of the foe, but they went blithely forth to meet their

fate, strong in a sincere confidence in Providence. If the worst came to the worst, well, "twere better to have fought and lost, than never to have fought at all!"

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Of all the branches of the Transvaal Civil Service there was not one that stood higher in the public estimation at that moment, nor one that distinguished itself more during the war, than that to which I had the honour to belong—the Department of Telegraphs. Equipped with the most up-to-date instruments, composed almost equally of picked men from England and Holland and of well-trained young Colonials and Transvaalers, under an energetic chief, our department proved itself, both before and during the war, second to none, and, the Afrikaner portion at least, worthy of the confidence of the Government.

I had just been transferred from Johannesburg to Pilgrimsrest, a quaint little one-street village near the Portuguese frontier, one of the oldest alluvial diggings of the early days, and now the centre of an important mining district. Here we heard that our commandoes had invaded the enemy's territory in every direction, and news of the preliminary engagements was awaited with breathless interest. The male inhabitants of the village often spent entire nights under the verandah of the telegraph office, and the importance of the telegraphist suddenly grew almost too great to bear with becoming modesty.

One Sunday morning, however, the office wore a deserted look. The Dutch inhabitants were engaged in courteously escorting those of British birth or sympathies over the border, and I was alone. After a long interval of silence the instrument began ticking off a message—

“Elandslaagte—flight—lancers!”

Then came the list of the fallen. Name after name of well-known men fell like lead upon the ear. Finally my colleague at the other end gently signalled that of my uncle, followed by the sympathetic remark: “Sorry, old man.”

I could write no more. What, my uncle dead! General Kock, Major Hall, Advocate Coster—all dead! It seemed impossible. We could not understand it, this first initiation of ours into war's horrible reality.

Within a week reinforcements were despatched from our district. I obtained a few weeks' leave of absence and accompanied them.

We were an interesting band. Two hundred strong, we counted among our number farmers, clerks, schoolmasters, students, and a publican. My mess consisted of a Colonial, an Irishman, a Hollander, a German, a Boer, and a Jew. It must not be imagined, however, that we were a cosmopolitan crowd, for the remaining hundred and ninety-four were nearly all true Boers, mostly of the backwoods type, extremely conservative, and inclined to be rather condescending in their attitude towards the clean-shaven town-dwellers. The almost universal respect inspired by a beard or a paunch is a poor tribute to human discernment.



Every mess possessed one or two ox-waggon, loaded with a tent, portmanteaux, trunks, foodstuffs, and ammunition. We made about twenty miles daily, passing through Lydenburg, Machadodorp, Carolina, and Ermelo, and reached Volksrust on the fourteenth day. During the march we learnt that heavy fighting had taken place in Natal, Dundee being taken and Ladysmith invested, and a strong commando had actually made a reconnaissance as far down as Estcourt.



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General Joubert, who had bruised himself in the saddle during the latter expedition, was now recruiting his health here in Volksrust. I went to see him, and found him installed in a railway carriage, and looking very old and worn. I showed him a telegram instructing me to apply to him for a special passport enabling me to return when my leave expired.

He said, "Others want leave to go home; you ask for leave to come to the front. But your time is so short, it is hardly worth while. Still, I am glad to see such a spirit among you young people."

Turning to his secretary, he ordered the passport to be made out. This was done in pencil on the back of my telegram. The general signed, handed me the document, and shook my hand. I thanked him, and left, highly gratified.

We entrained that afternoon, slept in the carriages at Newcastle, reached Ladysmith, or rather our station nearest Ladysmith, the following day, disentrained, rode into camp, reported ourselves for duty, and went on outpost the same night.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Our chief concern was whether we, as novices, would bear ourselves well in our first engagement. Speaking to an old campaigner on the subject, he said—

"Tell me candidly, how do you feel?"

"Well, rather nervous."

"Ah! Now, I can tell you a man who feels nervous before a fight is all right, because he has some idea of what he is going to meet. It is the reckless recruit that often proves a coward. He fancies it a mere bagatelle, and finds out his mistake too late."

This rather encouraged us, for, to tell the truth, we felt anything but reckless.

One evening about twenty of us were sent off to keep watch in a Kafir kraal near the town. In one of the huts we found a Kafir lying sick, and too weak to rise. He told us the former outpost had always brought him something to eat, but now they had not come for some days, and he had begun to think himself doomed to die of starvation, or, worse still, of thirst. We soon made up a collection of biscuits and cold tea, and I am happy to say that henceforth the poor creature's wants were daily supplied.

A rather peculiar adventure befell us here a few days later. The sun had already set when we reached the spot where we were to stand guard during the night. We dismounted, and two men went forward on foot to reconnoitre. After a while they returned with the startling news that the enemy was approaching in force. They were



sent forward again to make sure, and again returned, saying there could be no doubt about the matter.

“We heard the rumble of an approaching train, the march of cavalry, and saw the glint of arms between the trees!”

This was definite enough. A man was instantly despatched to alarm the main laager, while the rest of us followed leisurely. We were about half-way back when the messenger returned with an additional twenty-five men and an order that we were instantly to return to our post; if in possession of the enemy, to retake and hold it until relieved.



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A very tall order, and more than one man uttered the belief that discretion was the better part of valour, and that there was no humour in attacking numberless Britons with fifty men. We braced up our nerves, however, retraced our steps, and presently reached the vicinity of the kraal. Two men crept up close and came back to say the place was full of English. Leaving the horses in charge of a few men, we crept forward and surrounded the kraal. Each sought a suitable shelter and laid himself down to await the dawn. It was now about midnight. The next four hours passed very slowly, lying there in the cold and with the expectation of a desperate struggle in the morning. We thought how brave we were, and how sorry our general would be when he heard how we had all been shot down to a man, and how in after years this night attack of ours would rank with the charge of the Light Brigade. We hoped Chamberlain would die soon after us, so that we could meet his soul in the great Beyond and drag it through a sieve.

What was our surprise to find when it grew light that there had never been an Englishman near! The whole thing from beginning to end was only another false alarm, and all our valour had been wasted.

This kind of alarm was rather frequent at the time. A burgher woke up one night to find himself being roughly shaken and someone shouting in his ear—

“What are you doing? Get up, quick! Don’t you hear the alarm?”

“Yes, another false one, I daresay,” turning over for another nap. Happening to open his eyes, he became aware for the first time that he was speaking to no one less than General Joubert himself!

The poor fellow did not argue the point any further, but forthwith fled into the night, glad to get off at that price.

One morning two of us were returning from our usual swim when suddenly we saw the whole camp a beehive of commotion, burghers running to and fro, saddling their horses, shouting at each other, and generally behaving with a great lack of decorum—like madmen, in fact, or members of the Stock Exchange. Hastening on, we heard that the enemy were coming out to attack us. We hastily seized our nags, and in five minutes were on top of the nearest hill between ourselves and the enemy, who could be seen approaching three thousand yards away. We formed ourselves into groups, and each group packed itself a low wall of the loose stones lying about.

One German, armed with a Martini-Henry, found himself shunned by all his comrades on account of his cartridges not containing smokeless powder, and was obliged to entrench himself on his own at some distance from the rest. The poor fellow was the butt of all the primitive humourists from the backwoods, and was assured with much solemnity that his rifle would draw all the British fire in his direction, and that he was as good as dead already. Thorny is the path of glory!

The British guns in Ladysmith opened fire as their cavalry advanced, the shells falling a few hundred yards to our right, on a hill whence our cannon had lately been removed.



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When within two thousand yards the enemy suddenly wheeled to the left and were quickly out of sight between the hills. They found the Pretoria men there, and came back helter-skelter to the accompaniment of rapid rifle firing. First one saddle and then another was emptied as they raced across from right to left, making for a low scrub-covered kopje.

In this kopje a party of our men were concealed. With keen interest we watched the scene, waiting to see the enemy caught in the trap. Then a volley burst from the brush. Like a flash the horsemen wheeled and raced back into Ladysmith. The volley had been fired too soon.

A few mornings later we heard that during the night something very serious had taken place on Lombard's Kop. Being a sort of free lance, I immediately saddled my pony and rode in that direction. Presently I met two Boers on horseback.

"Morning, cousins." (Cousin is a title of courtesy used in addressing one's equal in age. Elder men are called "uncle.")

"Morning, cousin. Of what people may cousin be?"

"Of the telegraph service. And cousins?"

"Of the artillery."

"Something happened up there last night?"

"Yes. The English came and blew up our Long Tom!"

"How was that possible?"

"We can think what we like. Why was the burgher guard absent? It is shameful!"

We returned to camp together. The news had now been made public, and formed the one theme of discussion. Much credit was given the enemy for their audacity, but there was a strong suspicion that treachery had been at work. The ensuing court-martial resulted in two officers being suspended from duty only, although there were many trees about.

A few days later I went to see my brother, who was stationed on Pepworth Hill, some six miles to our right. He belonged to the Artillery Cadets, who at the beginning of the war had been distributed amongst the various guns in order to give them practical experience. Of the four that were attached to this gun two had already been wounded. It was glorious to see these lads of fifteen and sixteen daily withstanding the onslaught of the mighty naval guns. The rocks around their howitzer were torn by lyddite, and the ground strewn with shrapnel bullets.



“The British say we are trained German gunners. Quite a compliment to Germany!” said one youngster laughingly.

“And I,” said another, inflating his chest, “am a French or Russian expert! Dear me, how we must have surprised them!”

They showed me how they crushed their coffee by beating it on a flat stone. Their staple food was bully beef and hard biscuits.

“If only we had some cigarettes,” they said, “how gay we should be! Last week we got some sugar, enough for two days; we are so sick of black, bitter coffee!”

A severe thunderstorm now broke overhead, and as I had to go on duty that night I took leave of my friends. They had no tents, and had to find the best shelter they could under tarpaulins stretched between the rocks.

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Riding along, I soon found my raincoat soaked through. The water began to rush along the path, and the loud, incessant pealing of the thunder and the rapidly succeeding and fearfully vivid lightning flashes so terrified my horse that it refused to move a step. Dismounting, I led the animal through the blinding rain for upwards of an hour, when I reached camp, to find the outpost already gone. I took off my streaming garments, and turned into my warm bed. At midnight the flap of the tent was opened, and I was ordered to turn out and stand guard. Our effects were still at Volksrust. Drawing on a soaking wet pair of heavy corduroy breeches in the middle of the night is one of the least delicious experiences possible, as I found to my cost, to say nothing of sitting in them on an antheap for a couple of hours with a chilly rain falling.

In the morning came the news that the enemy had again surprised and blown up one of our guns—none other than the howitzer visited by me the previous evening. Presently the young cadets themselves came riding into camp, bringing with them pieces of guncotton, and showing by the state of their ragged uniforms the hand-to-hand nature of the struggle that had taken place.

One of them said in answer to my inquiries—

“We heard someone climbing the hill in the night, and challenged. It was the British. They shouted ‘Rule Britannia!’ and rushed up to the top. We fired into them. We were too few. By sheer weight of numbers they forced us aside. One of the artillerymen was dragged by the leg from his sleeping-place. He shook himself free, and bolted. The soldiers formed a square round the gun, charged it with guncotton, shouted ‘Stand back!’ and the next moment our gun was crashing through the sky. It all happened in a moment. Then the enemy retired, followed by some burghers, who had by this time arrived from the laager at the back of the hill. The Pretoria commando was also waiting for them, and intercepting their retreat, made them pay dearly enough for their exploit.”

COLENSO

One day our scouts made a splendid haul, bringing into camp that celebrated, devil-may-care animal, the war-correspondent. His story was that he had wandered out of Ladysmith with a packet of newspapers—“merely to exchange notes and to challenge you for a cricket match!”

Squatted on the ground, crowds of bearded Boers gazing at him with fierce interest, he looked anything but comfortable, and no wonder, for the word *spion* was often uttered. His colour was a pale green, while his teeth chattered audibly. He was subsequently sent to Pretoria, and thence exiled to civilisation, *via* Delagoa Bay.

On the same day we captured three natives bearing British despatches. As these runners were giving considerable trouble, it was decided to execute one and send the other two to spread the news among their friends—black and white.



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The grave was already dug, when General Joubert, always against harsh measures, decided to spare the Kafir's life. The contrast between the bearing of this savage and that of the war-correspondent was most striking.

Sometimes the merits of the different commandoes would be discussed. The palm was generally awarded to the Irish Brigade and the Johannesburg Police, two splendid corps, always ready for anything, and possessing what we others painfully lacked—discipline.

The burghers used to relate with much relish a story of how one day the British shells came so fast that even our artillerymen did not dare leave their shelter to bring up ammunition for the gun; how two of those devils of Irishmen sprang to the task, and showed how death should be faced and danger conquered. Erin for ever!

Buller now began to press his advance on the Tugela, and his searchlight could nightly be seen communicating with the besieged; long official messages in cipher, and now and then a pathetic little message, "All well, Edith sends love," would flash against the clouds, causing us to think of other scenes than those before us.

On the tenth of December a heavy bombardment was heard from the Tugela. On happening to pass the telegraph office at two o'clock, a colleague called to me—

"Buller has tried to cross the river; he is being driven back. Ten of his guns are in danger, and as soon as the sun sets our men are going over to take them!"

This was news indeed.

"Which is the road to Colenso?"

"Round those hills, then straight on."

"Thanks, good-bye," and off I went, determined to see those guns taken.

About four hours' hard riding, then a tent by the wayside, the red cross floating above. An ambulance waggon has just arrived, bringing a few wounded. I must be close to the battlefield now, but I hear no firing. What can have happened?

Half an hour further. I see the fires of a small camp twinkling in a gully to my left, and make my way thither. It is pitch dark. As I approach the camp I hear voices. It is Dutch they are speaking. Then several dim shapes loom up before me in the darkness.

"Hello! What commando is this?"

"Hello, is that you? By Jove, so it is! I thought I knew the voice," and dashing Chris Botha shakes my hand.



“It is you, commandant! Where are those ten guns?”

“Oh, that’s what you’re after. Sorry, but we took them early in the afternoon. Never mind, come along into camp. You’ll see enough in the morning.”

In the camp they had six Connaught Rangers—a captain, lieutenant, and four men, about four of the lot wounded. They alone of all their regiment had managed to reach the bank of the Tugela—Bridle Drift, about two hundred yards from the trenches of the Swaziland commando. Finding no shelter in the river bank, exhausted, wounded almost to a man, they ceased firing, whereupon our men left them in peace until the end of the fight, when they were brought over and complimented upon their pluck.



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"I'm tired out after to-day's work," Botha said, "but there's no help for it. I must sleep in the trenches again to-night. Walk down with me, your friends down there will be glad to see you."

After an hour's walk—it seemed more like a week—we reached the trenches, where the young heroes of the Swaziland commando made me welcome. I asked them about the day's fighting, but they said—

"Too tired to talk to-night, old man. Turn in; to-morrow will do."

We turned in, and slumbered undisturbed by any thought of the blood shed that day.

Early the next morning we waded through the river, wearing only a hat and shirt, and carrying our topboots over the shoulder. Dozens of Boers were splashing about in the water, enjoying themselves like so many schoolboys. Lying strewn about on the other side were scores of dead bodies; by the side of each fallen soldier lay a little pile of empty cartridge cases, showing how long he had battled before meeting his doom. Some lay with faces serenely upturned to the smiling sky, others doubled up in the agony of a mortal wound, with gnashing teeth fixed in a horrid grin, foam-flecked lips, and widely staring eyes.

Horrible, in truth, but most awful of all was the soul-sickening stench of human blood that infected the air. We soon turned back, unable to bear it any longer.

"Did your commando lose many men?" I asked my companion.

"Only two, strange to say. Wonderful; can't explain it."

"How did you feel during the fight?"

"When we saw the vast number of soldiers steadily approaching, and heard the thunderous explosion of hundreds of shells, we knew we were in for a hot time. Our small commando could never have retreated over the four miles of open country behind us. There was only one thing to be done—fight. And we fought—fought till our gun-barrels burnt our hands and our throats were parched with thirst—the excitement of it all!"

"Could you see when your bullet went home?"

"You noticed that soldier lying behind the antheap, a hole in his forehead? That man worried us a good deal. *He* could shoot, the beggar! Well, two of us fixed our rifles on the spot and waited till he raised his head; then we fired. You know the result."

Boys talking, mere boys, who should have been thinking of flowers, music, and love, instead of thus taking a grim delight in the stern lessons of war.



Saying au revoir to my friends, I now rode over to the telegraph office a few miles lower down. The operators were transmitting piles of messages to and from anxious relatives, and were not sorry to see someone who could lend them a hand. The chief of the department happened to be there at the time. He immediately placed me in harness. I wired to my field-cornet at Ladysmith saying I was unavoidably detained, as the phrase goes, and the next few weeks passed quietly by, long hours and hard work, it is true, but on the other hand pleasant companions and a splendid river, with boating and swimming galore.



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One morning a score of Theron's scouts passed by, their famous captain at their head. One of them—an old friend—reined in long enough to tell me they were off to lie in wait for a small British patrol, which, a native had told them, daily passed a certain spot suitable for an ambushade.

In the afternoon the same band returned, several on foot, and carrying someone in a blanket. What was my surprise to find that this was no other than poor Harry C——!

The native had misled them, and the surprise had been the other way about. My friend had received a bullet through the stomach, a wound which appeared necessarily fatal. He was laid down in a tent. Theron bent over him, his eyes filling with compassionate tears. "How now, Harry?"

"Awful pain, captain."

To break the news gently we wired home that he was only slightly wounded. This turned out to have been wiser than we knew, for, to our joy, Harry lingered on, rallied, and finally recovered, a triumph of medical skill.

PLATRAND

In Natal itself the situation was satisfactory, but the course of events elsewhere made the speedy capture of Ladysmith imperative. It was accordingly decided to make an attack on Platrand, or Waggon Hill, as the British call it. If we could gain this hill the town would be at our mercy.

The plan of attack was simple in the extreme. The Free Staters would climb one side, the Transvaalers the other, and Louis Botha himself ride over from Colenso with a reserve of three hundred men.

Our chief determined to view this fight, and agreed to take me along. It had been arranged that the attack should take place on the 6th of January. In the afternoon of the 5th we took the road to Ladysmith, travelling in a light mule-waggon, our horses tied alongside.

Near Nelthorpe a small commando passed us. Knowing very well what errand they were bound upon, we yet thought fit to ask them where they were off to. "Oh, nowhere particular," was the answer. "Out for exercise, that's all." This discretion was most commendable, for in our mixed forces spying must have been easy and frequent.

We pitched tent for the night, and at three the next morning saddled our horses and followed the spoor of the commando. Presently, encountering a Kafir holding half a dozen horses, we asked him where the owners were. He pointed to a hill near by, where we found the gallant Villebois, the kindly Oberst von Braun, and ill-fated von



Brusewitz. Little did we think at the time that the latter would meet his death a few weeks later on Spion Kop and the former shortly fall at Boshof!

It was growing light, and we could see, lying on our right, the neutral camp; further away, on Bulwana, our biggest gun, where we knew General Joubert was standing, his wife by his side.

Straight before us lay the key to Ladysmith—Platrand, whence now and again came the sharp rat-tat of the Metford, followed by the Mauser's significant cough.



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Through our glasses we espied six helmeted men slowly retreating up the mountain, pausing at every dozen yards to fire a volley at some invisible enemy. Three of them reached the top. The sentries were being driven in.

General Botha now arrived with the reserve force. All dismounted.

“Put your horses out of sight,” were his first words to his men, “they will draw the enemy’s fire.”

Scarcely had he spoken when a shrapnel shell burst overhead, and three horses were lying on their backs, snorting and kicking. Then came another and another. Both went wide. The animals were quickly led behind the hill, and the three wounded put out of their pain.

Taking the best shelter possible, we gazed upon the drama being unfolded before us.

The attack was now in full swing. The grating British volleys, the ceaseless mill of independent firing, the sharp flash of the British guns, the fierce whirr of our French shells, the deep boom of Long Tom resounding through the valleys. Who can describe it all?

Yet hardly a single combatant could be discerned. Attacked and attackers alike were invisible. One soldier only stood in plain view on the crest of the hill, signalling with a flag. Our men reached the crest, and the soldier disappeared. Whether in response to his signals or not, reinforcements presently reached the hill.

In long, thin lines of yellow they ran across the plateau to the crest, hoping to drive the Boers back the way they had come. As it approached the line grew thinner and thinner, until there was nothing of it left. And so on, for hour after hour, the yellow lines of gallant men flung themselves into the open, only to fall beneath the raging fire poured upon them from the sternly held mountain crest.

Down the hill our wounded dribbled, thirsty men, pale men, men covered with blood and weeping with rage. How grim must be the fire they have just passed through! One man is brought down lying across a horse. His face hangs in strips, shattered by a dum-dum bullet. Thank goodness, some of ours are using buckshot to-day!

A Boer mounts on a waggon.

“Who will take in ammunition?”

No response.

I turn to my chief. “Do you advise me to try?”

“I cannot; you must decide for yourself.”

Throwing a sack of cartridges over my horse’s back, I set off. No sooner in the open, than whizz, whizz, went the bullets past my ear. The pony stopped, confused. I struck the spurs into his flanks, and on we flew, the rapid motion, the novelty of the affair, and the continual whistle of the bullets producing in me a peculiar feeling of exaltation.

Then the sack tumbled off. I sprang down, hooked the bridle to a tree, rushed back for the bag, and started forward again. The firing now became so severe that I raced for a clump of trees, hoping to find temporary shelter there. Some of our men were here, lying behind the slender tree-trunks and taking a shot at the enemy now and then.

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“Absolutely impossible to live in the open,” they said. “Better wait awhile and see how things go.”

I laid myself down under the trees and listened to the bullets as they sang through the branches.

The very heavens vibrated as the roar of artillery grew ever fiercer, and the loud echoes rolled along from hill to hill and died away in an awful whisper that shook the grass-tops like an autumn wind.

What were those lines of Bret Harte’s about the humming of the battle bees?... I could not remember.

My eyelids grew heavy and presently I was fast asleep.

“Wake up! They’re coming round to cut us off. We must clear!” And away went my friend.

Knowing their horses would soon out-distance my heavily laden pony, and trusting to get away unobserved, I took his bridle and led him away. For about twenty yards all went well. Then suddenly there broke loose over us the thickest storm of lead I ever wish to experience. Whether it was a Maxim or not I could not say, but it seemed to me as if the whole British army was bent on my destruction. Like raindrops on a dusty road the bullets struck around me. The pony snorted, shivered, and sometimes stood stock still. I jerked the bridle savagely and struggled on, without the slightest hope of escaping, and thinking what a cruel shame it was that I should be shot at like a deer. Finally the shelter of a dry watercourse was reached. Following this for some distance, I encountered another party of our men, to whom I handed my charge, too shaken to repeat the experiment. The firing now slackened off, and I returned to my chief, full of mortification over my failure.

It was evident the hill would not be taken that afternoon, so we returned to our tent, intending to come back the next morning. Late that evening, however, Colonel Villebois passed and told us our forces had been withdrawn, General Botha being ordered to Colenso, where Buller had made a feint attack to help Ladysmith.

Our struggle was therefore a failure, but it had not been made in vain, since it proved once again that we also could storm a fortified hill, and fight a losing fight—the hardest fight of all.



SPION KOP

Something peculiar began to be observed about the British camp at Chieveley. The naval guns still flashed by day, the searchlight still signalled to Ladysmith of nights, the tents still glistened in the sun, but the soldiers, where were they?

Marching somewhere up the river. Buller meant to try his luck once more. More than one of our present leaders had in former days fought by Buller's side against the Zulus. They knew him tenacious, able; no mere theorist. It was here in Natal, under their eyes, that he had gained his Victoria Cross—the same priceless bit of bronze that young Roberts had just died to win; and they felt that to ward off his second blow would ask all our energy and cost many useful lives.



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The commandoes on our side of the river were extended to keep pace with the enemy's movements on the other. The distance between the different laagers lengthened considerably, and a speedy and certain method of communication soon became a necessity. To obtain this use was made of the vibrator, an instrument so sensitive that the most faulty line will carry sufficient electricity to work it. Having received orders to accompany the construction party, I said good-bye to my comfortable quarters, and found myself in the veld once again.

While the two waggons loaded with wire, *etc.*, went on by road we struck across country, myself on horseback, a vibrator strapped to the saddle, the others on foot. Half a dozen Kafirs accompanied us, carrying rolls of "cable," wire about the thickness of the lead in a pencil and covered with gutta percha. A wooden "saddle" holding one roll of wire was strapped on the back of one of the natives, one end of the wire joined up to the instrument in the office; the native marched forward, the wire unrolling as he went, and the other boys placing stones upon it here and there in order to prevent its being dragged about by cattle. In this manner we went forward, establishing an office at every laager on the way, with the result that every commando was always fully informed as to the situation of all the others, and the enemy's every movement immediately known to the entire forces, enabling reinforcements to be sent anywhere at any time.

This system was an easy one to learn, and it has been said that some of our generals became so fond of it that the slightest movement of the enemy was the signal for a request for reinforcements. This is, no doubt, a frivolous exaggeration.

The first day of laying the cable we had gone about fifteen miles, when communication with the office suddenly ceased. Telling the others to go on, I turned back and carefully tested the line, eventually finding the fault at sundown. Reporting my whereabouts to the office, I was ordered to follow the working party as rapidly as possible, the chief adding that it was especially desired to have communication the same night with the Standerton laager, where the others would have arrived by this time. I therefore pushed on, following the wire. It was pretty dark when I reached the foot of a mountain. Right across the cable led me—rather a difficult matter tracing it in the dark—but at last an open plain on the other side was reached; a few miles further I found one of our men stretched out in the grass by the side of the cable.

"Where's the Standerton laager?"

"This is where it was. Shifted yesterday; don't know where to. Others gone to find out. Got a blanket?"

I had not. We had no idea where the waggons were. We lay down to shiver, not to sleep, for the intense cold made the latter impossible and the former obligatory. In the middle of the night we moved round to the other side of the anthheap, thinking it *must* be warmer there. But it wasn't.



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At sunrise the others returned, saying that the Standerton laager had moved much higher up, and that the Johannesburg laager was the next on the list. They accordingly marched in that direction, laying the cable as they went, past precipices and over mountain gorges. I followed on, testing and repairing, very tedious work in the burning sun. Fortunately I was able to buy a little fresh milk from a native, which refreshed me immensely. The waggons were still missing, so we had very little food.

At midnight the cable led me up a high hill, so steep that the pony almost fell over backwards as I led him up the face of it. Right on the top lived an old native, who, hearing the barking of his dogs, rushed out armed with an assegai, ready to defend his eyrie against all comers. I persuaded him to take me straight to the Johannesburg laager, where a good night's rest made all right again.

The next morning communication was established with headquarters, and I had the pleasure of eating a decent breakfast with Ben Viljoen, then commandant, now general, whose acquaintance I had made during the Swaziland expedition.

A fiery politician and a reckless writer, his pet aversions were Hollanders and Englishmen, and it was hard to say which he detested the most. Brave and straightforward, he was most popular amongst his men, but the official, non-fighting, salary-pocketing element bore him no love. General in charge of these positions was kind-hearted, energetic Tobias Smuts, of Ermelo.

During the night Louis Botha arrived here, accompanied only by his aide and his secretary. He, Smuts, their staffs, all slept in one small tent on the hard ground, and with hardly room enough to turn round in. Truly our chiefs were anything but carpet knights!

For a couple of days my office was under a waggon, then my tent arrived, and soon everything was in full swing. One afternoon I was honoured by a visit from a Hollander Jew and Transvaal journalist, whose articles had more power to sting the Uitlanders than almost anything one could mention on the spur of the moment.

We drank tea together and discussed the probability of our camp being bombarded, standing, as it did, in full view of the hill whereon the British cannon had been dragged a few days before. He had just raised the cup to his lips when a well-known sound was heard—the shriek of an approaching shell. Nearer and louder it came, till finally—bang!—the shell burst not a hundred yards away. A young lineman, who had been listening with all his soul and ever wider stretching eyes, now gave an unearthly yell and almost sprang through the top of the tent, knocking over the unhappy journalist and sending the hot tea streaming down his neck. The youth's exit was somewhat unceremonious.

The office was hastily removed to the high bank of the adjacent stream. Whilst this operation was going on the instrument buzzed out a message ordering me to leave



immediately for the Spion Kop office. I at once said au revoir, handing over to my assistant the charge of the office, river bank and all, as well as the task of dodging the shells, which continued to fall around.

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Riding along the steep bank for about two hundred yards, I found a footpath leading down one side and up the other. No sooner had I started down this than I heard a loud explosion. It did not sound quite so near, but on gaining the opposite bank I saw floating over the spot just quitted by me a small cloud of smoke, showing that a shell had been fired at me with marvellous accuracy. Then a couple burst near the general's tent, and the laager was immediately shifted behind the hill.

I reached Spion Kop, took charge of the office, and was kept so busy that for a week there was no time to have a decent wash.

The hill next ours was daily bombarded with the utmost enthusiasm, shells falling there at the rate of fully sixty a minute, while we escaped with only an occasional bomb. Looking down upon the plain before us, we could see the British regiments drilling on the bank of the river, about two thousand yards away, probably to draw our fire, but in vain was the net spread.

The ground of operations was somewhat extensive. For some days the enemy's infantry had been harassing our right wing, attacking every day, and drawing a little nearer every night. Louis Botha was almost continually present at this point, only coming into camp now and then for a few hours' sleep.

One evening his secretary said to me, with genuine emotion, "It has all been in vain! Our men are worn out. They can do no more!"

He was a Hollander, and also a gentleman; that is to say, he was not one of those Hollanders who lived on the fat of the land, and then turned against us in our adversity; rather was he of the rarer stamp of Coster, who glorified his mother country by nobly dying for that of his adoption.

"Cheer up!" I replied. "There are other hills."

"To-morrow will tell," he said, as he bade me good-night.

And the morrow did. In the grey dawn two hatless and bootless young men came stumbling down into the laager.

"The British have taken the hill!"

Startled, we gazed at Spion Kop's top—only five hundred yards away, but invisible, covered by the thick mist as with a veil. The enemy were there, we knew it; they could not see us as yet, but the mist would soon clear away, and then....

Our guns were rapidly trained on the spot, our men placed in position, and we waited.



I ran into the tent to telegraph the news to Colenso. No reply to my hasty call. The wire is cut!

“Go at once,” said the chief, “and repair the line.”

As I rode off the mist cleared, and a few minutes later the fight had begun. The cable ran about a thousand yards behind our firing line, and as I went along, my eyes fixed on the wire, the noise of the battle sounded in my ears like the roar of a prairie fire. Jagged pieces of shell came whizzing past, shrieking like vampires in their hunt for human flesh.

Searching carefully for the fault, my progress was slow, and it was afternoon when the Johannesburg laager was reached. Here I found a despatch-rider, who said that reinforcements had arrived at Spion Kop early in the morning, that our men had immediately climbed the hill, and that, the issue being very, uncertain, we might have to retreat during the night.

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The line was still interrupted, although I had repaired several faults. I accordingly rode back to Spion Kop early the next morning. When I entered the laager it was to find that all the waggons had already retreated, and the tents standing deserted. Not quite deserted, for in one of them half a dozen bodies were lying. The enemy had unexpectedly retired during the night, and the entire commando was now on the hill, gazing at the plentiful harvest reaped by our Nordenfeldts. Thither I also went.

British ambulance men were busy collecting corpses. It was a mournful sight; it seemed to me as if war really meant nothing else than butchering men like sheep, quietly, methodically, and without any pomp or circumstance.

“A sad sight!” I remarked to the British chaplain.

“They only did their duty,” was his unfeeling reply. Duty! Is it any man's duty to kill and be killed without knowing why? For what did these poor Lancashire lads know or care about the merits of the war?

“What do you think the confounded English have had the cheek to do?” asked a friend. “You know they always keep our wounded as prisoners when they get the chance. Well, this morning their ambulance came here and coolly carted away all their wounded! Louis Botha says they might have asked permission first. I should have turned a Maxim on them!”

We went down to the laager, found the line in order, and wired the news of the victory to Pretoria. I had not been able to get into communication the day before because the chief had taken a hand in the fighting instead of attending to the instrument.

Believing that Warren would make another attempt, this time more to our right, we shifted the office a few miles in that direction and pitched our tent next to a farmhouse, which was being utilised as a hospital.

GLORIOUS WAR

Late that evening I heard someone outside the tent asking where the hospital was. It was my father. We had no idea of meeting each other here, as I had parted from him in Johannesburg before the war began, when he had no intention of going to Natal. He himself had been under the impression that I was still at Ladysmith.

He told me he had come to see my young cousin, Johannes, who had been wounded on Spion Kop the day before. We walked over to the hospital. The wounded lad, a frail boy of fifteen, looked terribly exhausted lying there on the floor, his left arm completely shattered.



“We were two together,” he said, “myself and another boy. We crept closer and closer to one of the small sangars, firing into it as we crept, until there was only one Englishman left alive in it. He called out ‘Water!’ and I ran to give him my flask. When I got close to him he pointed his gun at me and fired. I sprang aside, and the bullet ploughed up my arm. My chum then shot him dead. Our doctor was too busy with the English officers to attend to me, so I fear I shall lose my arm.”



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Poor child! his fear was only too well founded. His arm was amputated, after which he went to his uncle's farm to recuperate. When the British arrived there he would not surrender, but took his gun and went on commando. Three days later he was brought in, shot through the lungs. That is the last I have been able to hear of him.

A few days after the battle of Spion Kop we moved forward and opened another office on our right wing. The British soon after retired from the vicinity, and this wing was withdrawn. The office remained, however, being utilised by scouts and patrols for the transmission of urgent reports.

One day Oberst von Braun called, accompanied by two Boers. I asked him what had become of his lieutenant.

"Ah, poor von B——!" he said. "The fighting on Spion Kop was almost over, and he had just risen and walked forward a few steps, when a chance bullet crashed into his forehead, and he fell a corpse."

This was the same lieutenant who had caused a great sensation in Germany a few years before by killing an unarmed civilian in a moment of provocation. It may seem a just retribution that he should have met with such a tragic fate, but those who knew him in Natal felt nothing but regret for his loss. Oberst von Braun was taken prisoner a few days after, and the British reported that his mind was unhinged. This did not appear improbable to us, for we knew how much he had been affected by the loss of his companion.

I stayed here for three weeks, without much occupation except wasting ammunition on turtle doves and hoping that the next patrol would not be a British instead of a Boer one.

The deserted houses in the neighbourhood had all been visited in turn by both British and Boer patrols, and between the two enormous damage had been wrought. It must be pointed out, however, that the mischief done by our men was in no way authorised—was, in fact, against express orders, whereas the British now burn our houses to the joyful fiddling of the London *Times*, and with a righteous unction eminently national.

A small but remarkably severe engagement took place about this time, in which a portion of Viljoen's men suffered heavily.

This detachment, about forty in number, was guarding a Nordenfeldt stationed in an advanced position on an isolated hill. One afternoon a large body of the enemy suddenly attacked the hill. Ben Viljoen, who, as usual, was on the spot, is not what may be called an excessively pious man, but he rose to the occasion and inspired his little band by asking them if they did not fear God more than the British. Thus encouraged to stand firm, they bravely held the hill till fully half their number were killed. There was no hoisting of the white flag, however, our men at that time generally preferring almost

certain death to surrender. This instance was no exception. Every man got out as best he could, Commandant Viljoen himself racing out with the gun.

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Our cannon now shelled the hill furiously. The British ambulance tried to reach our wounded, but the fire was too hot. This bombardment kept on for two days, when the enemy retired, whereupon we again took possession of the hill. Two or three of our wounded were found to be still alive, but with their wounds in a terrible state of putrefaction. Imagine their sufferings during those two awful days of heat, thirst, and exposure, to say nothing of the shells continually exploding around them. They were brought into camp and ultimately recovered. For all I know, they may be fighting still. This little affair is known to the British as the battle of Vaalkrantz.

When they heard that their son had gone safely through the battle of Spion Kop an old Free State farmer and his wife came down to pay him a visit. The son then accompanied his mother home, the old man taking his place for a few days. One day some artillerymen were engaged in their favourite pastime of burning out unexploded lyddite shells, when one of the shells burst, killing three men. As fate would have it, the old father in question was one of the three.

Another peculiar accident happened on Spion Kop, whilst the rifles of the killed and wounded soldiers were being collected. One of the rifles lay under a corpse. Seizing the weapon by the muzzle, a young Boer attempted to draw it toward him. The charge went off and lodged in his stomach, inflicting a fatal wound. The soldier had been killed in the act of taking aim, and his finger had stiffened round the trigger. The young fellow thus killed by a dead man was the only son of his widowed mother.

PIETERS' HEIGHTS

When the British retreated from Spion Kop it was to move down to Colenso once more. Taking the Boschrand, after a feeble defence, they were enabled to command our positions on the other side, and succeeded in crossing the Tugela unhindered.

Why we surrendered the river so easily and then defended Pieters' Heights so obstinately is explained by the fact that, owing to the British advance on Kimberley, the idea had become general that we should have to give up Ladysmith in any case, and therefore our men were drawn back from the river preparatory to a general retirement. Pieters' Heights were held till everything was ready, and then the retirement was effected without even an attempt at pursuit by the enemy.

When the Pieters' Heights fighting began I was ordered thither. Going through the Klip River, our heavily laden waggon stuck fast. We quickly obtained the loan of another span of mules and hitched them on in front, but the double team only succeeded in breaking the trek-chain. There was nothing for it but to outspan and carry the heavy loads up the steep bank. At this we toiled till midnight. Too tired to catch the mules and haul the waggon out, we went to sleep, leaving that operation for the morning.

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Before we woke, however, another waggon came along. Finding the road blocked by ours, the driver roared at us to clear the way immediately. We were not going to rise so early just to please him, so we answered him that if he was in a hurry he could pull the waggon out himself. This he was obliged to do, in order to get past. We then thanked him, and gently told him that if he had addressed us in a decent manner in the beginning he would have spared himself all his trouble. We meekly added the hope that this little lesson would not be lost upon his wayward mind. His remarks cannot be reproduced here, but it was plain that he felt very much as little States do sometimes when taken in hand by one of the great Powers and subjected to a little kind cruelty.

After reloading the waggon we went on, and reached Pieters in due course. The first thing that drew my attention was the sight of one of my young colleagues standing under the verandah of the telegraph office, his face a picture of grief. His father had been killed that morning.

Going a few miles further, I took charge of the telegraph office in Lukas Meyer's laager. Meyer, a grand-looking man, formerly possessed much influence, being at one time President of the New Republic, a State founded by himself in a tract of country granted him and his followers by a Kafir chief for assistance rendered during an intertribal war. This small republic, soon incorporated with the Transvaal, was thenceforth represented in the First Volksraad by its former president, Louis Botha becoming its member for the Second Chamber. At the battle of Dundee Botha distinguished himself. Meyer did not. Then the former gained fresh laurels at Colenso, and this finally gave him the precedence over Meyer, General Joubert himself, on his death-bed, expressly asking that Botha should be appointed his successor. Meyer, then, was in charge of this laager, Botha had command of the whole line, and Commandant General Joubert was at headquarters near Ladysmith.

Daily the British regiments stormed, and daily they melted away before the fire of our men. The stench arising from the unburied corpses soon made the whole hill reek. The British asked for an armistice to bury their dead, and this was granted by the commandant to whom the request was made. When Botha heard of this he at once informed the enemy that the matter had been arranged without his knowledge, and that he could grant no armistice. I think this is the only case on record where an armistice has ever been refused by us, although armistices were asked for many times by the British.

The combatants, who during the interval had been chatting together most amicably, were quickly recalled to their respective positions, and the slaughter recommenced, continuing until one fine afternoon the enemy took the Krugersdorp commando's position, thus rendering our whole line untenable. A council of war was immediately called, to take place that evening, as it was impossible for our officers to leave the shelter of their trenches during daylight.



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Soon after sunset the various officers began to arrive. First came riding into camp, alone and unnoticed in the darkness, that incomprehensible man, Schalk Burger, now Acting President. He entered the tent moodily, nodded to us, and squatted down in the corner, absorbed in thought. My colleague and I were just making a meal of coffee and biscuit. We expressed our regret that we had no chair to offer him, asking him to accept a cup of coffee instead. This he did, in silence. Silence was his strong point.

Masterful Lukas Meyer next entered, and after him came the pride of the army, Louis Botha, soldier and gentleman, followed by several officers. A general council of war was now held, General Joubert being consulted by telegraph throughout the discussion. There was no sleep that night for the telegraphists who had to transmit the queries and replies to and from headquarters.

When the discussion was at its height, information was received that the Johannesburg laager was surrounded by the enemy. This laager now constituted our right wing. This intelligence was soon contradicted, but not before it had exercised a considerable influence upon the decision arrived at, which was to abandon Ladysmith. The minutes of this council of war, could they be published, would probably make most interesting reading, and be of great value to the impartial historian.

At two in the morning we inspanned; at sunrise we were over Klipriver and trekking past Ladysmith.

The road was one long string of waggons, each straggling on at the pleasure of its owner. Horses, thanks to the criminal neglect of those responsible, were already becoming scarce, and groups of men, many of them wounded, sadly stumbled along, carrying their unwieldy bundles of blankets, their little kettles, their knapsack, rifle and bandolier. Some trudged along with a saddle slung over the back, hoping to loot a mount by the wayside.

We did not travel far that day, but the next the march became more rapid, every vehicle putting its best wheel foremost. A heavy rain fell as Elandsplaagte was reached, adding to the general depression. Whilst the majority kept to the road, those who had no other means of conveyance entrained here for Glencoe. The commissariat stores were being hastily cleared out, what could not be loaded being set alight. The last train that left that evening carried the dynamiters, who destroyed the bridges after passing over them.

After a weary ride in the open trucks, seated on sacks of bread, a drizzling rain soaking down upon us, we reached Glencoe. The platform and station buildings were crowded with the sleeping forms of the weary burghers, who, as yet unused to retreating, were somewhat mixed in more senses than one. Louis Botha was still near Ladysmith with the rearguard, most of the other chiefs were coming by road, and there was no one on the spot to back up General Joubert in his attempts to reorganise the confused and

ever-growing mass of undisciplined men. The retreat, in fact, threatened to degenerate into a reckless flight.



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GLENCOE

President Kruger had been informed A of the chaotic state of affairs, and arrived at Glencoe early the next morning. The burghers were called together, and the President, leaning out of the window of his railway carriage, asked them to join him in singing a psalm. He then offered up a fervent prayer for guidance, after which he addressed the burghers, reproaching them for their want of confidence in an all-powerful Providence, and exhorting them to take courage afresh and continue the struggle for the sake of their posterity, which one day would judge their acts.

“Whither would you flee?” he asked us. “The enemy will pursue you, and tear you from the arms of your wives. The man who surrenders takes the first step into exile. Brothers! Stand firm, and you will not be forsaken!”

As the father of his people spoke, the doubts and fears that had filled the breasts of the multitude disappeared. Forgotten were the days and weeks of hunger, heat, and thirst; forgotten the ghastly shrapnel showers, the soul-crushing crash of the awful lyddite shell, the unnerving possibility of sudden death that for months had darkly loomed across their lives, and every man felt the glorious fires of patriotism rekindle in his bosom.

Then General Joubert spoke.

“If I be the stumbling-block in the way of our success, then I pray God to remove me,” was the humble prayer of the warrior grown grey in wars, who now found himself too feeble to direct the forces with his wonted vigour. He then reminded us of brave deeds done in the past, and expressed his confidence in the future, provided we did not lose heart.

When the General had finished, he sent officers round to marshal the men into some sort of order. It was wonderful to see the change in the spirit of the burghers. Where but a moment before had been disheartened mutterings and sulky looks were now smiling faces and cheerful conversation. With alacrity the men came forward, gave their names, and that of their respective commandoes, and took in the positions assigned them. The danger was past. Even the news of Cronje's surrender, which was soon after made public, did not have more than a transient effect. The anxiety as to his fate had been so keen that even to know the worst was a relief.

For two disquieting days, however, nothing was heard of the rearguard. To our relief it turned up on the third day. Several weeks of quiet followed, the British resting after their giant efforts, whilst we prepared to stem their further advance when it should take place. During this period of inaction on the part of the enemy I was sent down into Zululand, and stationed at a small spot named Nqutu, near Isandhlwana, Rorke's Drift,

Blood River, and other scenes of stirring battles fought in former days. At Rorke's Drift could be seen, in good repair, the graves of the gallant men who fell in defending the passage through the river against the Zulus after the British disaster at Isandhlwana.



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While at Nqutu we received news of the fall of Bloemfontein and the death of General Joubert, as well as of De Wet's victory at Sanna's Post, the latter the only bright gleam that relieved the daily darkening horizon of our future.

I now obtained a few days' leave of absence. My substitute left Glencoe early in the morning, accompanied by a mule waggon. The trolley duly arrived at sundown, but the substitute was absent. It appeared he had taken a short cut, as he thought, and had not been seen since. Bethune's mounted infantry was hanging about the neighbourhood, and we feared he might have been raked in. At midnight, however, he made his appearance, wet to the skin, after wandering to and fro in the chilly mist for hours. I immediately handed the books and cash over to him, and went to bed till four o'clock, when I saddled my horse and started for Glencoe, on leave and on my way home. Carefully nursing my mount, I reached Dundee at noon. After a short rest we went on, and reached Glencoe at one o'clock, none the worse for the morning's ride of almost fifty miles.

Here I learnt that a plan was afoot to attack the British camp at Elandslaagte, which lay quite open and unprotected, as if it were part of an Earl's Court exhibition. When I left by train next morning our guns were already in action.

Not being pushed home, however, the attack did not amount to much, except for its moral effect upon our men. It also gave the enemy the idea of finding a decent position for his camp.

Travelling with me in the train were several men on their way to the Free State, where our forces were being hard pressed. Before leaving I had also sent in a request asking to be transferred thither, as Natal was becoming really too dull.

At first sight Johannesburg did not seem much altered, but on driving through the deserted streets, all the shops barricaded, and tramway idle, the difference between the bustling city of old and this silent shadow of its former self was only too evident.

Another difference that thrust itself upon the observation was the alteration which had lately taken place in the sentiments of the remaining Uitlander inhabitants. These, upon their lavish protestations of friendship and fidelity, had been allowed to remain during the war. In our triumphs their sympathy was ever with us, but when Cronje was captured, Ladysmith relieved, and Bloemfontein abandoned, their long-latent loyalty to the British Empire became too fervent to be restrained within the bounds of decency. "Remnants" of red, white and blue were ostentatiously sewn into a distant resemblance of the British flag; the parlour piano once more did its often unsatisfactory best with the British anthem; mamma's darling received strict injunctions not to play with that horrid little Dutch boy next door; and papa, jingling the sovereigns he had received in his latest deal with the Government, prepared to pat Lord Roberts on the back when he should enter the town.

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But what can one say of those “oprechte[A] Afrikaners” who followed the same procedure? The Smits who became Smith, the Louw that suddenly shrank into Lowe (could he sink lower?), the Jansen transformed into Johnson, and the Volschenk merged into Foolskunk? What did John Bull think of all these precious acquisitions to his family?

In striking contrast was the bearing of some of the numerous British-born officials, British-born and with British sympathies, who nevertheless faithfully performed their arduous duties until their services were no longer needed, and then entered the new regime with conscience clear and not without some degree of regret for the old. Loyal to the old, they could be loyal to the new. That several of the British-born officials had played the despicable part of spy is undoubted, but their villainy served but as a foil to show more clearly the merits of those who remained honest men.

Before my leave had expired I returned to Natal, weary of miserable Johannesburg, and little thinking that I should not see my home again for years. Upon reaching Glencoe I found a telegram had just arrived, granting my request to be sent to the Free State. An hour later I was on my way, and the following evening the train landed me at Winburg, where a construction party was awaiting my arrival.

FOOTNOTES:

[Footnote A: *Oprechte* = thorough.]

THE FREE STATE

Menschvretersberg (Cannibal Mountain), near Thabanchu, was at this time the site of the Boer headquarters, and it was our duty to establish telegraphic communication between this point and Winburg, a distance of about forty miles.

After consideration, the inspector decided that it would take too long to lay a cable.

Wire fences had already been utilised in America for short-distance telephonic communication, and this system had already been tried at Van Reenenspas by ingenious young Bland, of the Free State telegraphs, employing, however, the vibrator instead of the telephone. We determined to follow his example.

According to the law of the land, every Free State farm has to be fenced. Blocks of sandstone, about four feet high and twelve inches square, are generally used for fencing uprights. Here, then, were lines ready made, and covering the country in every direction like network.



The only thing necessary to isolate the wire was to walk along the fence, cut the cross-bindings connecting the upper wire with the lower ones, lay a cable under the gates, and there you were. This did not take long, and soon messages were gaily buzzing to and fro over the fence. There was naturally a great loss of electricity, but not enough to prevent the working of the sensitive little vibrator.

As with the cable in Natal, however, there were frequent interruptions. A herd of cattle would knock a few poles over, a burgher hurrying across country would simply cut a passage through the fence, or a farmer in passing through a gate would notice the cable, dig it up, and take it along, swearing it must be dynamite, and that the English were trying to explode the Free State with it.



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All this necessitated constant repairing, but on the whole the system proved fairly satisfactory, allowing the Government in Kroonstad to keep in constant touch with the fighting line.

In Natal everything was very quiet; here, on the contrary, the British were pushing forward vigorously. General Louis Botha came down from Glencoe to aid De Wet, leaving his brother Christian to oppose bulldog Buller, or "Red Bull," as we called him.

In spite of Louis' presence the enemy continued to gain ground, and it was not long before Brandfort had to be given up. The enemy next took Thabanchu, and it became clear that our positions at Menschvretersberg could not be held much longer. President Steyn himself visited the positions, cheering and encouraging the men, but the strain of attempting to stem the British advance could no longer be sustained. Within a few days we received orders to retire to Lindley.

Retire! But how? We were three, our horses two, our luggage heavy. By a stroke of luck we managed to hire a cart and two. Hitching our horses on in front, we had a team of four, and the difficulty was solved.

When driving away from the spot where, in the midst of war's alarms, I had yet spent some of the happiest hours of my life, I could not help looking back long and earnestly at the beautiful homestead, and wondering what fate held in store for it and its kind-hearted owner, who, always against the war, and weary of sacrifices he deemed useless, had determined to remain behind and surrender to the enemy. Like many of our best and most progressive men, he had become disgusted with the want of discipline in the ranks, and the painful lack of unanimity amongst the leaders. Sincere in his convictions, I do not think he could be blamed for acting up to them. Those who have rightly earned the contempt and hatred of every true Afrikander are those Boers who, not content with deserting, have gone yet further, and attempted to assist the enemy that they were fighting against only the day before. Even their new masters must surely despise such willing slaves!

Absorbed in these reflections, I yet had time to notice the approach, from the opposite direction, of a Cape cart drawn by six bays.

As the two carts passed each other the team of bays was stopped by a vigorous hand, and President Steyn addressed us, force and determination stamping every word and gesture.

"Good morning! Why are you leaving already? I want communication with Kroonstad!"

"Good morning, President. We had orders to leave at once, but there is an operator in the office still; he will remain till the last moment."

“Very well; good-bye!” And off he went, the dust clinging to his long brown beard.

We drove on, our four horses trotting merrily along. We were five in the vehicle, however, including the driver and his little boy, and presently the weight began to tell. After the first halt one of the leaders failed.



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“He won’t make it much further,” said the inspector. “Better turn him loose and see what can be done with three.”

“I have a better plan,” said our other companion. Stopping the cart, he unharnessed the animal, passed the rope through its mouth, vaulted on its back, and rode to a farmhouse some distance away. Presently he returned, bringing another horse, which he had obtained in exchange for our exhausted animal.

Thus reinforced, we pushed on, arriving at Senekal at ten that night. The only hotel was crowded; we were glad to sleep on the parlour floor. After breakfast the next morning we continued our journey, passing group after group of burghers on their way home.

It was truly painful to see these poor fellows struggling along, their horses scarce able to walk and themselves in a condition not much better. At noon we outspanned at some water-pools, where several of these groups were also resting. We entered into conversation with them, and they told us that they had retired earlier than the others on account of the weakness of their animals; that one of their number had been taken ill, and could ride no further, even if his horse could carry him, which was doubtful.

We spoke to the sick man, who was lying in the shade of a tree. He was quite a youth, and evidently of a better stamp than his companions.

“If only I could reach a certain farm about five miles further on,” he sighed, “I think I should manage.”

“Take my seat,” said I, “and I’ll ride your nag.”

“I must tell you,” he objected, “that the poor beast is quite exhausted. It would take hours to get him there.”

“Never mind, I’ll start now, and you can follow on with the cart when our horses have had a feed.”

Our business admitted of no retard, so I meant to get a good start in order not to delay my companions.

I mounted the nag and shouted “Get up!”

He stumbled forward a few steps and stood stock still. I pricked him with the spurs, he moved on a little further and halted again. By dint of spurring, striking, and shouting, he at last broke into a slow trot, wearily dragging his hoofs, but before long he stopped once more.

I dismounted and tried to lead him, but he would not budge. Then I tried driving him on ahead, but as soon as I got behind him he turned out of the road, first to the right, then



to the left. Of all heart-breaking experiences this was the worst. I could not leave the animal to die by the wayside; the farm was only a few miles further on, where he would find water, food, and rest. I mounted again, shouted, cracked my sjambok—blows he could no longer feel—flourished my arms, jerked my body up and down in the saddle, and finally got him into a walk—but such a walk! slow, mechanical, every step an effort.

When we finally reached the farmhouse I sprang down and quickly threw the saddle off. No sooner did the faithful animal feel itself released from its service than it sank to the ground, utterly exhausted. I myself was not much better off, after my exertions in the blazing sun. If you are fond of horses, never try to repeat my experiment. Straining the last ounce out of your mount is too much like mule-driving, and that is the most soul-killing occupation on earth, as any Afrikaner can testify.



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The cart was waiting for me here. We bade adieu to the sick man, and drove on. Towards sunset we overtook a man struggling along on foot, carrying a heavy saddle on his head. He signalled to us to stop, and came panting up to the side of the cart.

“My horse died this morning,” he said, “and I’ve been carrying this saddle all day. Can’t you load it up for me as far as Lindley?”

The man looked so thoroughly done up that I felt sorry for him. Besides, I wanted to stretch my legs a bit, so I said that he could take my seat, and I started off on foot while they were strapping fast the saddle. The exercise was so agreeable in the fresh evening air that I continued it, and kept ahead of the cart until we reached Lindley. We went to the hotel, had a good dinner, and then to bed.

LINDLEY TO HEILBRON

Lindley and Heilbron were each in telegraphic communication with all the other towns still in our possession, and consequently also with each other; but no telegraph line ran between the two. A message from one to the other had to travel *via* Johannesburg and Kroonstad, involving a delay of several hours. It was our task to make good this missing link. Haste was required, for the British were already marching on Kroonstad, whence the Government was preparing to retire, ostensibly to Lindley, but in reality to Heilbron.

Unfortunately the material wherewith the new line was to be built had not yet arrived from the Transvaal. The inspector decided not to wait, but to build the line without it.

“Build a line without material? Impossible,” you say. Not at all. You forget the fences; we did not.

Our first care was to obtain a list of those farms along the road whose fences joined. This did not take many hours. Being joined here by a lineman, who had charge of half a dozen natives and a waggon, we loaded our luggage on the latter, as well as a sack or two of meal—the only foodstuff we could obtain, and began work, each armed with a spanner and a couple of iron tent-pegs.

The fences were in bad repair, many of the stone poles having fallen down and the wires being broken and tangled every few hundred yards. Lifting the heavy stones and repairing and untangling the barbed wire was unaccustomed work, and soon our hands were covered with cuts and bruises. The distance by road between the two points is only about forty miles, but owing to the fences running at all angles to each other we had about seventy miles to cover. This it took us a week to do, rising early, working all through the day, and continuing in the moonlight at night. By buying a couple of sheep to supplement the bags of meal, and drinking a gall-like imitation coffee brewed from

barley, we managed to fare well enough, and better than thousands of others are faring to-day.



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Our communication with the starting-point continued fairly good until we came within six miles of Heilbron, when it suddenly failed. I went back along the line, and eventually found the fault. After having repaired it and given my pony an hour's rest, I took a short cut for Heilbron, and arrived there at ten that night, only to find that during the time occupied by my return ride the wire had again stopped working. Having been in the saddle since six in the morning, I could do no more that night, although the Government, now installed here, was anxiously awaiting the resumption of communication. Early the next morning I started back. I considered it best to start testing from the middle of the line, and therefore went by road instead of following the fence. A few miles out of town I met De Wet's force, which was just retreating from Ventersburg. The men and animals were weary and dusty, but there was no depression noticeable; hope seemed to spring up afresh after every defeat, and those who thought of the result at all were confident that, as the song of the camp had it, "No Englishman shall ever cross the Vaal."

And now I shall try and draw you a picture of what I saw next. It was a scene painfully humiliating for a Boer; what it was for an Englishman I leave you to judge.

Coming along in the dusty road was a little drove of cattle and horses, about twenty in all, shaggy animals, and of all sizes, evidently the entire stock of some small farmer. Mounted astride on ponies, driving the sorry herd, their faces sunburnt, their hair all in a tangle, and their air the most dejected possible, were two young girls of about fifteen and seventeen years. Following them was a rickety old waggon. Under the hood sat an aged man and his wife, the parents of the two girls. Not a soul to help these poor creatures in their wild flight. They did not even know whither they were fleeing—anywhere to keep out of the hands of the enemy. Slowly the little caravan passed out of sight. Who can tell what regrets for the past were felt by the aged couple?—what hopes for the future by the helpless lasses?

When I reached the intermediate station I found that the fault lay on the Lindley side. Towards Lindley I rode, testing the line frequently, but the sun went down and I was still testing. It grew too dark to see the wire distinctly, so I made for a farmhouse near by to seek shelter for the night. I knocked at the door, whereupon the light within was immediately extinguished. A minute or so after a native servant came round from the back. I gave him my horse to take to the stable, and waited for the door to be opened. Presently the Kafir returned and asked me to follow him to a side door, which he opened for me. I stepped inside, and found myself in the presence of about a dozen Boers, all armed, and all gazing at me as if they had paid for the privilege. There was something tense in the situation.

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I broke the ice by asking them if they took me for a ghost. As soon as they heard me speak in Dutch the fixed stare gave way to a general grin. Then they explained, with a sigh of relief, that the zealous servant had told them with bated breath that I was a bold, bad Englishman, whereupon they had made the above preparations for receiving me. I did not fail to curse the native's stupidity, after which we sat down to a plentiful dinner. When this was over the mistress of the house made us a large bed on the floor, and soon my strange bedfellows and myself were slumbering like a lot of little cherubs.

Leaving early the next morning, I followed the line without any success until within four miles of Lindley. Then I noticed a long column of vehicles and cavalry trekking over the hill to my right and towards the town. Presently an old Boer came driving by.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked, pointing to the column.

"No."

"English."

I observed the column attentively. Yes, he was right. The mystery was explained. Naturally enough we could not get into communication with the town when it was already occupied by the enemy. The British had heard that the Government was in Lindley, and had therefore made this sudden march, whilst we believed them to be still in Kroonstad. It was most important that the President should know the news immediately. I at once attached the vibrator to the line and called up Heilbron.

"Here Heilbron."

"Here P. The English are in Lindley."

"What!"

"The English are in Lindley."

"Impossible."

"Please tell the President what I say."

Silence. Presently the reply came—

"Here Postmaster-General. The President says impossible. Enemy still in Kroonstad."

"Not much! Here they are, before my eyes. Please believe that there is no mistake."

"Wait a bit." Then, "Where is Piet De Wet?"



“Probably cut off, and on the other side of the town.”

“Can you remain there for a while?”

“Yes.”

After a while, “You may return now.”

“Had I not better remain and watch their movements?”

“Yes, do so.”

I remained in the neighbourhood that night and the next morning, but the enemy lay quiet in Lindley, so I returned to Heilbron.

When I reported myself to the Postmaster-General, he said—

“The President wants to see you.”

I thought I was going to get into a scrape for not having been able to report anything further. However, I followed the Chief to a small building a few doors lower down the street.

Entering, we found ourselves in a fairly roomy office, where two or three gentlemen were engaged in an earnest discussion. After being introduced to them I was taken into an inner office. Seated at a table, writing, was President Steyn.



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Although attired in plain black, like any other lawyer, there was a dignity in his bearing, and a force of character in his manner, that could not fail to make an impression on my mind, young as I was.

“Well,” he said, calling me by name, “where do you come from?”

My embarrassment was so great, in spite of the friendly smile that accompanied these words, that I could only stammer—

“From Winburg, President,” alluding to the last time I had seen him.

“No, no! I mean to-day.”

“Oh, from Lindley. But I could not find out much more. Some think their next move will be towards Bethlehem, others think they are coming on here.”

“Ah! Well, I know now that your information was correct, and I am satisfied with your work. I hope you will continue to be so successful. Now, go out there again, see what they are doing, and report to me.”

“Thank you, President,” was all I could say, as he shook my hand, and I retired, highly gratified, as you may imagine.

VELD INCIDENTS

My first thought was that my pony would have to be shod before I could expect him to carry me any further. I found Judge Hertzog, then Chief of Commissariat, in the street, a young man still, of medium height, whose clear brow and incisive speech marked him out from amongst the crowd of farmers, policemen, and idlers that constantly surrounded him with requests for this, that, or the other lacking article or animal.

He gave me an order to have my pony shod before all the others, a very important stipulation, for the ambulance horses had been waiting to be shod for a week. He added that he would supply us with other horses, but there were none to be bought. I told him I knew of a farmer who had a horse for sale at eighty pounds.

“Yes, he asks us eighty, and presently the enemy will come along and take it for nothing,” replied Hertzog.

I went to the blacksmith and handed him the order.

“Yes, everybody wants to be first,” said that worthy; “but first come first served, says I.”

“But this is for special service.”



“Can’t help that.”

“Do you mean to disobey the orders of the Government?”

“Oh, no, not I! But I have no nails; may have some in a day or two.”

“Whose are those you are using now?”

“They belong to the despatch riders’ corps.”

I at once sought out the captain of the corps and persuaded him to count me out thirty nails. I then returned to the smith and held a candle for him whilst he shoed my horse. When I led the animal away I found that it was lame.

“That’s nothing,” said the smith. “It will soon pass.”

“Oh, no. Just pull that shoe off and put it on again.”

This he did, and then the lameness disappeared. I took the animal to the stable, filled the crib with fodder, overhauled the vibrator, packed my saddle-bags, and went to bed.



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Early the next morning I started, making straight for the intermediate station.

After three hours' riding I met a mounted policeman riding at full speed, or the best imitation of it that his mount could produce. "The English are coming!" was all he uttered as he passed by. When I reached the farmhouse I heard shots falling just beyond the hill. The womenfolk on the farm were in a pitiful state of distress. They had ornamented the roof of the house with a white flag, following the custom then prevailing in those parts threatened by the enemy.

"They've been fighting all the morning," they said, wiping their eyes, "and now our men are retreating. Whatever will become of us?"

I stabled my horse, walked to the fence, attached the vibrator, and called up Heilbron. No reply. The line was down again!

This discovery put me into a pretty bad temper. Presently about a dozen Boers came galloping along from the fighting line. On seeing me, the leader reined in and shouted—

"What the devil is this? What are you doing here?" He took me for an Englishman, and thought this a good opportunity to gain distinction. Thoroughly roused by his bullying tone, I retorted—

"And who the devil are you? And where the devil are you running away to in such a hurry?"

Taken aback, he faltered—

"Oh, I have orders from my commandant, which I must keep secret."

"Yes, I know your kind of orders. Get away, and don't interfere with men who are doing their duty." The band thereupon cleared off. Then a despatch rider came dashing up, his splendid black entire specked with foam.

"I have an urgent despatch for the Government," he said, after we had made ourselves known to each other, "but my mount is about done up after all the riding about I have done away on our left."

"Give it me," I said; "I'll repair the line and send it through."

He handed me the message, and we walked over to the farmhouse. Whilst we were drinking a cup of coffee crowds of burghers rode past in retreat. Nearly every one stopped and asked for a glass of milk, a loaf of bread, or a few eggs. Their wants were supplied as far as possible. In every case money was offered, and in every case it was refused.



With the despatch in my pocket I could not delay, so I took my nag and rode back along the fence. The very first test I made I found the line in order again. I transmitted the despatch, adding that there was nothing to stop the enemy from taking Heilbron that night. This news caused some consternation, as may be imagined, and the Government left Heilbron immediately.

When I had finished I saw coming towards me a young Free Stater, who had been sent out from Heilbron to remove the fault, which he had succeeded in doing.

“Let’s go back to the farmhouse after sunset,” I said, “and see if the British are there already.”



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“Right!”

We waited till dark, and then carefully rode to the farm, making as little noise as possible. When near the house we dismounted, cautiously approached, and peered through a window. Everything was quiet. We knocked. The housewife opened the door, pale and agitated.

“They have not been here yet?” I asked.

“No, but we expect them every minute.”

We brought our horses into the yard, so as to be at hand, and entered the house.

“Your husband is not back yet?”

“No, but they say he is safe.”

The door opened noiselessly, and the man himself stood before us. He had also taken a look through the window before entering. He placed his gun in a corner, kissed his wife and children, and shook hands with us.

“We’ve had a hard day;” he said, “let’s go in to supper.”

After the meal, even more silent than is habitual amongst us, where talking at table is almost as bad form as making a joke with a minister would be in Sloper’s Scotland, our host told us that the English had camped on the spot where they had fought, and that he did not think they would march till daylight. It was best for us to sleep there that night, and leave with him before dawn.

We agreed.

“Father, can I go too?” asked his son, aged thirteen.

“No, my boy, you must stay and help mother to manage the farm. It will be a long while ere father returns.”

“Oh, father! I’m too old to stay in the house, like an old woman. Besides, I’m afraid they will make me prisoner.”

“Do you think they catch children like him?” his mother asked anxiously.

“No, I don’t think they are so cruel,” I replied; “but one can never tell.”

“Well, they won’t get the chance,” said the plucky little fellow. “As soon as I see them coming, I shall take my mare and go and hide in the hills.”



The mother did not say anything. She bore up bravely, as our women ever do, Heaven bless them! Was it not but some ten miles from this very spot that years before a handful of our pioneers had gained the victory at Vecht Kop, when the women loaded the guns and handed them to the men as the latter unflinchingly beat back the tremendous horde of maddened blacks that flung themselves against the hastily drawn circle of waggons. Does not one old lady still bear the scars of the nineteen stabs she received on that day? Our women are women indeed, and worthy mothers of the race that yet shall people all Africa and rule itself.

Do not think I am flying too high. The average Boer family numbers ten children. Boys are in the majority. If at present we have thirty thousand warriors (I am not counting the wasters), it follows that in two generations we shall have three hundred thousand. Taking the proportion then, as now, of ten to one, Britain will have to employ against us in 1940 no less than three million men! And when that time comes, the children of to-day will have the recollection of the concentration camps and of a few other little trifles to strengthen their backbone.



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The concentration camps! Fit subject for Dante, who in the *Divina Comedia* portrays as no other can the maddened heart of a father doomed to see his children waste away before his very eyes. There are many relentless Ugolins among the Boers to-day.

I firmly believe that a steady process of infanticide was never intended to be the *raison d'être* of these camps; no civilised nation could deliberately sanction a system cemented with the bones and blood of innocent babes. And the British are a civilised nation.

No, the fault does not lie in the system itself, but in its application. It is a humane idea carried out inhumanely, so inhumanely that when the Black Hole of Calcutta is forgotten Englishmen will still hang their heads for shame at the mention of concentration.

What the Levite concubine's outraged flesh was to Israel the infant mortality is to the Afrikanders of the Cape and Natal, who, a hundred thousand strong, may at any moment lose their self-control and throw in their lot with their brethren. Then Britain will tear the bandage from her eyes, but it will be too late.

Let me remind Canon Knox-Little, and those other divines who can complacently view the children's Golgotha, of the words of their Master: "*But whoso shall offend one of these little ones, it were better that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea.*"

But to return. After the usual reading of the Gospel, we retired for the night. Our sleep, however, was none too secure. At about two o'clock the dogs set up a terrible howling. My heart beat loudly. We were in for it now! But no, it was only the farmer's son, who came to tell us to get ready.

We rose at once. Our host said a long good-bye to his wife and children, and we rode away in the misty night, a keen wind cutting through flesh and bone.

After a very long hour we reached the house of our guide's brother.

We got in without awakening the inmates, and entered a small bedroom, where two young men were lying asleep. They woke on hearing us move about, and struck a match.

"Good morning," I said; "rather early, isn't it?"

"Yes," they replied, waiting for me to explain. I kept quiet, however, and watched the expression on their faces gradually change from surprise to uneasiness, and from uneasiness to alarm. Then I briefly explained the situation to the young men, after which we went to sleep in our chairs till daybreak, when the servant entered with the morning coffee.

Our guide took us into the parlour and introduced us to his sister-in-law. He then left to rejoin his commando.



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We stayed to breakfast, and then also left, making for Heilbron, but not feeling quite sure as to whether we should reach it before the enemy. After travelling a couple of hours we observed half a dozen horsemen appear against the skyline on our left. From the way they were spread out we judged them to be English. To make sure we rode a little nearer. On coming round one of the numerous undulating *bulten*, we saw three horsemen making for us at full speed. We at once wheeled round and took up a position behind some rocks. When the horsemen came closer we found that they were Boers. They told us, however, that the men first observed by us were really British, which accounted for their haste, and that the whole column was following just behind.

Now that we had located the enemy we felt more at ease. The scouts were riding near the road along which the wire ran, about seven miles from the town. Cutting across in plain sight of the enemy, we fixed the vibrator to the fence, and called up Heilbron. We heard the instruments working in the office, but got no reply to our hurried call. The scouts were about fifteen hundred yards away. We continued calling; they continued approaching, carefully inspecting every foot of ground before them. It seemed strange to us that the scouts of a column on the march should search for the enemy within five hundred yards only of the main body. But perhaps that is what they teach at Sandhurst. Presently the head of the column came in sight from behind the rise. The scouts were now within eight hundred yards. We quietly mounted our horses and rode away. They gave no sign of having observed our movements. When some distance away, we looked back and saw that the whole column had halted, about seven thousand men.

We reached Heilbron to find the place practically deserted. Wishing to see the enemy enter the town, we delayed our departure. Some hours passed, and nothing happened to denote the proximity of the British. We feared that they might be surrounding the town before entering it, so we left for Frankfort, following the road taken by the President the night before.

TAPPING THE WIRES

We had gone about a mile, when suddenly a score of horsemen made their appearance on top of the rise before us. Not knowing whether they were friends or foes, we swerved away to the left, regaining the road by a detour. After sunset we saw a small bonfire blaze forth about three miles away in the direction we were going. We hardly knew what to make of such an unusual sight. The night was a fairly dark one, but we pushed on rapidly. In the middle of a hard canter my horse suddenly struck his forefeet against some obstacle, and came crashing down upon his head. It was an anxious moment for me. When we had disentangled ourselves I hastened to feel the pony's knees, and found to my joy that they were but little damaged. Whilst still laughing over this mishap, we heard voices to our right. We listened for a moment. First came the question *in English*—



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“Where are they?”

Then the reply—

“Don’t know where they are now.”

This was enough for us, and we sped forth as silently and as fast as possible.

On approaching the bonfire we heard more voices—Dutch this time. We rode up to the group standing round the fire. Several friends came forward to greet us, and we became aware that this was the President’s party—about thirty men in all.

“Where are your sentries?” I asked.

“Just going out now.”

“Who is in charge?”

“The President’s secretary.”

Calling the latter aside, I said—

“I don’t wish to cause an alarm, but on coming along about a mile from here we heard men calling to each other in English. At one o’clock the British were only fifteen miles from here; your bonfire may have drawn a patrol hither.”

“What is it? Who has arrived?” asked Steyn, coming out of his tent. We gave him all the information we had gained. He immediately ordered all lights to be extinguished, and sent the guard to find out what the voices meant. All were relieved when it turned out to have been merely a couple of the President’s bodyguard searching for their horses.

Early the next morning a couple of deserters were brought in. They had been caught trying to slip past in the night. One said he had a sick son at home, and was only going to see him, perhaps for the last time. The other was going home to fetch better horses, and so forth. They were so unfortunate as to call upon the Deity to testify to the truth of their assertions. This roused Steyn’s ire.

“How dare you be guilty of such sacrilege?” he cried. “It is this cursed habit of yours of using God’s name upon every trivial occasion that makes our enemies think us a nation of hypocrites! Back to your commandoes at once!”

The men slunk away. We enjoyed their discomfiture in a measure, for, with all reverence for true religion, it must be confessed that many of these gentry thought



psalm-singing all that was required of them, and did not hesitate to leave their less “elect” brethren to bear the brunt of the fighting.

After breakfast I walked down to the telegraph line connecting Heilbron and Frankfort, which ran past this point. Taking about ten yards of “cable” wire, I cleaned about a foot of it in the middle, tied one end to my spanner, and threw the latter over the line. The swing carried it over a second time, the two ends hanging just above the ground. Attaching one end to the instrument, I heard the English telegraphist in Heilbron calling up Kroonstadt, and the Boer telegraphist in Frankfort working to Reitz.

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I immediately climbed the pole and cut the Frankfort side of the line. Then I took another piece of cable, and connected the earth terminal of the vibrator with the telegraph pole. The British signals now came through beautifully clear. The first message that passed was one from General Hamilton to Lord Roberts, announcing his arrival at Heilbron, the details of the two engagements fought during the march, the number of killed and wounded, and the state of his force—"often hungry, but cheerful." Then followed some others of lesser importance. The President's party were just driving away. I left my assistant with the vibrator, ran across to the road, and handed His Honour the messages. He smiled as he read the report and appeared highly gratified. After a few words of encouragement to me he drove on, and I returned to the line. The signals were now so weak, however, that nothing could be distinguished.

We saddled our horses and rode towards Heilbron, intending to try again closer to the town. We had not gone far before the captain of the despatch riders and one of his men overtook us. They had been ordered by the President to place themselves at my disposition. Four men would have attracted too much attention, however, and I persuaded them to return. We two rode on until almost on top of the hill overlooking Heilbron, when we dismounted. Drawing the horses behind a low stone wall, we attached the instrument to the line. I listened. There were no fewer than five different vibrators calling each other, some strong and clear, others sounding weak and far, like "horns of Elfland faintly blowing." Presently the disputing signals died away, and one musical note alone took up the strain.

Never was lover more absorbed in the thrilling sound of his divinity's voice than I in the notes of that vibrator, seemingly wailing up from the bowels of the earth.

Nor was my attention unrewarded.

"From Chief of Staff, Honingspruit," came the words, "to General Hamilton, Heilbron." Then followed orders. How Hamilton was to march from Heilbron; how Broadwood was to move from Ventersburg, the entire plan of campaign for the next few weeks! A mass of information to gladden the heart of our steadfast chief. "Hurrah!" we whispered to each other, as I carefully put the precious message in a safe place.

Then some harsh, grating sounds were heard in the microphone. The wires were evidently being overhauled in Heilbron. Complete silence followed. Hearing a couple of shots fired on our left, we removed all traces of our work and rode back to our starting-point, well satisfied with the valuable information we had so fortunately obtained. I at once sent my assistant after the President with the despatch. Fearing that the enemy might send a patrol here during the night, I left for Frankfort, and arrived there at midnight. Before leaving, however, I had instructed my assistant to join up the line where I had cut it, if upon his return the next morning he should find the place still free from the enemy.



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I MEET DE WET

The little village of Frankfort was wrapped in slumbering darkness when I entered it. Cold and hungry after the five hours' journey, I did not scruple to knock up the Postmaster. With an instinct of good-fellowship that did him credit, he at once made me welcome; breaking up a couple of empty boxes, we made a rattling fire, and soon big gulps of cocoa were chasing the last few shivers from my wearied frame.

My last thought as I wrapped my blanket round me and stretched myself out on the floor was of the despatch I had sent after the President. Suppose my messenger lost the document or was captured! But I would soon know, for if I found the line joined through at eight o'clock, according to my orders, it would be a proof that he had returned and found the coast clear.

The little office was crowded with busy clerks when I opened my eyes the next morning. Casting a rapid glance at the clock, I saw it was almost eight. There was no time to lose. I grasped the useful little vibrator with one hand, flung the blanket into a corner with the other, and set off, calling to the native servant to follow with a ladder. It was not advisable to operate under the eyes of the townspeople, so I marched across the bridge and into the veld, until a suitable spot was reached. No sooner had I thrown my wire over the line than I again heard British and Dutch signals intermingled. Good! My message was safe.

The Kafir shinned up the pole and cut the wire, permitting the British signals only to come through. I listened intently to the various more or less interesting messages being exchanged by the enemy. Presently a new and stronger note broke in—

"Hello! Here, Sergeant-Major Devons. Who are you?"

Devons? Those are the fellows that we fought at Ladysmith. But what—how comes he here? Listen—

"Here, Heilbron. We're just waiting to leave. Crowds of Boers on the hills."

"Ah! I say, I've pushed on, quite by myself, for fully twelve miles," said the hoarse note of the non-com.'s vibrator. "When I reached Roberts' Horse the chief said I was d——d lucky to get through!"

"Good on you!" replied his admiring hearer. "This is a bit different from old Tyneside, ain't it?"

"Cheer up; we shall soon be in Pretoria."

"Confound you!" said I, dashing my fist on the key, "you're not there yet!"



To prevent myself from interrupting them, advertently or otherwise, I had taken the precaution to disconnect the battery, so my little outbreak did no harm.

Then the sergeant-major sent a long message to his chief, Captain Faustnett, duly informing the latter of the distance he had come, all by himself, and of what the officer commanding Roberts' Horse had said, after which the Heilbron man remarked—

“Good-bye, we're off.” Silence followed.

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The net result of the morning's work was the knowledge that Hamilton was leaving Heilbron at that very moment, and leaving it ungarrisoned. This information I hastened to communicate to my chief, with the result that within a very short space of time we were again in telegraphic communication with that town and in possession of several hundred sick and wounded that the British had kindly left to our care. At Spion Kop we wanted their wounded, but did not get them; here we did not want them in the least, but we got them all the same.

My next task was the maintenance of the fence line between Frankfort and Reitz. A testing station had been established half-way between the two villages, consequently the communication was fairly good and there was not much for me to do. One day a message arrived from my chief in Pretoria, asking me to go thither, and accompany him northwards when the capital should be abandoned. The Postmaster-General of the Free State, however, insisted upon my remaining a few days longer.

A little while after De Wet's commando entered the village about a thousand strong. The rumour went that De Wet was going to rest for a week and then strike a heavy blow. No sooner had the column halted on the bank of the river than De Wet himself rode over to our office, accompanied by his secretary. They wrote out a few telegrams, and then De Wet entered into conversation with the Postmaster-General. His tone and manner lacked the slightest cordiality. He asked the Postmaster-General whether he was sure, quite sure, that the British side of our telegraph lines was always cut, so that the enemy could not tap our messages. Yes, the chief was quite sure. But De Wet thought it best that instructions to that effect should be re-issued, so as to leave no excuse for any possible negligence. This suggestion was carried out on the spot.

The chief then introduced me to De Wet. Compared with Louis Botha, or almost any other of our generals, De Wet presented but a sorry sight. His manners are uncouth, and his dress careless to a degree. His tactlessness, abrupt speech, and his habit of thrusting his tongue against his palate at every syllable, do not lessen his undeniable unattractiveness. But De Wet, if he lacks culture, certainly has an abundance of shrewdness, and is not without some dignity at times. And I must confess that it is chiefly owing to De Wet and Steyn that the war did not end with the fall of Pretoria. What is the secret of his success? This, he has one idea, one only—the independence of his country. Say to him—

“If the English win——” and he breaks in—

“If the heavens fall——”

Choosing his lieutenants by results only, he is assured of good service. An incorrect report, and the unlucky scout is tried by court-martial.



Whilst giving this modern Cincinnatus due credit for his undoubted smartness, it must be borne in mind that the movements of the Free State forces were generally determined by the *Oorlogscommissie*, a body made up of President Steyn, Judge Hertzog, Advocate De Villiers, and two or three other prominent men, whose trained intellects concerted the plan of campaign, De Wet being entrusted with its execution. He had power to alter details according as circumstances might dictate, but that was all.



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And he had men to aid him like General Philip Botha (third of three brothers, generals), Commandant Olivier (now captured), Captain Theron (killed near Krugersdorp), besides others whose names have never been heard of, but who, if De Wet were captured to-morrow, would be both willing and able to take his place.

One peculiar feature of the Afrikaner character is the complete absence of anything approaching hero-worship. Perhaps this is due to the habit of ascribing success to the favour of Providence. However this may be, it is certain that General Joubert's death hardly excited even a momentary thrill of regret, in spite of his years of service as Commandant-General. As for erecting a monument to the memory of any of our great men, why, we are all equal, they say, and anyone could have done as much.

Notwithstanding this characteristic of the people, De Wet, secure in the favour of the Government, knows how to make himself obeyed and respected. I have seen burghers retreat who, upon being stopped and threatened with death by their officer, have torn open their coats and shouted, "Shoot! Shoot me, if you dare! I shall not turn back!"

I cannot imagine anyone venturing to take up this attitude towards De Wet. He would certainly not hesitate to carry out a threat through any fear of the consequences. And yet it was my fortune to incur his displeasure. It came about in this way. The chief sent for me one day and said—

"You have asked to be allowed to return to the Transvaal. But there is a chance for you to do some very important work just now. Do you mind remaining three or four days longer?"

"Not at all."

"Very well. De Wet leaves to-morrow. You will accompany him. He wants you to tap the British lines near Kroonstad. You may attach yourself to Scheepers' corps, but you will be in no way subordinate to him, and you will use your own discretion in the execution of your duty. He will give you every aid and assistance. Try and get a horse from him, as we are short."

The chief then showed me a map whereon was marked out our line of route. It was evidently going to be an exciting adventure, and I thanked him warmly for having selected me to take part in the expedition. I then went and hunted up Scheepers, whom I found in his tent. This is the same Scheepers who later operated in Cape Colony, and whom Chamberlain has taken such a dislike to. I can assure the Secretary for the Colonies that Scheepers is an amiable and harmless young man, who would probably now be teaching a Sunday-school class had Joseph not been such a dreamer.

"Well, Scheepers," I said, "so I am to accompany you to-morrow. Can you supply me with a horse?"



“That will be difficult,” he replied, “but if money can buy one you shall have it.”

This seemed good enough. Early the next morning the commando was on the march. Scheepers had kept his word and sent me a horse. It was not an attractive animal outwardly, being of an indefinite shade between white and grey, and with an unnecessary profusion of projections adorning its attenuated frame. However, there was no time to lose, and I mounted the steed, trusting it might possess moral qualities which would atone for its physical defects.



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The animal went very well as long as I did not interfere with the bent of its wayward desire, which was to proceed in any direction but the right one. Have you ever steered an extremely willing young thing through her first waltz? If so you will know what my feelings were after the first hour. And now just imagine that the waltz lasted for four hours, and you will have some idea of my sufferings, for that is the length of time I was compelled to spend on the back of my new acquisition.

Scheepers had sent a couple of men on ahead a few days before in order to see if the coast was clear. One of his heliographists and myself now rode ahead of the column, planted a heliograph on a suitable spot, and called up towards a high hill beyond Heilbron, where it had been arranged that the two scouts should be about this hour. Scarcely had our heliograph glittered for a moment in the sun when back from the hill came a long flash of light.

"What news?" we asked.

"All quiet," came the reply.

We returned to the column, which was marching wonderfully slowly, and informed Scheepers, who was pleased to find his men so punctual. As we rode along he asked me a few particulars about the vibrator, wire tapping, and so on. I told him how at Spion Kop the wire failed at the very moment it was needed most.

"Yes," he remarked thoughtfully, "trifles often make all the difference. I had an experience of that myself one night not so long ago. We had laid a nice little trap near Kroonstad, put a charge of dynamite on the rails, placed the men in position, and waited for a train to come along. After a few hours of suspense the latter appeared, and just as it was going over the charge I pressed the button. What do you think happened?"

"The unexpected, I suppose?"

"Precisely. To our disgust the dynamite did not do the rest, and the train puffed tranquilly past. One of my battery wires had become disconnected in the dark, and through that one little detail the whole thing was spoilt."

"At least from your point of view," I said jestingly. "But think what a narrow escape you had yourselves. The train might have stopped, a searchlight might have thrown its piercing gleam over your waiting band, and a volley from a battery of maxims might have strewn the shuddering veld with your palpitating bodies!"

"Oh, no danger of that!" replied Scheepers lightly; "we knew there were no *Graphic* artists on board!"

Towards sunset the head of the column halted, nine miles from Heilbron, having done only twenty miles during the whole day's march. I say the head of the column, because



the body of it was still straggling somewhere along the road, to say nothing of the tail. We went to bed hungry, the men with the waggon being too lazy to make a fire. I consoled myself with the prospect of a good breakfast in Heilbron the next morning, and slept as well as the cold would let me.



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ROODEWAL

We were awakened the next morning while it was still dark. I roamed about in the gloom searching for my errant Rosinante. After describing half a dozen circles I returned to the waggon, to find the missing steed no longer astray, but peacefully grazing away about six feet from the aforesaid vehicle. It was a demon of a horse, no doubt about that. We upsaddled and stood shivering in the cold, our ears and noses fast becoming frostbitten, and waited for the body of the column to catch up to us, for it now appeared that everyone had gone to sleep where he pleased the night before. De Wet was in a furious rage.

"I told them we were to be in Heilbron at sunrise!" he shouted. "I wish the British would catch and castrate every one of them, so that they may be old women in reality."

His railing did not accelerate the approach of the loiterers, and it was long after sunrise when we finally made a start for Heilbron—nine miles distant. When we neared the town Scheepers, myself, and another went forward to reconnoitre. What was our surprise to find that the whole place was full of English! They had suddenly entered the town the night before. I at once went back and informed De Wet, who ordered the column to halt and outspan. Testing the telegraph line, I found that whereas there were no British signals audible, our own signals from Frankfort could be heard very plainly. The Frankfort telegraphist was busy calling Heilbron, not knowing that the town had again changed masters. As his was an ordinary Morse instrument I could not communicate with him, but I did the next best thing by cutting the wire. The presence of the enemy in Heilbron was a check for us. We did not expect Colville to come forward so rapidly. It was necessary to modify our plan of campaign, and De Wet and several of the commandants rode to a farm some six miles away to consult with the President, who had pitched his tent at that spot. Scheepers was still away scouting. His men made no effort to prepare any food, and as I was beginning to suffer from hunger the situation was anything but pleasant for me. It is hard to realise the amount of selfishness which generally prevails in a laager or commando. It is a case of everyone for himself. There is no regular distribution of rations every day, as in other armies. The commando is divided into messes of about ten men each. To this mess is given every now and then a live ox and a bag of meal. The ox is killed and cut into biltong, and the meal baked into stormjagers, a kind of dumpling fried in dripping. Now Scheepers' little corps, which consisted of half a dozen men, was probably not very well off itself in the matter of provisions—in any case, they offered me none. The commissariat consisted of nothing but oxen and meal, cold comfort for me. I rode back a couple of miles to a spot where a field telegraph office had been opened. Standing in the open veld under the telegraph line was a Cape cart, under the cart a telegraph instrument. This was the office.



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“Can you give me anything to eat?” I asked the telegraphist, one of our most capable men.

“Very sorry,” he answered; “I’ve been here for a week, and no one has troubled to send me any food. I’ve managed to get a loaf of bread from that farm yonder now and then, but their supply is exhausted, and I don’t know what to do next.”

“Why don’t you ask the President’s party for food? We all know they fare well enough.”

“I’ve sent them message after message, but can get no satisfaction. All they think about is the amount of work they can get out of me. Little they care what my troubles are!”

This was really a shameful state of affairs, and I began to grow disgusted with the whole business. Not satisfied with refusing to supply him with food, a passing commando had stolen his cart-horses, so that he had no means of leaving the spot.

It was a clear case of selfish and brutal neglect. I condoled with the poor fellow, and rode back to the laager. De Wet was still absent. It appeared that we were going to lie there for days, instead of the whole expedition being over in a day or two. After thinking the matter over, I decided to return to Frankfort and carry out my intention of going back to the Transvaal. Upon reaching Frankfort I explained the matter to the Postmaster-General, adding that the expedition would probably take a couple of weeks, by which time the Free State would already be cut off from the Transvaal, and my return rendered impossible. He urged upon me, however, to postpone my departure. During the day a telegram arrived from De Wet, saying he had now decided to move forward, and asking that I should accompany him. So convinced was I that his attempt would end in a fiasco, in spite of his knowledge of the enemy’s movements, that I persuaded the chief to send another in my place. De Wet was extremely annoyed, but I was foolish enough to insist. Judge of my regret when, a week or so later, we heard of the magnificent blow delivered at Roodewal. After this sudden swoop De Wet returned to the vicinity of Heilbron. The chief and I drove out to his camp. It was interesting to see his entire band clad in complete khaki, with only the flapping, loose-hanging felt hats to show their nationality. Wristlets, watches, spy-glasses, chocolate, cigarettes, were now as common as in ordinary times they were rare. Heliographic and telegraphic instruments by the cartload. No doubt about it, Roodewal came at an opportune moment. Roberts was pressing Botha hard in front, and this stunning blow at his lines of communication compelled him to pause. Think of his forces fighting through that rigorous winter, wearing only their summer uniforms! No wonder their ardour grew cool!



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Theron's corps now came through from the Transvaal and joined De Wet. Theron, dissatisfied with his treatment by the Transvaal Government, was here received with open arms. His hundred and fifty young fellows were as keen as ever; it did one's eyes good to see one corps at least where discipline was not despised. Theron was a slightly built young lawyer, with an expression of the deepest sadness, due to the premature decease of his *fiancee*. He took care of his men, fed and horsed them well, led them into hot corners and saw them safely out again. Terrible indeed must be the engagement when one of Theron's men is abandoned by his comrades. "No cowards need apply" was the motto of the band, held together by an *esprit de corps* without equal; and no cowards did. When the corps passed Frankfort Theron commandeered a horse from an alleged British subject. The latter threatened to appeal to the Government, and came into town for the purpose, vowing vengeance on Theron's devoted head.

"I enjoy myself," said Theron to me, "when they threaten me. It is when they come to me with soft words that I cannot resist."

As a matter of fact, the Government sustained Theron's action, and the owner of the animal was obliged to ask Theron to take two others for it. This he agreed to do, and thus ended the only instance of which I know in which the Free State Government allowed anything to be commandeered from a British subject.

The capture of the Yeomanry took place about this time. There have been several attempts to explain this affair. It was said in our laagers at the time that Colonel Sprague, immediately after his surrender, remarked to our commandant that he would shoot the Lindley telegraphist if he could get hold of him, because the latter had tampered with his message asking for reinforcements. This was quite possible, for at this time *most of the British telegrams passed through our hands before reaching their destination*. If I might venture to express an opinion, formed at the time, I should say that General Colville was absolutely free from any blame in connection with the capture of the Yeomanry—an incident to which we attached very little importance, being interested merely in the military qualities of our opponents, and in their social rank not at all.

When Rundle's force was at Senekal and Brabant's Horse at Harmonia every one of their telegrams was read by a telegraphist attached to one of the commandoes lying in the vicinity. Several of these messages were in cipher, it is true, but many of them were not. It was largely owing to information thus obtained that the British sustained a rather severe check when they advanced against our positions near Senekal. One would think the enemy would have taken strict precautions against their plans leaking out in this manner, but I presume we were considered rather too dense for that kind of thing.

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The affair of Roodewal decided Roberts to send back a strong column to keep us off his flanks. It was only infantry, and we got quite tired of waiting for it to reach us. It reached Villiersdorp eventually, and we fell back from Frankfort towards Bethlehem—the new headquarters. It was with heavy hearts that we said good-bye to our kind friends in Frankfort, for well we knew by this time what the passage of a British column meant for the defenceless non-combatants—houses broken down and burnt, children and greybeards torn from their families, and all the other useless and unnecessary cruelties that have broken so many lives, converted so many joyous homesteads into tombstones of black despair, and imprinted into the very souls of many Afrikanders an ineradicable loathing and hatred of everything British. As Boadicea felt towards the Roman, so feels many a Boer matron to-day against the Briton, and when Britons shall have followed Romans into the history of the past, the Afrikander race shall write an epitaph upon their cenotaph. Ambition! By that sin fell the angels, and by that sin fall the Angles. But oh, the pity of it! For of all the nations that in turn have risen and waxed great upon the surface of the globe, there are none for whose ideals the Boers feel more sympathy than for those of the British. It is the paralysing difference between the ideal and the real that is creating the gulf which threatens our eternal separation.

OFF TO THE TRANSVAAL

When we reached Reitz, on our way to Bethlehem, another young Transvaaler and myself obtained permission to try and reach the Transvaal. The enemy's columns were traversing the intervening country in all directions, but we determined that the attempt was worth making. Bidding good-bye to our Free State colleagues, we left the little village that was later to become famous as the scene of the capture of the Free State Government, and retraced our way to Frankfort. The send-off given us took the form of a little reunion in the parlour of the modest hotel. Here there were gathered together some dozen young Free Staters, and an impromptu smoking concert was held. Everyone present was compelled to give a song or recite something. The first on the programme was Byron's "When we two parted," which was sung with fine effect by a blushing young burgher. Next came the old camp favourite, "The Spanish Cavalier." The sentimental recollections induced by these two songs were speedily dissipated by a rattling comic song in Dutch, "*Op haar hot oog zit'n fratje*" A few recitations followed. One of the reciters had just enunciated the lines—

"Within the circle of your incantation
No blight nor mildew falls,
No fierce unrest, nor lust, nor lost ambition,
Passes those airy walls"—

when a mocking voice came floating in at the window—

“Are you referring to Downing Street?” It was a captured British officer, who, roaming about the village, had been attracted by our revelry. He was evidently no follower of the expand-or-burst policy of the British Cabinet.



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This appropriate interpellation put an end to the proceedings. We set off, unarmed, as we had sent our Mausers back to the Transvaal some time before, and mounted on a pair of nags that were plainly unfit to make the journey. Long before we reached Frankfort, in fact, my companion's horse gave in. We rode to a farmer's house near the road to try and find another mount. A boy of thirteen was the only male person on the farm. Yes, he had a pony. Would he exchange it for ours, and take something to boot? No fear, what he wanted was cash. How much? Thirteen pounds. But thirteen is an unlucky number; better take twelve. In that case, he would prefer to take fourteen. The pony was worth the price, the cash changed hands, and we continued our journey. Some miles from Frankfort we met two Boers, who told us that they had also meant to return to the Transvaal, but had heard that the enemy were so close to Frankfort that they had decided to turn back. We determined to continue, however, and shortly after dark we cautiously entered the village. The enemy had not yet arrived, but were expected early the next morning. We consulted one of our friends in the village, who advised us to try and cross the railway near Standerton. We decided to follow his advice, and left early the next morning. A few miles out of town we observed several horsemen to our left. Fearing these were British, we swerved to the right, cutting across country. Keeping a good look-out, we continued our way till evening, when we were overtaken by a farmer driving a cart. He was lame and had never been on commando, but on the approach of the British columns had left his home to their mercy. He conducted us to the modest cottage of his brother-in-law, where we found a bed for ourselves and stabling for our horses. Before sunrise the next morning we were again on our way. Through the thick mist we saw several horsemen approach a house standing solitary in the veld. They dismounted and entered the dwelling. Anxious to know whether these were friends or foes, we rode thither. Making as little noise as possible, we managed to gain the spot unobserved, and found that they were Boers. They gave us each a cup of steaming coffee, black and bitter, but none the less acceptable, directed us on our way, and wished us good luck. Towards noon we reached a hamlet named Cornelia, where we introduced ourselves to the leading inhabitant, with whom we lunched. Here my horse refused to feed, showing strong symptoms of *papies*. There was no help for it, however; he had to carry me, sick or well. Some miles further we reached the house of an English farmer. He had the consideration to conceal his satisfaction at the approach of his countrymen and the kindness to doctor my horse for me. The poor animal was in such a pitiable state that it could hardly stand. After swallowing a dose of strychnine, however, it improved wonderfully, and we were enabled to continue, but naturally at a



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very slow pace. That evening we slept at a farmer's house near the Vaal River. Here we heard that there was a Boer commando lying near Greylingstad, and thither we directed our way. As we rode through the Vaal the next morning we felt a genuine thrill of joy at setting our feet once more upon our own soil. That afternoon Greylingstad came in sight, but what a bitter disappointment! Instead of finding our own commandoes here, we found the place occupied by a large British force. We reined in on the veld, gazed at the British camp, and then at each other. To our left lay Heidelberg, to our right Standerton, both held by the enemy, and in front of us stood the tents of a British column at least five thousand strong!

Whilst we were still discussing the situation a Bushman mounted on a scraggy pony and seated on a sheepskin saddle came riding along. We hailed him and asked him where he was off to. He told us he belonged to a party of half a dozen Boers, who, hidden just over the hill, had sent him to see what we were. We ordered him to lead us thither. When we approached the spot it was to find the men all on their feet, rifles loaded and cocked, ready to lay us low should we prove to be Englishmen. We lost no time in dissipating their fears. They explained that they belonged to the commando which had been lying here, and which only the day before had retired on the approach of the enemy. They themselves, having been on a visit to their farms near by, had got left behind. I at once suspected that they meant to lay down their arms, but it would never have done to say so, so I contented myself with demanding their advice as to the best way of rejoining the aforesaid commando. They were not very anxious to rejoin it themselves, and consequently represented the matter as being extremely difficult. At length they showed us a farm near the British camp, and recommended our going thither, as the people there would be able to give us all possible help. We reached the farm just after sunset to the accompaniment of barking dogs and hissing geese. The door was opened by a feeble old man, who, with his equally aged wife, were apparently the only occupants of the place. As soon as it was evident that we were friends, however, two strapping sons made their appearance from a kopje behind the house, where the clatter of our horses' hoofs had caused them to take refuge. They informed us that they had followed the enemy's movements throughout the day, and that the line was so well guarded that our getting through was extremely unlikely. But we could sleep there that night, and the next morning we could see what was to be done.

During the evening the old father recounted, with much humour, his experience of Theron's merry band. How they had come there in the middle of the night, knocked him up, stabled their horses in his yard, asked for bread, *brod, brood*; eggs, *eiers, ejers*, in all the dialects under the sun, how they had actually plucked the oranges from his trees, until he was forced to ask Theron to station a guard in the orchard! But the next morning they had paid for everything, and ridden away, singing and shouting.

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Nothing in the old gentleman's manner to show that the enemy were camped only four miles away, although he knew very well that they would visit him the next day, and probably deprive him sooner or later of all he possessed. Only down the face of his white-haired wife rolled silent tears as she gazed at the bearded faces of her stalwart sons and thought of the long farewell that they would bid her on the morrow!

When we rose the next morning we lost no time in making for the high, boulder-strewn kopje behind the house. Here we found the farmer's sons, armed, their horses at hand, gazing through a large telescope at the British camp, which could be plainly distinguished with the naked eye.

Presently a small party of scouts left the camp and came in our direction, riding slowly, and eyeing every little rise or depression in the ground with the utmost distrust. They reached a farmhouse lying between their camp and ourselves, and after a while we saw a cart leave the farm and drive towards the camp. Another Boer laying down his arms, beguiled by Buller's blarney! Then the scouts came nearer and nearer. When within a thousand yards or so they encountered a troop of mares grazing on the veld. Round and round these they rode, plainly intending to annex any that might suit them. My friends were strongly tempted to fire on these cattle thieves. Only the thought of their aged parents restrained them, for they well knew the result would be the burning down of their home.

It was plain that the scouts were making for this farm. We hurried down to the house, saddled our horses—mine still suffering and hardly able to go at a trot, and went to say good-bye to our hosts.

"Yes, my children," said the old lady, "it is better to go, for should the British find you here they would only treat us the worse for it. And we have sorrow enough, God knows. Come and see my son, my sick and suffering son, who perhaps will never rise from his bed again!"

She conducted us into a bed-chamber, where, pallid and worn, his wife seated by his side, lay the wreck of a once splendid specimen of manhood, now, alas! in the last stage of some wasting disease—the result of privations endured on commando. All that we could do was to speak a few weak but well-meant words of comfort to the afflicted family, and then leave them to their fate.

The sons promised to follow us later, as they wished to remain in the neighbourhood to see what became of their home. My friend and myself rode to another farm in the neighbourhood, undecided as yet whether to make the attempt to get through the enemy's lines or to turn back; crossing Roberts' lines of communication in the Free State was easy enough, but here we had Buller to deal with. Upon reaching this farm we found the occupants greatly excited. A Hottentot had just arrived from a farm already visited by the enemy, bearing Buller's proclamation, printed in Dutch and

English, and promising protection, compensation, and I know not what all, to those who came in and surrendered. The entire household and several armed Boers from the vicinity gathered round the farmer. No one dared to read the proclamation aloud. It was handed from one to the other, shamefacedly, as if there were something vile in the very touch of the document.



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I anxiously watched the varying expression of their features, as interest struggled with patriotism. Wornied of strife and fearful of losing the result of years of hard work, the assembled men felt a strong inclination to accept the enemy's offer. But no one dared give utterance to his feelings. Eye met eye, and glanced away. It was easy to see what the result would be. It was plainly my duty to protest, but what could I do, a stranger, a mere youth? What could I say to these men, who had already given proof of their devotion on many a bloody field, and who only recoiled now when brought face to face with the supreme test—the sacrifice of their hearths and homes? I ventured to point out, however, that those who had already surrendered now bitterly regretted it, and added that the very nature of the case made it impossible for the British to carry out their promises. They listened in silence. My words may have had some slight effect; in any case, the Hottentot was sent back without a definite reply. It was useless to expect any aid from these men. Leaving them to decide their own fate, we started back for the Free State.

ARRESTED AS SPIES

A couple of hours' riding, then the farm of an old field-cornet, where we off-saddled and bought a few bundles of forage for our horses. The field-cornet entered into conversation with us whilst our animals were feeding, but omitted to ask us into the house, and kept eyeing us in a puzzled manner, as though we had dropped from Mars. I know not what my companion thought of it, or if he thought at all, but I myself put the old man's strange manner down to a sort of speechless admiration, and accepted it as such. But I was mistaken.

When our friend shook hands with us he did so very limply, and as far as we went he could be seen gazing after us.

"What ails him?" I asked my comrade.

"Oh, he doesn't see men like ourselves every day," was the careless answer. How could I argue?

We kept on our way, and towards sundown reached a farm on the bank of the Vaal, simultaneously with another young fellow coming from the direction of the railway line.

It turned out that this farm belonged to his father. He himself had left home that morning with the intention of crossing the railway, but had found the line so well patrolled that he had given up the attempt. We stabled our horses and entered the small but comfortably furnished cottage, where we were presented to the other members of the family. After supper came the usual evening service. This was hardly over when we heard a loud knocking at the front door. The door was opened, and the strange-mannered old field-cornet entered.



He greeted us solemnly and sat down. Next came a thundering rap at the back door, and another Boer entered, a tall, powerful fellow, who was foaming at the mouth with suppressed excitement, and bristling with cartridge belts.



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“My nephews,” said the first-comer to us, “you must not take it amiss, but it is my duty to arrest you!”

“What for, uncle?”

“For being suspected of spying. You must either accompany me back to my farm, or let me take your horses there, so as to prevent your leaving here during the night.”

“All right, uncle, take the horses, but don’t forget to feed them well. But perhaps it would spare you trouble if you read our papers.”

“It is easy to forge papers,” said the old man. His companion now boiled over and broke in—

“No, no! We’ve got you right enough! What else can you be but cursed spies, riding about the country like this?”

“I don’t wish to argue with you,” I replied, angered by his brutal manner. “I’m as true a burgher as you are, to say the least, and I warn you that I shall hold you responsible for what you do or say.”

“Oh! oh! Responsible? We are our own Government now. And where are your arms? Spies!”

“I see you have a gun, but perhaps that is only because you’ve had no chance to lay it down.”

“What! Yes, I’ve got a gun, and I’ll prove it to you!” he shouted, pointing the weapon at me.

“Just like a cowardly bully to threaten an unarmed man! But,” I added gently, “you’ll feel differently to-morrow.”

“Will I? Why?” he asked, curiosity getting the better of his rage.

“You’ll be sober then.” This only incensed him the more, but he saw that he had gone too far, and contented himself with uttering a few half-intelligible threats. We then went out to the stable, gave them our horses, and went to bed.

I woke just as dawn was breaking. Before the door stood the son of the house, his gun in his hand.

“Hello, you are up early,” I said. He looked rather confused.



“To tell the truth, I have been guarding you all night. But all the same, I don’t believe that you are spies. Come and have some coffee.”

We had just finished our coffee when we heard horses’ hoofs coming along the road, and presently one of our friends from the farm near Greylingstad entered the room.

“I’ve brought your horses,” he said, smiling merrily. “I passed the old field-cornet’s this morning and told him I could certify that you are no spies.”

Whilst we were saddling up the field-cornet and his companion of the night before arrived. The latter was now sober. They were profuse in apologies.

“You were angry last night because we had no rifles; you had more reason to be glad,” I remarked to the field-cornet’s assistant.

“Why?”

“Because if I had been armed I might have been imprudent enough to blow your brains out when you pointed your gun at me. And how awful that would have been!”

“Man,” he said, “it’s the cursed drink.”

“Well,” said I, “it’s all over now. Good-bye!” Off we went—my comrade, myself, and the man who had brought our horses, Delange. The latter had an *achter ryder* and two spare horses. Towards noon we reached the farm of one of Delange’s friends. My mount was now thoroughly done up, having eaten almost nothing for three days. I asked the farmer if he had a horse for sale.



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"There are several in the stable," he replied, "but they belong to my son, and he is on commando; so I am sorry, but I can't sell you one."

"I tell you what we'll do," said Delange. "I'll give you one of mine for yours, which can then remain here till it gets well. Should you come round here again one day we can then change back again."

"But suppose the animal dies?"

"Oh, I'll risk that. What is one horse more or less?"

I gratefully accepted this generous offer, and soon had my new acquisition saddled. It was a lively little nag, and all my weariness passed away as I felt it bound between my knees. Delange remained here, and my comrade and I continued our journey alone, making for Vrede.

"There's a Jew a few miles from here," said the farmer as he bade us good luck, "whom we suspect of treason. You should try and trap him and take him with you to Vrede."

Towards dusk we reached the Jew's store. We rode up to the building and he came to the door, an intelligent-looking man.

"Good evening," I said in English, "are there any Boers about?" We were both dressed after the English style.

When the man's wife heard English spoken she also came to the door and stood by her husband's side.

"Well, can't you answer?" The fellow's face was a study. He and his wife looked at each other, evidently feeling that some danger was threatening them.

"Sir," he said at last, speaking with an effort, "I have seen no Boers."

"Is this the road to Vrede?"

"Yes," he faltered.

"Thanks. Good-night," and we rode away. It might be easy to shoot a traitor in cold blood, but to try and trap a man into uttering his own condemnation seemed too cruel.

The next place we came to was a miserable-looking hovel standing by the wayside. The door was opened by an old man.

"Good evening, uncle. Can you sell us a few bundles of forage?"



“Good evening. Yes, certainly. Come inside. It’s a poor dwelling, but you are welcome. Johnny, take the horses and put them in the stable. Won’t you join us at supper?”

Our appetites needed no stimulating, and we at once joined the family, who had just been sitting down to table when we arrived. After the meal our horses were saddled and brought to the door.

“What do we owe you for the forage?” we asked. It would be an insult under any circumstance to offer to pay a Boer for a meal, “paying guests” being still unknown to our benighted nation.

“No, my friends,” he said. “I am poor, but I can’t take your money. We are all working for our country, and must help each other.”

“That’s true, but you must really allow us to pay.”

“No, no! A few shillings will make me no richer or poorer.” It was only with the greatest difficulty that we managed to leave a few shillings on the table. And this in spite of the fact that he was in the direst poverty. But this is nothing unusual in South Africa, where hospitality is considered a duty and a pleasure.



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We pushed on until late that night, when we reached Vrede. Here we learnt that the column which Lord Roberts had sent back from Johannesburg had just entered Reitz. The next day we turned our horses' heads towards Bethlehem, seeing a fair amount of game during the day's ride. Darkness found us still travelling onward. A few miles to our right a crimson glare lit up the heavens—a grass fire started by the British column, and an unmistakable danger-signal for us.

We were now very close to the enemy, and might expect to meet a patrol at any moment. Whilst riding along in the dense gloom we heard loud voices a few hundred yards ahead of us. Turning out of the road, we rode on the grass so as to make no noise, and carefully approached. Upon getting nearer we found it was some natives driving cattle into a kraal. Near by was a farmhouse, and thither we went. Only the womenfolk were at home. We quickly reassured them—for every stranger was taken for an Englishman—and were asked to stay for the night. Presently the farmer himself arrived—he had been out watching the enemy.

“They will pass here to-morrow,” he said, “then I shall go on that hill yonder and knock over a few of them. I had a fine chance to shoot to-day, but did not want to put them on their guard.”

“But don't you think it would be better to join a commando and help in making an organised resistance? You may kill a few of the enemy by hanging about in twos and threes, but what difference will that make in the end?”

“You mean us to act like the dervishes at Omdurman? I'm afraid you don't understand the affair, my son. We do belong to a commando, as a matter of fact, but we are scouts entrusted with the duty of keeping in constant touch with the enemy. If in the execution of this duty we see an opportunity to shoot a few of the enemy, are we to hold our hand because we happen to be only two or three?”

“I should think not. But the enemy call it sniping, and I have heard them say that snipers get no quarter. And if you fire on a column near here they will come and burn this house down.”

“It is not for me,” he replied, “to consider my own interests. I have my orders and must carry them out. What! Are we, who have lost sons, brothers, friends—are we, I say, to think of our property now? No! Let everything go, strip us to the bone, but leave us our liberty! It is not for ourselves that we battle and suffer, but for posterity. It is for the birthright of our children—freedom. We are no servile Hindoos to meekly bow beneath the foreign yoke! They have put their hands to the plough, but they will find it stubborn land, land that they will grow weary of manuring with the bodies of their sons! And all for what? To raise a crop of thistles and thorns, for that is all they'll ever get out of us!”

“And it strikes me the end of the furrow is still out of sight.”

“My boy,” he said earnestly, “*this furrow has no end!*”



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IN THE MOUNTAINS

"I wish you a pleasant journey," said our host the next morning, as we prepared to mount. "Have you money enough? Yes? Well, in any case, take this biltong along in your saddle-bags; it's my own make, you'll find it good. Keep a good look-out. Good-bye!"

After thanking him warmly for his kindness, we rode off. Halting but once to feed and water our horses, we reached a farm near Bethlehem towards evening, where we spent the night. We were awakened by the sound of a heavy bombardment in the direction of Bethlehem, which informed us that the British were attacking the town. With an optimism that now seems marvellous, we never for a moment doubted that the enemy would be driven back, and that we would at last be able to take a little repose, for twelve hours daily in the saddle was beginning to tell on us. Quite cheerfully we rode down to the village, listening to the music of the bursting shells and the lively rattle of the small-arms. Suddenly a cloud of Boers issued from a kopje to our right, and slowly retreated across our front. We rode up to them and learnt that they had just received orders to retire, as the place could no longer be defended. It appeared that the British general had informed De Wet that if he did not surrender the town it would be bombarded. Most of the property belonged to British subjects, so De Wet ordered all loyal inhabitants to leave the town, and then told the general to bombard as much as he liked, which the latter forthwith proceeded to do. De Wet had placed a couple of guns on the mountain overlooking the town, and this, together with Theron's hundred and fifty men—the only commando seriously engaged that day—sufficed to keep the British back for three hours. De Wet's own men were kept in reserve to meet the usual outflanking movement. The latter did not take place, however, the enemy coming straight on. Finally something went wrong with one of our two guns, and Theron being hard pressed, with the reserve too far away to render immediate help, the order was given to retire. The artillerists profited by the occasion to tumble the damaged gun down a precipice, saying that they had had enough of repairing it. Here it was found by the enemy the next day. A rush was made for the mountain passes, as it was feared the enemy might occupy them and cut off our retreat, but this was not even attempted, and we were allowed to gain our rocky fastnesses in peace. The following day was spent in climbing up and down the steep footpaths over the mountains, and that afternoon we arrived at the end of our journey, Fouriesburg, having spent something like a hundred hours on horseback during the last ten days. Our first move was towards the river, for we had not had a bath for several days. After repeated splashes in the chilly torrent we bought a few clean things, put them on, and then gravitated towards the telegraph office. Needless to say, our colleagues were surprised to see us, being under the impression that we had long since reached the Transvaal. Whilst still busy giving explanations we heard someone on the instrument calling Winburg. Now Winburg was in British hands; it could be no other than a British station calling. Wishing to gain a little information, we responded.



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“Here, Winburg.”

“Here, Bethlehem. Are you Winburg?”

“Yes.”

“Then give the name of the officer commanding.”

There was no time for hesitation, and in our haste we gave the wrong name.

“Go away,” came the answer; “you’re a way out. Trying to fool us, are you?”

After a while we called him up again.

“Bethlehem! Bethlehem!”

“Here, Lieutenant Sherrard, R.E. What’s up?”

“Here, Winburg. What’s the news?”

“That you are a lot of fools for keeping on fighting and murdering your men!” came the sharp reply.

“Oh, kindly allow us to know our own business best. You’ll find some method in our folly.”

“Maybe. How did you like the little bits o’ lyddite yesterday?”

“I believe it slightly killed one mule. How did you like the hell fire from the Nordenfeldt?”

“Never saw it. But honestly, why don’t you come in and surrender?”

“But honestly, what is your real opinion of those who desert their country in her hour of need?” He preferred not to say, but disconnected the wire, and we heard no more of our friend the Royal Engineer.

“Pity they were too sharp for us this time,” I said to the Postmaster.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” he replied, “we caught up their report of the engagement just after they entered the town. It seems they had a pretty severe loss. Ours was slight, but one lyddite shell burst over a group of horses and killed twenty.”

“And what is the situation now?”

“Well, all our forces are here in the mountains now, and we can hold out for years. There are only two passes; they are strongly held, and the enemy will never get through



them. We tried to get our prisoners to take parole, but they refused, so we have driven them over the Drakensberg into Natal. Last, but not least, the traitor Vilonel is here, waiting for his appeal to be heard.”

This Vilonel, a young man of prepossessing appearance, had been one of the most promising officers, and had early been promoted to commandant. Whether through overweening ambition on his part or not I cannot say, but Vilonel, accused of insubordination, was thenceforth given the distasteful and inglorious task of commandeering. He wearied of this, and applied for active service, but in vain. Then, smarting under a sense of injustice, he took the fatal step—deserted. Not content with this, he wrote a letter out of the British camp to one of our field-cornets, urging upon the latter to surrender. The letter fell into the hands of one of our Intelligence officers, who forthwith replied in the field-cornet’s name, asking Vilonel to meet him at a certain secluded spot. Vilonel kept the appointment, accompanied by a British major, and both were made prisoners, the major protesting energetically against what he was pleased to consider as a breach of the rules of warfare, but his captors begged to differ, reminding him that all’s fair in love and war, especially in dealing with traitors and their associates.

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Vilonel was tried at Reitz, and sentenced to five years, the judge remarking that he was lucky to get off with his life. The prisoner did not think so, and applied for leave to appeal. This was granted, but owing to the nature of the subsequent military operations the Court had not found time to sit, hardly time to pause, in fact.

When the day finally arrived for the appeal to be heard the little court-room was crowded with interested spectators. Judge Hertzog presided, assisted by two young advocates, Messrs. Hugo and Cronje, and Advocate De Villiers represented the State. The prisoner, who conducted his own defence, asked for a postponement. This was refused. He then made an able statement, asserting his innocence of any evil intentions, pleading that he had acted as his conscience dictated, and eloquently praying the Court to reconsider his sentence. It was a painful moment when the presiding judge, after a whispered consultation with the assessors, turned to the prisoner and confirmed the sentence, adding, in his clear, incisive voice, that the name of Vilonel would remain an eternal stigma upon the fame of the Afrikaner race. One could not help feeling a thrill of compassion at the tragic end of such a promising career. To-day a noble patriot, to-morrow a black traitor, despised by the lowest of his countrymen!

President Steyn's wife and family were installed in a house in this village, but the President himself preferred to camp in the veld and share the lot of his burghers.

With him were nearly all the members of the Government, if we except those who had chosen to remain behind in Bethlehem, and who, from what their delighted friends heard, had been compelled by the British to foot it all the way to Reitz. We went out to the camp, and reported ourselves. It was now bitterly cold, the snow-topped Drakensberg keeping the temperature at an uncomfortable proximity to zero. But the men were nearly all well provided with warm khaki uniforms reaped at Roodewal, the mountains were full of cattle and corn, and we felt that we could easily hold these almost inaccessible heights against the British cordon formed outside.

But it was fated otherwise. A despatch rider arrived from the Transvaal; the situation there urgently demanded the encouragement of Steyn's presence. To leave this impregnable stronghold and venture across the open plains below needed all the boldness of De Wet, all the steadfast courage of Steyn. These leaders had never been known to falter; they did not falter now. Everything was arranged in the utmost secrecy. For a few days there was a hurrying to and fro of commandoes, and then one morning De Wet's laager was seen to have disappeared.

Prinsloo was left behind over four thousand men, with orders to stand his own.

THROUGH THE CORDON



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IT was no easy matter to pass through the British forces that lay massed around the mountain-chain. We were two thousand horsemen, and our vehicles, carts, ox-and mule-waggons formed a procession fully six miles long. When we trekked out of the nek strict orders were given that there was to be no loud talking and no matches struck. This latter was especially hard on such a crowd of inveterate smokers. I remember whilst we were riding mutely along, listening to the creaking and jolting of the waggons, and wondering whether we were going to get through, or what the alternative would be if we did not, we suddenly saw someone deliberately strike a match and light his pipe.

“Who struck that match?” came from the front. Then the delinquent himself spoke up—

“It’s this confounded Kafir of mine. Was it you, Jantje?”

“Yes, baas,” responded the dutiful black, bobbing up and down on his master’s spare horse.

“Give him twenty with the sjambok.”

“Right!” Jantje and his master turned out of the road, and soon the unmistakable thwack! thwack! of the sjambok could be heard, mingled with subdued ejaculations in Kafir and Dutch. But judging by the expression on Jantje’s features by the camp fire that night, as he blew long fragrant clouds into the gaping nostrils of his envious friends, I have my doubts about that thrashing.

We halted frequently to allow the straggling ox-waggons to close up. Then we would dismount, stamp our chilly feet, draw our overcoats or blankets closer, and discuss trivialities. During one of these halts a horseman came dashing up from the rear—

“General, there’s a doctor behind who has just come through the enemy’s lines. He asks you to wait for him.”

“Tell him to hurry!”

We sat down and waited. In about half an hour’s time another horseman came hurrying along. Here at last! No. Only another messenger. Another long wait, and finally the doctor arrived. He squatted down next to De Wet, and in a low voice related how he had been unjustly captured by the British some weeks ago, how they had sent him to Johannesburg and kept him in prison until now, only liberating him after repeated requests for a hearing. His tale was listened to in silence and with deep attention. When it was told the order was given to mount, and on we trekked again past the sleeping British camp. Presently the moon rose, and by its light we passed a lonely farmhouse. Beware its slumbering inmates when the British come along to-morrow, for are not they responsible for the telegraph line which runs across the farm, and which we have cut in half a dozen places! No doubt the house will be burnt, and all the stock



confiscated. But never mind, the owner has surrendered and is living under British protection—protection whereof he is going to get a taste now, so why should we pity him? On we go until long past midnight, when we halt in a secluded little valley. Our horses greedily swallow the icy water, and then eagerly crop the tasteless dry grass, for our waggons are too far behind, we can give them no mealies to-night.



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The next morning a cloud of dust in our rear showed that we were being pursued. Whilst we were hastily inspanning and upsaddling, Theron came in from the right, bringing with him a captured Hussar. One old Boer, who had his little boy with him, brought the youngster up to the soldier and said—

“Now, sonny, you’ve never seen an Englishman. Here is one. Look at him well; you must shoot lots of them yet.”

“Go away,” said one of the Boers, “what do you mean by staring at the man like that? Don’t you know any better than to insult a helpless prisoner?”

“I’m sorry,” said the old man, turning away, “I don’t want to hurt his feelings; I only wanted to show my son the game he must track one day.”

The little boy cried when they led him away, saying—

“I ’ants my ’ickle khaki, I ’ants my tame Englishman!”

“Don’t cry,” said the old man, “father will catch you some to-morrow.”

The little fellow’s eyes brightened with anticipation, and his tears gave way to smiles. Sure enough his father came into camp a few days later driving before him two diminutive steeds bending beneath the weight of two corpulent khakis. He called his son and said—

“Now, sonny, here are the soldiers I promised you.”

The little fellow looked them over carefully. Then his lower lip began to pout, and tears rolled down his cheeks.

“What’s the matter, my son,” asked the astonished father, “doesn’t he like his khakis?”

“No, daddy,” replied the little chap, striving with his tears.

“Why not, my lad?”

Then the child’s restraint gave way, and he burst out—

“Oh, daddy, they’re not—*sob*—real—*sob*—soldiers at all!”

They were two of the C.I.V.

But to return. As soon as the waggons were ready they were sent on along the winding valley, whilst the horsemen and artillery took up a position on a neighbouring hill and awaited the British attack. This took the form of continuous shelling until sundown. As



soon as darkness fell the horsemen took a short cut and rejoined the waggons, which in the meantime had gained a considerable start. President Steyn and his secretary accompanied De Wet during the day and had a taste of the enemy's shell-fire. When we asked the secretary that evening how he had liked the ordeal he said he could hardly describe his feelings whilst it lasted, but when the shelling ceased it was the heavenliest sensation of his life. So if you want a heavenly sensation you know now how to get it.

We had an ambulance staff with us, but were sometimes obliged to leave our wounded behind, because we knew very well the enemy would be only too glad to get hold of our doctors and deprive us of all medical help.



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On crossing the railway near Honingspruit we captured a train. From the newspapers taken out of the mail-bags we learnt that we were being closely pressed, and that hopes were entertained of our speedy capture. We did not grudge the papers the pleasures of hope; what we objected to was their crocodile tears over us poor misguided, ignorant burghers, who were too stupid to see the beauty of becoming exultant British subjects, like the Irish. We also learnt that Steyn was ill, that he was hiding on a farm near Heilbron, that he was a prisoner in De Wet's camp, that his mind had given way, that he wouldn't let De Wet surrender, that De Wet wouldn't let the burghers surrender, that the burghers wouldn't let Steyn surrender, *ad fin. ad nauseam*.

As we had a distinct object in view, *i.e.* to bring Steyn to Kruger, we generally preferred to avoid unnecessary engagements. But we could show our teeth when we liked. We were laagered near Vredefort one day when the pursuers made a sudden dash forward, coming within a mile or so before they were observed. On this occasion there was no hasty flight. The cattle continued peacefully grazing around the waggons, whilst the horsemen went to meet the enemy. There was a brief exchange of shells, and then our men charged with such good effect that the British were forced to retire. They followed us at a more respectful distance after that.

De Wet kept his plans so secret that very few knew for certain whither we were bound. The President called me into his tent one morning and asked me a few questions about the roads near Balmoral, where the Transvaal Government was at that time. I happened to have a map with me, and so was able to supply the desired information. He then told me to take a couple of heliographists and try to get into communication with one of the Transvaal commandoes near Potchefstroom.

We climbed one of the numerous hills lying around and called up towards Potchefstroom, but got no reply. As we sat chatting, keeping our eyes fixed on the dark ridges in the distance, one of my companions remarked—

“This reminds me of a fine trick I played on the English a few months ago. We were trekking along quietly one day when I observed a heliograph glitter on a hill about ten miles away. I at once fixed my instrument, and soon learnt that it was a British helio post. I sent him a heliogram saying that we were a small party of British in danger of capture, and asking that an escort should be sent to bring us in. The next day the escort walked into our arms! We took the rifles and let the prisoners go—about a hundred men. The next day the British heliographist called me up again and reproached me for telling him such a deliberate lie!”

“And what did you reply?”

“Oh, I said, ‘g.t.l.’; you know what that means!”



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Espying a pretty little cottage in the valley below, I rode thither to try and buy a loaf of bread, leaving the others to continue calling. On the way down I noticed a telegraph wire running in the direction of Potchefstroom. In the farmhouse were only two young girls, the elder a charming golden-haired fairy with tender eyes of cornflower blue. And her smile!—it was enough to make one say all kinds of silly things just for the pleasure of seeing her ripe lips part, revealing her wholesome, even little teeth! No wonder I delayed my departure! I left at last, however—not without the loaf of bread—and made for the camp. I had not gone far before I met one of the burghers, who told me Steyn and De Wet had gone up to the helio post a little while before. What would they say when they found me absent from my post! I approached the camp in anything but an enviable mood, and was just off-saddling when the two leaders returned. Like a flash the thought came to me of the telegraph line I had seen.

“President,” I said eagerly, before he could speak, “there’s a telegraph line near here. Shan’t I go and try to tap it?”

He looked at me very seriously for a moment, and then replied, a smile breaking through the frown, “Yes, go on, you should have been there already.” Saved again! I went, but needless to say, if I heard any secrets that evening it was not through the medium of a telegraph wire!

SKIRMISHES

A band of about thirty Transvaalers, mostly from Potchefstroom, who had been attached to De Wet for some time, now decided to go on ahead and join Liebenberg’s commando, near their native town. As De Wet had no intention of moving forward just yet, I joined my brother Transvaalers. Bidding adieu to our Free State comrades, we crossed the Vaal. Just beyond the river we were joined by two or three others, who had with them as prisoner a British sergeant. This fellow had been in charge of a band of native police, whose insolence had terrorised the women and children for miles around, until a body of Boers came along and routed them out of the district, capturing their leader. What became of the blacks I do not know, but it must be remembered that the Transvaal natives are Boer subjects, and liable to be shot if caught aiding the British. The feeling against the sergeant was very bitter.

“Oh, you’re the Kafir chief, are you?” said one of our men to him.

“Ho, yuss, h’ I’m the Kefir ginnyril,” responded the flattered cockney, with an irritating grin.

“I’d like to Kafir general you through the head,” said the disgusted Boer promptly. The sickly grin faded, and the threat was not carried out.



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Towards afternoon a heavy rain began to fall. There was no shelter for us, and we pushed along, wet and cold. Then night came, and the road, now transformed into a rushing torrent, was only shown us by the lurid lightning flashes that continually rent the heavens. And we had a sick man on the trolley, for whom this exposure was a serious matter. But finally we reached a farmhouse, occupied by an old woman. Her eyes filled with tears when she saw us, and she thanked the Lord that He had spared her to behold once more the defenders of her country. Near by was an empty building. We outspanned and off-saddled, turning our animals loose, as we knew they would not stray far in such a blinding storm. The sick man was hastily carried in and laid upon some dry blankets.

Then we made half a dozen roaring fires with some mealie cobs that we found lying in the house, stripped ourselves, and held our boots and clothing over the fire till they were fairly dry. By this time the water boiled; we drank some coffee, then made up beds on the floor and slept till morning. It was a bit of a struggle to get into our damp things when we awoke, but as we rode along our clothes dried and our spirits rose. Then Potchefstroom came in sight, but, alas! it was held by the enemy.

“What would my poor mother say,” said one young fellow, “if she knew I was so near!”

“Oh, my wife and children!” sighed another.

“Cheer up, boys!” interrupted the commandant. “Our country first, you know.”

That afternoon we joined a small commando lying near the railway between Potchefstroom and Frederikstad. It numbered barely a hundred men, but they had with them a bomb-Maxim and a Krupp. At midnight we got orders to march for the hills near Frederikstad, where we arrived at dawn. Here we were reinforced by a score of burghers, and we continued our way, keeping in a parallel with the railway, but behind some intervening hills. Presently a scout came in and reported the enemy in sight.

“Forward!” ordered the commandant, and forward we raced along through the veld, keeping a look-out for holes. One youngster’s horse went down, the rider turning a beautiful somersault. Shouts of laughter greeted his exploit, but he quickly remounted, and was one of the first to reach the hill for which we were making, and which dominated the railway. Keeping the Nordenfeldt in reserve, we opened fire with Krupp and small-arms on the advance guard of the enemy.

We did not know at the time that we were tackling Lord Methuen and five thousand men, but such was the case. Of course we made a very poor show; what can you expect? But anyhow, we engaged them for about two hours. Then their cavalry came on with a rush, and we were compelled to give way. It was only with the greatest difficulty that we saved the guns, and we only succeeded in doing so, I presume,

because the enemy were not aware of our real numbers. Our waggons fled to one side of the line whilst we

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remained on the other, with absolutely nothing to eat. By buying a few eggs and other small produce from the natives we managed to subsist until the third day, when we crossed the railway, marched all night, and rejoined our waggons at dawn. To slaughter sheep and cook porridge did not take long; hearty is the only word to describe the meal we made. Then we moved round and joined Liebenberg, who, with six hundred men, had just retaken Klerksdorp without firing a shot. But then, the place was garrisoned by only forty English, and resistance would have been of no avail.

We hung about the neighbourhood of Potchefstroom for about two weeks, anxiously waiting for the word to be given to attack the town, but Liebenberg confined his tactics to making an appearance in sight of the town and retreating as soon as the enemy came out to give battle. This kept the enemy on the *qui vive*, it is true, but it also tired out our horses, and we soon grew weary of it. We had several lively little skirmishes, however. One day about forty of us were detached to go and bombard a British gun which stood on the other side of the town, whilst the rest of our commando approached the town on this side. We were sitting down quite comfortably under a tree below our gun, eating bread and dripping, listening to the duel and smiling at the high aim of the British gunners, when the look-out shouted—"Here's the enemy behind us!"

The gun was rapidly limbered up and we rode to the top of the hill. Across the valley about a hundred horsemen were stealthily stealing up Vaal Kop, evidently with the intention of taking us in the rear. We halted and gave them a couple of shells, to which they very promptly replied.

"Commandant," said one of my comrades, "let's charge them. They're not too many for us."

"No," was the reply; "it's best to be prudent."

"Well, I'm going to have a smack at them, anyway! Coming along?" he shouted to me, and without waiting for a reply, started down the valley. I followed him, and we cut across over the loose stones at a breakneck pace, not making straight for the enemy, but for a rocky ridge whence our fire could reach them. As we climbed the ridge we were joined by two others. When we got to the top we saw about forty horsemen in the valley beyond.

"Fifteen hundred yards!" shouted Frank, and we let them have it. Round and round they turned in a confused circle, like a flock of worried sheep. Then they rode away to the right, straight into a morass, back again, and finally retreated in amongst the bushes on the slope of the hill, whence they favoured us with a few well-aimed shots in reply. The whole thing had lasted barely five minutes, but we had each emptied about fifty cartridges, so we felt quite happy. As we left the shelter of the hill and rode back across



the valley, their companions on top of the hill turned a Maxim on us, but the bullets all went high, singing overhead like a flight of canaries. Going up on the other side, I took a piece of bread out of my pocket, and was just trying to persuade myself to offer our two companions some, when crack! crack! came a couple of Nordenfeldt shells right behind us. It didn't take us long to get over the hill, the vicious little one-pounders crackling and fizzling round us all the while.



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On the other side a comical sight met our eyes. The whole veld was full of scattered Boers retiring in all directions, with a shell bursting in between them every now and then, luckily without any effect. A few hundred yards away stood the cart of our clergyman, who was frantically trying to unharness his mules and inspan horses in their place. He was so nervous that his fingers refused to undo the straps, so we dismounted and effected the exchange for him. As soon as the last strap was buckled he lashed up and drove away, too excited even to say thank you.

We were so accustomed to retreating by this time that it seemed extraordinary to see a man lose his head so easily. The British shells pursued us till we were out of sight, but the only casualty was when a shell passed so close to Van der Merwe, the mining commissioner of Johannesburg, that the concussion knocked him off his horse.

That evening Jonas came into camp. Jonas is quite a character in his way. When the British entered Potchefstroom he, with four followers, took up a position on a kopje about six miles out of town, and a thousand yards from the Johannesburg road. Whenever a convoy or a body of British came along Jonas and his merry band would open a furious fusillade, causing the unhappy enemy no end of inconvenience. It is a fact that he carried on this game for months, unhindered.

After his day's work Jonas would lay aside rifle and bandolier, don his overcoat, and stroll into town to see his family.

He was challenged by a sentry on one occasion, but Jonas reprovved him so severely and bluffed him so completely, that the poor fellow broke into an abject apology, whereupon Jonas very condescendingly promised to say no more about the matter.

WE ENTER POTCHEFSTROOM

"On Sunday we shall hold service in Potchefstroom," announced the commandant. Ah! Something definite at last! The men's hearts grow light as they polish their rifles, for are not they going to behold their dear ones soon? No one thinks of doubting the commandant's word; he is our leader, what he says must be true. How we shall get in none know, but get in we shall, all are sure of that. One morning my two comrades are sent to spy the town. My horse's unshod hoofs are tender as my lady's hands; I have searched the plains for a dead horse wearing shoes. Of all the carcasses I find the hoofs are gone, cut off by sharper comrades. I must remain behind. At night the order is given, "March!" Cheerfully the column trots out of camp; we who have no horses follow it with wistful eyes. There are girls in the town too, ah! such girls! Complexions a dream of purity, mystic, melting eyes, and hair a silken web to weave sweet fancies through.



At midnight my two friends return. What, the others gone already? And you still here! No, mount, saddle, hurry, sick or well, go we must, and come must you! And perhaps, after all, if we ride steadily, who knows? If my horse fails, why, we will loot another on the road.



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We do not take the *spoor*, we slip across the veld; my mount treads gingerly, but what odds? After to-day he shall rest for a week!

We near the town. Everything is deathly quiet. Where is our commando? Cautiously we enter the streets, riding far apart, rifles ready. Halt! here comes a horseman. Don't fire, he is unarmed. Why, 'tis but a boy! Where's the enemy? Where's the foe, quick? What! Deserted the town? We look around and see a long string of Boers come speeding along about a mile behind. Hurrah, we are first in! We race into the market square, crowds of people, and halt at the Government Buildings. Up with the *Vierkleur*! Ah, the proud exultation of seeing our own flag once more float over the ancient capital! Women press around, young and old, beautiful alike in pure emotion of patriotic joy, eager to greet their war-worn men.

My sons, do they live? God be praised, they are here. The father fell at Belmont, but He has spared the sons!

And mine, I say, and mine; three they are, boys yet—what, no more? All I have—all I had gone for ever! Oh, Lord, uphold us! Welcome home, my boy. Your brother, is he well? Speak! Ah me! I loved him best; it is my punishment At last! my love, my husband! Happy day! Hush ... a hymn peals forth and wafts our thoughts to One above, a harmony of mingled joy and sadness. The last solemn notes die away, and we separate—joyous couples to make mirth together, sad widows to weep alone.

How strange to sit at a table once more, to hear again the melody of girlish voices! "Sweet are looks that ladies bend on whom their favours fall." Let us bask in the warmth of your smiles to-night; to-morrow the cheerless veld again!

Tales to boil the blood are told, barbarous brutality. Our commandant's daughter dragged before the provost-marshal. The gun found buried in your yard; your father's work? No, my own. You lie! Out you go—property confiscated, furniture sold; go seek the commandoes and ask them for shelter!

A widow, husband killed. Clear out, furniture confiscated! Why? Your sons are fighting; you are a rebel! I'll teach you to remember Major C-----.

But in a skirmish Major C----- is killed; joy of the widowed and fatherless. Homage to our noble women, patient under persecution, steadfast in adversity, cheerfully sending forth their nearest and dearest to battle to the end!

On the morrow a sharp alarm note is sounded. An officer gallops from house to house. Quick! saddle and ride; meet at Frederikstad! Myself and a comrade are quickly



speeding thither, our brief Valhalla over. On the road we overtake and pass parties of twos and threes, all on the same errand. At last we approach the rendezvous. Up the hill rides a dense body of cavalry; down near the station horsemen dash in and out, to and fro, like busy ants. On the hill a few footmen leisurely stroll about, rifle in hand. What means all this commotion? We pass a Kafir hut.



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“Are those Boers or English, outa?”

“Boers, baas.”

“Sure?”

“Yes, baas, it’s our own people.”

“Yes, look, that’s the commandant ahead on his roan. Come along!” We near the horsemen. The last man dismounts as we approach; his companions are disappearing over the rise; he shifts his saddle forward, staring at us intently. A tall, well-built fellow, red hair, chin scrubby, dust-covered features. A bayonet at his side—by heavens! an Englishman!

“Frank, it’s a khaki,” I whisper, “keep straight on.”

The soldier looks me in the face as we slowly pass him. I feel my cheeks burn and turn my head away. His gun stands in the bucket; we can shoot him, but then, the others? We wear top-boots and riding-breeches, hats pinned up at the side; he is in doubt—perhaps we are scouts just come in. He mounts his horse and rides after his comrades.

Now turn and away, over boulders and bushes for dear life! Suddenly a dozen scouts file down the hill, two hundred yards off. I wave my hat and beckon them to follow. They halt, perplexed. Then a few bullets whistle by, and we see the scouts come dashing after us. But the bushes are high and the boulders loose; we are down the hill now, over the flats and away! Down to the river—the bridge is destroyed! Never mind, through we go, and then turn round to smile at our pursuers.

DE WET ONCE MORE

The reason for all this hurry-scurry became plain when we learnt that De Wet, tired of playing at hide-and-seek with the enemy on the other side of the Vaal, had crossed over and passed by Potchefstroom the night before. It was into the pursuing force that we had ridden.

Reaching the laager, we found the majority of our comrades there. Of the fate of those who had delayed to leave the town we were ignorant. The laager inspanned and followed De Wet, who had just passed here, and after a few hours’ rapid trekking caught up to him. A halt was called for breakfast, but before the water boiled for coffee the enemy came in sight behind us. The cattle were rapidly driven together, oxen yoked and horses saddled, and in about three minutes’ time we were on the move once more. De Wet’s force and our own combined comprised nearly three thousand men, with six hundred waggons and carts, forming a train that made a splendid target for the British gunners.



There was not much difficulty in keeping the enemy back, but still they hung on persistently, worrying us day after day, until our horses, and even the tougher mules, began to drop in the road, and our men to grow weary of the saddle.

The oxen bore up best of all; we now made the discovery that they could trot just as well as mules, and with less effort. But even they felt the strain.

As far as we went the road we left behind us was littered with abandoned animals. It was pitiful to see these dumb creatures try to drag themselves after us, as if they too feared the pursuing foe. But still the weary march went on, night and day, until a numbed indifference settled over us.



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Shells fell to the right and left unnoticed; was the apathy, not of despair, for our faith would never let us feel that, but of sheer and utter exhaustion.

Haggard men, sunk in slumber, beat a mechanical tattoo on their horses' ribs as the gaunt animals dazedly staggered forward. And now came the stunning news that Prinsloo, Prinsloo with 4,000 men, had surrendered! Only one hope sustained us—the Magaliesberg. There we would find shelter and rest.

But Clements was lying in wait for us there, waiting for us to walk blindly into the trap he had set. Well was it for our straggling train that Delarey came dashing down on Clements in the night, slaying and capturing right and left, till the British general was glad to take refuge in entrenched Pretoria! Else we were surely taken and the war ended. When at last we struggled over Olifant's Nek, it was to find the pass held by friends, not foes, many signs of the enemy's occupation, from plundered farm-houses to hundreds of biscuit tins, strewn the ground.

Our waggons were drawn up in a line behind the mountain, and we manned the passes, confident in our ability to hold them. But we were too wearied, and the enemy too persistent. On the third day they forced the weaker of the passes, and we were forced to fly once more. Had the British continued their stern chase our capture were almost certain; strange to say, with success within their grasp, they held their hand, halted, and followed us no further. In the retreat the Free State and the Transvaal commandoes took different directions, myself remaining with the latter. We marched all night, past frowning kopjes, and camped in a thick mimosa forest at dawn.

Here the commando decided to remain for a while. I obtained a pass from Liebenberg and set off alone to make my way through the dense bush to Middelburg.

The first day I discovered De Wet's "meagre commando," about a thousand men, who had been ordered to conceal themselves here and feed up their animals, whilst De Wet himself, with the other half of his force, scoured the country to within ten miles of Johannesburg.

In the evening I arrived at a mission station, where the only whites were the missionary's young daughter and her youthful brother. Their father had left for a visit shortly before the war broke out, and had not been able to return. They themselves had done the mission work, unaided, through all these anxious months. And remember that at this time the bushveld Kafirs were waging war amongst themselves!

The next day I encountered a couple of waggons laden with ammunition for Delarey. The escort told me they had left Middelburg eighteen days before. Making circuits to avoid the enemy and taking wrong roads had delayed them.



Then—it is wonderful how news travels amongst the Kafirs—I heard that Steyn was also somewhere in the bush, on the way to join the Transvaal Government. Fortunately for me, I rode right into his party that evening, just as they were starting off again. I had only off-saddled once since sunrise, but the chance was too good to be missed, and I joined them. The party consisted of barely fifty men—not an extravagant escort, but sufficient, under the circumstances.

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We travelled till midnight, halted for an hour, and then forward again till sunrise, when we crossed the Pienaar's River. Here we found a fair-sized commando under a general whose name I forget, as that was the only time I ever heard it. He was expecting an attack, the waggons were already retreating. We halted long enough to prepare breakfast, during which time the President shot a few bush doves. Hardly had we finished the meal when the rat-tat, rat-tat of small-arms showed that the British were approaching. Then a Maxim rattled forth amongst the rocks, and warned us that the action had begun in earnest.

The commando kept the enemy back just long enough to give us a decent start, and then retired. We afterwards learnt that this British force—under Barnum-Powell, of Tarascon—had been sent out from Pretoria expressly to intercept us. It was a close thing—had the enemy been a little smarter they might have had us. As it was, we doubled away under cover of the bush, and were soon out of reach.

Now followed a week of rapid trekking, varied with a little shooting now and then at the partridges and bright-plumaged birds that abound in the bushveld, and once relieved by the sight of a magnificent bush fire, a sea of roaring flame. I must not forget our banjoist, who of nights beguiled our careworn chief with cheery marches, quicksteps, and comic songs. Finally we emerge upon the *hoogevelde* of Middelburg, to find the town in the enemy's hands. We make for Roossenekal. Again the British are before us. We turn away towards Machadodorp. As we near the village Schalk Burger comes out to meet us. He and Steyn speak earnestly together. Burger is more silent, more taciturn than ever. We push on, and reach Machadodorp, where a train is in waiting. The station is crowded with Transvaalers, all eager to shake their gallant Free State brethren by the hand. The President and party enter the carriage, the engine whistles, and the train speeds down to Waterval Onder, where Paul Kruger and his advisers are impatiently awaiting its arrival.

END OF THE REGULAR WAR

The battle of Machadodorp was expected to take place at any moment, and the general feeling was that this fight should decide the campaign, the more so as the issue was confidently awaited by us. On the second day after Steyn's arrival at Waterval Onder the British attacked. Never before in the history of the war had such a furious bombardment been known. Only those who have witnessed the fierce storms of the tropics can form an idea of the awful unending roar of the lyddite guns as they belched forth one continuous shrieking mass of projectiles into the defenders' trenches. At Waterval Onder the two Governments listened in silent suspense as the sonorous reverberations rolled through the mountains, louder and fiercer yet, till the firm earth shook beneath the shock.

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At last came the appalling message that the British were victorious, and our men in full retreat! High hopes had been built on this combat; no wonder if for a while we felt disheartened. The end of regular warfare had been reached; it was imperative that an entire change of tactics be adopted. Steyn was for beginning the guerilla system immediately, in which he was supported by Gravett, Pienaar, and Kemp; Kruger, however, determined to defend the railway to the last. The British lost no time in following up their success. It had been said that they would never venture down these precipitous heights, but, like all other prophecies about this surprising war—except Kruger's, that he would stagger humanity—it turned out false, for down into the infernal mountain pits the enemy thronged after us, with a courage that made us marvel.

The Governments retreated by train to Nelspruit, and thence to Hectorspruit, the commandoes following by rail and road.

Here the forces were divided, those without horses being sent to entrench Komatipoort, while the rest made ready to slip past the approaching enemy's outstretched arms. It was decided that President Kruger should leave for Holland, Schalk Burger acting in his place. Most of the burghers still fighting are Progressives, and therefore politically opposed to Paul Kruger, but there were few who did not feel a sincere sympathy for the venerable President in this, well-nigh the bitterest hour of his stormy life. I say nearly every man still fighting is as fervent a Progressive as the world could wish, and as much opposed to Paul Kruger's policy as the British themselves! Then what are they fighting for? you ask. For independence! Let us gain that, and in one year's time you will see the Transvaal merged into the model Free State, the Switzerland of South Africa!

After Kruger's departure Steyn took leave of the Transvaal Government. His last interview with Botha took place in the open air, in full sight of the burghers. The two conversed in low, earnest tones. Botha looked ill and haggard, he had aged since he had gained his spurs at Colenso; the weight of his responsibility lay heavy upon him.

Louis Botha is idolised by his men—perhaps he has not an enemy in the world—but it is to Steyn, and Steyn alone, that the honour belongs of the resistance still being offered by the Boers. Let not this detract from the merits of those other and equally gallant spirits, leaders or men, who have nobly breasted the waves of adversity; who shall blame them if at times they felt the current overwhelming?

Steyn utters a last cheering word, then shakes Botha's hand, mounts, and rides away at the head of his little escort.

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The scene around the station resembles nothing so much as a cattle fair. Near the line stands a policeman, his gaze fixed upon a large box lying at his feet. The box is filled with gold. Ben Viljoen, standing on a waggon, addresses the men, explaining to them what guerilla warfare means. On the other side hats, shirts, and what not are being dealt out with a lavish hand. Some burghers wander off into the bush in search of game, others lie lazily stretched out beneath the trees. Trains crammed with men arrive from the rear, discharge their freights of assorted humanity, and are immediately boarded by the dismounted men destined for Komatipoort. The line is blocked with traffic, trains run anyhow, and it will be some days before everything is ready for our trek to begin.

There being no longer any need for officials, my colleagues volunteered to form themselves into a fighting corps, and did me the honour of selecting me as their leader. The corps, however, lacked accoutrements. I went down to Delagoa Bay. Upon returning, with two other officers, we were arrested at the Portuguese station Moveni.

Although armed with passports signed by the District Governor, we were informed that we would under no circumstances be allowed to recross the frontier. Nor could we obtain permission to return to Lourenço Marques by train. The young Portuguese commandant, a mirror of courtesy, explained that we had either to await further orders there or walk back to the Bay, a distance of fifty miles.

After waiting for several hours we quietly boarded a train coming from Komatipoort, and managed to reach Lourenço Marques unobserved. We still believed that we would contrive to get back somehow sooner or later, but were soon cruelly undeceived. President Kruger, who was the guest of the District Governor, wrote to General Coetser at Komatipoort, asking him not to destroy the bridge and advising him to take refuge in Portuguese territory. Coetser himself, with the few of his men who had fairly decent horses, preferred to follow Botha, who by this time had begun his trek from Hectorspruit, and left General Pienaar in charge of Komatipoort.

Influenced by the arguments of the Portuguese—one of which was that, should the British cross the Portuguese frontier and take the Boers in the rear, Portugal would not be able to prevent it—and by the fact that the positions first chosen for the entrenchments lay within a mile of the frontier and therefore could not be occupied, a *Krygsraad* resolved to follow the President's advice. The bridge had already been mined, the guns placed in position, and everything made ready to give Pole-Carew and the Guards a worthy reception; but fate decided otherwise, and General Pienaar, with some two thousand men, crossed the frontier,—needless to say with what deep regret—thus reducing by one-fifth our forces in the field, a loss which would have been avoided had Steyn's advice been taken and guerilla warfare begun after Machadodorp.

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There was thenceforth nothing for us poor ship-wrecked wretches to do than to gaze impotently on our heroic brethren still struggling against the storm. The waves run high, but it is their duty to continue.

And they will continue. Not because they are sure of success, but because it is their duty.