

Sir John French eBook

Sir John French

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SIR JOHN FRENCH

CHAPTER I

EARLY DAYS

A Kentish Celt—A Rebellious Boy—Four Years in the
Navy—With the 19th Hussars—"Captain X Trees"—A Studious
Subaltern—Chafing at Home—The First Opportunity.

"If I don't end my days as a Field-Marshal it will not be for want of trying, and—well, I'm jolly well going to do it." In these words, uttered many years ago to a group of brother officers in the mess room of the 19th Hussars, Sir John French quite unconsciously epitomised his own character in a way no biographer can hope to equal. The conversation had turned upon luck, a word that curiously enough was later to be so intimately associated with French's name. One man had stoutly proclaimed that all promotion was a matter of luck, and French had claimed that only work and ability really counted in the end. Yet "French's luck" has become almost a service proverb—for those who have not closely studied his career. Luck is frequently a word used to explain our own failure and another man's success.

Not that success and John French could ever have been strangers. There are some happy natures whose destiny is never in doubt, Providence having apparently planned it half a century ahead. Sir John French is a striking instance of this. Destiny never had any doubt about the man. He was born to be a fighter. On his father's side he comes of the famous old Galway family of which Lord de Freyne, of French Park, Co. Roscommon, is now the head. By tradition the Frenches are a naval family, although

there have been famous soldiers as well as famous sailors amongst its members. There was, for instance, the John French who fought in the army of King William, leading a troop of the Enniskillen Dragoons at Aughrim in 1689.

Sir John French is himself the son of a sailor, Commander J.T.W. French, who on retiring from the Navy settled down on the beautiful little Kentish estate of Ripplevale, near Walmer. Here John Denton Pinkstone French was born on September 28, 1852, in the same year as his future colleague, General Joffre. His mother, a Miss Eccles, was the daughter of a Scotch family resident near Glasgow.

[Page Heading: *Playing with soldiers*]

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Of the boy's home life at Ripplevale very little is known. He was the sixth child and the only son of the family. Both his parents dying while he was quite young, he was brought up under the care of his sisters. But there is no reason to suppose that he was therefore spoiled; for one of these ladies shared in a remarkable degree the qualities of energy and determination which were to distinguish her brother. Young French's earliest education was largely guided by this gifted sister, who is now so well known in another field of warfare as Mrs. Despard.

It is extremely difficult to say what manner of boy the future Field-Marshal was. Only one fact emerges clearly. He was high-spirited and full of mischief. Everything that he did was done with the greatest enthusiasm, and already there were signs that he possessed an unusually strong will.

Inevitably games quickly took possession of his imagination. Very soon the war game had first place in his affections. He was perpetually playing with soldiers—a fascinating hobby which intrigued the curious mind of the rather silent child. French, in fact, was a very normal and healthy boy, with just a touch of thoughtfulness to mark him off from his fellows.

He was not, however, to enjoy the freedom of home life for very long. At an early age he was sent to a preparatory school at Harrow, which he left for Eastman's Naval College at Portsmouth. After the necessary "cramming" he passed the entrance examination to the Navy at the age of thirteen. In the following year (1866) he joined the *Britannia* as a cadet. Four years of strenuous naval work followed. But like another Field-Marshal-to-be, Sir Evelyn Wood, the boy was not apparently enamoured of the sea. As a result he decided to leave that branch of the service.

That action is typical of the man. He is ruthless with himself as well as with others. If the Navy were not to give scope for his ambition, then he must quit the Navy. Already, no doubt, his life-long hero, Napoleon, was kindling the young man's imagination. But the English Navy of those days gave little encouragement to the Napoleonic point of view. It was bound up with the sternest discipline and much red tape. If rumour speaks true young French was irritated by the almost despotic powers then possessed by certain naval officers. So he boldly decided at the age of eighteen to end one career and commence another.

To enter the sister service he had to stoop to what is dubbed the "back-door," in other words a commission in the militia. It seems rather remarkable that one of our most brilliant officers should have had this difficulty to face. Incidentally it is a curious sidelight on the system of competitive examinations. But there are several facts to remember. Sir John French's genius developed slowly. One does not figure him as ready, like Kitchener, at twenty-one, with a complete map of his career. In these days he was probably more interested in hunting than in soldiering. The man who is now proverbial for his devotion to the study of tactics was then very little of a book-worm.

Indeed he seems to have shown no special intellectual or practical abilities until much later in life.

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[Page Heading: *The "Dumpies"*]

In 1874 he was gazetted to the 8th Hussars, being transferred three weeks later to the 19th. At that time the 19th Hussars was scarcely a crack regiment. With two other regiments raised after the Indian mutiny it was nicknamed the "Dumpies," owing to the standard of height being lowered, and it had yet to earn the reputation which Barrow and French secured it. About John French the subaltern, as about John French the midshipman, history is silent. No fabulous legends have accumulated about him. Presumably the short, firmly-built young officer was regarded as normal and entirely *de rigueur* in his sporting propensities.

The subaltern of the 'eighties took himself much less seriously than his successor of today. The eternal drill and the occasional manoeuvres were conducted on well-worn and almost automatic principles. As a result, the younger officers found hunting and polo decidedly better sport. Few or none of them were military enthusiasts; and study did not enter largely into their programme. It entered into French's—but only in stray hours, often snatched by early rising, before the day's work—or sport—began.

Despite constant rumours to the contrary, there can be no question that French was a most spirited young officer and a thorough sportsman. He at once earned for himself the sobriquet of "Capt. X Trees," as a result of his being a "retired naval man." To this day among the very few remaining brother officers of his youth, he is still greeted as "Trees."

As might be expected, French showed no desire to pose as "the glass of fashion or the mould of form." He never attempted to cultivate the graces of the *beau sabreur*. His short square figure did not look well on horseback and probably never will. But he was admitted to be a capable horseman and to have "good hands." Although not keen on polo he was very fond of steeplechasing. Of his love for that sport there is ample proof in the fact that he trained and rode his own steeplechasers.

[Page Heading: *A difficult team*]

One of his best horses was a mare called "Mrs. Gamp," which he lent on one occasion to a brother subaltern—now Colonel Charles E. Warde, M.P. for Mid-Kent. Riding with his own spurs on French's mare, Colonel Warde was one of three out of a field of four hundred to live through a Warde Union run which was responsible for the death of six hunters before the day was over.

Young French also became a very good whip. Along with Colonel H.M.A. Warde—now the Chief Constable of Kent—he had a thrilling adventure in coach driving. When the regiment first started a coach it was necessary to bring it from Dublin to the Curragh. The two subalterns, neither of whom had ever driven four horses before, commandeered four chargers belonging to brother officers. One of the animals was a

notorious kicker. But they took them up to Dublin and drove the coach twenty-eight miles down to the Curragh next day, arriving there alive and with no broken harness!

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At that time French differed from his fellow officers probably rather in degree than in temperament. Although a very keen sportsman he did not put sport first. Colonel C.E. Warde, one of his closest friends, gives the following description of the man. "Although he never attempted to go to the Staff College he was continually studying military works, and often, when his brother subalterns were at polo or other afternoon amusements, he would remain in his room reading Von Schmidt, Jomini, or other books on strategy. I recollect once travelling by rail with him in our subaltern days, when after observing the country for some time, he broke out: 'There is where I should put my artillery.' 'There is where I should put my cavalry' and so on to the journey's end."

In spite of these evidences of a soldier's eye for country, there is nothing to show that French had developed any abnormal devotion for his work. He was interested but not absorbed. In 1880 a captaincy and his marriage probably did something to make him take his career more seriously. His wife, Lady French, was a daughter of Mr. R.W. Selby-Lowndes, of Bletchley, Bucks. They have two sons and a daughter.

A few months after his marriage he accepted an adjutancy in the Northumberland Yeomanry. For four uneventful years he was stationed at Newcastle, where the work was monotonous and the opportunities almost *nil*.

[Page Heading: THE WAITING GAME]

Naturally the young man fretted very much at being left behind with the Yeomanry when his regiment was ordered to embark for Egypt in 1882. And he never rested until he was allowed to follow it out in 1884. It was in many ways a new 19th which the young officer re-joined in Egypt. The regiment hurried out in 1882 had at last come under a commander of real genius in Colonel Percy Barrow, C.B., and in that commander French was to find his first real military inspiration. It is difficult to judge what his future might have been but for this one man and the Nile Expedition, which proved the turning point in French's career as it did in that of his regiment.

Then, as ever, French was a man who had to wait for his opportunities. He was thirty-two years of age before he saw this, his first piece of active service. Where Kitchener found, or made, opportunities for military experience, French was content to wait the turn of events. So it has been all through his life. He has never forestalled Destiny; he has simply accepted its call. But when an opportunity presented itself he always seized it, and the Nile Expedition was no exception to the rule. Major French, without Staff College training, without the usual diplomas, was to prove himself once and for all a master tactician.

CHAPTER II

WITH THE NILE EXPEDITION

A Forlorn Hope—Scouting in the Desert—The Battle of Abu Klea—Metammeh—The Death of Gordon—A Dangerous Retreat—“Major French and His Thirteen Troopers.”

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Sir John French's first experience of actual warfare was a bitter one. If ever the British Government bungled one of their military enterprises more thoroughly than another, it was the Nile Expedition of 1884-5. What began as a forlorn hope ended in complete failure, and in three short months French experienced the miseries of retreat, of failure, and of work under an invertebrate War Office.

To this day no one has ever justified the hidden processes of logic by which the Government responsible came to the conclusion that the Soudan must be evacuated. It is true that the Mahdi, Mohammed Ahmed, had won considerable successes against our forces since his appearance in 1881. But no army of any dimensions had ever been opposed to his "Divine powers." Why Gordon should have been entrusted with the evacuation is not so doubtful. W.T. Stead and other journalistic pundits conceived him to be the man for the task, however much Egypt's ruler, Lord Cromer, might differ from their verdict. So to Khartoum Gordon was sent with an all too small band of followers. Presumably the authorities imagined that the man who had worked miracles in China with neither men nor money would settle the Soudan on equally economical terms. But the Mahdi's black braves were other mettle than the yellow men, as Gordon himself well knew from his past experience in the Soudan.

[Page Heading: THE SLEEPER WAKES]

Reaching Khartoum on February 18, 1884, he quickly discovered how perilous the defeat of Baker Pasha at El-Teb had made his position. He at once warned his superiors, but nothing was done. In April he found Khartoum besieged, but even that did not startle the Home authorities from their lethargy. At length, however, the Government realised that to allow their General to perish at the hands of the Dervishes might be to forfeit their prestige in Egypt. Lord Wolseley was accordingly instructed to relieve Khartoum at all costs.

Those instructions were more easy to give than to obey. Wolseley decided to send a flying column across the desert from Korti to Metammeh and thence to Khartoum; and a second up the Nile. With the luckless flying column went part of the 19th Hussars, under Lieutenant-Colonel Barrow. Major French was second in command.

On December 30, General Herbert Stewart's little force, with its thousand odd men and two thousand camels, was on parade for inspection near Korti. At first there was some doubt as to how the camels would stand the attack of the Mahdi's wild warriors.

"In order to test the steadiness of our camels as regarded noise and firing, the 19th Hussars one day at brigade drill charged on the unprotected mass of camels, cheering and yelling. Everybody expected to see them break their ropes and career wildly over the desert. The only result was that one solitary camel struggled to his feet, looked round and knelt down again; the others never moved an eyelid.

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"That was satisfactory: and as firing into them with blank cartridges and over them with ball had already been tried ... with no visible result, the general opinion was that they would stand charging niggers or anything else in creation with equanimity. Sad to say we came to the conclusion that it was want of brains *pur et simple* that caused our steeds to behave thus docilely: any other animal with a vestige of brain would have been scared to death, but, as it was, no one regretted their deficiency." [1]

[Page Heading: THE KITCHENER WAY]

Before the corps set out from Korti, Sir Herbert Stewart sent for the chief men at Ambukol who knew the desert route. Showing them money he asked whether they would act as guides. This they refused to do. Said Stewart, "You will come anyway. If you like to ride to Metammeh tied on your camels well and good; if you prefer not being lashed on, you will get these nice presents." They agreed to go! So they were sent to ride ahead of the column, guarded by some of the 19th, who had orders to shoot if they attempted to fly. But no such effort was made.

The rest of the 19th had more arduous work to do. During the whole weary march they were far ahead of the column scouting.

"On coming to a plain with hills in the distance, you'd see various specks on the tops of the furthest hills, and with the help of your glasses discover them to be the 19th. Sir Herbert (Stewart) was immensely pleased with them and pointed them out to me as being the very acme of Light Cavalry." [2]

The column itself was almost half-a-mile in length, even when by night it marched in close order. It was a strange sight to see the camels, with long necks outstretched, swaying across the desert towards the horizon, both the men and their ostrich-like steeds enveloped in a huge cloud of dust. A wind storm arose more than once, flinging blinding clouds of sand in the men's faces. On New Year's Eve, however, the soldiers shouted themselves hoarse with "Auld Lang Syne" as they plodded wearily along the moonlit desert.

Very soon the cavalry had an opportunity to distinguish themselves. On the following day a halt was called "to allow the indefatigable 19th to find out the reason of a faint light burning far off on the plain.... They returned with several natives, a string of camels and several loads of dates. They had found ... the natives bivouacked for the night, surprised them, captured as much loot as possible and bolted the rest." [3]

After a fortnight's marching the column came in touch with the enemy at Abu Klea. At this time French's work was peculiarly dangerous. He spent night after night in the desert in solitary watching and waiting for the Dervishes.



On January 16 the 19th Hussars were sent to reconnoitre. They reported that the Mahdi had mustered considerable force between the British camp and the wells. Stewart determined to fight his way through to the wells at any cost. Leaving a very small force to hold his camp, he formed his main body into a square, in which form it advanced. No sooner had the advance begun than the enemy opened a terrific fire. Yet the square pushed on, despite constant halts necessary to assure its formation remaining intact, as the guns were hauled over the rutty and uneven surface of the desert.

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Soon, however, the Dervishes rushed to the attack, and Stewart found himself outnumbered by four to one. The attack was delivered with appalling force. The Arabs' shouts as they rushed forward have been described by an eye-witness as like the thunder of the sea.

[Page Heading: THE BROKEN SQUARE]

Their onslaught was so sudden that the square was broken, the heavy camel corps suffering specially severely. So did the naval brigade whose solitary Gardner gun jammed at the critical moment. When Lord Charles Beresford was attempting to clear it his assistants were all speared and he himself was knocked senseless under the gun. Somehow or other, with much difficulty, he managed to get back to the square.

During the afternoon, however, the Arabs' attack began to diminish in violence. Here was the cavalry's opportunity. They charged the enemy with great impetuosity. Gradually the Dervishes were driven off by the aid of the artillery. But there were the wells still to capture, and the detachment of the 19th Hussars was given that important mission. They were able to accomplish it without resistance. That night the thirsty force was able to drink water again—albeit yellow in colour and weird of taste.

After a brief rest the advance on Metammeh was continued, with the Hussars still in the van. On the following night there was a scene of wild disorder. It was very dark and camels began to stumble and lose their places in the long grass.

The men were so weary that many went to sleep and even fell from their camels, which wandered along unguided and strayed far from the column. The night was extraordinarily dark, and there was no moon to light the way for the exhausted column through the wild and pathless country, which would have been difficult to traverse even in broad daylight. At times it was discovered that the troops were going in a circle and the rear guard found itself in front of the force.

When at last open ground was reached the enemy were found to be in strength. Once again a fight was inevitable for the tired force. So Stewart had a zeriba of camel saddles, boxes, etc., hastily flung up to protect his men. By this time the horses of the 19th Hussars were so done up as to render them useless. French's regiment, therefore, was left with some artillery, under Colonel Barrow, in the zeriba, along with the war correspondents, who had tried in vain to make a dash back to Abu Klea.

[Page Heading: THE GUARDS AT ABU KLEA]

The rest of the force once more formed into a square to meet the enemy's attack. It was like a tornado when it came.

With a headlong rush eight hundred spearmen, led by emirs on magnificent horses, hurled themselves upon the British square. Without a tremor the troops awaited their onslaught, cheering loudly as they saw the fluttering banners of the enemy approach. The brunt of the attack was on the left angle of the front face, where the Guards and Mounted Infantry received the charge, at a distance of three hundred yards, with a fire so deadly that the front ranks of the yelling Dervishes were mown down. The battle was over within a few moments. The enemy never got within thirty yards of the square, but with broken ranks and wild confusion the spearmen fled, leaving two hundred and fifty of their dead upon the field.

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This rapid victory was largely due to the garrison in the zeriba, who made very effective use of their guns. The enemy left two hundred and fifty dead on the field. Yet not a single British soldier was either killed or wounded in actually repelling the charge. Among those seriously wounded later in the day was General Stewart, who died of his wounds a few days later. Almost his last words to Colonel Barrow were, "Take care of the 19th Hussars; they have done well."

But all this gallantry was vain. While the force was still near Metammeh, news came of the fall of Khartoum. An officer who was with him when the blow fell has recorded that he never saw French so profoundly moved as he was on the receipt of these black tidings. With Khartoum fallen the mission of the flying column was ended. Its position indeed had become extremely precarious. The problem before the authorities was now not how to relieve Khartoum, but how to relieve the Relieving Expedition.

It cannot be said that they solved it very successfully. Buller was sent up to Gubat to take command. With him he brought only the Royal Irish and West Kent Regiments to reinforce the column. And his instructions were to seize Metammeh and march on Berber!

[Page Heading: HIS FIRST RETREAT]

Once on the scene, however, Buller soon saw the hopelessness of the situation. Considering that the fall of Khartoum had released a host of the Mahdi's followers, the storming of Metammeh was now a doubly difficult enterprise; an attack on Berber would have been simply suicidal. Buller accordingly determined on a retreat.

On February 13 he evacuated Gubat. On March 1 his advance guard had reached Korti. In this retreat the 19th Hussars again did splendid work. For days on end the column was submitted to that unceasing pelting of bullets which Buller characterised in one of his laconic dispatches as "annoying." But Barrow, the Hussars' chief, was a master of the art of reconnoitring. Time and again he and his men were able to deceive the enemy as to the direction of the column's march. It was then that French had his first experience in "masterly retreat."

How sorely the column was pressed may be shown from one incident. While he was preparing to evacuate Abu Klea, Buller received information to the effect that the enemy was advancing upon him with a force of eight thousand men. He determined upon a desperate measure. He left standing the forts which he had intended to demolish and filled up the larger wells.

A desert well, to the Oriental, is almost sacred, and never even in savage warfare would such a course have been adopted. But Buller knew that the absence of water was the only thing that could check the rush of the oncoming hordes, and this deed, terrible as it may have seemed to the Eastern mind, was his sole means of covering his retreat.

Orders were therefore given to fill up all the principal wells with stones and rubbish. It was certainly an effectual measure, for the enemy would be delayed for many hours, perhaps days, before he could restore the wells and obtain sufficient water to enable him to continue in pursuit of the British force which was so hopelessly outnumbered. In the circumstances Buller could not be blamed for saving British lives at the price of Oriental tradition.

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Sir Evelyn Wood was also sent with reinforcements from Korti to strengthen the force at Gakdul Wells. There he met French for the first time. "I saw him," Sir Evelyn relates, "when our people were coming back across the desert after our failure, the whole force depressed by the death of Gordon. I came on him about a hundred miles from the river—the last man of the last section of the rear guard! We were followed by bands of Arabs. They came into our bivouac on the night of which I am speaking, and the night following they carried off some of our slaughter cattle." [4]

[Page Heading: MENTIONED IN DISPATCHES]

Major French was quickly able to distinguish himself in the retreat. For Buller was a believer in cavalry and used it wherever possible. In his dispatch on the retreat he paid French the following handsome tribute:

"I wish expressly to remark on the excellent work that has been done by a small detachment of the 19th Hussars, both during our occupation of Abu Klea and during our retirement. Each man has done the work of ten; and it is not too much to say that the force owes much to Major French and his thirteen troopers."

The flying column occupied just two months in its fruitless expedition. But no more trying experience was ever packed into so short a time. On that march across the Bayuda desert history has only one verdict. It is that pronounced by Count von Moltke on the men who accomplished it—"They were not soldiers but heroes." None of the men earned the title more thoroughly than Major French and his troopers. "During the whole march from Korti," says Colonel Biddulph, "the entire scouting duty had been taken by the 19th Hussars, so that each day they covered far more ground than the rest of the force." [5] The enemy themselves came to respect the little force of cavalymen. "Even the fierce Baggara horsemen appeared unwilling to cross swords with our Hussars," wrote one who accompanied the column. Major French and his regiment had firmly established their reputation.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] *With the Camel Corps up the Nile*, by Count Gleichen, by permission of Messrs. Chapman and Hall.

[2] *With the Camel Corps up the Nile*, by Count Gleichen, by permission of Messrs. Chapman and Hall.

[3] *With the Camel Corps up the Nile*, by Count Gleichen, by permission of Messrs. Chapman and Hall.

[4] For this and much other valuable information the writer is indebted to Field-Marshal Sir Evelyn Wood.

[5] *The Nineteenth and their Times*, by Col. J. Biddulph, by permission of Mr. John Murray.

CHAPTER III

YEARS OF WAITING

Second in Command—Maintaining the Barrow tradition—The Persistent Student—Service in India—Retires on Half-pay—Renewed Activities—Rehearsing for South Africa.

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After the success in the Soudan Major French had not long to wait for promotion. A few days after General Buller's tribute he was appointed Lieutenant-Colonel of his regiment. So that he came back to England as second in command of the 19th Hussars.

From this time onward he became entirely absorbed in his profession. It is true that he had always been interested in it; but there is no question that Barrow was the man who had shown him the fascination of scientific generalship. While making the reputation of the 19th, Barrow had unhappily lost his own life. He died as the result of re-opening an internal wound while tent-pegging in the following year. French determined to carry on his work, and at Norwich the training of the 19th Hussars rapidly became famous throughout the Army.

One young officer, now General Bewicke Copley,[6] was attached to the 19th from another regiment in order to study their methods. He tells how he was greatly struck by the brilliant work which French was doing. His strict discipline and his terrific ideas of what training meant, may have struck some of his young subalterns as scarcely yielding them the ideal existence of the *beau sabreur*. Probably they were right; but they were being licked into a state of amazing efficiency.

In 1887 it fell to Sir Evelyn Wood's lot to inspect the regiment. Pointing to French, he asked his Colonel, "Of what value is that man?" The reply was, "He is for ever reading military books." And he has been reading them ever since!

A couple of years later he attained the rank of Colonel, with command of his regiment. Very soon Sir Evelyn was to discover the answer to his question. For he was anxious at that time to introduce the squadron system. French was the one commanding officer who carried it out. In spite of the very large amount of extra work it entailed, he was willing to take any number of recruits and train them in the new method. That method was finally allowed to lapse, although it has been adopted in another form for infantry regiments. It is typical of French that he was willing to slave over the unpopular way of doing things, while other men adhered to the traditional and official methods.

[Page Heading: THE AUTHORITIES ASTONISHED]

While French was still busy elaborating new theories and testing them at manoeuvres, his regiment was ordered to India. There he met one of his future colleagues in South Africa, Sir George White. He was also fortunate in working with one of the most brilliant of all British cavalry trainers, Sir George Luck.

The latter considered that the cavalry regiments in India required drastic reorganisation. French was ready to carry it out. To increase the efficiency of the cavalry extensive manoeuvres were organised. French acted as Chief of the Staff to General Luck, and astonished the authorities by the way in which "he conducted troops dispersed over a

wide area of ground, allotting to each section its appointed work and bringing the complete movement to a brilliant conclusion.”

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But the Government's recognition of his brilliant work was by no means encouraging. In 1893 Colonel French was actually retired on half-pay! It is an admirable system which allows the middle-aged officer to make way for youth in the British army; but the spectacle of a French despatched into civil obscurity at the ripe age of forty-one, has its tragic as well as its comic side. That it acutely depressed him we know. For a time he was almost in despair as to his career.

Actually, however, these two years "out of action" were probably invaluable to him—and to the army. For the first time he had the opportunity for unrestrained study; and much of that time was spent, no doubt, in thinking out the theories of cavalry action which were yet to bring him fame and our arms success.

Much of his most valuable work dates from this period of enforced retirement. He was present, for instance, during the cavalry manoeuvres of 1894 in Berkshire. He took part in the manoeuvres as a brigadier. His chief Staff Officer, by the way, was Major R.S.S. (now Lieut.-General Sir Robert) Baden-Powell, while the aide-de-camp to the Director-General of manoeuvres was Captain (now Lieut.-General Sir) Douglas Haig. Here French formulated what was to be one of the axioms of his future cavalry tactics. One of those present at headquarters has recorded his remarks.

[Page Heading: THE FUNCTION OF CAVALRY]

"There is," said French, "no subject upon which more misconception exists, even among service men, than as regards the real role of cavalry in warfare. My conception of the duties and functions of the mounted arm is not to cut and to hack and to thrust at your enemy wherever and however he may be found. The real business of cavalry is so to manoeuvre your enemy as to bring him within effective range of the corps artillery of your own side for which a position suitable for battle would previously have been selected."[7]

It is difficult to conceive a more clear and concise statement of the function of cavalry. It differs widely from the rather grim utterance of the late Sir Baker Russell, who stated that the duty of cavalry was to look pretty during time of peace, and get killed in war.

Happily Colonel French's theorising was not without its effect. The Berkshire manoeuvres showed a number of flagrant shortcomings in our cavalry. Several military men, ably seconded by *The Morning Post*, insisted on the reorganisation of that arm. After the customary protest, officialdom bowed to the storm.

French's old chief, Sir George Luck, was brought back from India to institute reforms. The first thing that the new Inspector-General of Cavalry insisted upon was a revised Cavalry Drill Book. Who was to write it? The answer was not easy. But eventually Colonel French was called in from his retirement and installed in the Horse Guards for that purpose.

The result was a masterpiece of lucid explanation and terse precision. The book evolved into something much more than a mere manual of drill. For it is also a treatise on cavalry tactics, a guide to modern strategy, and a complete code of regulations for the organisation of mounted troops.

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No sooner was the book issued than another problem arose. Who was to carry out all these drastic alterations? Once again, recourse was had to the half-pay Colonel in Kent! Who so fit to materialise reforms as the man who had conceived them? So in 1895 Colonel French was ensconced in the War Office as Assistant Adjutant-General of Cavalry. There were great reforms instituted.

British cavalry was placed on a brigade establishment at home stations. Which means that, for the first time, three regiments were grouped into a brigade and placed under the command of a staff colonel, who was entirely responsible for their training. In the summer months the regiments were massed for combined training.

In spite of the revolution he was accomplishing, it is doubtful whether French was at all happy at the War Office. He is essentially a man of action. Unlike Kitchener, he prefers execution to organisation, and he probably chafed horribly over the interminable disentangling of knots which is efficient organisation. His one consolation was the solution every night before he left his desk of a refreshing problem in tactics.

[Page Heading: FROM STOOL TO SADDLE]

There are endless stories of his pacing up and down that back room in Pall Mall like a caged lion. Like Mr. Galsworthy's Ferrand he hates to do "round business on an office stool." His temperament is entirely dynamic. Everything static and stay-at-home is utter boredom to him. Probably no soldier ever showed the qualities and the limitations of the man of action in more vivid contrast.

His trials, however, were not of long duration. So soon as the brigade system had been fully organised he was given command of one of the units which he had created—the Second Cavalry Brigade at Canterbury. Here he was able to achieve one of his most notable successes. It happened during the 1898 manoeuvres. As commander of a brigade, French was chosen to lead Buller's force in the mimic campaign. His opponent was General Talbot, an older officer who worked on the stereo-typed methods. The antiquity of his antagonist's ideas gave French his opportunity. He made such a feature of reconnaissance that the experts declared his tactics to be hopelessly rash. But by the mobility of his force he continually checked and out-maneuvred his opponent—appearing in the most unexpected places in the most unaccountable ways.

[Page Heading: THE CRITICS ROUTED]

At the end of the manoeuvres the fighting centred round Yarmbury Castle. All day French had been harassing General Talbot's forces. At last, by a rapid movement, his cavalry surprised several batteries of the enemy's horse artillery. He commanded them to dismount and made the whole force his prisoners. When the umpires upheld his claim, the experts aforesaid were given considerable food for thought.

The general conclusion was that luck had contributed to his success, and that in actual warfare such recklessness might lead to disaster. Consequently, French's opponents were justified to some extent in their insistence that the old methods were best. Indeed, his success only strengthened prejudice in certain quarters.

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Happily, however, the original mind won the day. And in 1899, French was given command of the first cavalry brigade at Aldershot, with the rank of Major-General. This is the highest post open to a cavalry officer in his own sphere during the time of peace. Thus French's critics were finally routed, and he was free at last to train British cavalry according to his own brilliant and original ideas.

FOOTNOTES:

[6] To General Bewicke Copley the writer is indebted for much kind assistance in writing this chapter.

[7] Quoted in *M.A.P.*, March 3, 1900.

CHAPTER IV

ELANDSLAAGTE AND RIETFontein

The Unknown Commander of Cavalry—Who is General French?—Advancing without Reinforcements—"This is your Show, French"—The White Flag—The Chess-Player—The Victor in Anecdote.

From the end of the South African War until the outbreak of the European War the British nation had never taken its army seriously. At best it had shown very tepid interest in its work. Some brief Indian skirmishing might momentarily flash the names of a few regiments or a stray general upon the public mind. But for the most part we were content to take the army very much for granted, forgetful of Mr. Dooley's sage pronouncement that "Standing armies are useful in time of war." Prior to the Boer War the public ignorance on the subject was even more appalling.

[Page Heading: A NEW STAR]

At the opening of the South African campaign there was a good deal of vague discussion as to who should have the cavalry command in Natal. But General French was not one of the officers prominently mentioned. Yet, he had already risen to a position analogous to that which General von Bernhardt then occupied in the German army. In any other European country his name would have been practically a household word. Even to the English newspaper writer it was a paradox and a problem.

"Who is this General French?" people asked one another, when news of his first victories came to hand. Scarcely anyone was able to answer the question. One finds curious corroboration of the prevailing ignorance of French's career in a society journal of that date. In January of 1900, a then most popular social medium was almost pathetically confessing its perturbation on the point. After giving a description of

General French, the writer goes on rather in wrath than in apology—"Since I wrote the above paragraph, I have found a letter in an Irish paper, which declares that the French of whom I have just spoken is not the hero of Colesberg. The French of whom I have spoken is George Arthur (*sic*), while the Colesberg French is John Denton Pinkstone French. Of John Denton Pinkstone French I have found no details in any of the ordinary books of reference. Probably some correspondent will supply me with the details." There was a lapse or six weeks before any further information was forthcoming.

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But there was one man who knew his French. General Sir Redvers Buller had found his worth on the Nile Expedition, in repeated autumn manoeuvres at home, and in many a long discussion on military topics. His casting vote, therefore, made French Commander of Cavalry in Natal.

Major Arthur Griffiths has supplied an admirable little sketch of French's appearance at this time. "He is short and thick, and of rather ungainly figure. Although he can stick on a horse as well as anyone, rides with a strong seat, and is indefatigable in the saddle, he is not at all a pretty horseman. His mind is more set on essentials, on effective leadership with all it means, rather than what soldiers call 'Spit and polish': he is sound in judgment, clear-headed, patient, taking everything quietly, the rough with the smooth; but he is always on the spot, willing to wait, and still more ready to act, when the opportunity comes, with tremendous effect."

That description is true in general, if not in detail. For patience is certainly not one of French's personal, if it be one of his military virtues. A close friend of his agreed to the word "tempestuous," as most nicely describing his temperament. Like every good soldier, in fact, French has a temper, for which he is none the worse. If apt to flame out suddenly, it quickly burns itself out, leaving no touch of resentment in the scorched.

[Page Heading: RECALLED TO LADYSMITH]

Ten days after the Boer ultimatum had been delivered to the British agent at Pretoria, French was in Ladysmith. He arrived there, to be pedantically accurate, on October 20, 1899, at 5 a.m. At 11 a.m. he was in the saddle, leading a column out to recapture the railway station at Elandslaagte, which, with a newly-arrived train of troops, the Boers had seized overnight. No sooner had his men begun to locate the enemy, than French was recalled to Ladysmith. Reluctantly the men turned back to reinforce Sir George White's small garrison, for what he feared might prove a night attack. Soon afterwards, however, news of General Symons' victory at Talana came in to cheer the men after their fruitless sortie.

At once Sir George White saw his opportunity. It was the Boers, and not the British, who now stood in peril of a sudden attack. There was little sleep for French's men that night. At 4 a.m. next morning they were again on the march for Elandslaagte.

About eight o'clock on one of those perfect mist-steeped summer mornings that presage a day of burning heat, French's force came in sight of the Boer laagers. As the mist cleared the enemy could be spied in large numbers about the station and the colliery buildings and over the yellow veldt. French ordered the Natal Battery to turn its little seven-pounder on the station. One of the first shots told; and the Boers came tumbling out of their shelter, leaving the trainload of British soldiers, captured the previous night, free to join their comrades. Soon afterwards the station was in the hands of the British, as the result of a dashing cavalry charge.

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But the Boers were only temporarily dislodged. Their long range guns very soon shelled the station from the neighbouring kopjes with deadly effect. French was compelled to withdraw. The stupidity of the enemy, in leaving the telegraph wires uncut, enabled him immediately to acquaint Sir George White with the peril of his situation. White's orders were emphatic: "The enemy must be beaten and driven off. Time of great importance." The necessary reinforcements were hurried to the spot.

[Page Heading: IN HIS ELEMENT]

French did not wait for their arrival before striking at the enemy. The Light Horse, under Colonel Scott Chisholme, quickly took possession of a low ridge near the railway station, which fronted the main line of the enemy's kopjes. While he held this ridge French had the satisfaction of seeing infantry, cavalry and artillery coming up the railway line to his assistance. In the late afternoon his force numbered something like three thousand five hundred men, outnumbering the enemy by more than two to one.

Those who ask why so many men were required, do not understand the position in which the British force found itself. The enemy were entrenched on a series of high, boulder-strewn tablelands, which offered almost perfect cover. Between these tablelands and French's force lay a wide and partly scrubless stretch of veldt. Over that terrible exposed slope his men must go, before they could come within useful range of the enemy. French was faced with a most perilous and difficult enterprise. However, that is precisely what French likes. He rose to the situation with ready resource. It was not easy to locate the exact position of the enemy ensconced amid these covering hills. So in the afternoon he ordered a simultaneous frontal and flank attack. Just which was front and which was flank it was for his lieutenants to discover. Sir Ian Hamilton's instructions to the infantry were brief but decisive. "The enemy are there," he said, "and I hope you will shift them out before sunset—in fact, I know you will."

When the action had fairly commenced, Sir George White and his staff galloped over from Ladysmith. French approached, saluted, and asked for instructions. The chivalrous White's only reply was, "Go on, French; this is your show." All the afternoon he stayed on the field, watching the progress of events, and approving French's dispositions.

The battle proved to be, in many ways, one of the most spectacular in history. For as the infantry advanced, under a steady hail of shell and bullets, the sky began to darken. The Boer positions stood silhouetted by stray puffs of white smoke against a lowering cumulus of clouds. While the artillery on both sides shook the ground with an inferno of sound, the storm burst. The thunder of the heavens became a spasmodic chorus to the roar of the guns. One correspondent has described how he found himself mechanically humming the "Ride of the Valkyries"

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that was being played on such a dread orchestra. Slipping and stumbling, cursing and cheering, the Devons crept forward across the sodden grass. Many of the bravest, among them Chisholme, went down on that plain of death. Far beyond the level veldt there were something like 800 feet to climb in the face of Mauser and shrapnel. At length, however, the top of the ridge was reached. There stood the three guns that had wrought such havoc, now silent among the corpses of the frock-coated burghers who had served them.

[Page Heading: THE WHITE FLAG TRICK]

The Boers still kept up the fight, however, on the further side of the plateau. The cheering Gordons, the Manchesters and the Devons now flung themselves at the remnant of the foe. Suddenly a white flag was seen to flutter defeat from a kopje beyond the laager. On the instant the soldiers paused at the surprising notes of the "Cease fire," followed by the "Retire." For a moment they wavered between discipline and dismay. At that instant from a small kopje east of the nek came a violent burst of firing as some fifty of the enemy made a last effort to regain their position.

There was a momentary panic in the British lines. But a little bugler shouted "Retire be damned," and sounded the "Advance." Gradually the infantry recovered, and the Gordons and Devons, rushing on the enemy, took a fearful revenge for the dastardly trick.

French had scored his first victory within a day of his arrival. What wonder if men called him "French the lucky?" From now onwards that tradition was to cling to his name. But a great deal more than luck went to the winning of Elandslaagte. Had French not advanced his men throughout in open formation, the day might never have been his. It has been said that he was our only general to master the Boer methods. He was certainly the first and the most able imitator of those methods. But he was prepared to meet them before he ever stepped on South African soil. For his whole theory of cavalry tactics is based on the realisation that massive formations are now hopelessly out of date.

[Page Heading: LUCK OR BRAINS]

One of the newspaper correspondents[8] happened to run across French twice during the battle. He tells how at the end of the engagement he met the General, who had come along the ridge in the fighting line of the Manchesters and Gordons, and offered him his congratulations on the day. He adds: "Last time I had met him was when the artillery on both sides were hard at it; he appeared then more like a man playing a game of chess than a game of war, and was not too busy to sympathise with me on the

badness of the light when he saw me trying to take snap-shots of the Boer shells bursting amid the Imperial Light Horse near us.”

French’s luck lay in his ability to see his opportunities and grasp them. But the soldier will never be convinced on that point, even if French himself attempt his conversion. For him the British leader has remained “The luckiest man in the army” ever since Elandslaagte. Yet in a letter to Lady French after the engagement he had written, “I never thought I would come out alive.”

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As frequently happened in the South African campaign, success could not be followed up. Having cleared the railway line, French was unable to garrison his position, and returned next morning to Ladysmith. A couple of days later he was again in action, and again he was successful. It had become necessary to keep the way open for General Yule and his jaded forces now in retreat from Dundee. White determined to sally out and distract the enemy. Once again the heavy share of the work fell on French and his cavalry.

Marching out from the town towards Modder Spruit they found the enemy holding a range of hills about seven miles from Ladysmith.

Flanked by the artillery, and supported from the rear by rifle fire, the infantry advanced to a convenient ridge from which the Boer position might be shelled. There they were joined by the field and mountain batteries, whose well-directed fire played great havoc among the enemy.

During the engagement one costly mistake was made. The Gloucesters on reaching the summit of the slope, attempted to descend on the other side. Their advancing lines were ploughed down by a deadly fire. "In the first three minutes," said an eye-witness, "Colonel Wilford, who was commanding the regiment, had fallen shot through the head, and a number of the men lay dead and dying about him. So fierce was the attack that no living thing could have remained upon the exposed slope, which boasted not even a shred of cover of any kind." Slowly and silently the Gloucesters retired.

By two o'clock the infantry fire had ceased, and White had received news that Yule was nearing Ladysmith in safety. He therefore decided to withdraw his troops. This was no easy matter, for the Boers, instead of relinquishing their position, had merely retired for a short distance. The retreat, however, was safely carried out, thanks largely to the masterly fashion in which French's cavalry covered the retirement.

From a military point of view the engagement would scarcely be called important. But from a strategic point of view it was invaluable. It certainly saved General Yule's force, which the Boers would otherwise have cut off on its way to Ladysmith. This would scarcely have been difficult, for the column was in no condition to fight. That it covered twenty-three miles without food, water, or rest before nightfall in its exhausted condition was in itself remarkable.

[Page Heading: THE ONLY GENERAL]

This was the last successful engagement that the British forces were to fight for many a day. But that was not French's fault. In the first week after his arrival he had scored two distinct successes and won for himself a reputation among the Boers. He was indeed the only British general for whom they at that time expressed the very slightest respect.

In a week his name became a by-word among them. A soldier[9] has recorded how, when towns or railway stations were captured, our men would find allusions

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to French chalked on the wall. Thus: "We are not fighting the English—they don't count—we are only fighting the 'French.'" Quite early in the campaign this inscription was found on the wall of a Boer farm house: "Why are we bound to win? Because although we have only 90,000 burghers, that means 90,000 generals—but the English, though they have 200,000 soldiers, have only one General—and he is French." That was in the days before Roberts and Kitchener were on the scene.

But the Boers were not alone in their appreciation of French. One of the authorities of the German General Staff wrote of him "His (French's) name was one of those most dreaded by the enemy," and "he impressed his personality on the troops." Perhaps the best description of the man ever penned, however, came from the brilliant American journalist, Julian Ralph. "As to his personality, the phrase 'The square little General' would serve to describe him in army circles without a mention of his name.

"He is quiet, undemonstrative, easy, and gentle. When you are under his command you don't notice him, you don't think about him—unless you are a soldier, and then you are glad you are there." [10]

FOOTNOTES:

[8] The correspondent referred to is Mr. George Lynch.

[9] "A.D.C." *The Regiment*.

[10] In the *Daily Mail*.

CHAPTER V

THE TIDE TURNS

White's Dash from Ladysmith—Nicholson's Nek—The Reverse at Lombard's Kop—A Cavalry Exploit—French's Dramatic Escape from Ladysmith.

So far the tide of battle had flowed fairly equally between the two armies. Thanks to French, White had won the two engagements which he had to undertake in order to save Yule's column. In Ladysmith he had now an admirably proportioned force of 10,000 men, quite adequate for the town's defence. Across the Atlantic an Army Corps was hastening to his succour. He had only to sit still and wait in Ladysmith, fortifying it with all the ingenuity that time would permit.

Unfortunately he was not content to sit still and wait behind his entrenchments. He determined not to be hemmed in without a struggle. Be it remembered that at that time the British commanders had not fully realised the numbers, the equipment and the intrepidity of their opponents. The traditional chastening of experience was still wanting. As Napier has it, "In the beginning of each war England has to seek in blood the knowledge necessary to ensure success; and, like the fiend's progress towards Eden, her conquering course is through chaos followed by death."

It was a very beautiful if a rather optimistic plan of attack that White arranged for the morning of October 30. He divided his forces into three columns. During the night of the 29th Colonel Carleton, with the Irish Fusiliers and the Gloucesters, was to advance upon and seize a long ridge called Nicholson's Nek, some six miles north of Ladysmith. This would protect his left wing. On the right flank the infantry were to advance under cover of French's cavalry and mounted infantry, while the artillery was to advance in the centre.

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Provided that all went well the plan was of course superb. No sooner had the main army won their action at Lombard's Cop than it would swing round to the right and wedge the Boers in between its artillery and the force on Nicholson's Nek. But suppose anything happened to Carleton? Or suppose that the main action was lost? In either case disaster would be inevitable. In the event, French was alone able to stick to his time table. Misfortune befell both Carleton on the left, and Grimwood on the right.

[Page Heading: THE MULES BOLT]

At 10.0 p.m. Carleton was on the march; and two and a half hours later Grimwood's brigade had set out eastward. By some mistake two of his battalions followed the artillery to the left instead of taking the infantry route. Of that error Grimwood remained in ignorance until he reached his destination near the south eastern flank of Long Hill towards dawn. Soon afterwards the Gordon Highlanders were amazed to find an officer in their ranks from Carleton's column, jaded and spent. He reported that all the mules of his battery had bolted and had not been recovered.

The day had begun with a double disaster. Grimwood's force was not all at White's disposal; Carleton's was not to appear at all. Never had a general's plans gone more thoroughly agley.

Of the unequal engagement which ensued little need be said here. A ludicrously insufficient force was attempting to encircle a larger and better equipped one. The result was not long in doubt. Although White's forty-two guns pounded away bravely, they were no match for the heavy artillery of the enemy. One huge Creusot gun had been dragged to the top of Pepworth Hill whence it threw a 96lb. shell a distance of four miles. There were also several 40 lb. howitzers which hopelessly outranged the British guns.

From a front over eight miles in extent there poured in a converging artillery fire against which our guns could do nothing. Gradually the right flank was pushed back along with the centre; and the left flank was now non-existent. During the afternoon the inevitable retirement took place, under the Creusot's shells. Had not Captain Hedworth Lambton rapidly silenced the gun on Pepworth Hill with his naval battery, opportunely arrived at the critical moment, the retreat might well have been a rout. As it was the tired force which wandered back to Ladysmith had left 300 men on the field.

Irrecoverable disaster had overtaken Carleton's column. While breasting Nicholson's Nek in the darkness the men were surprised at the sudden clattering by of a Boer picquet. The transport mules, panic-stricken, fled *en masse*, wrecking the column as they stampeded down the hillside, felling men as they went. It was a gunless, ammunitionless and weary column which the Boers surprised in the early morning. The end was the surrender of the force to the enemy.

[Page Heading: A BRILLIANT SUCCESS]

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The British position was now serious. Nothing could prevent Sir George White and his forces from being cooped in either Colenso or Ladysmith. But it is typical of French that he found a last opportunity of out-manoeuvring the Boers before leaving Ladysmith. In the battle of Lombard's Cop his cavalry had taken but a small part. Had some of them, however, been sent with Carlton's column to keep it in touch with the base, the issue of its enterprise might possibly have been different.

A couple of days afterwards, on November 2, French found an opportunity to score. The Boers had moved round our lines and posted their guns in a very advantageous position. White therefore ordered a bombardment by the naval guns to which the Boers replied. Whilst they were so engaged French crept round behind Bester's Hill, where the Boer commander had a large camp. Before Joubert realised what the movement meant French was upon him. Field artillery, along with the naval guns, supported his advance. While this double fire was distracting the Boers, French stormed their laager. The enemy fled, leaving their camp and all its equipments to French. This brilliant little success was practically a cavalry exploit, and it was typical of much that was to follow.

It now became obvious that Ladysmith was becoming completely invested. The Boer lines which had been three miles from the town were creeping nearer. Assuredly the belligerent town was no place for a cavalry officer.

[Page Heading: THE ESCAPE]

French determined to leave Ladysmith. It would not be easy to break through the lines of the net that was closing round the city. Whether or no the railway was still open was uncertain. When French's aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Milbanke, now Sir John Milbanke, V.C., asked the station-master whether a special train could get through to Pietermaritzburg, that worthy indignantly scorned the idea. With the Boers at Colenso it would certainly be madness—a fool's errand. Milbanke, however, used persuasions which resulted in an effort being made to run the gauntlet. That evening an engine and a few carriages duly drew up at the station. Very soon French's staff was aboard. As the train was about to start a short and agile elderly officer might have been seen to dash across the platform into the last carriage, where he ensconced himself beneath a seat lest the train be stopped and searched. Very soon bullets were rattling through the carriage windows, and it was an excessively uncomfortable journey that the British General and his staff endured. But they were at last free to carry out fresh services for their country. Five months were to pass before another train crossed these metals.

CHAPTER VI

THE CAMPAIGN ROUND COLESBERG



The Fog of War—A Perilous Situation—Damming “The Flowing Tide”—Shows His Genius as a Commander—A Campaign in Miniature—Hoisting Guns on Hilltops—The Fifty-mile Front—Saving the Situation.

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So far French had justified the tradition which called him lucky. Any competent and experienced general *might*, with luck, have won the battle of Elandslaagte. That victory did not mark French out as a commander of genius. But what followed in the campaign round Colesberg did.

It is very much to be regretted that the circumstances of the case forced this campaign to be fought amid an unusually dense variety of “the fog of war.” Owing to the difficulty and danger of the operations and the extended front on which they were carried out, any newspaper correspondent present could hope to chronicle only a sub-section of the action. The public, therefore, was without any complete record of what happened.[11] To the man in the street the British general and his forces seemed to spend three months in perpetual dodging in and about some thirty square miles of kopjed veldt.

[Page Heading: THE “INEFFICIENT” GENERAL]

Yet French’s column was the pivot on which the whole British plan turned. This campaign in miniature gave French his chance finally to disprove the fallacies of the critics at home. Before his appointment in October, he had actually been described by some of his opponents as “inefficient to command in the field.” This is the tragedy of many a brilliant cavalry leader—it is impossible for him to demonstrate his ability save in actual warfare.

When French went down to Cape Town to consult with General Buller, he found his Chief oppressed by serious misgivings. Sir George White and his force were surrounded in Ladysmith; Mafeking and Kimberley were both invested by the enemy; and a great invasion was threatened along the whole northern boundary of Cape Colony. To deal with all these difficulties Buller had only one army corps. One column, under Lord Methuen, was advancing to the relief of Kimberley; another, under General Gatacre, was attempting to stem the Boer invasion of Cape Colony; while a third, to be led by Buller himself, was massing at Chieveley, prior to advancing to the relief of Ladysmith. French was given command of a fourth column with which he was to harass the Boers around Colesberg. A Boer commando under Schoeman had seized a passage on the Orange River at Norval’s Pont on November 1. On the 14th the Boers entered Colesberg; and a proclamation was issued declaring the district to be a Free State territory.

[Page Heading: WORRYING TACTICS]

From the first no striking victories were anticipated for French’s little force. It was to act as a dam, rather than as a weapon of destruction. It was a rather flimsy dam at that. Buller’s instructions, which at first spoke of a “flying column,” soon declined to suggestions of “a policy of worry without risking men.” In particular it was to stop raids on the railway line which might impede Methuen’s advance on Kimberley.

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Collecting a part of his force at Cape Town, French left on November 18. On the following night he reached De Aar, where Major-General Wauchope gave him another couple of companies of Mounted Infantry. Acting on Wauchope's advice, he determined to make Naauwpoort his base. Buller had suggested Hanover Road. But French on arrival found that Wauchope was right. The country round Naauwpoort proved to be much more level, was less closely laced with wire fences, and afforded better means of communication both by road and rail.

No sooner had he arrived (on November 21) than he ordered a reconnaissance to be made on the following morning. His cavalry came within eight miles of Colesberg, without seeing the enemy. Accordingly French determined to attack the town, and asked for reinforcements of cavalry for that purpose. On November 23, however, further reconnaissance supported by a trainload of infantry showed that the situation had developed. It was found impossible to approach Arundel, as the kopjes north of Arundel station were occupied by the Boers.

Reporting the state of affairs to headquarters, French said that, in his opinion, the Boers should be pushed out of Colesberg immediately, as they were being reinforced daily, and were spreading disaffection throughout the Colony. But he was not in a position to do more than worry the enemy for several days. However, his persistent night-and-day fretting of Schoeman's forces achieved the desired result. His ubiquitous patrols seriously alarmed the Boer general as to the safety of his outposts at Arundel. A squadron of Lancers discovered one day that the kopjes round Arundel had been evacuated.

After that a dash on the town followed. Here again the policy of nag and bluster had frightened the Boers out of their position. There were only a hundred men in it when the British force arrived; and they fled precipitately at the mere sight of it. Next day, Colonel Porter struck even farther north with his cavalry and mounted infantry, occupying a kopje three miles north of the town.

There followed a brief lapse in active hostilities. The Boers heavily entrenched themselves on the neighbouring hills; and a prisoner taken by our men said that Schoeman had at least 3,000 men, with some useful guns, and was waiting for further reinforcements.

French's position now became critical in more than one sense of the word. For in mid-December news of the triple British disaster came through to hearten Schoeman and his men. Cronje had inflicted a crushing defeat on Methuen at Magersfontein; Botha had crippled Buller at Colenso; and Gatacre's force had met with a reverse at Stormberg. Elated by his colleagues' successes, Schoeman was spoiling for the fray. Could he once gain a victory over French, the whole of Cape Colony would probably join the rebellion. Both east and west the Dutch population were simply waiting a sign to rise.

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With the whole of South Africa in revolt, our position of “splendid isolation” in Europe might well have induced Continental complications. The foreign Press, indeed, was almost unanimous in its jubilations over this series of disasters. The German papers in particular, filled their pages with the most atrocious insults and jibes. Such was the situation in “Black Week.” There was much ominous talk on the Continent about “the flowing tide.” Only one obstacle prevented these dire prophecies from coming true. French and his little force possibly stayed the tide of a world conflict, through checking the rebel torrent between Naauwpoort and Colesberg.

[Page Heading: A TIGHT CORNER]

It is typical of his perfect *sang froid*, that in this excessively tight corner, French found time to send a cheering Christmas greeting to friends at home. “We shall drink your health on Christmas Day,” he wired on behalf of himself and his staff, “and we hope you are well, and having as good a time as we are.”

French’s use of Arundel was masterly. For him to attack was impossible; about this time he was outnumbered by something like five to one. His one aim, therefore, was to keep the Boers from the railway line. The moment that his scouts discovered the Boers throwing out detachments to defend a kopje, French would have an elaborate attack, or a reconnaissance in force to drive the enemy in. At this time scarcely a day passed without its “affair” of one sort or another. If it was not a night attack, then it was a miniature siege, or a flanking movement—or a piece of bluff! His men were in the saddle night and day. One of those present has related how he practically lived on his horse for two months.

Did Schoeman attempt to force a pitched battle, then French, by a series of simultaneous flank and rear movements, would harass him out of the possibility of a general action. It is doubtful, indeed, whether during this lively period of his life the Boer commander ever really had time to meet either his fellow commanders or his lieutenants and discuss a concerted plan of action. No sooner was a general movement visible in the Boer camps, than French and his men swept out, or threatened to sweep out, on some dangerous design. Every morning the General himself made a personal reconnaissance in the neighbourhood.

[Page Heading: A BRILLIANT EXPLOIT]

During his reconnaissance on December 31, French came to the conclusion that an offensive movement was at last possible. Colesberg lies in a little plateau, ringed round by a quadrangle of kopjes, all of which were strongly held by the enemy. Just beyond this quadrangle, however, one or two kopjes projected from its western face. French determined to seize one of these, from which he could push forward along the enemy’s flank, jeopardising his line of retreat.

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As usual, the venture was brilliantly conceived and ably carried out. During the day a squadron of Hussars was sent forward to Maeder's Farm, some five miles on the line of march. There the men bivouacked under arms, and at midnight set out on a silent march to the west. Under the screen of darkness and perfect silence the advance was speedy. Even the regimental carts were dispensed with, lest the creaking of their wheels might betray the advance. Not until the column was near its objective, McCracken's Hill, did the Boers suspect its approach. An amazed shouting and some wild rifle-fire from the outposts—and McCracken's Hill was in French's hands.

The cavalry now wound round the hill towards the road. But their commander, Colonel Fisher, found it impossible to take the hills commanding the road. As generally happened, a complicated engagement ensued. The Boers attempted to retake McCracken's Hill next morning, adding a counter-attack to the north-east and an enveloping movement on the right to the already complex situation. But French checkmated every move, although he finally thought it wise that Colonel Fisher should evacuate the hill he had so cleverly won. That night both French and Schoeman were wiring for reinforcements in the hope of clearing up the situation.

[Page Heading: THE FATE OF THE SUFFOLKS]

Some days afterwards came the only reverse which French ever received at the hands of the Boers. There has been endless argument as to who was directly responsible for the disaster to the Suffolks. It seems best simply to record the fact that the order was given by French as the result of pressure brought to bear on him by the enthusiastic colonel of the Suffolks. The key to the Boer stronghold lay in the kopje of Grassy Hill. Lieutenant-Colonel A.J. Watson had frequently reconnoitred the Boer position in company with General French. As a result, he was confident that his battalion could rush the position. On January 5 he begged for permission to attempt the feat. On the following day French authorised him to make the attack should he see a favourable opportunity, on condition that he first informed the General of his plans and probable time of attack. This he failed to do, and that night, without further warning, Watson and his men crept noiselessly out of camp, walking either in canvas shoes or in stocking-soles in order to deaden the noise of their footsteps.

The foremost ranks were scrambling breathlessly towards the summit, when a withering Boer fire fell upon their panting lines. It was clear that they were not only discovered but expected. Watson ordered a withdrawal. But withdrawal from that stark boulder-strewn hill-side was almost an impossibility. The column fell into disorder, some advancing and some retreating, under a fierce fire from the enemy. Watson himself gathered together the rear company and attempted, with reckless gallantry, to lead it to the summit.

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He was among the first to fall, riddled with bullets, and although his officers perished with him almost to a man, the men beat a hasty retreat, in face of the enemy's destructive fire. The affair accounted in all for eleven officers and 150 men. No doubt the gallant Watson was largely to blame. But the facts seemed to show that the enemy were in some way apprised of his intentions. Against such a chance as this, strategy and generalship are helpless. Certainly French would be the last man in the world to deny any responsibility, had he been to blame for that one mishap in a memorable campaign.

One fact was now clear beyond dispute. The enemy's right had been strongly reinforced and was too alert to allow of much hope of successful action against it. Nothing daunted, French therefore directed his energies to the left. A few days later (January 11) he accomplished the *tour de force* of the campaign. In the plain to the west of Colesberg there arose an isolated kopje, some six hundred feet in height, called Coles Kop. This hill, which rises almost sheer from the plain, taxes the wind of the unencumbered climber to the utmost. Being higher than the surrounding kopjes, it commands both Colesberg and the enemy's laager. The Boers had left it ungarrisoned, thinking it useless either to themselves or to the enemy. They made a very great mistake. For the mere hint that a thing is impossible fires French to attempt it.

[Page Heading: PREPARING A SURPRISE]

One day Schoeman woke up to find shrapnel assailing him apparently from nowhere. It was coming from a 15-pounder which Major E.E.A. Butcher, R.F.A., had coaxed up to the top of Coles Kop in three and a half hours by dint of much scientific haulage and more sinew. The Boers themselves never equalled this extraordinary feat.

To hoist the guns on to the hilltop was the least part of the undertaking. Guns without ammunition are useless. To get shells on to the kopje without disaster was an infinitely more difficult undertaking. He solved it by installing a hill lift. The veldt is not a very promising engineering shop; but Butcher was not easily beaten. Using steel rails for standards and anything worthy the name for cable, he soon had the framework erected. To the uprights were fixed snatchblocks over which he passed his carrying wires. On this mountain lift he was able to send weights up to 30 lbs., thanks to an ingenious system of pulleys. Nor was the lift altogether rustic, for a drum and ratchet made it double-acting, so that as one load went up another was automatically let down. It is only fair to say that the Boers themselves were masters of the art of haulage. How they managed to get their guns to the top of kopjes remained for long a mystery to our men. Butcher, however, quickly taught his men to beat the enemy at their own game, although nothing else quite so dramatic as the Coles Kop incident is on record.

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During this proceeding French had been distracting the enemy by a demonstration to the south-east of Colesburg. Consequently the shells from nowhere began to pour into their laager during breakfast (January 12) with devastating results. The laager was instantly abandoned, and a second, two thousand yards farther off, suffered the same fate. When Butcher had finally been able to get a second 15-pounder up the hill, the Boers were compelled to shift every camp they possessed into sheltered positions.

Most of these exploits show the resource and the daring which mark French's tactics. But his caution is no less remarkable. One instance of it will suffice. Shortly after the Coles Kop incident, it was discovered that the Boers had left open a portion of the road from Colesberg, where it goes through a narrow pass known as Plessis Poort. Immediately French planned its capture. One detachment was sent to occupy Bastard's Nek, another defile to the west of Plessis Poort. Covered by a cross-fire from the artillery, the infantry were to move forward and seize the road. In order to divert the Boers' attention from these matters, a demonstration was ordered along the whole British line. Advancing carefully the infantry met with little opposition, a fact which made French suspicious. As the silence continued he abruptly ordered the "Retire." The moment that his men obeyed, a fierce fire broke out from the enemy, who were present in force. French's caution was justified.

[Page Heading: MASTERS OF TACTICS]

During all this time the rival fronts had been gradually stretching out, in the constant effort to parry outflanking movements, until they reached the extraordinary length of fifty miles. Yet at the utmost neither general could throw more than ten thousand men into the field! During the last days of French's command, the fighting had become more a matter of outpost skirmishes than anything else. The Boer generals, who now included De Wet and Delarey, were entirely taken up with the effort to out-manoeuver the irrepressible French.

It was here that French first mastered the new problem of modern warfare—the extended front. The ability of the rival generals gradually gave the campaign the resemblance of a Mukden or a Mons in miniature. That the British force was not entirely out-manoeuvered by such masters of tactics as Delarey and De Wet says something for French's extraordinary mastery of a new method of warfare in something like six weeks' time.

Herein lies French's peculiar genius. Although he knows all the methods of all the schoolmen, he is capable as one soldier expressed it, "of making his own tactics brand new on the spot." To that fact one may attribute his consistent superiority to the Boer. Where even Kitchener and Roberts doubted, French invariably did the right thing. During the following fortnight he had more brilliant opportunities of demonstrating his unique abilities.

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FOOTNOTES:

[11] To those interested enough to pursue the subject further, I commend *With French and his Cavalry in South Africa*, by C.S. Goldman. (Macmillan & Co.)

CHAPTER VII

THE DASH TO KIMBERLEY

French's Pledge—The Task—The First Shell—"Hemmed in"—"We must break through"—The Lancers' Charge—In and Out of Kimberley—The Surrender of Cronje.

By the end of the year French had saved the situation in Cape Colony. Realizing this, Roberts summoned him to Cape Town on more important business. Into French's hands he placed the task which Methuen had failed to accomplish through adverse circumstances—the Relief of Kimberley. When Lord Roberts, with customary precision, had stated exactly what he wanted, he was surprised to receive a dramatic pledge from his General. "I promise faithfully," said French, "to relieve Kimberley at 6 o'clock on the evening of the 15th, if I am alive."

It may be asked why the case of Kimberley was considered so urgent by Lord Roberts. There are those who have suggested that the presence of the millionaire, Cecil Rhodes, in the beleaguered city was responsible for the authorities' energy in the matter. The mere suggestion, however, refutes itself. For Rhodes was the one man who did more than any other to have the defences of the city brought into a state of some sort of efficiency. The fact is that there was discontent among the civil population and a constant peril of surrender. For this the great hundred pound shells which hurtled destruction across the town's streets from the neighbouring heights were chiefly responsible.

On the face of it, French's promise might then have been taken for a piece of reckless bravado. The camp on the Modder River in which he gathered his forces together was over a hundred miles from Kimberley. The commander-in-chief had promised him a full cavalry division of eight thousand five hundred men. But on February 11, French had barely four thousand eight hundred men, with seven batteries of Horse Artillery at his disposal. Between his camp and the mining city lay Cronje with a mobile force as large as French's own. Add to this that the ground to be covered consisted largely of arid and well-less veldt, affording neither food nor drink for man or beast. The time too was the African summer, with all the difficulties of handling partly raw English troops to be faced. The task before French and his men was certainly such as might have appalled a less courageous leader.

[Page Heading: DECEIVING CRONJE]

Guile as well as daring had much to do with the success of the enterprise. The vast concentration camp, with its flapping seas of canvas, was in itself a huge blind. Through its bustle and publicity French meant Cronje to conclude that he was about to force the Pass of Magersfontein, and thence to relieve Ladysmith. For this Cronje prepared himself with customary care. Meantime, French proceeded, as ever, to belie the very justifiable expectations he had aroused.

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The most obvious route for French would be over Koodoesberg's Drift towards the west. Accordingly Macdonald's Highland Brigade spent a strenuous day in threatening the Drift and returned to camp.

After a day's rest Macdonald's horses were again ready for the field. On Sunday morning therefore, February 11, the long column filed silently out of camp. At 10 o'clock the main body had covered 22 miles, reaching the farmhouse of Ramdam. By that time Cronje's outposts had probably realised that the camp which French had carefully left standing at the Modder River was simply a city of canvas from which the inhabitants had departed.

Next day the force was again on the march at 3.0 a.m. It now took an easterly course in order to force a crossing on the Riet River. Its goal was Waterval Drift. But so intense was the darkness that after an hour of difficult movement the General ordered a halt, until dawn, when he ordered the division to make the feint on Waterval. He was not certain whether the Drift was held in force by the enemy or not. But very soon conviction came in a shell nicely aimed at the General in person. It burst between French and his staff. "There are too many of us riding together," was his only comment, as he moved forward to reconnoitre the ground from the top of the nearest kopje.

Very soon the Horse Artillery had the gun silenced, and the whole division swerved to the right just as the Boers drew off down stream to wait for the English crossing. Immediately the whole division was making for De Kiel's Drift further up stream. The banks proved to be steep and difficult, but a ford was discovered. As the cavalry neared the bank a party of Boers saw the ruse, and a neck-to-neck race for the Drift began. By a piece of daring horsemanship our cavalry got home first, and the Boers arrived too late to dispute their passage. By mid-day the division was able to cross and bivouac on the right bank, pending the arrival of the baggage train, left far behind.

[Page Heading: DELAYED TRANSPORT]

The Riet River is by no means a refreshing torrent; it winds its slow way in muddy melancholy to the cleanly water of the Vaal. But at least it contained water in which both men and horses could forget the heat of the veldt. All day the weary cavalymen waited for the supplies, which did not come until they were attempting to snatch a few hours of sleep. The transport horses stumbled and strained their way up the banks in the early hours of the morning.

There was pleasant excitement in camp, however, when both Roberts and Kitchener rode over to congratulate French on his progress, and wished him "good luck" for the rest of the journey. But the delay in transport was annoying to French. Neither the men nor their horses received any supplies until the morning was well advanced. And the sun was already scorching the veldt before the division was ready to advance. That delay was to be paid for

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in sweat and suffering. On that day alone over one hundred horses died or fell out from exhaustion. Their tired riders were forced to trudge across the veldt at what pace they could, or to find ignominious relief in the ammunition carts. Shortly after mid-day, however, a welcome well of water was reached. Here, thought the parched and foot-sore men, was relief at last. But once again they were doomed to disappointment. It is one of French's characteristics that he practises an exquisitely perfect loyalty both to the army and to his superiors. That well of sparkling water was destined for the infantry tramping on behind. Reluctantly the troopers turned aside on their tedious way. Not a drop of the water was touched.

By this time the men's sufferings from thirst and dust were intense. At two o'clock they neared Klip Drift, where they were fiercely attacked by a large body of Boers. The guns of the first brigade, however, quickly put the enemy to flight, but the General thought it well to make certain alterations in the order of his advance. These changes were only accomplished with the greatest difficulty. So tired were the horses that even the General's gallopers, who were continually traversing the column's half-mile front, were often unable to spur their horses to anything better than a walk. Very quickly the enemy returned to the attack, pestering French on the right. Realising his peril, he changed his course suddenly and headed away from the Klip Kraal Drift. Naturally, the enemy rushed off to block his way. For an hour and a half the Drift appeared to be the division's urgent objective. Then, without warning, he as suddenly turned about and swung back to Klip Drift.

[Page Heading: THE BOERS FLEE]

These manoeuvres had reduced the horses almost to the last stage of exhaustion. Many of them fell dead by the way. But at last the river was reached. Still the actual crossing was not yet. Once again French showed his extraordinary mastery of finesse. He ordered preparation to be made for the actual crossing at Klip Drift and Rondevaal Drift. Having thrown Gordon to the left to effect one crossing and Broadwood to the right to effect another, French advanced so rapidly that Cronje was utterly nonplussed. Gordon opened a heavy shell fire which completely disconcerted him, although only a very few of the guns could come into action. Soon afterwards Gordon was crossing the river in pursuit. The Boers fled, in spite of the natural strength of their positions and the utterly exhausted state of our men. But neither Gordon on the left, nor Broadwood on the right, was satisfied with merely effecting a crossing. Both went in pursuit of the enemy towards Kimberley. The result was a complete rout. The Boers' camp, their ammunition, their wagons, fell entirely into our hands.

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The rout was not without spasmodic touches of humour, even for these jaded men. "One of the Staff plunged into the river and caught some geese, but someone else ate them; a pig ran the gauntlet through the camp—amidst roars of laughter, even from the serious General—of lances, bayonets, knives, sticks, boots, water-bottles, anything to hand, and at length was caught by a lucky trooper, who shared his feast that night with his friends. A wagon of fresh fruit was taken, sufficient to make thirsty men's mouths water, but some thought the grapes were sour." [12]

The next day was perforce spent in camp, resting the tired troops and awaiting the arrival of supplies. The baggage was not on the scene until late in the afternoon, much to the discomfort of French's men. It was midnight before Lord Kitchener and his Staff were near the camp. One of French's aides-de-camp, Captain J. Laycock, rode out in solitary peril, and although continually sniped at by the Boers, was able to lead Lord Kitchener and his Staff safely into camp. All day the Boers had been making the men's lives a burden through unexpected sniping and feints. French is said to have admitted that had any of their attacks been driven home, his plans might have been seriously disconcerted. "Could the Boers learn to attack they would be a most formidable foe," was his verdict on the situation.

[Page Heading: THE ROAD BLOCKED]

At 9.30 on February 15 the column set out on the last stage of their journey. French, with the idea of putting the enemy off the track, led his men towards Bloemfontein. His idea was eventually to dash straight for Kimberley with his whole division, hemming the enemy's rear and flank in at Magersfontein, where Methuen's force could hold him in front. Scarcely had the advance begun, however, when a murderous fire broke out from the river on the south-west, followed almost instantaneously by a cross fire from a line of kopjes on the north-west. The road to Bloemfontein was blocked; and the road to Kimberley was exposed to a cross fire from the enemy's two positions. This was checkmate with a vengeance. It was thought that some two thousand Boers held the kopjes ahead of French. At once he ordered the guns into position and boldly replied to the enemy's fire. The column was now nearing a plain several miles in width, guarded on one side by a ridge running from north to south, and on the other by a hill. The Boers held both hill and ridge in force. So that whatever the guns might do, the position was difficult—if not impossible. By all military rules French was "hemmed in." To a lesser man retreat would have seemed inevitable, though disastrous. Once again it was French v. The Impossible. A member of his staff relates how, sweeping the horizon with his glass, while riderless horses from the guns galloped past, he muttered, squaring the pugnacious jaw, "They are over here to stop us from Bloemfontein and they are there to stop us from Kimberley—we have got to break through." In an instant his decision was taken. He would attempt the impossible—a direct cavalry charge in the teeth of the enemy's fire.

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[Page Heading: A TERRIFIC CHARGE]

He immediately ordered Gordon to charge the right front. The members of his Staff expected that the General would now take up a position of security in the rear of the column, before the grim work began. But he kept his place in the van with his Staff. His officers were practically certain that not only the first, but several of the leading squadrons would be utterly wiped out. There appeared to be nothing in heaven or earth which could prevent huge losses. Gordon led his men—the Ninth and Sixteenth Lancers—in superb style. Despite the pitiable condition of the horses, it was a charge worthy of the British Army. A strong fire poured in from the Boer trenches and from the kopjes above. But as the huge masses of armed men gained the inevitable momentum and pounded down upon the enemy in a cloud of sword-lit dust, the Boers fled before these clattering hoofs. Throwing up their guns they begged for mercy. But nothing could stop the terrific impetus of the charge. Nearly one hundred and fifty Boers fell as the Lancers ploughed through their trenches. Behind the Lancers the whole division now swept on in perfect order, led by the Greys. “So the whole division swung up the plain at the gallop. It was a thrilling time never to be forgotten,” wrote Boyle. So wild was the Boer fire that our casualties only amounted to four men wounded and two horses wounded.

The plain once cleared, a halt was made for the guns to come up, to hold the enemy on the left. When the Artillery had joined the main force, the advance was again begun. The plain once crossed, the smoke stacks of Kimberley came into view. At sight of these dingy symbols of the commerce they had risked all to save, the men raised a tired cheer. Kimberley was relieved—although the nervous operators to whom French attempted to heliograph the fact, persisted in pessimistically believing that he was the enemy.

By far the worst of the work was now over. Before French reached Kimberley, however, the Boers made a last effort to stay his victorious advance. But they were driven back with heavy loss. Only the frightful condition of his horses prevented French from turning rout into annihilation. But his worn-out animals were quite beyond pursuing even a beaten enemy.

At length, Kimberley, seeing the huge sand cloud on the horizon, came to the conclusion that it enveloped the horsemen, not of Cronje but of French. About six o'clock in the evening an officer rode out of the besieged city to meet the soldier who had saved it. At 7—just one hour after the moment of French's historic promise, the General entered Kimberley with his Staff. He dined that night at De Beer's Sanatorium.

But there was no rest for the conquerors. At 3.30 on the following morning the cavalry was harrying the Boers to the north-east. At 5 o'clock they came upon a body of Boers on a well-fortified ridge, who were covering the army's retreat. Unable to operate vigorously against them owing to the condition of his forces, French forced them to draw

in their outposts. But it was impossible to do more. His horses were half dead. And in the terrific heat “the tongues of men and horses become black from thirst.” Realising the hopelessness of the situation, French returned to the town.

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[Page Heading: A MAGNIFICENT RESPONSE]

Rest was not yet, however. Scarcely had he retired than news came that Cronje had decided to evacuate Magersfontein. No confirmation followed, however. The General, therefore, advised his Staff that at last a night's rest was possible. A couple of hours later a telegram arrived from Lord Kitchener, announcing that Cronje, with ten thousand men, was in full retreat from Magersfontein, with "all his wagons and equipment and four guns, along the north bank of the Modder River towards Bloemfontein, that he had already fought a rearguard action with him, and if French with all available horses and guns could head him and prevent his crossing the river, the infantry from Klip Drift would press on and annihilate or take the whole force prisoners."

General French responded magnificently to the call of this opportunity. Another man might have pleaded that his troops and horses were utterly unfit for work, but with French the greater the obstacles, the stronger is his determination to win through! Of all his five thousand men, only two thousand could be found whose horses were fit to carry them in that wild dash to head off the Boer Commando.

At 3 a.m. on February 17, French left Kimberley, and by a marvellous piece of far-sighted calculation made straight for Koodoos Rand Drift, the very crossing which Cronje himself had chosen. His horses died on the way, but French reached the river first and seized the Drift, almost under the enemy's eyes.

Cronje was completely surprised. The previous evening, French had been in pursuit of the Boers north of Kimberley; now he had suddenly appeared 35 miles to the south, and was facing the enemy, determined to cut off his retreat. Swiftly Cronje moved down the river and took possession of a long stretch between Gaardeberg Drift and Wolveskraal Drift.

It must have been an anxious night for General French, for had Cronje realised how small was the force that thus held him at bay, and made a desperate effort to break through, there would have been little chance of thwarting him. But Cronje lay still in the river bed, while the British forces closed swiftly in and the net was drawn closer round him.

[Page Heading: CRONJE SURRENDERS]

For ten long days the Boer General held out, while the British artillery poured shells into his laager. Meanwhile the Boers flocked in from every side to endeavour to rescue Cronje from his hopeless position. French undertook to check them and hold them back, leaving the main army to deal with the surrounded enemy.

General French and his men were in continual action for the next few days. But the soldiers gloried in their work, for they were cheered by the message from Queen

Victoria in appreciation of their excellent work, particularly in the relief of Kimberley, which had earned for them “the gratitude of the whole nation.”

At length, on February 27, Cronje surrendered, and four thousand men laid down their arms. Thus closed the most brilliant exploit of the British Arms in South Africa—an exploit whose success can be largely traced to the extraordinary mixture of dauntless courage, practical acumen and remorseless persistence which mark the genius of Sir John French.



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FOOTNOTES:

[12] *The Cavalry Rush to Kimberley*. By Captain Cecil Boyle, *Nineteenth Century*, June, 1900.

CHAPTER VIII

ROUNDING UP THE BOERS

French in the Modder—At Bloemfontein—French and the Artist—An Ambush—Doing the Impossible Again—Short Shift with Barberton Snipers—Some French Stories.

To have relieved Kimberley and partially effected the capture of the redoubtable Cronje in the course of a fortnight, was no mean accomplishment. The average commander would have been content to rest his forces after such exertions. But French is never tired. The very day that Cronje surrendered news came through that a rescue party was coming to Cronje's assistance, and already held a hill on the south-east of the Modder. Although the river was in flood, as the result of torrential rains, French forthwith led out two brigades with their batteries to make a reconnaissance. In forcing the stream both French and his A.A.G. very nearly lost their lives. Losing its foothold the General's horse took fright and fell, flinging him into the raging torrent. As the animal strove to recover, it upset Colonel (now Sir Douglas) Haig, who was coming to the rescue, dashing rider and horse into an over-hanging willow tree. Both French and Haig luckily managed to get themselves free from their plunging animals and struck out for the shore. Dripping but determined, they jumped on to fresh mounts, and advanced in two steamy haloes across the dusty veldt. Of course, not a solitary Boer was in sight for ten miles at least!

[Page Heading: AT POPLAR GROVE]

It very quickly transpired, however, that the Boers were strongly entrenched at Poplar Grove. At their head were French's most redoubtable opponents in the Colesberg campaign—De Wet and Delarey. For once his old antagonists were able to get back at least a little of their own. Their position extended across the river and was protected by a chain of hills, with kopjes between, not to mention the wired fences, ditches and other wiles in which they excelled.

Lord Roberts determined that an attack must be delivered before the enemy had time to recover from the shock of Cronje's surrender. French was, therefore, ordered to circle round the Boer left flank, thus cutting off his retreat, while the infantry delivered a frontal attack.

The result was a compliment to the terrible French and his cavalry. No sooner did the Boers realise that the horsemen were upon them, than they beat a hasty retreat. Before the cavalry were in position, the Boers and their wagons could be seen scurrying off for the river. Arm-chair critics at home have strongly criticised French for what followed. They claim that what should have been a rout, ended in an orderly escape. But they forget several factors in the situation.

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While French's men were urging their spent horses forward to overtake the enemy, it became obvious that De Wet had very cleverly covered his retreat. First from a farmhouse in the rear, and, when it was taken, from a low kopje, a small body of men poured forth a hail of bullets. In manoeuvring to take the kopje, the tired cavalry allowed the astute De Wet and Delarey to escape with their guns intact. Kruger and Steyn also, who had come up to hearten their followers, got away.

Maddening as it was to French to see his old enemy escape through his fingers like this, the condition of his men and of his horses had to be taken into account; they were dead beat. For once the manoeuvring of De Wet proved as successful as when it was practised by French at Colesberg. Finally the event of the day is attributable to two of French's best qualities—his caution and his extreme parsimony in the matter of human life. A more ruthless leader might possibly have captured the Boer guns. But it is extremely doubtful whether he would have taken De Wet, Delarey or any other of the well-mounted Boer leaders.

From Poplar Grove the enemy fell back on Driefontein. On March 10, French again drove them, although not without real difficulty, from their stronghold. This accomplished, the army pushed on towards Bloemfontein, which surrendered on March 13. For six weeks the main body halted there to rest, but chiefly to obtain remounts for the cavalry. During that time, however, French's men were not idle. They continually patrolled the surrounding country, keeping in constant touch with the enemy and driving him back for many miles from the town.

[Page Heading: A PAINFUL SITTING]

One unhappy afternoon the General spent in sitting for a painter in Bloemfontein. It was probably the severest ordeal of the campaign for that retiring soldier. "General French," wrote the painter's youngest daughter, "is quite the shyest man in the British army, and looks less like a cavalry officer than you could possibly imagine. He is a heavy man, always looks half-asleep—although who is there more wide awake?—has a very red complexion, grey moustache, thick-set figure, and the last personality in the world to help an artist as a sitter. He promised to sit for the painter, although most characteristically he could not for the life of him think what he had done to be of sufficient interest for anyone to want to sketch him. At last, after a great deal of trouble, the painter got him to sit one morning just outside the club at Bloemfontein. That sitting was the shortest and most disjointed the painter has ever had. The General sat bolt upright in a chair, reading his paper upside down through sheer nervousness, and, if he left that chair once, on one excuse or another, he left it a hundred times, coming back looking more thoroughly upset and nervous each time, until at last he never came back at all. And the painter's only chance of sketching him was at the club during dinner!"[13]

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At last the main army was ready for work again, and on May 1 the troops moved out of the fever-stricken town. French and his cavalry were the last to leave, but they overtook Lord Roberts and the main body, and led the way to Kroonstad, once again the seat of the Free State Government. Here by one of his famous turning movements, French cleverly forced the enemy to surrender and give up the keys of the town. Keeping ahead of Lord Roberts and his forces, he crossed the Vaal River and was first at the gates of Johannesburg, which the British entered on May 31.

[Page Heading: THE GUNS]

After two days in the mining city, Lord Roberts' triumphant forces moved on their way to Pretoria. French's next task was to cut the railway communications to the north of Pretoria. In carrying this out he made a wide detour to the west, where his cavalry found themselves in a treacherous country of kopjes, scrub and menacing gorges, a type of country most dangerous to mounted men. Anxiously he pushed forward to reach open country before nightfall (of June 2). But the Boers were before him. A sudden hail of Mauser bullets and shells announced an ambush. But French was undismayed. "Quietly, in complete mastery of the situation, General French gave his orders. 'Make room for the guns,' passed down the line; and like a fire engine to the rescue, up dashed a section of horse artillery and a pom-pom."^[14] Very quickly the enemy was beaten off, in spite of the fatigue of a thirty-two mile march. No further resistance was met with as the men passed through the rich, orange-growing country round Pretoria. On June 4, French had completed his enveloping movement, and taken up his position to the north of the town. In the afternoon the cavalrymen learnt, with no little chagrin, that Lord Roberts had already entered Pretoria.

When the efforts to negotiate peace with Botha had failed, French was instructed by Lord Roberts to push the Boers east by a turning movement on their flank, which he would follow by the usual frontal attack on foot. So energetic were the Boers in harassing Lord Roberts' force, that drastic action had become necessary. It proved to be one of the most difficult enterprises that the cavalry had undertaken.

As usually happened the Boers were securely ensconced on ridges, the chief of which was known as Diamond Hill, while our men were condemned to work round from a level plain open to the enemy's fire. In order not to become a series of conspicuous targets, the cavalrymen were forced to dismount and fight their way up to the ridges on foot. For two days they fought gallantly against a steady fire, until the infantry's attack on the enemy's other flank gave French his chance to drive them out. For a third time the plight of his horses finally forbade his taking full advantage of his success. The Boers were driven back, but without being severely punished. The ubiquitous De Wet, need one add, showed a clean pair of heels.

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[Page Heading: A DARING VENTURE]

In July, French was in command of the forces operating in Eastern Transvaal. There followed a long and arduous march towards the east which, after the capture of Middleburg, ended in the surrender of Barberton. It was in the beginning of September that French turned his attention to the enemy's forces collected round the latter town. He commenced his operations by circulating reports of an intended action in the opposite direction. While the Boers prepared to meet this he was able to reach Carolina with comparative ease. Here he remained for three days in order to prepare for a flanking movement against Barberton. As he must cut himself off entirely from sources of supply, such preparation was very necessary. French was about to attempt one of the most daring achievements of his career. He was going to take mounted men over a miniature Alps. The Boers were prepared for his attacking Barberton from every direction save one. They never supposed for a moment that the British troops would attempt to force the Nelshoogte Pass. For what did it mean? The scaling of precipitous heights, and the passage along narrow ledges of men, horses and guns. It would have been a difficult task for mountaineers, far less for heavily burdened cavalrymen.

French, however, was determined to do the impossible "once more." He would repeat the miracle of Coles Kop on a titanic scale. Accordingly, after a day's hard fighting, he rested his men for a night near the entrance to the pass. On the following morning, the enemy having disappeared, the advance was sounded. Up a narrow path, whose gradient was frequently one in four, the men crawled, often on hands and knees, while their horses stumbled on behind. Frequently they were scaling towering crags several hundred feet in height, from which there was sometimes a sheer fall of over a thousand feet. In teams of sixteen the oxen panted, struggled and frequently perished in the attempt to drag the heavy guns up the fearful incline. Only a man of indomitable courage would have attempted such a feat. But French lost not a single man in the process. Perhaps the division's perfect belief in his luck did something towards nerving the men for the ordeal.

The top of the pass once reached, French determined to make a sudden descent on Barberton. Taking a leaf out of the Boers' book, he left the whole of his baggage behind to lighten the horses, and rushed his men towards the town. On descending the other side of the pass the soldiers had still to lead their horses, who were as often on their haunches as their feet. Barberton and the Boers saw the oncoming of the British force with blank amazement. It was the last thing in the world they expected. The Boer Commando in possession, six hundred strong, had just time to escape from one end of the town as French entered it at the other.

[Page Heading: A WAY WITH SNIPERS]

Enraged at the surprise that had been sprung on them, the Boers commenced sniping the town from various vantage points in the vicinity. But French knew how to treat the

sniper. The following notice was immediately dashed off by the local printing press and posted all over the town.

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TO THE INHABITANTS OF BARBERTON.

This is to give notice that if any Shooting into the Town or Sniping in its vicinity takes place, the Lieutenant-General Commanding will withdraw the Troops, and shell the Town without further notice.

By order,

D. HAIG, Lt.-Col.
Chief Staff Officer to Lt.-General French.

September 15, 1900.

The sniping stopped forthwith.

One of the first things that French did was to go and personally rescue his old enemy, Schoeman, from the local jail. That worthy, having surrendered, had come into bad odour with his fellow countrymen. In consequence he had been incarcerated at Barberton. For once the unfortunate Schoeman was glad to see the face of his old enemy again!

French rested his forces in Barberton for three weeks, leaving the town on October 3. The march back to Pretoria was, if anything, more trying than the adventurous dash to Barberton had been. Apart from the trying climb over the heights of the Kaapsche Hoop, and the eternal sniping of the Boers, the weather now brought new sufferings. The men were exhausted by days of heat, and soaked by nights of torrential rain. It was a thoroughly tired and jaded force which finally reached Pretoria on November 3.

One incident of that trying march shows how ably French dealt with Boer bluff. The enemy had made prisoner a captain of the R.A.M.C, and sent a message that they would shoot him unless General French pledged his word that he would burn no Boer farms. French replied that unless the captured medical officer were brought into the British camp next morning, he would burn the town of Bethel to the ground; and, if he were shot, ten Boer prisoners would be similarly put to death. The doctor was brought into camp next morning.

[Page Heading: LORD ROBERTS' RETURN]

In inspecting the cavalry on their return, Lord Roberts expressed his high appreciation of French's work and informed him that, while retaining his cavalry command, he had been appointed to the command of Johannesburg and district.

At the end of the month Lord Roberts returned to England to take command of the Home Forces; and several months elapsed before French was able actively to take up that long rounding-up of the Boers which Kitchener was now planning in such elaborate

detail. During the early part of 1901 he was able to clear the Boers out of the central district of Cape Colony. On June 8 he took supreme command of the operations in that Colony, and by November he had confined the enemy to its north-eastern and south-western extremities.

Not until Midsummer, 1902, was French able to return home. Before that he had spent some time recruiting his health in Cape Town. Very eager were the loyal citizens to fete the most successful of all the British Generals. But French would have no banqueting on his account. The war, he characteristically explained, was not yet ended, and so long as it was in progress he was not inclined to accept any public hospitality.

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Anything like show or ostentation is foreign to French's whole nature. If there are few stories of his exploits in South Africa, there lies the reason. He is far too modest a man to prepare *bons mots* or pretty *jeux d'esprit* for public consumption. Also he is by nature a silent man. His silence is not the detached, Olympian and rather ominous silence of Kitchener. It proceeds simply from a natural modesty and reticence, which reinforce his habitual tendency to "think things over." He is the type of man whom hostesses have to "draw out"; he never talks either on himself, the army or any other subject. To "do his job" better than anybody else in the world could do it is enough for French; chatter about it he leaves to less busy people.

His habitual taciturnity, curiously enough, is one of the traits which endears him to the army. For French's silence has no trait of churlishness. It is the silence of a man utterly absorbed in the task before him, the man whom Tommy Atkins admires. "If the British soldier likes one thing in a General more than another," wrote a soldier who served with French in South Africa, "it is the golden gift of silence, especially when joined to straight action, just to distinguish him from the old women of both sexes. Whenever French penned a dispatch, or an order, or a proclamation, he wasted no ink and strained no pen nibs; but he never penned anything if there was a way of doing the thing himself." [15]

[Page Heading: A SHIRT-SLEEVED GENERAL]

In South Africa he earned the title of "the shirt-sleeved General,"—a soubriquet that conveys a subtle compliment from Tommy's point of view. Actually French was often to be seen walking about in camp during his heavy marches in shirt-sleeves. One afternoon a correspondent rode up to the lines, and seeing a soldier sitting on a bundle of hay, smoking a dilapidated looking old briar pipe, asked where the General was. "The old man is somewhere about," coolly replied the soldier. "Well, just hold my horse while I go and search for him." "Certainly, sir," and the smoker rose obediently and took the bridle. "Can you tell me where the General is?" inquired the correspondent of a staff officer further down the line. "General French? oh, he's somewhere about. Why, there he is, holding that horse's head!" And the officer pointed directly to the smoker, still tranquilly pulling at his pipe, and holding the horse! Needless to say "Uncle French" and his men hugely enjoyed the correspondent's awakening.

Such a man is bound to be the idol of the ranks. "What a good leader General French is," wrote Driver Payne, of the Royal Horse Artillery, to a friend. "He seems so cool at excitable moments; he does not lose his head and rush his men into danger. In fact, he always looks before he leaps, and when he does leap, he makes us move—and the Boers too." Perhaps French was best summed-up one day by a trooper whom, in a curt word, he had just sentenced to barracks for some offence. "The General don't bark much," he remarked, "but, crikey, don't he know how to bite!"

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FOOTNOTES:

[13] *M.A.P.*, August 25, 1900.

[14] *With General French and his Cavalry in South Africa*. By C.S. Goldman. By permission of Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd.

[15] *The Regiment*, September 5, 1914.

CHAPTER IX

WORK AT HOME AND RESIGNATION

At Aldershot—Driving Training at High Pressure—General French is “fairly” well pleased—Strenuous Manoeuvres—Chief of the Imperial General Staff—Ulster and Resignation.

With Lord Kitchener, General French had a wonderful welcome on his return from South Africa. The former had certainly added a few leaves to his laurel wreath, but French brought back a complete new crown of his own. His return home in July was a triumphal progress. At Southampton, in replying to congratulations, he paid a fine tribute to his men.

French’s hatred of ostentation in any form prevented him from allowing Society to fete him to its heart’s content. He was the most retiring of lions; and, like Kitchener, he allowed London to idolise him only at a distance. A knighthood was one reward of his services; and after a brief rest he was back at Aldershot as Lieutenant-General in command.

For the first time French found himself in command of all arms of the service in time of peace. After his arrival, instruction was driven at high pressure. No sooner had he arrived than he turned out the whole of his command—“just to see how they looked!” Such a thing had scarcely ever happened before; and the order sent desolation to the hearts of some of the officers. For it meant that the whole force, every man, horse and gun had to turn out forthwith, in full marching order, and ready for action. After the first feverish digging out of accoutrements and tents, however, the men became hardened to these sudden alarms and excursions. They became a part of the programme.

The cavalry especially was trained to an extraordinary degree of perfection. The most rigorous methods in use abroad were used and bettered. The result was the production of a body of men who, like Wellington’s heroes of Torres Vedras, “were ready to go anywhere and do anything.”

[Page Heading: "FAIRLY" WELL PLEASED]

In December, 1907, French was appointed Inspector-General of the Forces. In this extremely exacting office, his qualities of thoroughness and grip had splendid scope. A glance at his comments discloses the high standard of excellence which he exacted from every branch of the service. Only the other day timid folk were bewailing his methods at manoeuvres. Four horses had succumbed to a gruelling day of fierce exertion. But French expressed himself as "well pleased." One does not remember his ever going farther up the giddy incline of the superlatives. Probably his exacting eye never yet met the corps

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of his dream. He had a terrible word with which he was wont to emphasise the fact of disenchantment. How often did one read "General French expressed himself as 'fairly' well pleased with what he saw"? A withering qualitative. French was determined to infuse the whole army with his own professional love of efficiency. To that end he phrased his judgments with extraordinary care. His remarks were as nicely aimed and as carefully timed as his cavalry charges. Nor did they lack shattering force on occasion.

After five years of "tuning up" the army, French took command of its administration. In 1912 he was appointed Chief of the Imperial General Staff, a body formed on the lines of the efficient German General Staff. Of the nature and value of the reforms instituted under his direction it is too early yet to speak. Suffice it to say that in the European War they have met the almost intolerable strain with signal success. For once we presented to the Continent the unparalleled spectacle of a War Office "ready for action."

In particular Sir John French encouraged originality of thought among his officers by frankly seeking critical contributions for a new service journal, and by putting various opportunities for individual enterprise in their way.

In the midst of these invaluable if slightly uncongenial administrative activities, Sir John French was brought to a tragic standstill. A political intrigue cut across his soldier's life, and ended its usefulness for the time being. At this early date it is extremely difficult to disentangle the rights and wrongs of the Gough incident. But there is no need to enter into the political aspect of the case here. Suffice it to deplore the sticky mess of party politics which threatened to gulf a great career.

[Page Heading: THE ULSTER CRISIS]

In the month of March the Government believed that they had serious reason to expect disturbance in Ireland. Accordingly, General Sir Arthur Paget was summoned to the War Office to consult his military chiefs. Apparently, General Paget was instructed—so far as can be gathered in the absence of documentary evidence—to lay before his officers a certain choice of action. He accordingly called a meeting of his officers, whom he informed that "Active operations were to be begun against Ulster; that he expected the country to be in a blaze by Saturday (March 21); and that he was instructed by the War Office to allow officers domiciled in Ulster to disappear, but as regards others that any who resigned would be dismissed." The officers were given two hours to make their decision. Out of a total of 72 officers in the Brigade, 59 "would, respectfully, and under protest," prefer to be dismissed, while five claimed exemption on the ground of being domiciled in Ulster.

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A few days later it was explained on behalf of the Government that no operations were intended against Ulster, and that through “an honest misunderstanding” General Paget had misinterpreted his instructions. Brigadier-General Gough was therefore asked to return to his command, finally obtaining a written undertaking, signed by the Secretary of State for War, that the troops would not be used in Ulster. In addition to Colonel Seely’s signature, that of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (Sir John French) and of the Adjutant-General (Sir J.S. Ewart) appeared on the memorandum.

Now it transpired that two important paragraphs of the memorandum were written by Colonel Seely, but presumably they were not sanctioned by the Cabinet. The paragraphs in question ran: “His Majesty’s Government must retain their right to use all the forces of the Crown in Ireland, or elsewhere, to maintain law and order, and to support the Civil Power in the ordinary execution of its duty.

“But they had no intention whatever of taking advantage of this right to crush political opposition to the policy or principles of the Home Rule Bill.”

As they stand these two paragraphs are a trifle ambiguous. The fact apparently occurred to General Gough. For he asked Sir John French explicitly whether they could be taken to mean that he could not be called upon to order his brigade to take part in the coercion of Ulster to the Home Rule Bill. Sir John French wrote across the note that this was his belief. On the strength of this General Gough returned to his command.

[Page Heading: A QUESTION OF HONOUR]

When the facts of the case were known, the Government were severely criticised by the Labour and the Nationalist parties. In replying to these criticisms, on Wednesday, this pledge was declared to be “not operative.” As the result, Colonel Seely, who had signed the assurance, threatened resignation. On Friday, March 26, it was known that both Sir John French and Sir J.S. Ewart had resigned their positions. Every effort was made to induce these distinguished officers to reconsider their decision, but without avail. To remain in office would mean repudiating their pledged word. To this course no possible pressure could induce Sir John French to agree. He persisted in his resignation: and the Prime Minister solved a very dangerous situation by himself taking up the office of Minister of War, which Colonel Seely had now resigned.

So Sir John French went for a second time into retirement. Nothing less could be expected of one whose views on discipline are so extremely strict and whose ideals of loyalty are notoriously so high. To have remained in office would have been to impair the authority of the Imperial General Staff, quite apart from failing in loyalty to a pledged word. For all these reasons Sir John French chose eclipse rather than dishonour.

Unquestionably he viewed the *impasse* purely from the military point of view. His dislike of anything like politics in the army is well known. Mr. Asquith’s famous dictum on

taking up the office of Secretary for War is an echo of General French's invariable advice to his officers—"You will hear no politics from me, and I expect to hear none from you."

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What his attitude towards the officers at the Curragh was in the first instance, is a matter of mere surmise. It has been said that he would personally have dealt very sharply with those concerned. But such statements obviously lack authority. Sir John French is much too discreet an officer to babble his views abroad on such a point. All we know is that at the time he strongly deprecated politics in the army in several speeches of considerable force. A psychological problem in army feeling was closely bound up with the issue. It is enough to emphasise the fact that Sir John French is himself no politician and did what he did because his honour demanded nothing less.

[Page Heading: A HOLIDAY]

For four months the most energetic man in the Army was able to rusticate. Actually nothing ever fell out more happily than this enforced holiday. His duties during the past few years had necessarily been extremely exhausting. He had rarely had time for the rest and relaxation that make for physical and mental freshness. Now he gave himself to the walking, the riding and the yachting he so keenly enjoys, and so rarely indulges in. For the General has, at least, taken the love of the water from his otherwise tedious days in the Navy. He is an expert yachtsman and has explored a large part of the British coast at one time or another. Riding and hunting are, however, the only sports he now takes very seriously. He rides a great deal during his busiest days at home, running down from London to the Manor at Waltham Cross for the purpose when occasion permits.

Until the beginning of August, Sir John French was able to revel in his new found freedom. When the call came, it found him feeling better and fitter than he had done for years. Perhaps even political intrigue serves a purpose in the game of the War Gods.

CHAPTER X

HIS BELIEF IN CAVALRY

The Lessons of the Boer War—Cavalry v. Mounted Infantry—A
Plea for the Lance—The Cavalry Spirit—Shock Tactics still
Useful.

It does not necessarily follow that because a man is a great cavalry leader, he therefore has ideas on the subject of cavalry. To the popular mind cavalry suggests clouds of dust and a clatter of hoofs, the flashing of swords, followed by the crash and sound of an engagement. The man who would conduct this imagined spectacle satisfactorily would therefore be dependent rather on the timely uprush of the spirit than on the mechanical certainty of the mind. He would need to act by inspiration and impulse, rather than by cold thought. Quite obviously some other and less resplendent being would have to time the rise of his curtain in the theatre of war. He would be the last

man whom one would figure, like Kipling's successful General, "worrying himself bald" over a map and compasses.

[Page Heading: THEORY AND PRACTICE]

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But the popular version does less than justice to the modern cavalry leader in general and to French in particular. We have seen him as a subaltern poring over his books before his colleagues were out of bed. We have seen him varying the monotony of War Office administration by solving problems in tactics. Indubitably he is a student: incidentally he is an innovator. This fact of mental duality raises him in a moment out of the ruck of mere cavalry experts—of both sorts. On the one hand he is not a competent machine working out other people's ideas in the field of battle: on the other he is no blundering theorist whose ideas crumple into ineffectual dust under the stress of actual warfare. He can carry out with the ardour of the soldier the schemes which he has formulated with the cold cunning of the strategist. It is difficult indeed to say in which field of cavalry work he more greatly excels—that of theory or practice. We shall see later that he possesses qualities altogether apart from those of the theoriser or the man of action. Suffice it now to glance at the astonishingly complete theory of cavalry on which his marvellous execution is founded.

One reaches the bedrock of French's curiously sane conception of war when one asks him to define war. In dealing with those gentlemen who tell us that the Boer War was fought under such abnormal conditions that it is useless as a ground-work for conclusions as to future wars, he uttered a memorable retort. "All wars are abnormal," he observed, "because there is no such thing as normal war." [16] There we have one of the axioms both of his theory and of his practice. There can be no fixed conditions, and so there can be no final theories as to the conduct of warfare. Theory is simply a means to an end. And the successful general is he who most ably adapts the general body of theory suitable for all cases to the particular campaign on which he is engaged.

[Page Heading: A VEXED QUESTION]

Broadly, however, French has very clearly defined what he considers to be the use and the abuse of cavalry. After the Boer War, as is well known, opinion on the subject of the future of the mounted arm was bitterly divided. There were those who saw in French's success a justification for the cavalrymen of the old school, armed *cap a pie*. There were others who, like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, saw the end of their day approaching. The author of *The Great Boer War* says of the charge before Kimberley: "It appears to have been one of the very few occasions during the campaign when that obsolete and absurd weapon the sword was anything but a dead weight to its bearer." And again: "The war has been a cruel one for the cavalry.... It is difficult to say that cavalry, as cavalry, have justified their existence. In the opinion of many the tendency of the future will be to convert the whole forces into mounted infantry.... A little training in taking cover, leggings instead

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of boots, and a rifle instead of a carbine, would give us a formidable force of 20,000 men who could do all that our cavalry does, and a great deal more besides.... The lesson both of the South African and of the American Civil War is that the light horseman who is trained to fight on foot is the type of the future." [17] This is the opinion of a very competent civilian who deeply studied the South African campaign. But it is the opinion of a civilian.

On the other hand many experts, most of them military men, insist that the day of shock tactics is far from done. They instance the charge before Kimberley as a case in point. Obviously all the elements of disaster were there. Only a brilliant use of the traditional cavalry attack saved the situation—and Kimberley. Situations of that sort are bound to arise again. How is the mounted infantryman, lacking the *elan* and spirit of the cavalryman, to meet the situation?

[Page Heading: TOO MUCH CAUTION]

French takes an attitude somewhat midway between these two extremes. He, of all men, has developed cavalry most successfully on what might be called mounted infantry lines. That is to say, he has taught his men to fight on foot, to take cover at every opportunity, and to master the whole art of reconnaissance. But at the same time, he objects to extremist [18] views as to the abolition of the cavalry spirit. "One or two distinguished foreign soldiers who have publicly commented upon that campaign have said that what is termed the 'Cavalry Spirit' is opposed to the idea of dismounted action. They hold that the cavalry disdain to dismount, and they see in riding the end instead of the means. They consider that events in the Far East teach us that we must render our cavalry less devoted to 'manoeuvres' and to 'tournaments,' in order to enable them to fit themselves to take part in modern fighting; that the times have come when the methods of warfare should be changed; and that the cavalry must determine to defeat the enemy by dismounted action entirely.

"I cannot speak with any certainty as to what has happened in European Armies, but as regards the British Cavalry, I am absolutely convinced that the Cavalry Spirit is, and may be encouraged to the utmost, without in the least degree prejudicing either training in dismounted duties or the acquirement of such tactical knowledge on the part of leaders as will enable them to discern when and where to resort to dismounted methods.

"How, I ask, can the Cavalry perform its role in war until the enemy's Cavalry is defeated and paralysed? I challenge any Cavalry officer, British or foreign, to deny the principle that Cavalry, acting as such against its own Arm, can never attain complete success unless it is proficient in shock tactics.

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“Cavalry soldiers must, of course, learn to be expert rifle shots, but the attainment of this desirable object will be brought no nearer by ignoring the horse, the sword or the lance. On the contrary, the *elan* and dash which perfection in Cavalry manoeuvres imparts to large bodies of horsemen will be of inestimable value in their employment as mounted rifle-men when the field is laid open to their enterprise in this role by the defeat of the hostile Cavalry. That the Cavalry on both sides in the recent war did not distinguish themselves or their Arm, is an undoubted fact, but the reason is quite apparent. On the Japanese side they were indifferently mounted, the riding was not good, and they were very inferior in numbers, and hence were only enabled to fulfil generally the role of Divisional Cavalry, which they appear to have done very well. The cause of failure on the Russian side is to be found in the fact that for years they have been trained on *exactly the same principles* which these writers now advocate. They were devoid of real Cavalry training, they thought of nothing but getting off their horses and shooting; hence they lamentably failed in enterprises which demanded, before all, a display of the highest form of Cavalry spirit.”

On the other hand Sir John French protests against the tendency to *ultra-caution* in handling cavalry at manoeuvres. The cavalry charge is always a risk. The risk taken by the Field-Marshal, for instance, when he ordered the famous charge which won him the way to Kimberley, would certainly have been regarded as fatal at official manoeuvres. It is absurd, he insists, that the umpires should call on cavalry to surrender the moment that they come face to face with an infantry fire. Such a moment may be the cavalry's great opportunity.

[Page Heading: VIEWS ON CAVALRY]

Many of the modern armies, he holds, are suffering from cavalry without confidence. And there is abundant evidence to justify the charge. Bernhardi has pointed out that the phenomenal successes of the German cavalry in the war of 1870-1 were due not to its own extraordinary valour, but to the absence of opposition on the part of the French. Von Moltke made a similar criticism (which Sir John French approves) on the Prussian cavalry after the war of 1866. “Our cavalry failed,” he wrote, “perhaps not so much in actual capacity as in *self-confidence*. All its initiative had been destroyed at manoeuvres, where criticism and blame had been almost synonymous, and it therefore shirked independent bold action, and kept far in the rear, and as much as possible out of sight.”

French, in fact, is convinced that the “cavalry battle” is by no means a thing of the past. Until the enemy's cavalry is overthrown, the work of the mounted infantryman cannot begin. So long as opposing countries train efficient cavalry, the clash of the rival horsemen is the inevitable preliminary of any campaign.

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At the same time his views on the specialisation of training are far from extreme. The cavalry spirit must be encouraged: but it must not be permitted to overshadow that wider *camaraderie* which is the Army spirit. "It is not only possible but necessary," he says, "to preach the Army spirit, or, in other words, the close comradeship of all arms in battle, and at the same time to develop the highest qualities and the special attributes of each branch. The particular spirit which we seek to encourage is different for each arm. Were we to seek to endow cavalry with the tenacity and stiffness of infantry, or to take from the mounted arm the mobility and the cult of the offensive which are the breath of its life, we should ruin not only the cavalry, but the Army besides. Those who scoff at the spirit, whether of cavalry, of artillery, or of infantry, are people who have had no practical experience of the actual training of troops in peace, or of the personal leadership in war. Such men are blind guides indeed." [19]

For cavalry, then, Sir John French sees a brilliant future. "The opinion which I hold and have often expressed is that the *true role of cavalry on the battlefield is to reconnoitre, to deceive and to support*. If the enemy's cavalry has been overthrown, the role of reconnaissance will have been rendered easier. In the roles of deception and support, such an immense and fruitful field of usefulness and enterprise is laid open to a cavalry division which has thought out and practised these roles in its peace training, and is accustomed to act in large bodies dismounted, that I cannot bring myself to believe that any equivalent for such manifest advantages can be found even in the most successful raid against the enemy's communications by mounted troops." [20]

[Page Heading: A HISTORIC PHRASE]

How brilliantly Sir John French trained his men to accomplish these multiple activities, recent history has shown. We may note in passing, however, that mechanics have now divested the cavalry of one of their chief functions. The aeroplane is now the eye of the army and the strategical role of the cavalry is no more. The mounted arm will almost certainly now be confined to screening operations and to shock tactics, after the opposing armies have come into touch with one another. History, therefore, has obviously justified Sir John French in his championship of the cavalry spirit. Without it his horsemen would have been no match for the German cavalry. Thanks to their training, they "went through the Uhlans like brown paper" in General Sir Philip Chetwode's historic phrase.

FOOTNOTES:

[16] Sir John French's Preface to *Cavalry* by General von Bernhardi. By permission of Messrs. Hugh Rees, Ltd., and Messrs. Hodder & Stoughton.

[17] *The Great Boer War*, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. By permission of Messrs. Smith, Elder & Co.

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[18] Sir John French's Preface to *Cavalry in Future Wars*, by General von Bernhardi. By permission of Mr. John Murray.

[19] From Sir John French's Introduction to *Cavalry*, by General F. von Bernhardi, by permission of Mr. Hugh Rees and Messrs. Hodder & Stoughton.

[20] From Sir John French's Introduction to *Cavalry*, by General F. von Bernhardi, by permission of Mr. Hugh Rees and Messrs. Hodder & Stoughton.

CHAPTER XI

THE MODERN MARLBOROUGH

Europe's Need—The Plight of France—A Delicate Situation—The Man of "Grip"—A Magnificent Retreat.

On August 4, Great Britain woke up to find herself engaged in one of the most terrific contests in history. Out of an assassination at Serajevo had sprung a European war. In demanding apologies for the death of its Archduke, Austria-Hungary, with the connivance of Germany, refused to be conciliated with the most adequate apologies offered by Servia. The result was a protest from Russia, which would doubtless have allayed the situation, but for the aggressive attitude dictated to Vienna from Berlin. In the sequel Great Britain found herself arrayed with Russia and France against the Austro-Germanic forces.

The question arose as to who should lead the English expeditionary force so sorely needed to stem the tide of the German legions as it rolled over an outraged Belgium and an unprepared France. There was never any doubt as to whom the great task should be entrusted. Sir John French was obviously the man for the task.

[Page Heading: A CAPABLE STAFF]

Fate pointed to him not only as the greatest active military leader in this country, but as the one man possessing the peculiar qualities called for in this campaign. There may be more brilliant intellects in the army, but there is no other such leader of men. This campaign was bound to be a long, a hazardous and a delicate enterprise. It called for a man of extraordinary grip and pertinacity of purpose. These qualities French possesses to a marked degree. He has also the power of sensing ability in other men. In South Africa he was able to surround himself with one of the ablest General Staffs in Europe. French's extraordinary rapidity of thought, his lightning decisions, and his masterly grip of the most complex situation, allied with lieutenants competent to undertake the most difficult operations which he may suggest, provides a combination probably unequalled in history.

In another respect French is peculiarly suited to the onerous task imposed upon him. His innate sense of loyalty makes him a colleague of rare qualities. On the face of it the British commander's position called for very great tact. It was delicate almost to a distressing degree. Allied commanders have always to struggle with the teasing element of friction. Sir John French eliminated that at the outset. Even more difficult was the problem of seniority. General Joffre, who is French's superior, is his inferior in rank, not being a Field-Marshal. Here was a situation teeming with difficulties. The slightest clumsiness on the British Commander's part would have caused a crisis. There were no crises, because French is a diplomatist as well as a soldier.

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No sooner had the British army fairly landed on French soil than it was faced with the worst trial of war—a prolonged and perilous retreat before overwhelming odds. But Sir John French knew all that was to be known of the scientific retreat. Had he not seen it thirty years ago on an Egyptian desert, and practised its every form time and again on the African veldt? In four days the British force covered 60 miles in orderly and aggressive retreat, without once giving way to confusion or disorder. The men who had been with French in South Africa, General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien and General Sir Douglas Haig, had the situation in hand from the first. The retreat was a triumph for the British army, and particularly for the cavalry which French had trained. Nor was its route that desired by the German Headquarters Staff. Through the vigour of his cavalry charges, French was able to dictate his own line of retreat. He had held his position long enough to save the French left wing; and he had retreated in order before a force five times that of his own.

[Page Heading: SPLENDID PRAISE]

French's old South African commander, Lord Roberts, was particularly struck by the retreat from *Mons*. He expressed his admiration in the following remarkable letter to Lady French:

12 Sept., 1914.

MY DEAR LADY FRENCH,

I write these few lines to tell you how much I admire your husband's Dispatch, and how proud I am of the splendid work done by the troops under his command. When the whole story of the war comes to be known, the masterly way in which the Retreat from Mons—under vastly superior numbers—was carried out, will be remembered as one of the finest military exploits ever achieved....[21]

I trust you will continue to get good news of Sir John, and that you are keeping well yourself. With kindest regards, in which Lady Roberts and my daughters join,

Believe me,
Yours sincerely,
(Signed) ROBERTS,
(F.-M.).

That was only the first chapter in the story of his new achievements. The authentic history of his latest successes remains to be written. The French, however, were not wrong in dubbing the British Field-Marshal "the modern Marlborough." For French belongs to the same dogged, cautious school as Marlborough and Wellington. His genius is one of those which include an infinite capacity for taking pains. Indeed his

thoroughness is more than Teutonic. In this war, French has, so far, found no Napoleon to fight. It is, indeed, questionable whether the Germans have a commander of his excellence on the field. But the preparations of the German Headquarters Staff may be admitted to be Napoleonic in their elaborate and far-seeing perfection. Yet time and again, as in the Napoleonic wars, they have gone down before a British General who unites the dash of von Roon with the caution and the prescience of Moltke.

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FOOTNOTES:

[21] Published by courtesy of Lady French and Earl Roberts.

CHAPTER XII

FRENCH, THE MAN

A Typical Englishman—Fighting at School—Napoleon
Worship—"A Great Reporter"—Halting Speeches and Polished
Prose. A South African Coincidence—Mrs. Despard and the
Newsboy—The Happy Warrior.

So far, this book has necessarily been chiefly a record of events. That was inevitable, for the man of action writes his story in deeds. Nor was there ever a great soldier who made less clamour in the world of newspapers than General French. He has never adopted the studied reticence of Kitchener nor yet the chill aloofness of certain of his colleagues. War correspondents are not anathema to him; neither does he shudder at the sight of the reporter's pencil. Yet, somehow, few anecdotes cluster round his name.

Perhaps that is because his modesty is not a pose, although it has become almost a tradition. It is simply a natural trait in a modest and rather retiring disposition. French simply will not be talked about—and there is an end of the matter.

If one were asked to describe the man, one might best answer that he is the Englishman to the *n*th. degree. It is usual to find that the man of extraordinary merit is in some degree a contrast with and a criticism of the mere average mortal of his set. The dour urbanity of Kitchener, for instance, is Oriental rather than English, and contrasts strangely with the choleric tradition of the army officer. So the infinite alertness and constant good humour of Roberts has a quality of Latin *esprit* very foreign to the English temperament. But there are no such peculiarities about French. He is the very essence of healthy normality.

Yet, although of Celtic descent, he is essentially English. He has not hacked his way to fame in the manner of the Scot, nor has he leapt upon her pedestal with the boisterous humour of the Irishman. He has got there in the dogged but sporting English way, taking Fortune's gifts when they came, but never pushing or scrambling for them when they were out of reach.

One catches the spirit of the man in the schoolboy. When he first went to school at Harrow, the boys, knowing that sisters had been responsible for his education, were prepared to take it out of him. But as French was ready to fight at the slightest



provocation, and equally ready to swear eternal friendship when the fight was done, he quickly won his way through respect to popularity.

[Page Heading: AN ADMIRER OF NAPOLEON]

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Despite this quality, the steadfast object of his admiration has been one of the most abnormal and theatrical figures in history—Napoleon. It is, however, Napoleon the soldier and not the personality that has attracted French, who, by the way, possesses a wonderful collection of Napoleonic relics. He sees Napoleon as the greatest strategist the world has known. As such the Corsican claims his unstinted admiration: but there his admiration stops. For French is altogether humane. There is nothing of the iron heel about either his methods or his manners. His extreme parsimony of life we have seen as the cause of the only criticism which has ever been levelled against him.

By a strange coincidence, however, his worship of Napoleon has proved itself invaluable in an unexpected way. In following Napoleon's campaigns out in detail, French had traversed every inch of Waterloo, and much of the Belgian battle-ground in the European war. There can be little doubt that the success of some of his work has been due to his detailed knowledge of the scene of operations.

Inevitably, perhaps, French suggests Napoleon in certain subtle traits of character rather than in personality. His rapidity of thought, for instance, has probably rarely been equalled, since Napoleon set Europe by the ears. An officer under his command in South Africa, has recorded how, day after day, for weeks on end, French would answer the most intricate questions on policy and tactics over the telephone with scarcely a moment's delay. Such inhuman speed and accuracy of decision link French with the greatest commanders of history.

There is just a suggestion of Napoleon too, in his habitual attitudes. He usually stands with legs wide apart and arms folded either across his chest or clasped behind his back. But the perfect cheerfulness of his smile banishes any fear of Corsican churlishness of manner. It is very certain that French is not feared by his staff: he is worshipped by them. The reason for that is not far to seek. Although his temper is irascible, it is not enduring. Often it will flash out in wrathful words, but the storm is quickly over. Men of this choleric temper are always beloved, for good humour inevitably underlies the ebullitions of so light a rage. They never nurse hatreds nor brood over trifles. Also they are healthily impervious to the wiles of flattery or the snare of favouritism. There is nothing of the jealous and erratic genius about French. To read his dispatches is to find praise lavishly given to subordinates but no mention of self. For he looks after his assistants and leaves his own record to fate. He has, indeed, mastered the art of being great enough to allow others to be great. Hence the excellence which always marks his General Staff.

[Page Heading: THE SOLDIERS' IDOL]

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Such qualities must inevitably endear a General to his officers, to the men who have to bear the brunt of their Chief's personality. But do they appeal to the private? Both Napoleon and Wellington indubitably took immense pains to surround themselves with a shroud of mystery. Under their dark mantles, the ranks must feel, lay buried the talisman of success. We know that his officers found "the sight of Wellington's long nose on a frosty morning worth another ten thousand men" to them. Sir John French has cultivated neither a nose, nor a frown, nor even a chin. How does he manage to be the idol of his men? it may be asked. Simply and solely by being himself. Without any of the meretricious arts of the personality-monger, he has impressed his personality on the troops in a most memorable way. This is largely due to the impression of quiet confidence which he always gives. You feel you are safe with French. Nothing, you know, will ever upset the cool sanity of his reasoning, the balanced decision of his judgments. This impression of certainly is strengthened by the distinctly masterful carriage of the man. His short, stocky figure, like General Grant's, suggests that fatigue is unknown to him. This is indeed the case. The story has often been told of how the General and his staff once decided, after an exhausting day, to spend the night in a lonely farm in South Africa. The house only boasted one bed, which was of course, reserved for the General. But French insisted on a tired member of his staff occupying the solitary mattress, and wrapping himself up in a rug, went contentedly to sleep on the floor.

His mind is as tireless as his body. The operations round Colesberg could only have been undertaken in their complicated entirety by a General who did not know what mental fatigue meant. This physical and mental fitness French has most carefully studied to preserve. At one time, several years ago, he feared a tendency to *avoi*rdupois, and instantly undertook a stern but successful bulk-reducing regimen. Apropos the regimen there is a story. Just before the present war, a bulky package was one day delivered to him at his club. French opened it negligently, expecting to discover the inevitable knick-knack of doubtful utility. But this was not the usual gift. It was a package of weight-reducing preparations.

[Page Heading: AN INDEPENDENT THINKER]

French's mind, however, is original as well as tireless. Just there lies the unique quality of his gifts. The art of war is necessarily one of the most highly systematised and therefore the most hide-bound in the world. No man is more perilously in danger of having his mind swathed in red tape and numbed by discipline than the soldier. In modern times the tendency to employ masses has not lessened the tendency to stereotype habits of thought. The danger of the mechanical soldier is stressed by no one more forcibly than by General von Bernhardi.

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He holds that a self-reliant personality is as essential as a profound knowledge of generalship to the modern commander. French possesses both. Although profoundly versed in all the doctrines of the schoolmen, he is never afraid to jump over the traces where they would lead to a precipice. He has never been hampered, as so many soldiers are, by his studies. Knowledge he has always used as a means to an end, which is its proper vocation. To this independence of mind, as to nothing else, may be attributed his phenomenal success amid the abnormal conditions of Boer warfare. Where the books end, French's active mind begins to construct its own "way out" of the corner.

The Boers were indeed the first to admit his superiority to the other English officers, if not to themselves. De Wet was once asked in the early stages of the war how long he expected to avoid capture. He replied, with a smile, that it all depended on which General was dispatched to run him down. When a certain name was mentioned, the reply was "Till eternity." General B—— was next mentioned. "About two years," was the verdict. "And General French?" "Two weeks," admitted De Wet.

French has, of course, never accepted social life in this country on its face value. The young officer who was studying when his friends were at polo or tennis, was under no illusions as to the havoc which an over-accentuation of the sporting and social side of life was playing with the officers' work. Nowadays, like Kitchener, he is bent on producing the professional and weeding out the "drawing-room" soldier. No wonder that his favourite authors are those acutest critics of English social life and English foibles, Dickens and Thackeray. The former's "Bleak House" and the latter's "Book of Snobs" are the two books he places first in his affections.

[Page Heading: A GREAT REPORTER]

He is himself a writer of parts. We are, ourselves, so close to the event he describes, that we are perhaps unable to appreciate the literary excellence of the despatches which French has sent us on the operations in France. A Chicago paper hails him, however, as "a great reporter." "No one can read his reports," the writer remarks, "without being struck with his weighty lucidity, his calm mastery of the important facts, the total absence of any attempt at 'effect,' and the remarkably suggestive bits of pertinent description."

Undoubtedly, the Americans are right—provided that these dispatches were actually penned by the General himself.

His speeches may be obvious and even trite; his letters may lack any flavour of personality; but these dispatches are literature. Like his hero Napoleon, like Caesar and Wellington, Sir John French has forged a literary style for himself. There is nothing

amateurish or journalistic about his communications from the front. The dispatch from Mons, for instance, is a masterpiece of lucid and incisive English. It might well be printed in our school-histories, not merely as a vivid historic document, but as a model of English prose.

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Not that Sir John French's style is an accident. Like most of the other successes of his career, it is the result of design. The man who laboriously "crammed" tactics laboured equally hard over the art of writing. The many prefaces which he has written to famous books on strategy and war bear traces of the most careful preparation.

Apart from his dispatches, however, French has written some virile, telling English in his prefaces to several books on cavalry and on military history. The most interesting is that which he wrote for Captain Frederick von Herbert's *The Defence of Plevna*. He prefaces it with a dramatic little coincidence of war capitally told. "During the last year of the South African War, while directing the operations in Cape Colony, I found myself, late one afternoon in February, 1902, at the north end of the railway bridge over the Orange River at Bethulie, strangely attracted by the appearance of a well-constructed and cleverly hidden covered field work, which formed an important part of the 'Bridge head.' Being somewhat pressed for time I rode on and directed my aide-de-camp to go down into the fort, look round it, and then catch me up. He shortly overtook me with an urgent request to return and inspect it myself. I did so, and was very much struck, not only with the construction of the work and its excellent siting, but also with all the defence arrangements at that point of the river. Whilst I was in the fort the officer in charge arrived and reported himself. Expressing my strong approval of all I had seen, I remarked that it brought back to my mind a book I had read and re-read, and indeed studied with great care and assiduity—a book called *The Defence of Plevna*, by a certain Lieutenant von Herbert, whom, to my regret, I had never met. 'I am von Herbert, and I wrote the book you speak of,' was the reply of the officer to whom I spoke." [22]

[Page Heading: OSMAN PASHA]

Osman Pasha was a soldier after French's own heart. Indeed, his tenacity was probably equal to that of his critic. Hence this fine tribute: "The great soldier who defended Plevna refused to acknowledge such a word as defeat. When things were at their worst his outward demeanour was calmest and most confident. There was no hysterical shrieking for supports or reinforcements. These might have reached him, but through treacherous jealousy he was betrayed and left to his own resources. In spite of this no thought of capitulation or retreat ever entered the mind of Osman Pasha...." [23] What a wonderful little cameo of courage!

One wonders whether the school-boy who sent French the following letter on his return from South Africa knew the quality of his writing.

"MY DEAR FRENCH,—You are a great British General. I want your autograph, but, whatever you do, don't let your secretary write it."

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I have said that Sir John French is the average Englishman in an accentuated degree. How then does he regard war? If the plain truth be told, we are not at heart a martial nation. We have made war when we have been compelled to it by the threat of an Armada or the menace of a Napoleon. But we have not cultivated war, at least since our wode days, as a pastime and a profession. Nor is French that abnormal being, an Englishman governed by the blood lust. Mrs. Despard has said that in reality he regards war as a hideous outrage. He has no delusions as to the glory of war. By no chance could he be ranked among the romanticist of the battlefield. That, perhaps, is why he never is, never has been, ruthless or remorseless with the men whom he commands.

[Page Heading: FRENCH AND THE SUFFOLKS]

If ever French had cause for anger, it was over the unlucky incident of the Suffolks, the one failure unwarrantably attributed to his ever victorious arms. Yet he was the one officer who softened the bitterness of that reverse to the men. He met the regiment in the Transvaal just eight months after the disaster. His speech to the troops, as reported in at least one paper, is well worthy of preservation. After referring to his pleasure in meeting them all again, he said: "What you did at Colesberg is still fresh in my recollection ... but what I wish especially to recall is the sad event of the night of January 5th and 6th, and to express my sympathy with you on the loss of your gallant leader, Colonel Watson, who on that night showed splendid qualities as a noble and able officer. Now, it has come to my knowledge that there has been spread about an idea that that event cast discredit of some sort upon this gallant regiment. I want you all to banish any such thought from your minds as utterly untrue. You took part ... in a night operation of extreme difficulty on a pitch dark night, and did all in your power to make it a success. So do not let any false idea get into your minds. Think rather that what took place brings honour to your regiment, and add this event to the long list of honours it has won in the past. I want you all to bear in mind about such night operations, that they can never be a certain success, and because they sometimes fail it does not, therefore, bring discredit on those who attempted to carry them out. You must remember that, if we always waited for an opportunity of certain success, we should do nothing at all, and that in war, fighting a brave enemy, it is absolutely impossible to be always sure of success: all we can do is to try our very best to secure success—and that you did on the occasion I am speaking of. I thank you for that and all the good work you have done since, and remember above all that no slur whatever attaches to your regiment for the result of that occasion."

With these finely sympathetic words might be placed French's speech to his troops before the battle of Elandslaagte. "Men," he said, "you are going to oppose two thousand or three thousand Dutch. We want to keep up our honour as we did in the olden time—as soldiers and men, we want to take that position before sunset."

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[Page Heading: FRENCH AND HIS MEN]

In that single phrase, “as soldiers and men,” one has the key to French’s popularity with the ranks. He treats the men as human beings and not as machines. In other words, he understands the British soldier through and through. Mrs. Despard has told a touching little story of the affection which he inspires in his men. She was returning home one evening when she was surprised by a question as she stopped to buy the customary evening paper. “Are you Mrs. Despard, General French’s sister?” asked the ragged wretch. She admitted that claim to distinction. The man then told her, with much enthusiasm, how when working with a battery in a very hot corner during the South African war, he had seen the General ride over to cheer them up. “Now, hi don’t care ’oo that man is, and I don’t care ’oo I am, I love that man,” he said rather huskily. Mrs. Despard has told how she forgot her paper that night in shaking the ex-soldier’s hand.

For this tact in dealing with his men, Sir John French has largely to thank the vein of acute sensibility which runs through his character. This sensibility can be traced in his mouth, which is remarkably finely chiselled. We have seen it in his childhood, when he shrank from some of the usual noisiness of boyhood. And Mrs. Despard has crystallised it in a phrase. Feeling depressed on one occasion before addressing a meeting on some reforms which she considered urgent, she confessed to her brother that she was spiritually afraid. “Why,” he replied, “don’t worry, I’ve never yet done anything worth doing without having to screw myself up to it.” French, very obviously, is a man for whom spiritual doubt may have its terrors. One cannot figure him as harbouring the narrow if sincere religion of a Kitchener or a Gordon.

One might sum him up as the *beau-ideal*, not only of the cavalry spirit, but of the scientific soldier. He can lead a cavalry charge with the dash of a Hotspur: and he can plan out a campaign with the masterly logic of a Marlborough. Unlike some of his contemporaries, he has attained extraordinary mastery over the science of war without himself becoming a scientific machine. In many ways he bears, in character and temperament, a striking resemblance to his colleague in arms—General Joffre. Although Joffre is three inches taller than French—he is five foot nine—he is otherwise very similar in appearance. There is the same short, powerful physique, the narrow neck surmounted by a massive head and heavy jaw, and the same broad forehead, with masterful eyes peeping from beneath bushy eyebrows. Neither of these men on whom hangs Europe’s destiny is in the least degree strident or self-assertive. Indeed, both tend to be listeners rather than talkers. Both have the same trick of making instantaneous decisions. Both scorn to be merely “smart” in outward appearance; both are devoted to efficiency in detail; and, most suggestive of all, each finds himself eternally compared to General Grant! Probably the latter’s dogged personality forms the best possible common denominator for these two remarkable men.

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[Page Heading: AN OPPORTUNITY]

It is said that when news of the war in South Africa reached French, momentarily obeying a natural impulse, he waved his hand and cried, "Hurrah for South Africa." If anyone had any right to thank Heaven for that particular campaign, it was certainly French. But he would have "hurrahed" any campaign that gave opportunity for his powers. After all, the soldier's stage is the battlefield. Without wars he is without an active role, and must spend his years drudging in the rehearsal theatre of the Colonies. If he be so original and so thorough a soldier as French, his abilities will be at an even graver discount. For the rehearsal is not the play; and the best Generals, like the ablest actors, are notoriously weak at rehearsal, which does not pluck fully at their energies. Probably French would have hurrahed for South Africa, however, had he had no special abilities at all. For nowhere is he happier than on the battlefield. If the grisly game of war must be played, French plays it with all his heart. It is the game which destiny put him on the stage to play; the game which he has devoted his life to mastering; and the only game in which he has ever seriously interested himself.

Luck invariably follows the man who is utterly absorbed in his profession, for the simply reason that, being always engrossed in his work, he is always alive to his opportunities. French's luck consists solely in the fact that he happens to be a soldier. Men of Kitchener's organising genius may be many things; in nothing, not even in the arts, are they likely to seriously fail. But French is a soldier in the sense quite other than Kitchener. He is a man made for the endurance of hardship and for the facing of hard practical difficulties in the field. It is as natural for him to conduct a campaign as it was for Pope to "lisp in numbers, for the numbers came." He is the Happy Warrior in being.

FINIS

FOOTNOTES:

[22] From Sir John French's Preface to *The Defence of Plevna*, by Capt. Frederick von Herbert, by permission of Messrs. Smith, Elder.

[23] From Sir John French's Preface to *The Defence of Plevna*, by Capt. Frederick von Herbert, by permission of Messrs. Smith, Elder.

APPENDIX

THE MONS DESPATCH

To the Secretary of State for War

September 7, 1914.

MY LORD,

I have the honour to report the proceedings of the Field Force under my command up to the time of rendering this despatch.

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1. The transport of the troops from England both by sea and by rail was effected in the best order and without a check. Each unit arrived at its destination in this country well within the scheduled time. The concentration was practically complete on the evening of Friday, the 21st ultimo, and I was able to make dispositions to move the Force during Saturday, the 22nd, to positions I considered most favourable from which to commence operations which the French Commander-in-Chief, General Joffre, requested me to undertake in pursuance of his plans in prosecution of the campaign.

The line taken up extended along the line of the canal from Conde on the west, through Mons and Binche on the east. This line was taken up as follows:—

From Conde to Mons inclusive was assigned to the 2nd Corps, and to the right of the 2nd Corps from Mons the 1st Corps was posted. The 5th Cavalry Brigade was placed at Binche.

In the absence of my 3rd Army Corps I desired to keep the Cavalry Division as much as possible as a reserve to act on my outer flank, or move in support of any threatened part of the line. The forward reconnaissance was entrusted to Brigadier-General Sir Philip Chetwode with the 5th Cavalry Brigade, but I directed General Allenby to send forward a few squadrons to assist in this work. During August 22 and 23 these advanced squadrons did some excellent work, some of them penetrating as far as Soignies, and several encounters took place in which our troops showed to great advantage. 2. At 6 a.m. on August 23 I assembled the Commanders of the 1st and 2nd Corps and Cavalry Division at a point close to the position, and explained the general situation of the Allies, and what I understood to be General Joffre's plan. I discussed with them at some length the immediate situation in front of us. From information I received from French Headquarters I understood that little more than one, or at most two, of the enemy's Army Corps, with perhaps one Cavalry Division, were in front of my position; and I was aware of no attempted outflanking movement by the enemy. I was confirmed in this opinion by the fact that my patrols encountered no undue opposition in their reconnoitring operations. The observation of my aeroplanes seemed also to bear out this estimate. About 3 p.m. on Sunday, the 23rd, reports began coming in to the effect that the enemy was commencing an attack on the Mons line, apparently in some strength, but that the right of the position from Mons and Bray was being particularly threatened. The Commander of the 1st Corps had pushed his flank back to some high ground south of Bray, and the 5th Cavalry Brigade evacuated Binche, moving slightly south; the enemy thereupon occupied Binche. The right of the 3rd Division, under General

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Hamilton, was at Mons, which formed a somewhat dangerous salient; and I directed the Commander of the 2nd Corps to be careful not to keep the troops on this salient too long, but, if threatened seriously, to draw back the centre behind *Mons*. This was done before dark. In the meantime, about 5 p.m., I received a most unexpected message from General Joffre by telegraph, telling me that at least three German Corps, *viz.*, a reserve corps, the 4th Corps and the 9th Corps, were moving on my position in front, and that the 2nd Corps was engaged in a turning movement from the direction of Tournay. He also informed me that the two reserve French divisions and the 5th French Army on my right were retiring, the Germans having on the previous day gained possession of the passages of the Sambre between Charleroi and Namur.³ In view of the possibility of my being driven from the Mons position, I had previously ordered a position in rear to be reconnoitred. This position rested on the fortress of Maubeuge on the right and extended west to Jenlain, south-east of Valenciennes, on the left. The position was reported difficult to hold, because standing crops and buildings made the siting of trenches very difficult and limited the field of fire in many important localities. It nevertheless afforded a few good artillery positions. When the news of the retirement of the French and the heavy German threatening on my front reached me, I endeavoured to confirm it by aeroplane reconnaissance; and as a result of this I determined to effect a retirement to the Maubeuge position at daybreak on the 24th. A certain amount of fighting continued along the whole line throughout the night, and at daybreak on the 24th the 2nd Division from the neighbourhood of Harmignies made a powerful demonstration as if to retake Binche. This was supported by the artillery of both the 1st and 2nd Divisions, whilst the 1st Division took up a supporting position in the neighbourhood of Peissant. Under cover of this demonstration the 2nd Corps retired on the line Dour-Quarouble-Frameries. The 3rd Division on the right of the Corps suffered considerable loss in this operation from the enemy, who had retaken *Mons*. The 2nd Corps halted on this line, where they partially entrenched themselves, enabling Sir Douglas Haig with the 1st Corps gradually to withdraw to the new position; and he effected this without much further loss, reaching the line Bavai-Maubeuge about 7 p.m. Towards midday the enemy appeared to be directing his principal effort against our left.

I had previously ordered General Allenby with the Cavalry to act vigorously in advance of my left front and endeavour to take the pressure off.

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About 7.30 a.m. General Allenby received a message from Sir Charles Fergusson, commanding 5th Division, saying that he was very hard pressed and in urgent need of support. On receipt of this message General Allenby drew in the Cavalry and endeavoured to bring direct support to the 5th Division. During the course of this operation General De Lisle, of the 2nd Cavalry Brigade, thought he saw a good opportunity to paralyse the further advance of the enemy's infantry by making a mounted attack on his flank. He formed up and advanced for this purpose, but was held up by wire about 500 yards from his objective, and the 9th Lancers and 18th Hussars suffered severely in the retirement of the Brigade. The 19th Infantry Brigade, which had been guarding the Line of Communications, was brought up by rail to Valenciennes on the 22nd and 23rd. On the morning of the 24th they were moved out to a position south of Quarouble to support the left flank of the 2nd Corps. With the assistance of the Cavalry Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien was enabled to effect his retreat to a new position; although, having two corps of the enemy on his front and one threatening his flank, he suffered great losses in doing so. At nightfall the position was occupied by the 2nd Corps to the west of Bavai, the 1st Corps to the right. The right was protected by the Fortress of Maubeuge, the left by the 19th Brigade in position between Jenlain and Bry, and the Cavalry on the outer flank.⁴ The French were still retiring, and I had no support except such as was afforded by the Fortress of Maubeuge; and the determined attempts of the enemy to get round my left flank assured me that it was his intention to hem me against that place and surround me. I felt that not a moment must be lost in retiring to another position. I had every reason to believe that the enemy's forces were somewhat exhausted, and I knew that they had suffered heavy losses. I hoped, therefore, that his pursuit would not be too vigorous to prevent me effecting my object.

The operation, however, was full of danger and difficulty, not only owing to the very superior force in my front, but also to the exhaustion of the troops.

The retirement was recommenced in the early morning of the 25th to a position in the neighbourhood of Le Cateau, and rearguards were ordered to be clear of the Maubeuge-Bavai-Eth Road by 5.30 a.m.

Two Cavalry Brigades, with the Divisional Cavalry of the 2nd Corps, covered the movement of the 2nd Corps. The remainder of the Cavalry Division, with the 19th Brigade, the whole under the command of General Allenby, covered the west flank. The 4th Division commenced its detrainment at Le Cateau on Sunday, the 23rd, and by the morning of the 25th eleven battalions and a Brigade of Artillery

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with Divisional Staff were available for service. I ordered General Snow to move out to take up a position with his right south of Solesmes, his left resting on the Cambrai-Le Cateau Road south of La Chaprie. In this position the Division rendered great help to the effective retirement of the 2nd and 1st Corps to the new position. Although the troops had been ordered to occupy the Cambrai-Le Cateau-Landrecies position, and the ground had, during the 25th, been partially prepared and entrenched, I had grave doubts—owing to the information I received as to the accumulating strength of the enemy against me—as to the wisdom of standing there to fight. Having regard to the continued retirement of the French on my right, my exposed left flank, the tendency of the enemy's western corps (II) to envelop me, and, more than all, the exhausted condition of the troops, I determined to make a great effort to continue the retreat till I could put some substantial obstacle, such as the Somme or the Oise, between my troops and the enemy, and afford the former some opportunity of rest and reorganisation. Orders were, therefore, sent to the Corps Commanders to continue their retreat as soon as they possibly could towards the general line Vermand-St. Quentin-Ribemont.

The Cavalry, under General Allenby, were ordered to cover the retirement.

Throughout the 25th and far into the evening, the 1st Corps continued its march on Landrecies, following the road along the eastern border of the Forêt De Mormal, and arrived at Landrecies about 10 o'clock. I had intended that the Corps should come further west so as to fill up the gap between Le Cateau and Landrecies, but the men were exhausted and could not get further in without rest. The enemy, however, would not allow them this rest, and about 9.30 p.m. a report was received that the 4th Guards Brigade in Landrecies was heavily attacked by troops of the 9th German Army Corps who were coming through the forest on the north of the town. This brigade fought most gallantly and caused the enemy to suffer tremendous loss in issuing from the forest into the narrow streets of the town. This loss has been estimated from reliable sources at from 700 to 1,000. At the same time information reached me from Sir Douglas Haig that his 1st Division was also heavily engaged south and east of Maroilles. I sent urgent messages to the Commander of the two French Reserve Divisions on my right to come up to the assistance of the 1st Corps, which they eventually did. Partly owing to this assistance, but mainly to the skilful manner in which Sir Douglas Haig extricated his Corps from an exceptionally difficult position in the darkness of the night, they were able at dawn to resume their march south towards Wassigny on Guise. By about 6 p.m. the 2nd Corps had got into position with their right on Le Cateau, their

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left in the neighbourhood of Caudry, and the line of defence was continued thence by the 4th Division towards Seranvillers, the left being thrown back. During the fighting on the 24th and 25th the Cavalry became a good deal scattered, but by the early morning of the 26th General Allenby had succeeded in concentrating two brigades to the south of Cambrai.

The 4th Division was placed under the orders of the General Officer Commanding the 2nd Army Corps.

On the 24th the French Cavalry Corps, consisting of three divisions, under General Sordet, had been in billets north of Avesnes. On my way back from Bavai, which was my "Poste de Commandement" during the fighting of the 23rd and 24th, I visited General Sordet, and earnestly requested his co-operation and support. He promised to obtain sanction from his Army Commander to act on my left flank, but said that his horses were too tired to move before the next day. Although he rendered me valuable assistance later on in the course of the retirement, he was unable for the reasons given to afford me any support on the most critical day of all, viz., the 26th.

At daybreak on August 26 it became apparent that the enemy was throwing the bulk of his strength against the left of the position occupied by the 2nd Corps and the 4th Division.

At this time the guns of four German Army Corps were in position against them, and Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien reported to me that he judged it impossible to continue his retirement at daybreak (as ordered) in face of such an attack. I sent him orders to use his utmost endeavours to break off the action and retire at the earliest possible moment, as it was impossible for me to send him any support, the 1st Corps being at the moment incapable of movement. The French Cavalry Corps, under General Sordet, was coming up on our left rear early in the morning, and I sent an urgent message to him to do his utmost to come up and support the retirement of my left flank; but owing to the fatigue of his horses he found himself unable to intervene in any way.

There had been no time to entrench the position properly, but the troops showed a magnificent front to the terrible fire which confronted them.

The Artillery, although outmatched by at least four to one, made a splendid fight, and inflicted heavy losses on their opponents.

At length it became apparent that, if complete annihilation was to be avoided, a retirement must be attempted; and the order was given to commence it about 3.30 p.m. The movement was covered with the most devoted intrepidity and determination by the Artillery, which had itself suffered heavily, and the fine work done by the Cavalry in the

further retreat from the position assisted materially in the final completion of this most difficult and dangerous operation.

Fortunately the enemy had himself suffered too heavily to engage in an energetic pursuit.

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I cannot close the brief account of this glorious stand of the British troops without putting on record my deep appreciation of the valuable services rendered by General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien. I say without hesitation that the saving of the left wing of the Army under my command on the morning of the 26th August could never have been accomplished unless a commander of rare and unusual coolness, intrepidity, and determination had been present to personally conduct the operation. The retreat was continued far into the night of the 26th and through the 27th and 28th, on which date the troops halted on the line Noyon-Chauny-La Fere, having then thrown off the weight of the enemy's pursuit. On the 27th and 28th I was much indebted to General Sordet and the French Cavalry Division which he commands for materially assisting my retirement and successfully driving back some of the enemy on Cambrai. General D'Amade also, with the 61st and 62nd French Reserve Divisions, moved down from the neighbourhood of Arras on the enemy's right flank and took much pressure off the rear of the British Forces.

This closes the period covering the heavy fighting which commenced at Mons on Sunday afternoon, August 23, and which really constituted a four days' battle.

At this point, therefore, I propose to close the present despatch.

I deeply deplore the very serious losses which the British Forces have suffered in this great battle; but they were inevitable in view of the fact that the British Army—only two days after a concentration by rail—was called upon to withstand a vigorous attack of five German Army Corps. It is impossible for me to speak too highly of the skill evinced by the two General Officers commanding Army Corps; the self-sacrificing and devoted exertions of their Staffs; the direction of the troops by Divisional Brigade and Regimental Leaders; the command of the smaller units by their officers; and the magnificent fighting spirit displayed by non-commissioned officers and men. I wish particularly to bring to your Lordship's notice the admirable work done by the Royal Flying Corps under Sir David Henderson. Their skill, energy, and perseverance have been beyond all praise. They have furnished me with the most complete and accurate information, which has been of incalculable value in the conduct of the operations. Fired at constantly both by friend and foe, and not hesitating to fly in every kind of weather, they have remained undaunted throughout.

Further, by actually fighting in the air, they have succeeded in destroying five of the enemy's machines.

I wish to acknowledge with deep gratitude the incalculable assistance I received from the General and Personal Staffs at Headquarters during this trying period.

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Lieutenant-General Sir Archibald Murray, Chief of the General Staff; Major-General Wilson, Sub-Chief of the General Staff; and all under them have worked day and night unceasingly with the utmost skill, self-sacrifice and devotion; and the same acknowledgment is due by me to Brigadier-General Hon. W. Lambton, my Military Secretary, and the Personal Staff. In such operations as I have described the work of the Quartermaster-General is of an extremely onerous nature. Major-General Sir William Robertson has met what appeared to be almost insuperable difficulties with his characteristic energy, skill and determination; and it is largely owing to his exertions that the hardships and sufferings of the troops—inseparable from such operations—were not much greater. Major-General Sir Nevil Macready, the Adjutant-General, has also been confronted with most onerous and difficult tasks in connection with disciplinary arrangements and the preparation of casualty lists. He has been indefatigable in his exertions to meet the difficult situations which arose. I have not yet been able to complete the list of officers whose names I desire to bring to your Lordship's notice for services rendered during the period under review; and, as I understand it is of importance that this despatch should no longer be delayed, I propose to forward this list, separately, as soon as I can.

I have the honour to be,
Your Lordship's most obedient Servant,
(Signed) J.D.P. FRENCH, Field-Marshal,
Commander-in-Chief,
British Forces in the Field.

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Typographical errors corrected in text:

Page 151: optimisitc replaced by optimistic

Page 73: pursut replaced by pursuit

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