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ON THE HEELS OF DE WET

BY

THE INTELLIGENCE OFFICER

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN 'BLACKWOOD'S MAGAZINE.'

FOREWORD.

This short history is an amplification of a diary kept by the author during the late war, which amplification, through the courtesy of the editor, was published as a series of papers in 'Blackwood's Magazine.' The author is well aware of the shortcomings of his work, which he presents to the public in all humility, after asking pardon from such of the performers on his stage as may see through the slight veil of anonymity in which it has been attempted to enshroud them. If any should think the few criticisms which have crept into the text unjust, will they bear in mind that the regimental officer has suffered, in silence, much for the sins of others. It is the author's conviction that cases were rare when the ship did not sail true enough: in the beginning she may have badly wanted cleaning below the water line, but she never failed to answer her helm. It was more often the man at the helm than the sailing quality of the vessel that was at fault, and the marvel is that she was of sufficiently tough construction to be able to stand the stress incurred by indifferent seamanship.

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ON THE HEELS OF DE WET.

I.

ToC

THE BIRTH OF THE BRIGADE.

"De Aar," and the Africander guard flung himself out of his brake-van.

De Aar! After forty-eight hours of semi-starvation in a brake-van, the name of the junction, in spite of the ill-natured tones which gave voice to it, sounded sweeter than the chimes of bells. It meant relief from confinement in a few square feet of board; relief from a semi-putrid atmosphere—oil, unwashed men, and stale tobacco-smoke; relief from the delicate attentions of a surly Africander guard, who resented the overcrowding of his van; relief from the pangs of hunger; relief from the indescribable punishments of thirst.

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Yet at its best De Aar is a miserable place. Not made—only thrown at the hillside, and allowed by negligence and indifference to slip into the nearest hollow. Too far from the truncated kopjes to reap any benefit from them. Close enough to feel the radiation of a sledge-hammer sun from their bevelled summits—close enough to be the channel, in summer, of every scorching blast diverted by them; in winter, every icy draught. Pestilential place, goal of whirlwinds and dust-devils, ankle-deep in desert drift—prototype of Berber in a sandstorm—as comfortless by night as day. But as in nature, so in the handiwork of men, even in the most repulsive shapes it is possible to find some saving feature. De Aar has one—one only. Its saving feature is where a slatternly Jew boy plays host behind the bar of a fly-ridden buffet. Here at prices which, except that it is a campaign, would be prohibitive, you can purchase food and drink.

But at night it is not an easy place to find. The station is full of trains, and, arriving by a supply-train, you are discharged at some remote siding. A dozen wheeled barricades—open trucks, groaning bogies piled with war material—separate you from the platform. You dare not climb over the couplings between the waggons, for engines are attached, and the trains jolt backwards and forwards apparently without aim or warning. Up over an open truck! You roll on to the top of sleeping men, and bark your shins against a rifle. Curses follow you as you clamber out, and drop into the middle way. A clear line. No,—down pants an armoured train, a leviathan of steel plates and sheet-iron. You let it pass, and dash for the next barricade. Thank heaven! this is a passenger train. As it is lighted up like a grand hotel you will be able to hoist yourself over the footboards and through a saloon—"Halt! who goes there?" and you recoil from the point of a naked bayonet. "Can't help it, orficer or no orficer, this is Lord Kitchener's special, and you can't pass here!" It is no use. Another wide detour; more difficulties, other escapes from moving trains, and at last you find the platform.

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De Aar platform at night. If the management at Drury Lane ever wished to enact a play called "Chaos," the setting for their best scene could not better a night on De Aar platform. Each day this Clapham Junction of Lord Kitchener's army dumps down dozens of men, who are forced for an indefinite period to use the station as a home—tons and tons of army litter and a thousand nondescript details. The living lie about the station in magnificent confusion—white men, Kaffirs, soldiers, prisoners, civilians. A brigadier-general waiting for the night mail will be asleep upon one bench, a skrimshanking Tommy, who has purposely lost his unit, on the next. Even Kitchener's arrival can work no cleansing of De Aar. It only adds to the confusion by condensation of the chaos into a more restricted and less public area.

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But our first needs are animal. Stumbling over prostrate forms, cannoning against piles of heterogeneous gear, we make the buffet. A flood of light, the buzz of voices, and the hum of myriads of disturbed flies, and we live again. Filthy cloths, stained senna-colour with the spilt food and drink of months, an atmosphere reeking like a "fish-snack" shop, a dozen to twenty dishevelled and dirty men of all ranks clamouring for food, two slovenly half-caste wenches. That is all, yet this is life to the man off "trek." There is even a fascination in an earthenware plate, though its surface shows the marks of the greasy cloth and dirty fingers of the servitors.

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A lieutenant-general and his staff have a table to themselves; we find a corner at the main

board, where the meaner sit. After food, news. De Wet has invaded the Colony with 3000 men. He was fighting with Plumer to-day at Philipstown. Then we begin to understand why we were summoned to De Aar. The little horse-gunner major, who vouchsafed the news, had just arrived with his battery from somewhere on the Middelburg-Komati line. Five days on the train and his horses only watered four times. That was nothing at this period of the war, when the average mounted man was not blamed if he killed three horses in a month. The major did not know his destination or what column he was to join. Delightful uncertainty! All he knew was that his battery was boxed up in a train outside the buffet, and that it would start for somewhere in half an hour. It might be destined for Mafeking, or it might be for Beaufort West; but he was ready to lay 2 to 1 that within six weeks his battery would be on the high seas India bound. Wise were the men who took up this bet, for the little major and his battery are in South Africa to this day.

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Food over, it was necessary once more to face the maze of De Aar platform. It may seem strange, but when you are on duty bound, it is easier, once the right platform is gained, to find the officials at midnight than in the day. Under martial law few travellers have lights; fewer are allowed, or have the desire, to burn them on the platform. Consequently a light after midnight generally means an official trying to overtake the work which has accumulated during the day.

"Railway Staff Officer? Yes, sir, straight in here, sir."

A very pale youth, in the cleanest of kit, whitest of collars, and with the pinkest of pink impertinences round his cap and neck. He never looked up from the paper on which he was writing as he opened the following conversation—

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Pale Youth. "What can I do for you?"

Applicant. "I am here under telegraphic instructions."

P. Y. (taking telegram proffered) "Never heard of you."

A. "You must have some record of that wire!"

P. Y. "I never sent it. It must have been sent by the Railway Staff Officer. He's asleep now. Come back in the morning and see him!"

A. (furiously) "You d—d young cub!—is this the way you treat your seniors? What do you belong to?"

P. Y. (Jumping up nervously) "Oh, I beg your pardon, sir; I thought you were one of those helpless Yeomanry officers. They are the plague of our lives. I will go and wake the R.S.O." [*Disappears. Returns in five minutes.*]

P. Y. "The R.S.O. says that you must report to the office of the line of communications. They may have orders about you. You will find the brigade-major in a saloon carriage on the third siding outside the Rosmead line." [*Salutes.*]

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We go out into the night again, wondering if perdition can equal De Aar for miserable discomfort, and De Aar officialdom for inconsequence. The third siding, indeed! It was an hour before the saloon was found in that labyrinth of cast-iron.

The brigade-major was there, a wretched worn object of a man, plodding by the eccentric light of a tallow dip through the day's telegrams. Poor wretch! he earns his pittance as thoroughly as any of us do. Again we drew blank. "Never heard of you." All we could get out of him was, "You had better bed down in the station and await events." Poor devil! so worn with work and worry that he looked as if a simple little De Aar dust-devil would snap his backbone if it touched him. So we were turned adrift again in the old iron heap to swell the army of vagrants who live by their wits upon the communications.

It was about two in the morning before we found our servants. The soldier servant is a jewel—but a jewel with some blemishes. If you tell him to do anything "by numbers," he will do it splendidly; but he does not consider it part of his duty to think for himself, consequently you have always to think both for yourself and your servant, and that is why on this occasion we found ours sitting on our rolls of bedding at the far end of the platform. It had never struck them that we should want to sleep in a place like De Aar. Disgusted, we tried the hotel. Here they loosed dogs on us and turned out the guard. Still more disgusted, we returned to our bedding, and sardined in with the ruck and rubbish on the platform.

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Sunrise in South Africa. The sun knows how to rise on the veldt. When first seen it is as good as a tonic. It makes one feel joyous at the mere fact of being alive. But this feeling wears off with a week's trekking, especially when the season gets colder, or a night-march has miscarried. Then you never wish to see the sun rise again. There was a time when a man who boasted that he had never seen the sun rise was branded as a lazy sloth, an indolent good-for-nothing, who willingly missed half the pleasures of life. After twenty months continuous trekking in South Africa one is not sure that one's opinions on this subject fall into line with those of the majority. For after a baker's dozen of sunrises one has generally reached that state when the greatest natural pleasure is found inside rather than outside of a sleeping-bag. But in spite of the general detestation in which De Aar is held, the neighbouring hills furnish, in the quickening light of dawn, studies in changing colour so voluptuous, varied, and fantastic that the wonder is that all the artists in the world have not fore-gathered at the place. But familiarity with all this beauty

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reduces it to a commonplace. It just becomes part of the monotony of your daily life, especially if you have, as we had that morning, to wait your turn before you could wash, at the waste-water drippings from a locomotive feed-pump. Here you fought for a place, jostled by men who at home would have stepped off the pavement and saluted. But after a few months of war, at a washing-pump there is little by which you can distinguish officers from men, unless the former have their tunics on. From the washtub to *chota haziri*. The buffet is not yet open, but a dilapidated Kaffir woman on the platform is doling out at sixpence a time a mess of treacle-like consistency which is called coffee. What would you think if you could catch a glimpse of us? What would the bright little maid who brings in the tea in the morning say, if she could see us now? Certainly if we came to the front-door she would slam it in our faces, and threaten us with the police!

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But we must be up and doing. It is an extraordinary day at De Aar. Every one is bustling about. Staff popinjays hurry up and down the platform. Stout elderly militia colonels, who would never be up and dressed at this hour in ordinary circumstances, are heckling the R.S.O., who has more starch in his tunic than has ever been seen in a tunic before. What does it all mean? Then we remember the naked bayonet of the previous night. Lord Kitchener is at De Aar. Oh, Hades!

We feel his presence, but it is not long before we see him. How he must worry his tailor. Tall and well-proportioned above, he falls away from his waist downwards. It is this lower weediness which evidently troubles the man who fashions his clothes. But it is his face we look at. That cold blue eye which is the basilisk of the British Army. The firm jaw and the cruel mouth, of which we read in 1898. But presumably this is only the stereotyped "military hero" that the papers always keep "set up" for the advent of successful generals. None of it was visible here. A round, red, and somewhat puffy face. Square head with staff cap set carelessly upon it. Heavy moustaches covering a somewhat mobile mouth, at the moment inclined to smile. Eyes just anyhow; heavy, but not overpowering eyebrows. In fact, a very ordinary face of a man scarcely past his prime. Hardly a figure that you would have remarked if it had not been for the gilt upon his hat—in fact it was all a disappointing discovery. He was pacing up and down with his hands on his hips, and elbows pointing backwards, talking good-naturedly to a colonel man, who was evidently just off "trek," and with his overgrown gait and ponderous step the great Kitchener did not look half as imposing as his travel-stained companion.

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The chief was explaining something to the colonel. They paced up and down together for a few minutes, then stopped just in front of us, and the conversation was as follows:—

Chief. "All right; I will soon find you a staff. Let me see; you have a brigade-major?"

Colonel. "Yes; but he is at Hanover Road!"

Chief. "That's all right; you will collect him in good time. You want a chief for your staff. Here, you (*and he beckoned a colonel in palpably just-out-from-England kit, who was standing by*); what are you doing here? You will be chief of the staff to the New Cavalry Brigade!"

New Colonel. "But, sir—"

Chief. "That's all right. (*Reverting to his original attitude.*) Now you want transport and supply officers. See that depot over there? (*nodding his head towards the De Aar supply depot.*) Go and collect them there—quote me as your authority. There you are fitted up; you can round up part of your brigade to-night and be off at daybreak to-morrow. Wait; you will want an intelligence officer. (*Here he swung round and ran his eye over the miscellaneous gathering of all ranks assembled on the platform. He singled out a bedraggled officer from amongst the group who had arrived the preceding night in the van of the ill-natured Africander guard.*) What are you doing here?"

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Officer. "Trying to rejoin, sir."

Chief. "Where have you come from?"

Officer. "Deelfontein—convalescent, sir."

Chief. "You'll do. You are intelligence officer to the New Cavalry Brigade. Here's your brigadier; you will take orders from him. (*Turning again to the colonel and holding out his hand.*) There you are; you are fitted out. Mind you move out of Richmond Road to-morrow morning without fail. Good-bye!"

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II.

ToC

THE MEET!

The driver leaned out of the cab of his engine and gave the brigadier a little of his mind.

"Look here, I am a civilian; I know my duties. I had my eight bogies on, and by the rights of

things I had no business to take on your beastly truck—and now I tell you that the line is not safe, and here I stay for the night. Bear in mind that you are now dealing with civilian driver John Brown, and he knows his duties."

"My hearty fellow!" answered the brigadier, who had commanded a Colonial corps too long to be put out by "back-chat" from a representative of the most independent class in the world, "that is not the point. If we were all to do our duty rigidly to the letter, we should get no forwarder. It is not a matter of saving this train, it is a matter of a gentleman keeping his word. I have given my word that I will march out of Richmond Road to-morrow at daybreak. You wouldn't like it on your conscience that not only had you made a pal break his word, but you had also been the means of leaving a gap in the line for De Wet. Duty be hanged in the Imperial cause! What did Nelson do at the battle of Copenhagen? Now this is just a parallel: I know that you are loyal and sportsman to the backbone; I want you to be the Nelson of this 'crush.' I know I can't order you—but I know that you are a sportsman, and as a sportsman you will not give me away. Look here, I am just going into the telegraph-office for ten minutes. Think it over while I'm there!"

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The driver's face was a study, and as for Fireman Jack, he just smiled all over his dirty countenance. There is only one way to a Colonial's heart, and you must be shod with velvet to get there. We then adjourned to the little shanty that served Deelfontein for a stationmaster's office. We—that is such of the staff of the New Cavalry Brigade as the brigadier had been able to collect in De Aar.

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"Where's a map?" asked the brigadier. The chief of the staff looked at the intelligence officer. The intelligence officer looked at the supply officer. A map! No one had ever seen a map. But a "Briton and Boer" chart had been part of the chief of the staff's home outfit, and after considerable fumbling it was produced from his bulging haversack.

"Well, you are a fine lot of 'was-birds' with which to run a brigade: but this will do. Now, Mr Intelligence, jot down this wire:—

"From O.C. New Cavalry Brigade to O.C. first squadron 20th Dragoon Guards to arrive at Richmond Road.

"On receipt move with all military precautions at once to Klip Kraal, twenty-six miles on the Britstown Road. I will follow to-morrow morning. Look out for helio. communication on your left, as another column is moving parallel to you to the south."

"There," said the brigadier, "we have got over that difficulty, and anticipated Kitchener's orders by twelve hours. May Providence protect those raw dragoons if old Hedgehog^[1] is in the vicinity. Three days off a ship and to meet Hedgehog is a big thing!"

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The dirty and smiling face of Fireman Jack was poked in at the doorway.

"Please, sir, the driver says as how he is ready to move, and would like to start as soon as possible."

"Hearty fellow!" said the brigadier; and then as we climbed into our saloon again he added: "There is only one way of treating these fellows. Treat them as men and they are of the very best on earth; combat them, and they won't move a yard. Some one at De Aar ordered an extra truck on to this man's train, and he has been sulking ever since. Now that he's on his mettle and emulating Nelson, you will see that he will bustle us along. Nothing but a dynamite cartridge will stop him. My fellows in Natal were just the same."

Two hours later, just before it was dark, we ran into Richmond Road. The driver jumped off his engine and strode across the platform. "General," he said, with the frank familiarity of the Colonial, "I should just like to say that I had shaken hands with you. I wish that there were more like you; we should all be better men. Good-bye and good luck to you, sir!"

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It is not intended in these papers to compile a historical record of the operations in South Africa to which they relate. But in order that the part which the New Cavalry Brigade played in the campaign which arrested De Wet's invasion in February 1901 may be intelligible, and in order that the readers may better understand the peregrinations of our own particular unit, it may be expedient here to give a brief outline of the initial scheme which, sound as it may have appeared, within twenty-four hours of its birth became enshrouded in the usual fog of war. After outlining the scheme all we can hope is that these papers may furnish occasional and momentary gleams of light in that fog, since their object is not to build up contemporary history, but to furnish a faithful record of the life and working of one of the pieces on the chess-board of the campaign—a piece which, in this De Wet hunt, had perhaps the relative importance of a "castle."

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ROUGH SKETCH MAP SHOWING DE WET'S INVASION
(FROM THE NOTE-BOOK OF A STAFF OFFICER)

De Wet's long-promised invasion—of which Kritzinger's and Hertzog's descent into Cape Colony had been the weather-signal—was now an accomplished fact. He had invaded with 2500 to 3000 men and some artillery. Plumer had located him at Philipstown, had effectually "bolted" him, and, in spite of heavy weather, had pressed him with the perseverance of a sleuth-hound in the direction of the De Aar-Orange River Railway into the arms of two columns in the vicinity of Hautkraal. A week previous to this, as soon as it was known that De Wet had evaded the force intended to head him back when moving south down the Orange River Colony, the railway had been taxed to its utmost to concentrate troops on the Naauwpoort-De Aar-Beaufort West line. Day and night troop-trains, bulging with khaki and bristling with rifles, had vomited columns, detachments, and units at various points upon this line—Colesberg, Hanover Road, De Aar, Richmond Road, Victoria West, and Beaufort. Lord Kitchener himself, at a pace which had wellnigh bleached the driver's hair, had hied down to De Aar in his armoured train. Plumer had diverted the invasion west, Crabbe and Henniker and the armoured trains had kicked it over the railway-line. Kitchener was content. If De Wet followed his jackal Hertzog into the south-western areas, the columns on the line from De Aar downwards were to move west as parallel forces and tackle the invader in turn. Each would run him till exhausted, with a fresh parallel to take up the running from them as soon as they were done; while at the end, when the last parallel was played out, De Lisle as a stop stood at Carnarvon, ready to catch the ripe plum after the tree had been well shaken. Admirable plan—on paper. Admirable plan if De Wet had only done what he ought to have done—if he had only allowed himself to be kicked by each parallel in turn, churned by relays of pom-poms, until ready to be presented to De Lisle. But De Wet did not do the right thing. He was no cub to trust to winning an earth by a direct and obvious line, where pace alone would have killed him. He was an old grey fox, suspicious even of his own shadow, and he doubled and twisted: in the meanwhile Plumer ran himself "stone-cold" on his heels, and the majority of the parallel columns, played by his screen of "red herrings," countermarched themselves to a standstill. The old, old story, which needs no expansion here. Admirable plan, if only the British columns had been as complete at their rendezvous as they appeared on paper. We were the New Cavalry Brigade—the 21st King's Dragoon Guards and the 20th Dragoon Guards, just out from home; the Mount Nelson Light Horse, newly raised in Cape Town; a battery of R.H.A., and a pom-pom. But where were we. We were due to march out of Richmond Road at daybreak on the morrow. Two squadrons of the 21st King's Dragoons and one of the Mount Nelson's were with Plumer—Providence only knows where—learning the law of the veldt. The rest of the Mount Nelson's and one squadron of the 21st King's Dragoons were at Hanover Road. One squadron of the 20th Dragoon Guards was at Richmond Road; two squadrons were in the train on the way up from Cape Town. The guns at least had arrived. Yet we were about the value of a "castle" on the chess-board designed to mate De Wet.

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"Now we shall have to take our coats off."

The brigadier was right. It was no mean affair to arrive at sundown at a miserable siding in the Karoo, called by courtesy a station, to find its two parallels of rails blocked with the trucks containing the nucleus of a cavalry brigade, and to get that nucleus on the road by daybreak. The supply column was all out, the battery half out—these were old soldiers; but the two squadrons of 20th Dragoon Guards had not yet awakened to the situation. The brigadier looked up and down the platform, gazed a moment at the long tiers of laden trucks, and then made the above remark.

And we had to take our coats off. The 20th were new but they were willing; and it is difficult to say which hampers you most, an over-willing novice or an unwilling expert. You who sit at home and rail at the conduct of the campaign, rail at the wretched officer, regimental or staff, little know what is expected of him. You have your type in your mind's eye—an eyeglass, spotless habiliments, and a waving sword; you pay him and expect him to succeed. Your one argument is unanswerable. You place the greatest man that you can select to guide and cherish him, therefore if he does not succeed it must be through his own shortcomings. In your impatience you opine that he has not succeeded. Therefore he must be ignorant, indifferent, and incompetent. Little do you realise the injustice of your opinion. You sweat, during a war, an intelligent class—the same class, be it said, from which the best that your universities can produce is drawn,—you sweat it as no other educated class would allow itself to be sweated in the whole civilised world, and yet, though men drop in harness for you by dozens every month, you turn upon them and revile them. Can you not appreciate the fact that it is not always the medium, through which the Great Head you have selected works, that is in error,—that the pilot's hand may be at fault, and not the steering-gear? Take us that night at Richmond Road. New troops, new staff, little or no information, and an order to be in position at a point 50 miles distant in 36 hours. If bricks have to be made, has not the workman a right to expect to be supplied with the ingredients? Is the blame altogether his if, when exposed to the heat of a tropical sun, his hurriedly constructed clay crumbles to pieces for want of the straw with which his taskmaster failed to supply him? We think not. But that night at Richmond Road we had no time to ruminate upon our difficulties. We had to surmount them, and with our brigadier we took our coats off and buckled to the job.

Telegrams:—

1. *To Intelligence, New Cavalry Brigade, Richmond Road, from Intelligence, De Aar.*

"You must organise your intelligence locally, impossible to supply so many columns with men from here. Will see what can be done later. Authorise such expenditure as you think fit."

2. *To Int. N.C.B. from Int. De Aar.*

"De Wet Expert^[2] reports De Wet moving towards Vosberg. Plumer still in touch. Hertzog, Brand, Pretorius, all between Prieska and Vosberg with large quantities remounts for De Wet. Theron has been detached by De Wet, moving south rapidly to join Brand, intention attacking Britstown. Local farmers Hanover and Victoria West districts collecting to assist invaders. Inform New Cavalry Brigade. This wire is repeated to Intelligences Victoria West, Carnarvon, Fraserberg, 'Chowder'^[3] Cape Town, Orange River, Beaufort, and Chief Pretoria."

3. *From Brigade-Major New Cavalry Brigade, Hanover Road, to O.C. N.C.B. Richmond Road.*

"Hope to move out from here to-morrow. No trains available. As ordered by you, proceed by road to Britstown. Saddles for Mount Nelson's not yet arrived."

4. *From Ass. Director Transport De Aar to O.C. N.C.B. Richmond Road.*

"Impossible to equip you with more mule transport than has been forwarded to you; will make up your deficiencies with ox transport, which will be waiting for you at Britstown when you arrive."

5. *From O.C. De Aar to O.C. N.C.B. Richmond Road (60871).*

"Proceed with extreme caution, as local rebel commando under Van der Merwe said to be collected at Nieuwjaarsfontein between you and Britstown. As extra precaution you may take the company of Wessex Mounted Infantry, stationed at Richmond Road, with you as far as Britstown."

6. (Six hours later) "*Vide* my 60871. Wessex M.I. countermanded."

These only represent a portion of the communications which were waiting for us in the telegraph-office at Richmond Road. But they are a fair enough sample to illustrate the difficulties with which the brigadier had to contend. The communication about the rebel gathering at Nieuwjaarsfontein moved him to moralise. "Alas for my advance squadron! If I believed that it were true, I would move out at once with what we have got and nab those rebels. But as it is I will leave it to the advance squadron, and we will supply the burial-party in the morning! Look here, Mr Intelligence, you have got to form an Intelligence Department to-night. You had better set about it at once."

The Intelligence officer walked out into the clearing in front of the station and surveyed the scene. It was now too dark to see his face; but there was that something in his attitude that betrayed the feeling of utter hopelessness which possessed him. It is in just such an attitude that the schoolmaster detects Smith Major's failure to prepare his Horace translation before that youth has hazarded a single word. The Intelligence officer had been ordered to raise an Intelligence Department for the brigade. Trained in the stern school of army discipline, he had no choice but to obey. And with this end in view he left the precincts of the station. Then the absolute impossibility of the situation dawned upon him. Not a soul was in sight, and even if there had been, though the powers of the press-gang officer were vested in him, he did not know a word of the Dutch or Kaffir tongues. He stood upon the fringe of the gaunt Karoo. On either hand stretched a waste of lone prairie—a solitude of gathering night. Out of its deepest shades rose masses of jet-black hill: the ragged outline of their crests bathed purple and grey in the last effort of the expiring twilight. Already the great dome of heaven had given birth to a few weary stars, and but for the shrinking wake of day still lingering in the west the great desolate pall of night had fallen upon the veldt—the vast, mysterious, indescribable veldt!

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But as treasure-trove is found when the tide is at its lowest ebb, so often when the wall of impossibility seems an insuperable mass of concrete, it is found to be the merest paper. As the Intelligence officer, awed by the great solitude of the sleeping veldt, stood musing on its fringe, a voice hailed out of the darkness—

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"What ho! Whose column is that?"

A moment more and a mounted man cantered up, and a young Africander threw himself out of the saddle.

"Whose column?" asked the new-comer.

"The New Cavalry Brigade!"

"Not Henniker's?"

"No; who are you?"

"I'm one of Rimington's Tigers.^[4] I'm attached to Henniker's column, and I've been sent down here to round up a man who lives about these parts!"

"Have you got him?"

"No. Who may you be? Have you got a match?"

The Intelligence officer felt in his pocket, and an inspiration came to him as he fumbled for the matches.

"How did you see me? I never saw you, and you were against the sky-line."

"A cigar is a big beacon, old chap!" Then the Tiger struck a light, and for the first time realised that he was talking to an officer. "Oh, I beg your pardon, I thought that you were a civilian."

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In the short life of the match each had taken stock of the other,—the one, a pleasant-faced Imperial officer, the other a hard-bitten Colonial. The Intelligence officer was the first to speak.

"Do you speak Dutch and Kaffir?"

"I do."

"Are you in a giant hurry to get back to Henniker's?"

"I'm not wearing myself out with anxiety."

"Well, look here, we shall probably meet Henniker in the course of the next few days. Come along with us till we strike your column. I am Intelligence officer of this brigade, and I want to get together some sort of an Intelligence gang to-night. We start at 4.30 to-morrow morning."

"In what capacity do you want me?"

"As my chief guide. Do you know this country?"

"I have often been through it; but I'll soon find some one who does. Have you got any boys?"^[5]

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"Not a soul. I've only just this moment arrived!"

"Well, we must have boys. Where are we to go?"

"To Britstown."

"Then we want a white guide and at least four boys. Yes, I'll come, sir. What's the force?"

"It's an embryo brigade; but when we get it together it will be quite a handsome force—three regiments and six guns!"

"Any Colonials?"

"Yes, the Mount Nelson Light Horse."

"Never heard of them, but you now want to raise these boys. What kind of a man are you? Do you go straight in up to the elbows, or do you play about in kid gloves?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, will you come down to a farm over there, and back me up in everything that I do? We can get all we want there!"

"I'll back you up in everything that is in accordance with the exigencies of the service."

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"Which means——?"

"That I don't wear kid gloves——?"

"Come along, then; we'll soon round up a gang!"

A quarter of a mile brought the two men to the enclosure of a little Karoo homestead, nestling in a hollow in the veldt. The Tiger was leading his pony, and after he had tied it to the rail outside, they walked boldly up to the verandah. They were greeted by an excited dog, and a minute later the door was opened by a tall cadaverous-looking youth.

"What do you want?"

The Tiger answered in Dutch. The farmer had evidently seen him before, as he bridled angrily.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" came the answer. "You have come back again. Well, I am sorry we have no forage for you!"

"It is not forage I want. Where is your father? Here is an officer who must see the 'boss.'"

"I tell you the 'boss' is not here. But will not the officer come in. Good evening, mister, come in here. I will bring a light!"

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The two men were shown into a sitting-room, and the youth disappeared. A moment later a slender girl of about seventeen whisked into the room with a lamp, put it on the table, and disappeared. But the light had shone upon her just long enough to show that she was very comely. The true Dutch type. Flaxen hair, straight forehead and nose, beautiful complexion, and faded blue eyes. The farm evidently belonged to people of some substance. The room, after the manner of the Dutch, was well furnished. Ponderously decorated with the same lack of proportion which is to be found in an English middle-class lodging-house. Harmonium and piano in opposite corners,—crude chromos and distorted prints upon the walls; artificial flowers, anæmic in colouring and glass-protected, on the shelves; unwieldy albums on the table; coarse crotchet drapings on the chairs; the Royal Family in startling pigments as an over-mantel. For the moment one might have fancied that it was Mrs Scroggins's best parlour in Woburn Square.

After considerable whispering in the passage, the mother of the family, supported by two grown daughters and three children with wide-opened eyes, marched into the room.

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"Good evening," and there was a limp handshake all round.

The attitude and expression of the good dame was combative. She was stout, slovenly, and forty. And the first impression was that she had once been what her pretty daughter was now at seventeen. There is nothing of the beauty of dignified age in the Dutch woman past her prime.

"Where is your man?"[6] asked the Tiger.

"He has gone to Richmond to sell the *scaapen*." [7]

"And your sons?"

"I have no sons."

The Tiger threw open the photograph album on the table, and put his finger on a recent photo of two hairless youths in bandoliers. The likeness to the good lady in front of us was unmistakable.

"Who are these?"

"My sister's children," came the glib answer.

"Good," said the Tiger, as he slipped the photograph out. "I shall keep this. Who is the young man who opened the door."

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"Bywoner." [8]

"Good; then he can come along with us. How many boys have you on this farm?"

"They have all gone with my man."

"All right, I am going round to see—bring a candle. All right, don't make a fuss, my good lady. Don't take that lamp; the officer will stay here while I go out."

The stout *frau* produced a piece of paper, and laid it on the table with all the confidence of a poker-player displaying a Royal Flush. The Tiger picked it up and read:—

"This is to certify that Hans Pretorius can be implicitly trusted to give all assistance to the military authorities. He has furnished the required assurances.

"(Signed) L—, *Resident Magistrate*."

The Tiger held the slip of paper and photograph side by side for a moment, and then slowly lit the former in the flame of the lamp. The women and children stood solemnly and watched the blaze. Only the pretty girl showed any emotion. The faded blue of her eyes seemed to darken. She said something. It sounded like "hands opper."^[9] How the Dutch hate the English Africander!

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The Tiger only laughed as he said, "You wait here, sir, while I go round the premises. Come along, Mrs Pretorius."

The Intelligence officer had not been alone five minutes before the door opened and the pretty daughter appeared with a glass of milk on a tray. The look of indignation had disappeared—a smile lurked on the pretty features. Now the Intelligence officer was tired and thirsty—a glass of milk was most refreshing. Moreover, he was an Englishman—a pretty face was not without its charms for him.

The Daughter. "Please, sir, the Kharki^[10] is taking Stephanus with him. You will not let him do that. There will be no one left to look after the farm and to protect us from the boys."

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Intelligence Officer. "Who is Stephanus?"

D. "He does not stay here; he is" (*then the blue eyes filled with tears*)—"he is—my sweetheart!"

I. O. (softening) "But we will not hurt him; you will have him back in a few days."

D. "Who can say? You are going to make him fight, and then I shall never see him again. Oh, please, sir, don't take him" (*and a hand—a fair dimpled hand—rested on the Intelligence officer's sleeve*).

I. O. (moving uncomfortably) "I am afraid that I must; but no harm shall come to him, that I promise!"

D. "But he doesn't know the way, and you will shoot him if he shows you a wrong road."

I. O. "He will know all that we want him to know."

D. "Where will you want him to take you? I know he doesn't know the way."

I. O. "Why, he has only to go to Britstown!"

D. (the tears drying) "And you promise me that you will not harm him?"

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I. O. "Of course I won't."

D. "Oh, thank you." She was gone, and the Intelligence officer was left to his own thoughts. It had slipped out unawares. He had been caught: he realised that much as soon as the word had left his lips. He had yet much to learn.

There was a noise in the verandah. The Tiger had arrived with Stephanus, four ponies, and three native boys.

"This will do for a start, sir; we will amplify on the march!"

But as the Intelligence officer handed over his department to the quarter-guard of the 20th Dragoon Guards for safe keeping until the morrow, Miss Pretorius was saddling a pony in the kraal. She had to find her father before daybreak. Her father with his two sons was at Nieuwjaarsfontein!

Richmond Road is not a township. It is only a railway-station, but it boasts of one *winkel*^[11] adjoining the railway buildings. Here the O.C. of the New Cavalry Brigade had taken up his quarters for the night, and here the Jew proprietor had arranged food and lodging for the staff. Part barn, part shop, and part dwelling, this dilapidated hostelry is typical of its kind. You meet with them all over the South African veldt. You bless them when they shelter you from the wind and rain; curse them when, housed in a six-storeyed mansion, which boasts the same legend over the door—hotel—you remember to what you were at one time reduced by the chances of a soldier's life.

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The brigadier was just sitting down to the only meal that the slatternly wife of the Jew could produce—a steaming mess of lean boiled mutton—when the Intelligence officer returned from his adventure.

"Come and sit down, Mr Intelligence; have you raised a band of robbers yet?"

"Yes, sir; I've collected a trooper of Rimington's Guides and some boys."

"You seem a brighter fellow than I took you for. Well, here you are; here is another telegram for you. We ought to come right on the top of the swine to-morrow."

To Intelligence N.C.B. from Int. De Aar.

"Gathering of rebels at Nieuwjaarsfontein confirmed from two sources. Repeated, &c."

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The Intelligence officer kept his own counsel. He felt certain that there would be no gathering at Nieuwjaarsfontein when the force arrived. But he had bought his experience, and determined to profit by the same in the future.

"I think that we have a chance of a show this jaunt," said the brigadier, after somebody had produced a bottle of port. "This is about the best plan that K.^[12] has thrown off his chest. But I am afraid that Plumer will spoil it. He is a holy terror when he gets on a trail. That is his great fault: you will never catch these fellows by holding on to a trail after you have been on it three days. I don't care how red-hot it may be. You run yourself stone-cold, only to find that your quarry has outlasted you. Now, after De Wet crossed the railway at Hautkraal, Plumer's obvious move was to Strydenburg. They could have pushed stuff out there to him from Hopetown. K. wants De Wet to go south-west into the loop of the J which our five columns make. Now, if Plumer, Crabbe, & Co. stick to him, he'll break back to the Orange River as sure as fate. But if Plumer lets him alone, and we are not messed about by too many general-men, we'll have him. Once De Wet gets south as far as Britstown he's a dead bird. But we shall be messed about by too many generals. See, how many have we?—Five. That's enough in the way of cooks to spoil any pottage. But personally I don't think De Wet will be the good little fly and walk into our pretty parlour. They don't ask me for opinions; but if I was running this show, I would have halted Plumer on the railway, left the J as it is, and collected an infernal 'push' of men north of the Orange River. I should have held a line from Mark's Drift to Springfontein. When I had got that, I would have turned our sleuth-hound Plumer loose again. Then all we fine fellows could have played with De Wet until he was sick of the Colony. We could then escort him to the Orange River, and the 'pushes' on the far side would have picked up the pieces. But here we are; may Providence guide him to us! I'm for bed. Good night!"

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FOOTNOTES:

- [1] Commandant Judge Hertzog.
- [2] A special Intelligence officer was told off to watch De Wet's movements.
- [3] "Chowder" was telegraphic address of general commanding line of communications in Cape Colony.
- [4] Rimington's Guides wear a piece of leopard-skin in their hats, and are known as Rimington's Tigers.
- [5] Native boys.
- [6] Husband.
- [7] Sheep.
- [8] Farm working hand.
- [9] Traitor. Lit., Hands upper—*i.e.*, surrendered man.
- [10] The Boers speak of all British soldiers as Kharkis.
- [11] Store.
- [12] Lord Kitchener is commonly spoken of as "K." in South Africa.

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III.

ToC

BEE-LINE TO BRITSTOWN.

"Not bad for a green crush."

The brigadier sat down on the edge of a great slab of rock to watch the baggage over the nek. It was a typical South African nek. An execrable path winding over the saddle of a low range of tumbled ironstone. Just one of those ranges which force themselves with sheer effrontery out from the level of the plain. Loose sugar-loaf excrescences which stud the sea of prairie with a thousand flat-topped islets, and weave the monotony of landscape peculiar to this great continent. The rough post-cart track led down into a vast amphitheatre, so vast that Western Europe can furnish no parallel to it. Yet its counterparts are met and traversed every day by the countless British columns now slowly darning the gaping rent in Africa's robe of peace. Who, if they had not known, would have said that the beautiful panorama, which the morning sun now unveiled before us, was a theatre of war? Away at our feet stretched mile upon mile of rolling Karoo and blue-grey prairie. True it was punctuated and ribbed with stunted kopjes. But still the everlasting plain predominated, until it was lost in an autumn haze which no sun could master. Immense,—a land without a horizon, a land every characteristic of which inspires a sense of independence and freedom. A sensation—an intoxication, to be felt, not to be described. Why

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should men fight in a land such as this? Surely there is room for all! The very animals of the field, ignorant of the selfishness bred of a limited pasturage and restricted space, are docile and free of vice. But with man it is different.

The dweller on the open plain learns freedom. The lesson of cramped cities is avarice—that the fittest may survive. Who shall blend the two? There, as we stood with our loins girt for war, did that great peaceful prairie unfold before us. As the morning sun grew stronger, the everlasting grey of the Karoo became jewelled with brighter tints. The middle distance of the plain was spangled with a streak of winding silver. A river tracing its erratic course between the kopje islets. At intervals along its banks the eye rested upon the patches of darker green. The home plantation of some farm, glimpses of whose whitewashed walls even now caught a glint from the strengthening sun-rays. Here was a stretch of yellow furrow—the finger of civilisation on a virgin waste. Here spots of shimmering white, where the surface of a dam reflected the flooding light of day. Here and there a flock of sheep relieved the monotony of the everlasting grey. While across our front a bunch of brood-mares were galloping in the ecstasy of day and freedom, and a bevy of quaintly pirouetting ostriches gave life to the wonderful picture. And presently a little fan of brown dots opened out on the grey below—opened out and diverged in pairs. Dots so small and insignificant that they looked like ants upon a carriage-drive. Out and out they spread, till they seemed lost and merged with the brood-mares and ostriches, now ceasing their wild movements and grouping in mild amazement at the strange invasion. And still the dots diverge. It is the advance-guard of our column—heralds of selfish man bringing horrid war into this peaceful vale. As the dots mingle with the ant-heaps on the plain, or are lost in the folds of the grey prairie, a pillar of dust rises from the centre of the fan. A larger mass of brown—the battery and its escort—a great kharki caterpillar creeping across the grey,—it is time to be moving, the last mule-waggon has topped the nek, and the last of the rear-guard are leading their horses up the post-cart road.

"Not bad for a green crush!" said the brigadier as he prepared to follow down the hillside. "Hullo! what is that?"

A spark had shown out of the misty distance. A little glitter. It came, trembled a second, and disappeared. Again it came, a many-pointed star, winking and shivering.

"Some one is calling up. Here, signaller!—where is the brigade signaller?"

A great dragoon tumbles out of his saddle and begins to arrange his tripod. In a few seconds his mirror has caught the sun in answer to the twinkling star in front.

"Who is it?"

A silence broken only by rhythmic clicks, as the signaller catches the distant conversation, and his monotonous reading of the code. A stolid assistant takes it down. "'T' group, 'W' group, 'I' group, 'Enna,' 'E' group—Major Twine, sir."

"Oh, the advance squadron. Well, that's satisfactory; we shall not have to bury them after all. What have they got to say?" and the brigadier sat down on his rock again as the signaller spelt out the message.

"Am moving now on Nieuwjaarsfontein. Parties of mounted Boers on both flanks. Have not been molested." Here the signaller broke down.

"Something has gone wrong, sir. They have gone out!"

For a moment the light again twinkled in frenzied haste. "Breaking station—shooting!" then all was dark.

"I think, sir," ventured the signaller, "that they have broken up the station because some one was shooting at them."

"Very likely. Here, Mr Intelligence, just you get on your horse and gallop up to the main body. Tell Colonel Washington that I want to send an officer on to the advance squadron, now twenty-five miles in front of us: would he be so kind as to send one back to me. Don't waste time!"

Down the steep hillside, threading through the rumbling mule-trolleys, with their teams zigzagging in the throes of a heavy drift, and their groups of chattering drivers, whose black polished faces are aglow with negroid bonhomie. "*Aihu, Aihu. Bom-Bom. Scellum*^[13] Oom Paul. *Scellum* President Steyn." Then a crack from the great 12-foot whip-thong, sounding like a well-timed volley. At the bottom of the incline a small spruit. There on the bank stands Willem the Zulu. A dilapidated coaching-beaver on his head. A square foot of bronzed chest showing between the white facings of an open infantry tunic. His nether limbs encased in a pair of dragoon overalls, with vivid green patches on the knees. Was there ever such a picture of savage good nature and childishness as the giant Willem swung the great bamboo haft of his whip above his head, and chided or exhorted his team straining in the drift! "Come up, Buller," to a favourite ass. "Kruger, you *scellum*," to a refractory lead, while the great thong cracked like a pistol as the leather hissed between the culprit's ears without touching a hair on its hide.

Splash through the drift. "D—n it, sir, can't you let a horse water in peace." And as you feel the springy Karoo beneath your animal's stride, you catch the lament of some officer whom you have hustled in the drift.

That first gallop in the morning! Although we who have been out here for months may hate the very mention of the veldt, yet if we live to go home we shall live to regret that we ever left it. We may curse its boundless wastes—curse that endless rise which so often has lain between our tired bodies and the evening bivouac; but the curses will die over the rail of an ocean steamer and with

the fading lights of Cape Town, while the memory of the exhilarating air, the freedom, the stirring adventure lurking in every dip and donga of that wind-swept, sun-dried, war-racked expanse of steppe, will live with us for ever. Who can forget those autumn mornings, when the horse, influenced by the same exhilaration as his rider, races across the spongy soil; playfully shies at a half-hidden ant-heap; with cat-like agility avoids the dangerous bear-earth; when all seems strong, and young, and full of life; when war is forgotten, until the rocket-bird falls slanting across your path, and its plaintive note calls back to your memory the whine of the Mauser bullet! Yes, it is good to be a soldier. The chances are heavy; but, all told, it is worth it.

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"Where the devil are you galloping to? Don't you know that you shouldn't approach mounted troops at that pace?"

You feel inclined to tell the cavalry colonel, fresh from the Curragh, that we had left all that behind eighteen months ago. But discipline rules experience, and automatically the respectful hand is up to the helmet-peak.

"The general's compliments, sir. He wishes to send an officer on at once with a message to Major Twine. Will you kindly detail one of your officers. He is to come back with me to the general at once."

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"Oh, you are from the general, are you? Here, Sturt," turning to his adjutant, "send Mr Meadows back with this officer to the general. And you, sir, don't you in future come galloping up like that into my regiment."

"Very good, sir."

"Now, Mr Intelligence, I don't want you here any more. You have got to find out something about this road. I shall expect you to know all about those farms by this evening. So get along with your robbers. You can call yourself an egg-and-milk patrol, if you like. I should like some eggs for breakfast. Unless we strike Burghers, I halt at the first convenient water after eleven—from eleven until two. Go and find that water, and don't get shot."

Back again to the front. By throwing a circle the main body is avoided, and ten minutes' canter brings you to the advance-guard. To the brain of the advance-guard would have been perhaps a more truthful statement, for the subaltern commanding the leading troop is riding alone along the post-cart road. His men are but dots strung out on either flank like buoys in the Hoogly. The subaltern himself is full of importance, grievances, and map-study.

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Subaltern. "Why haven't you given me a guide?"

Intelligence Officer. "There is only one road, and that is as clear as a pikestaff."

Sub. "It is the principle that I go on."

I. O. "Well, continue to go on it. You are doing all right."

Sub. "That is not the point. I ought to have a guide and an interpreter. This is not the only road in the whole bally country, I presume?"

I. O. "Well, here we are. There are five of us. You only have to command us. That's what we are here for."

The subaltern with evident disapproval took stock of the Intelligence officer and his following—the Tiger and three nondescript black boys.

Sub. "Have you been here before?"

I. O. "Never."

Sub. "Have your boys?"

I. O. "I cannot say. They speak no known language!"

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Sub. "Great Heavens! I call it murder to send us out like this."

A dragoon sergeant galloped in from the right flank.

Sergeant (in great state of excitement). "Please, sir, mounted men have just crossed our front."

Sub. "Which way?—how many were there?"

Sergeant. "About five thousand, sir!"

Sub. "Great Cæsar's ghost! Five thousand!—did you count them, sergeant?"

Sergeant. "No, sir; nobody saw them, sir: it was only their tracks. There are so many they are all over the place, so I think that there must be about four or five thousand!"

I. O. "I'll send my men to look at them!"

Sub. "Yes, do. I'll go too; but I will first send a note back to the column."

I. O. "I wouldn't do that yet. It may only be a herd of springbok!"

The subaltern did not disguise his look of scorn at this reflection. But John the Kaffir, with the aid of the Tiger, announced that the tracks in question had been made on the previous day by Major Twine's squadron—perhaps eighty strong. So much for circumstantial evidence. But this is

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nothing. It is not fair to judge new troops on their first day on the veldt. If that sergeant is alive to-day, you might stake such credit at the bank as you possess that he would not only give you the correct number to within five of the group which made the spoor, but would also give a fair description of the nature of the party and the pace at which they had travelled. Such is experience.

At eleven o'clock, except that the ridge of hill had been left behind, it seemed that no impression had been made upon the great waste of Karoo in front of us. But the road led down into a pretty little glen, formed by the shelving banks of a tiny river. In the early days some wandering Voortrekker had chanced upon the fascinating spot, had marked down the crystal stream and fertile grazing. Here he had out-spanned his team, drawn fine with days of trekking, and his bivouac had grown into a permanent abode. Here he had lived and died, and no doubt his great-grandchild now owned the pretty little homestead where the column was to make its midday halt. All Dutch homesteads are the same, yet there are not two alike, which is a paradox in which every one who has trekked across the veldt will agree. There are the same kraals and cattle-runs. The home plantation surrounded with stone walls. The same outhouses and forage-lofts. The artesian well, with its fluttering windmill. The dam with dirty water, the little low-roofed dumpy dwelling, washed white, half-swing doors, low stoep, and trellis front. It is in their topographical surroundings only that they differ. The one will stand bleak and exposed upon a dreary plain, the other will nestle coyly behind a grove of pointed gum-trees in some kloof or gully. Chance and nature alone decide if in structure and setting they please the eye. Man is indifferent. A house is to shield him from the elements, not to improve the landscape or impress the passer-by.

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Although the Intelligence officer knew little about the science of his new office, yet he had common-sense, which is a soldier's most valuable attribute, and he knew better after eighteen months of war than to ride haphazard into a farm-house, even though the farm-house was in Cape Colony. He borrowed two men from the advance-guard, and, with the aid of the Tiger and his boys, reconnoitred the environs before he sent back to the general to tell him that he had found an ideal spot for the midday halt. Then as the advance-guard occupied the nearest eminences, he handed his horse over to one of the boys and walked up to the stoep of the farm-house. The farmer and his *frau* stood on the verandah to welcome him, and, as is their wont, their family of girls of all ages crowded in the open door behind their parents to gain a view of the Kharkis. Just as the inevitable hand-shake had taken place, up cantered the Tiger.

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"Here we are, sir. These are the kind of people we have to deal with," and he produced two gaudily framed pictures—President Kruger and President Steyn. "Our worthy host made a miscalculation this morning, for I found a Kaffir girl hiding these in the bushes."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you see, sir, yesterday morning a commando was here. Then our loyal friend had these two pictures hanging up in his parlour. Last evening the squadron of 20th Dragoons passed through. Uncle here saw them coming, so he hid away Oom Paul and Steyn and put the Queen and the Prince of Wales on the wall. After the squadron had gone he expected his commando back again, so up go the Presidents. We came along first, so there had to be another transformation-scene, which I have partially disturbed. I'll bet my bottom dollar that their Royal Highnesses are now adorning the parlour." (Sinking his voice.) "It's a very fair weather-cock, sir; we are not a hundred miles from a pretty strong commando. It must be under some influential leader, or we shouldn't have this little burlesque."

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The farmer smiled benignly and pressed his hospitality upon the troops. Nor had the Tiger been mistaken. There, sure enough, upon the walls of the sitting-room reposed coloured portraits of the late Queen and King Edward, while, as the Intelligence officer stepped into the room, a strapping daughter sat down to the piano and played the first bars of the National Anthem. Poor subterfuge, since the damsel had overlooked the Free State favour pinned upon her breast!

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"Eggs—butter? Yes, they had both; they would only be too glad—would not the general take food with them?"

Click-clock! Click-clock!^[14]

The main body had just come in, the gunners were watering their horses, the Dragoons taking out their bits. The gunners knew what it meant, and the little major, who for some reason had undone his gaiter, shouted, without changing his attitude, the only necessary order, "Hook in!" To the Dragoons the muffled reports meant nothing. For all they knew or cared at the moment that hollow echoing rhythm might have been a housewife beating carpets. But the General, the Intelligence officer, and the Tiger knew.

Click-clock, click-clock!

Here came the news. A heavy dragoon, sweating from every pore, his face portraying the satisfaction of a man first shot over, came galloping in. He handed to the general a slip of paper from the subaltern in command of the advance-guard:—

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"11.55. Enemy firing on my left flanking patrol—about fifty mounted men advancing towards me. I am on a rise 500 yards to the south-west of the farmhouse."

"That is a good boy," said the brigadier musingly, as he swung round on his heel and took in the topography of our position at a glance. "A very clear report. Here! you tell the officer commanding the pom-pom to take his gun up on to that rise. And you" (turning to another of his staff), "tell Colonel Washington to send a squadron with the pom-pom! Wait, don't be in a hurry;

hear me out, please. Tell him that the squadron is to extend, take the rise at a gallop—dismount just before it reaches the top. Now you may go."

Then turning to the chief of the staff, "Have you got a match? Thanks. Now, tell Freddy^[15] to send two of his guns on to that rise south of the dam. Send a troop with him. I will be here with the rest to await developments!"

"Order given, sir!" and the Intelligence officer touched his cap. [62]

"Good. Now you go with the pom-pom. I shall be here; let me know developments. Get along. Don't argue!"

Already the pom-pom is trotting out of the farmhouse enclosure and the squadron of Dragoons extending on the plain beyond. The faces of the gunners are as impassive as if they were about to gallop past at a review. They have been doing this sort of thing for months; it has no novelty for them. But with the Dragoons it is different. This is their first engagement; you can see it in the countenances of the men nearest you. The excitement which whitens men's cheeks and makes every action angular and awkward.

"Second Squadron 20th Dragoon Guards—Gallop!"

"Pom-pom—Gallop!" comes the echo.

The Boers must be close up, for the advance-guard is falling back. They are coming back for all they are worth. It will be a race between us and the enemy for the possession of the ridge; please Providence that we may be there first, for of a truth he who loses will pay the stake. The officers realise this, and sitting down to their work they make the pace. The wild line careering behind them suits itself to their lead; instinctively in its excitement and inexperience it closes inwards. Only 200 yards more. The sky-line is clear and defined. No heads have appeared as yet. One hundred yards! Now we are under the rise, the horses feel the hill—a few seconds and we shall know who has won the race. "Steady, men, steady!" Up goes the squadron leader's arm. "Halt! Dismount!" A chaotic second as the frenzied line reins in. "'Number Threes.' Where are the 'Number Threes'?"—"Way for the pom-pom." The straining team crashes through the line. The dismounted troopers follow their officers up the slope. A moment of suspense—and a long-drawn breath. We are first. There are the Boers dismounting a hundred yards away. "Action front, the pom-pom." "Down men, down!"—come the hoarse orders, and a ripple of fire crackles along the summit of the rise. "Let them have the whole belt." *Pom-pom-pom-pom-pom-pom!* The little gun reels and quivers as it belches forth its stream of spiteful bombs. For a moment the Boers return the fire. Then they rush for their horses, and in as many seconds as it takes to light a cigarette are galloping *ventre à terre* across the plain in an ever-extending fan. The merciless lead pursues them. The Dragoons spring to their feet to facilitate rapidity of fire, while the pom-pom churns the dry dust of the veldt into little whirlwinds among the flying horsemen. Five hundred yards away stands a kopje. In three minutes the last of the Boers have placed it between them and the British fire—except for the three or four that lie motionless upon the plain. [63]

"Now we shall have it!" and the pom-pom captain turns to the squadron commander. "I advise you to make your men lie down again. I'm going to man-handle my gun down the slope." [64]

"*Click-clock, click-clock, click-clock!*" go the Mausers. The Boers are on the top of the kopje. It is to be their turn now. No; there is a roar behind the farm, then another, and another. Then three little white cloud-balls open out on the lip of the kopje. [65]

"Good little Freddy!" soliloquises the pom-pom captain as he snaps his glasses into their case. "He was watching them. I must get my beauty to the end of this rise, to catch them as they leave."—"Pom-pom, limber up!"

Boom-boom-boom. Three more little puffs of white over the kopje. *Click-clock* once, and the brush was over. What was it worth? Four mangled rebels on the veldt, and one stalwart dragoon, with white drawn face and sightless eyes turned to the beautiful blue of heaven!

The brigadier cantered up to the rise. A section of Horse Artillery rumbled up after him. "Look here," he said to the squadron leader, "you must get your men on to that kopje: they are not worth pursuing—there are not more than twenty of them. If I were you I should open out, divide and gallop round both flanks of the kopje; it's open veldt beyond, and we'll look after you from this ridge. You won't see any more of them than their tails. Don't pursue beyond 3000 yards. My orders are to go to Britstown, not to wear my horses out over scallywag snipers!" [66]

"We must push on and get touch with our loose squadron to-night," said the brigadier, as he and his staff made a hasty midday meal off tinned sausages and eggs cooked by the terrified women of the farmhouse. "I wonder what has happened to that poor little subaltern boy that I sent on this morning. Ah! here's Mr Intelligence direct from the bloodstained field; now we shall know the damage!"

Brigadier. "Any Boer wounded?"

Intelligence Officer. "Yes, sir; two, and two killed."

B. "Are the wounded talkative?"

I. O. "One is too far gone, sir; the other is quite communicative."

B. "Well, what has he got to say?"

I. O. "He lies about himself. Swears that he is a Free Stater; but as a matter of fact his name is Pretorius, and he is a son of the farmer from whose wife we got our guides last night. By the merest chance we took a photograph of the farmer's two sons out of an album we found at the farm. And here is one of them wounded to-day. From his account it appears that a man called Lotter is here with a commando, and that he and his have just brought off rather a bad thing. Lotter's commando only joined the rebels returning from Nieuwjaarsfontein about an hour ago. The rebels knew that our advance squadron was at this farm last night, and when they saw us here, they mistook us for Major Twine, and knowing his strength attacked in good heart."

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B. "I thought it was something of that kind. Well, we need not eat our hearts out about Twine. Those swine won't be taking any more to-day, especially now that they have reason to believe that we are about. But we won't waste time; we'll go on in half an hour. Send word round, and then come and have some food!"

As the shadows began to grow long across the level of stunted Karoo we had placed another ten miles behind us on the road to Britstown. Never a further sign did we see that day of our enemy. But this is typical of this free fighting on the open veldt. Your enemy comes upon you like a dust-devil—he appears, strikes, wins or loses, and then disappears again as suddenly as he came. You fight your little battle, bury your dead, shake yourselves, and forget all about the incident. This, it may be assumed, for the last year has been the nature of the life which all mounted men have led out here.

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Just before the sun set, enshrouded in a curtain of rising mist, we reached a great ridge of table-land. A particularly wild and forsaken tract of country.

"We shall have to halt at the first water," said the brigadier. "What an unholy place to camp in! Well, if there are no Boers it doesn't matter. It's lucky that we had a turn-up against those fellows to-day. They will hardly stomach a night-attack with the echo of a pom-pom chorus still ringing in their ears. Is that a flag?"

The advance-guard were beginning to show like stunted tree-trunks upon the sky-line on our front. Yes; it was a flag. There was work for the lumbering dragoon signaller again. Slowly he spelt out the message: "No enemy have been seen. Ridge is clear. Right flanking patrol had touch with rear troop of Major Twine's squadron, now moving on Nieuwjaarsfontein. Lieutenant Meadows, rejoined, reports Major Twine's squadron seen several bodies of enemy; his squadron has been sniped, but not seriously engaged. Country very open on far side of ridge. Good camping-ground and water at foot of ridge."

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"Good business!" said the brigadier, turning to his chief of staff. "Will you canter up and mark out a camp? It's a great relief to find that that advance squadron hasn't been scuppered."

A more dismal camping-ground could not have been found. The fair veldt seemed to have vanished. Instead of a sprinkling of farms, there was only one human habitation within sight—a miserable edifice of mud and unbaked bricks belonging to a Boer shepherd of the lowest type. The dam was a natural depression formed by what appeared to have been the crater of some long-extinct volcano. The country surrounding it was of the roughest, and to make the situation more depressing, with sundown great banks of cloud had gathered in the west. The brigadier might well be anxious for his small force of raw troops in such a fastness, and it is easy to appreciate the feeling which prompted him to personally post the night pickets. But raw troops, raw transport, all will settle down in time, and an hour after sundown the men were having their food.

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Before the main body moved into camp the Tiger had made a discovery. He had found a wounded Boer in the shepherd's shanty. A stalwart young Dutchman, with his right hand horribly shattered by a pom-pom shell. The youth was in great pain, and, as the Boer so often has proved, was very communicative under his hurt. He was a Free Stater from Philippolis, and belonged to Judge Hertzog's commando. He was one of fifteen scouts sent by Hertzog, under a commandant called Lotter, to pick up the Richmond rebels and take them down to Graaf Reinet, where De Wet's invaders had orders to concentrate, before undertaking the more desperate venture of the invasion. He indorsed the other wounded man's version of the attack they had made upon us in the morning, and he also volunteered the information that Brand, Hertzog, and Pretorius were due to attack Britstown—our destination—this very evening. This information so far interested the brigadier that he ordered an officer's patrol from the 20th Dragoon Guards to leave camp at 3 A.M. and ride right through to Britstown without a halt, so as to arrive there by nine or ten in the morning. It was important to know if Britstown had been attacked, since until the concentration took place on the morrow the garrison there was weak: it was also important that the general officer commanding the combined movement should know of the deflection from Hertzog's commando which we had encountered. Lieutenant Meadows, having proved so successful in avoiding the enemy in the morning, was again entrusted with the mission, and he was given Stephanus as his guide.

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The gathering clouds did not prove simply a seasonable warning. A great icy blast swept up the valley, driving a broad belt of stinging dust before it, and the bivouac was smitten through and through by a South African dust-storm. Five minutes of fierce gale, with lightning that momentarily dispelled the night, then a pause—the herald of coming rain. A few great ice-cold drops smote like hail on the tarpaulin shelter that served headquarters for a mess-tent. Then followed five minutes of a deluge such as you in England cannot conceive. A deluge against which the stoutest oil-skin is as blotting-paper. A rain which seems also to entice fountains from the earth beneath you. In ten minutes all is over. The stars are again demurely winking above you, and all that you know of the storm is that you see the vast diminishing cloud, revealed in the west by the fading lightning-flashes, and that you have not a dry possession either in your kit or on your person.

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"Not much fear of sleeping sentries to-night," said the chief of the staff as we cowered round a fire under the waggon-sail.

"No; and it is just as well: it is on these sleepless nights that 'brother'^[16] is fond of showing himself," answered the brigadier. "I don't like all these Free Staters about. They may be able to stir up the new crop of rebels into doing something desperate. Raw guerillas, with a leaven of hard-bitten cases, are always a source of danger. But I think that we worked our own salvation in the skirmish this morning. They would hardly believe that we should have such a small force with so many guns. No; our luck was in to-day, when they discovered us instead of Twine's squadron. We shall make something out of the 20th. They are the right stuff: that squadron went for that rise to-day in splendid style. The Boer cannot stand galloping. I may be a crank—they believe that I am one at Pretoria—but I am convinced that I have discovered the true Mounted Infantry formation for the sort of fighting that we are now experiencing out here. If you find your enemy in any position that you can gallop over, without riding your horse to a standstill, go for him in extended order. You will get more results from an enterprise of this kind than from a week of artillery and dismounted attack. I hear that D. claims to have originated this formation. Why, I was practising it with my fellows in Natal before D. was born, or rather when he was an infant in the knowledge of war. I am as convinced that I am right as I am that the rifle is the cavalry-man's arm. It is not for shock tactics that you require to mount men nowadays: the use of a horse is to get into the best fire-position in the shortest possible time. The battles of the future will be decided by rifles and machine-guns, not by lance and sabre. There's heresy for you; but it's my honest conviction!"

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FOOTNOTES:

- [13] Scoundrel.
- [14] The double report made by a small-bore rifle.
- [15] The major commanding the battery R.H.A.
- [16] *I.e.*, Brother Boer.

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ToC

IV.

THE FIRST CHECK.

The first lesson brought home to the Englishman in South Africa is, that he must not judge the country by any European standard, for as long as he continues so to do he will find himself at sea. To show surprise is to declare ignorance—and the British and Dutch South Africans, after the manner of all superlatively ignorant races, have the profoundest contempt for those in whom they themselves can discern ignorance. Thus when the kindly eminence of a hill gives you a ten-mile view of some tiny townlet—a view conveying no inkling of the importance of the centre which you are about to approach—it is well to be silent. For the Colonial is surely more imaginative than the phlegmatic Englishman—and the sorry collection of tin shanties and flimsy villas, which at so great a distance appear to you of little more significance than a farm with straggling outhouses—represent to his mind a town, and he will resent a less appreciative rating of them. This may appear unreasonable: it is, but it is none the less true; and in a great measure the variance of focus between the English and the Colonial mind has been responsible for the girth-galling which at the beginning of the war marked our efforts in harness with our colonial *confrères*. We have

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heard all the defects of the British officer, because the Colonial thinks quickly and lightly, and wastes no time in giving expression to his thoughts; we have not heard so much of the defects of the Colonial, because the British officer, while focussing his opinions less rapidly, though more seriously than the majority of Colonials, reserves his criticisms. But they are an easy people to manage if you can preserve your silence without offending their vanity. They admire in the Englishman the qualities which they themselves have not yet fully developed; but it cuts them to the quick if the evidence of superiority is thrust upon them. Thus, when the officer commanding the advance-guard, looking down the great straight road leading into Britstown,—a track which would have done credit to the Roman Road at Baynards,—commented unkindly upon the township, the Tiger was hurt, and thought unpleasant things about British cavalry subalterns in general, and the officer in command of the advance-guard in particular. But then Britstown had been a town to the Tiger ever since he could remember. Until he had arrived at man's estate and visited Kimberley and Cape Town, Britstown had been the town of his imagination and Beaufort West his metropolis. To the officer commanding the advance-guard, Britstown and Beaufort West, if rolled into one, would hardly have earned the dignified classification of a village. The mental focus of the two men was at variance, and the Tiger felt that the subaltern possessed the stronger lens. Yet man for man, on horse or foot, clothed or naked, to the outward eye he was not a better man. It is here that the feeling lies.

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The brigadier halted the advance-guard upon the rise. He wanted to know something about Britstown. The ugly rumour of Brand's intention to storm and sack it was still with us. As yet there had been no news of Lieutenant Meadows and his patrol. Three hundred yards to the right front was a tiny farm. A solitary upstart on the bare veldt. An architectural nightmare in red brick. Already a patrol from the advance screen of dragoons was edging towards it, lured by that magnetism irresistible to every British soldier. A magnetism prompted from beneath the belt, and which no military precaution, or experience, or solicitude for personal safety will eradicate from the canteen-bred soldier. If our scouts had been as farm-shy as so many of them have proved gun-shy, it would have made an appreciable difference in the casualty lists of the campaign. The brigadier looked upon the farm. It cannot be said that he found it fair, within the artistic meaning of the phrase. But there was a pan,^[17] which meant water for the horses, and doubtless there was a hen-house and a buttery.

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"Mr Intelligence, we will have breakfast at that farm. Let the advance-guard move on another half-mile, then Freddy will be able to water his horses in comfort. Here, who is commanding the advance-guard? Have you told your men to rally on that farm?"

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"No, sir."

"Then you had better look after them."

Away the youth went at a gallop, and it was about time, as the right flank had evidently divined success in the attitude of the first patrol, which had stopped at the farm, and the ungainly red edifice was exercising its magnetic effect upon the whole advance-guard. When the officer commanding the advance-guard arrived, dragoon No. 1 already had his head buried in a bucketful of milk, while dragoon No. 2 was indiscriminately stuffing as many eggs and pats of butter into a square of red handkerchief as the said square would contain.

The brigadier moved up to the homestead, and threw his reins to his orderly. The family paraded on the stoep, as all Dutch families do on similar occasions. And, as is the custom of the country, the brigadier shook hands with them all with great dignity. But he had no eyes for Oom Jan of the massive head and bushy beard, no eyes for the stout madam his *frau*, nor for his six solid and lumpy daughters, for he was busy breaking the tenth commandment. In front of the house, on the beaten clay clearing, stood a truly magnificent carriage—a four-wheeled family spring-cart, rich in upholstered cover, electroplated bits, and cut-glass finishings. The brigadier examined it carefully, and then sent his orderly to fetch the commandeering officer. In this case it was the supply officer, a quick-witted boy, who at the moment believed that he was a subaltern, but who really was the youngest brevet-major in the British army.^[18]

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Brigadier. "Look here, Mr Supply; I want you to value this *sham-a-dan*."^[19]

Supply Officer. "Very good, sir; it looks a good cart."

B. "Do you know your Shakespeare?"

S. O. "No, sir. I was a militiaman; but I'm becoming educated in the matter of South African carts, and I have found that even with fair usage and good drifts paint will sometimes come off."

B. "Quite so; you have made my point, in spite of your modesty with regard to your upbringing. What is the full limit at which you may requisition a spring cart?"

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S. O. "Forty pounds, sir."

B. "What would you think is the value of this one?"

S. O. "Thirty-nine pounds ten shillings, sir!"

B. "I think that you are right to within a few pence. Make out a receipt for it, and then come and have breakfast. Here, Mr Intelligence, tell my servant to put the ponies into this cart. Now I call that a suitable conveyance for a general officer. I have never had a decent cart since I've commanded a column. In fact, I have almost been ashamed to sign myself as O.C. of a brigade, when my sole possession has been a broken-down Cape cart with only one spring. Self-respect is half the battle in the success of life. With a cart like that I shall be able to insult with a light heart every column commander with whom I am told to co-operate. Look here, Mr Intelligence; I am

going to be a real live brigadier in future. Just you get me the regalia in Britstown—a pink flag and red lantern. I don't see why—but what do you want—?”

A howl had set up in chorus from the family on the verandah of the farm, and old Oom Jan came sidling up to the brigadier hat in hand.

Oom Jan. "But the commandant won't take my cart?"

Brigadier. "Dear me! no—no commandant will take your cart."

O. J. "But see, they are putting the horses in!"

B. "You will get a receipt."

O. J. "For how much?"

B. "Forty pounds."

O. J. "No, no. Only last year I gave £120 for it."

B. "I would gladly give £120; but I am not allowed. Besides, you are getting full value, and I will leave you my old cart."

How much longer the altercation might have lasted would have depended on the duration of the general's good-humour, had not another issue of more moment prejudiced Oom Jan's case. A dragoon had cantered up from the rear-guard, with the two little square inches of paper torn from a notebook which mean so much in war.

"A party of about six mounted men are hanging on my rear. If they approach any closer I shall fire upon them. They seem very persistent, and do not mind exposing themselves."

As the brigadier handed the note to the chief of the staff, the threatened firing broke out in the rear. Breakfast was declared ready at the same moment. The brigadier listened. Two more shots were fired, and then silence.

"That," said the brigadier, "is a very one-sided battle. It can wait until we have had our food. I am not going to allow six men to play 'Old Harry' with my digestion."

As the meal progressed, in came another fleet orderly.

"Regret to say that party reported on my rear was Lieutenant Meadows, who should have been in Britstown this morning. He lost his way in the night. I am sending him in to you to explain. I regret that we have shot one of his horses."

Brigadier. "I thought it was a one-sided battle. I don't know which is the bigger fool, the officer commanding the rear-guard or the youth who has lost his way in the dark. Did you give him a guide, Mr Intelligence?"

Intelligence Officer. "Yes, sir; I gave him the tame burgher Stephanus whom we roped in at Richmond Road."

B. "Those crimped men are no good. He slipped them in the dark, I bet. Hullo! here is the boy. His peace of mind, I fancy, wouldn't be worth much at a public auction."

A smart-looking, though travel-stained, little dragoon subaltern cantered up, dismounted, and saluted. The brigadier was right; he did not look particularly happy. There was a moment of silence while the brigadier took a spoonful of marmalade, then he turned to the boy.

"Well, my pocket Ulysses, what is the extent of your adventure?"

Meadows. "Got lost, sir!"

Brigadier. "And your guide?"

M. "Had to leave him behind, sir!"

B. "Which means he left you!"

M. "He tried to, sir; but he didn't get far!"

B. "What happened?"

M. "First he took us wrong—took us back along the road we had come by. Then when I talked to him he tried to bolt, and I had to shoot him!"

B. (suddenly becoming interested) "The devil you did! Have you had anything to eat? Sit down and have some food. Did you kill him?"

M. "No, sir; I left him with that other wounded Boer in the mud hut near the last camp. But he is very sick. We did what we could for him."

B. "Evidently! Are you sure that he was leading you wrongly?"

M. "Yes, sir. He was taking us back along the road by which we had come from Richmond Road. We stumbled upon one of my own men's water-bottles which he had dropped earlier in the day. As soon as the guide saw what it was, he tried to do a bolt."

B. "Circumstantial evidence, I think; verdict and sentence in one. Well, you at least have the satisfaction of knowing that you have brought your man down. But next time don't hit a refractory guide so hard. I have an idea that if you shot less straight you might have been able to carry out your orders even with a refractory guide. Where are the telegrams? Hand them over to your colonel, and tell him to send another officer on with them at once. No; give them to me. Here, Mr Intelligence, off you go. Just get into Britstown as quickly as you can. As we haven't

seen any smoke curling up over the landscape, I take it that Brand and Co. have postponed their good offices. But if anything is wrong, mind you manage to get one of your party back to me with the information."

The Intelligence officer and the Tiger had not left the column a mile behind them when they met a Cape cart coming along the dusty road from Britstown. It was driven by a youth of some eighteen summers, who stopped his pair of mules with the greatest unconcern to the signal from the Tiger.

Tiger. "Good morning. What is your name?"

Driver. "Good morning. Naude."

T. "Where have you come from?"

D. "Britstown!"

T. (who was now close up to the cart and busy in examination of it) "What have you been doing in Britstown, and how long have you been there?"

D. "I have been there about ten days: my wife has been confined there!"

T. "So you have taken her out for a drive to-day?"

D. "No. How could I?"

T. "Then you have been driving another lady?"

D. "No."

T. "What have you got those two cushions on the seat for? What's the good of lying? Where are you going now?"

D. "Back to my home!"

T. "Where is that?"

D. "Drieputs, two hours^[20] on."

T. (decidedly) "Now, look here; it is no use lying any more. I will tell you what you have been doing and who you are. You are the son of old Pretorius of Richmond Road. Yesterday you were on commando with Lotter; your brother was shot and taken by us. I don't know where you slept last night; but this I do know, that yesterday you drove a wounded man into Britstown, and probably a lady as well. The lady came from Nieuwjaarsfontein. For you see those cushions you have on your front seat came out of the Nieuwjaarsfontein *sitkamer*.^[21] I have got a similar one, which I took myself from the farm. So don't lie any more. Tell me who is in Britstown?"

D. (who had lost his air of stolid indifference, and was beginning to move uncomfortably) "Britstown is full of Kharkis; they are coming in now fast."

Intelligence Officer. "Is this road clear into the *dorp*?"^[22]

D. (with polite sarcasm) "You may ride along this road in perfect safety."

T. (cheerily) "That is more than you can, my friend. (*Turning to Intelligence Officer.*) This man has evidently, sir, carried information to Brand's people and a wounded man into Britstown; see the blood on the back of the seat. I should keep him a prisoner, sir—send him back to the column with a man. Besides, if I am to stay with you, sir, I should like his cart and mules. They are good mules, you see. They have been into the town and back, and have scarcely turned a hair!"...

There was no doubt as to the occupation of Britstown when the Intelligence officer and his escort crossed the vlei, which is the principal outlying feature of that typical little South African township. The De Aar road was one block of moving transport, and the usually quiet main street of the village was alive with troops. Of a truth a concentration was taking place, and the Dutch were not amiss in their simile when they likened a British concentration to a flight of locusts.

Very few of you will have ever heard of Britstown. Yet, like so many other obscure South African townships, this war has brought it a history. Nor is the historical record which has been built up for it of extraordinary merit. There will be many in the ranks of a certain favoured corps who will scarcely treasure the memory of that little wayside asylum. We remember when the papers were full of the exploits and valour of this returning corps—then Britstown found no mention. Yet its associations, pleasant though they may not be, are closely interwoven with its short-lived history. The story is told to-day over the hotel-bars of the little township by gleeful Colonials. Told how in open fight, a handful of rebel farmers—perhaps our friends the brothers Pretorius and Stephanus were amongst them—drove two companies of England's *élite* every mile of the twenty-two which lie between Houwater and Britstown. The Colonial, clinking his glass,—shallow in his taste and appreciation,—glories in the story, which is writ large in rebel little Britstown to this day, and will be for all time.

A militia picket is astride the road. None—at least by the main highway—may pass into the confines of the town without permission. The stolid country lout of a sentry views all new-comers with suspicion. But the deadlock is saved by the arrival of a dapper, chubby-faced youth, clean of person, well groomed in habiliments and gear.

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"I am the staff officer of the town commandant. What can I do for you?"

Intelligence Officer. "What I want is the telegraph-office."

Staff Officer. "Certainly, sir; but what do you belong to? Are you with the main column?"

I. O. "Dear me, no. I have just come in from the New Cavalry Brigade!"

S. O. "Yes; we are expecting you. You are to camp on the south side of the town. Just under the parapet of those defences. Those are our southern defences. What do you think? Brand had the impertinence to send in last night and demand our immediate surrender. That we, Britstown, should surrender—!"

I. O. (brutally) "And did you? Look here; you will have to wait until the general comes in for your camping arrangements. All I want is the telegraph-office."

S. O. "Of course we did not surrender. Why, we have made this place impregnable. There are three companies of my regiment here, to say nothing of the local town-guard."

I. O. "Oh, hang the town-guard! You trot along and find the chief of our staff. I have other things to think about. By the way, has the rest of the New Cavalry Brigade come in here? The Mount Nelson Light Horse—they are marching from Hanover Road?"

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S. O. "No; but there is some ox-transport for you with the Supply column. How far back is your general?"

I. O. "About three miles. Thanks." (*Intelligence Officer and the Tiger canter on.*)

Tiger. "Please, sir, did he say that the De Aar column was in?"

I. O. "Yes. Why?"

T. "Only the bulk of Rimington's—that is, Damant's—Guides are with it, and I should like to go and see them as soon as I have shown you the telegraph-office. I will also try and find out what young Pretorius was doing in here last night."

In five minutes a "clear-the-line" message was on its way to "Chief, Pretoria," to tell him that the concentration ordered two days ago had taken place. To us, following the fortunes of one small unit in the great move, it will appear that in our forty-eight hours' association with the New Cavalry Brigade everything has proceeded as could have been desired by the master-mind. But it was not so. Almost before the last of the horses had been detrained at Richmond Road, the whole nature of, and necessity for, the movement had changed. In short, everything had turned out as the brigadier had anticipated. Plumer, with the tenacity for which he is famous, had clung to the rear-guard of De Wet's column, snatching a waggon here and a tumbril there, until he himself could move no farther. De Wet had outlasted him, and had, moreover, seen that it would be useless to carry out his original programme. So he doubled and doubled again, with the result that the cleverly devised scheme of relays of driving columns was out of joint, and a dozen units were uselessly spread out over the veldt a hundred miles from the place in which the invader was catching his breath, within jeering distance of the column which had ran itself stone-cold in his pursuit. So within forty-eight hours of the start the whole plan had to be reconstructed. This reconstruction was explained to the New Cavalry Brigade through the medium of one hundred and four telegrams which were awaiting its arrival at Britstown. As the majority conveyed contradictory instructions, the piecing together of the real meaning partook of the nature of one of those drawing-room after-dinner games with which yawning guests at winter house-parties are beguiled. The first cover that was opened deprived the brigadier of his chief of the staff. That officer was ordered to proceed without delay to take up the command of a mobile column to be formed at Volksrust, the other end of the world—that is, the world with which we are at present concerned.

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"Don't open any more till we have fed," said the brigadier. "A man with an empty stomach has no mind. We will have a fat high tea at the local Carlton, and then devise strategy."

A general in the field is a great man. But a general in a town at which half-a-dozen Colonial Corps have concentrated is of no account. In the street men pass him by without recognition, and in hotels private swashbucklers in smasher hats literally hustle him.

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"This table is reserved for the commandant," said the ample hostess of the Britstown Carlton.

"Who is the commandant?" queried the brigadier.

"Major Jones," came the answer.

"Well, I'm—! this beats cock-fighting. This is the result of martial law and the control of the liquor licence!—a well-fed major reserves seats, while a hungry general stands!" and the general and staff of the New Cavalry Brigade occupied the reserved table, and became guests of the hotel in common with thirty dishevelled troopers, who had passed into the hotel, representing themselves to the dazed militia sentry at the door as officers. The food may not have been of the best, but it was in abundance; and in a quarter of an hour the brigadier was prepared to study his instructions.

B. "Now, Mr Intelligence, since they see fit to remove my chief of the staff, you have got to be maid-of-all-work. You and I have got to run this brigade until the brigade-major turns up. He must be a bit of a 'slow-bird,' I think, or he would have been here with the rest of my hoplites by this. Do you know anything about staff work?"

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Intelligence Officer. "Nothing, sir!"

B. "So much the better; you will then have a mind ripe for tuition. Now I will give you a lesson. You have two pockets in your tunic. The right pocket will be the receptacle for 'business' telegrams, the left for 'bunkum.' Now for the telegrams!"

It would be beyond the scope of this sketch to give the contents of the one hundred and four telegrams which had accumulated in forty-eight hours. It will suffice to state that ninety-seven were relegated to the "bunkum" pocket, and seven retained as conveying intelligent orders worthy of consideration. It is superfluous to mention that the whole of the messages sent by the local intelligence departments and by the De Wet expert were dismissed as "bunkum," often without perusal. As the brigadier pertinently remarked: "I suppose that the poor fellows have to justify their existence as members of the great brain-system of the army. The only means by which they come into prominence is by squandering the public money, and they only hurt those who take their information seriously. They do you no harm if you consistently ignore their existence, and don't worry to read their messages."

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The sum-total of the messages of instruction which the brigadier had so quaintly filed as "business-material" was information from the Chief, Pretoria, that the plan of the operations was changed. That our general was to co-operate—a word of very elastic meaning, and responsible for much velvet-covered mutiny during the present campaign—with the columns in his neighbourhood which, over and above the skeleton of the New Cavalry Brigade, had concentrated that day at Britstown. A message in cipher gave an inkling of the plan which had risen phoenix-like out of the ashes of the original dispositions. De Wet, instead of being enticed south, was to be driven north into the loop of the Orange River between Prieska and Hopetown, where Charles Knox's column and a column of Kimberley swashbucklers would be ready for him. The Britstown columns, and the brigadier of the New Cavalry Brigade co-operating, would push north—wheel into line with the panting Plumer, now north of Strydenburg, and then "Forward away!" Now, just as the original scheme had, when on paper, presented a very reasonable and common-sense stratagem, so with the new incubation. But there were three main factors over which the gilt cap at Pretoria had no control, and which dished this, as they have dished ninety-nine out of every hundred of schemes which were undertaken during the guerilla war. The first of these three lay in the fact that the strategy was a conformation to the enemy's movements. This naturally gave him time to think and to develop his counter-move, with all advantages in the balance. No. 2 is to be found in the timidity of certain of the column commanders. Men who proverbially take every opportunity of sacrificing the main issue to pursue some subsidiary policy. Men whom De Wet loves, and whom he plays with, decoys, and bluffs until he achieves his object. Men whose heart will not take them, like Plumer, "slap-bang" along the course which must lead to heavy conclusions, if the enemy will fight; but who prefer to fritter away the *morale* and efficiency of their columns in pursuing a phantom enemy. Choosing a country in which an enemy as sagacious as the Boer would never operate, these men are careful not to leave the security it affords, though their telegrams to headquarters build up the statistics which have misled our calculations throughout the war. The third reason is just as deplorable. It is the passive resistance evinced between column commanders, who are called upon to co-operate. These leaders, instead of sinking all differences in one common objective, work rather as if they were employed in a business competition. And why is this? Ask of the man in Pretoria with his hand on the tiller. Is not centralisation the cause of it all? Does not the centralisation of the guiding authority mean that all success is judged by personal results,—that the "brave" is selected for preferment who can claim to have the most scalps dangling from his waist-belt. This is the nature of the war for which the British nation is content to pay many millions a-month!

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"Please, sir, can I speak to you a moment?" The Tiger stood in the doorway of the hotel dining-room.

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"Anything serious?" asked the Intelligence officer.

"I have made a discovery."

"Can you spare me, sir?" (*to the Brigadier.*)

"For half an hour. I am going down to the commandant's office to see the general. Meet me there in half an hour."

"What is it, Tiger?"

"I will now show you something which will open your eyes. Something which will show you how this game is worked. It is only about two minutes' walk from here."

As the Intelligence officer and the Tiger made their way down the main street, it would have required no great strain upon the imagination to have fancied that the town had recently been carried by assault, and the victorious troops allowed the licence consequent upon street fighting. Even in the few short hours of occupation debauchery had had its way. Drunkenness is the worst attribute of irregular soldiering upon five shillings a-day. If the Colonial has money he will drink. Where the average white man greets a friend and acquaintance with a hand-shake, the South African Colonial calls him to the nearest bar, and they drink their salutation. When half-a-dozen Colonial Corps "off the trek" meet in a wayside township, they turn it into an Inferno. Here they were crowding in and out of the houses in drunken hilarity. The townsfolk, delighted at their opportune arrival when Brand was at their gates, ply them with the spurious spirit which passes

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for whisky in South Africa. If the spirit is there, no amount of military precaution will prevent the Colonial trooper from securing it. You cannot place whole regiments—officers and men alike—under arrest. And when a Colonial regiment is "going large," in the majority of cases it would baffle any but an expert to distinguish officer from man. And while young men in smasher hats fall over each other in the streets, the sober British troops look solidly on and wonder. Some, it is true, fall away with the rioters. But they are few. Discipline and want of means buoy them at least upon a surface of virtue. Yet, be it said to the credit of these roysterers in town, the man who drinks the hardest in the afternoon will follow you the straightest in the morning!

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The Intelligence officer and the Tiger had arrived at a little cottage on the outskirts of the town. A primitive yet pretty dwelling—a toy villa of tin.

"Go in," said the Tiger.

The Intelligence officer knocked and entered. He was met with a smile by the pretty Dutch girl with the great blue eyes, who had so played upon his feelings at Richmond Road.

"Miss Pretorius!"

FOOTNOTES:

[17] Water dam or pool.

[18] When out with a column men were often weeks before they knew what the Gazette had given them.

[19] Colloquial Hindustani—bullock hackney carriage.

[20] Boer method of assessing distances.

[21] Sitting-room.

[22] Village.

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V.

ToC

A NEW CAST.

For the moment the Intelligence officer could ill disguise his astonishment. Here, standing in front of him, was the girl who had taught him his first lesson in staff jurisprudence. The memory of the incidents at the farmhouse, her petulance with the Tiger, her tears for her lover, had been almost effaced by the vicissitudes of the last forty-eight hours. If he had ever thought of the girl at all, it had been in the same spirit as a mariner recalls a passing ship, whose shapely lines were barely distinguishable in the night. His surprise was such that he could only marvel that while, travel-stained and dishevelled, he had arrived at Britstown with an effort, she had already reached that goal, and, to judge from the studied neatness of her attire, had reached it with consummate ease. Her smile and attitude as she held out her hand to her visitor expressed satisfaction at the meeting—a satisfaction tempered with a determination to show a front which should declare a full measure of resistance. Taking advantage of his officer's surprise, the Tiger discreetly withdrew.

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Intelligence Officer. "Miss Pretorius,—how did you get here?"

Miss Pretorius. "Quite simply. Partly on horseback, partly in a Cape cart."

I. O. (recovering somewhat) "Naturally; I did not anticipate that you had walked. But with what object?"

Miss P. (the corners of her pretty mouth sinking in defiance) "I might easily have walked, and arrived before a British column. As to my object in coming here, surely your Africander spy has informed you?"

I. O. "If you mean the Tiger, he has told me nothing!"

Miss P. "And may I also ask something,—What authority have you to put me such a question? At the institution which prided itself in teaching me—an Africander girl—the manners and customs of the English, they were emphatic upon the impertinence of asking personal questions."

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I. O. "I must apologise, Miss Pretorius. But the circumstances are hardly normal. We cannot get away from the fact that we are influenced against our better natures by an unfortunate state of

war."

Miss P. (petulantly) "Oh, the war! That is just like you Englishmen—you paragons of manly virtue—you make the war a cloak for all your sins. It is such an upright war, therefore in its furtherance you can do no wrong—cannot even be unmannerly. It is this that has made you so beloved in the Republics; but how does your attitude hold good with me? I am a loyal British subject, living at peace with all men in a British colony. What right, therefore, have you to catechise me as to my goings and comings? I do not even live within the legitimate area of your so-called just war. I am only exposed to its rigours—that is, as far as the insolence of those who should be our defenders affects us women—because you English, in spite of your vaunted power and military magnitude, cannot defend us, your Africander dependants, from a few simple farmers. Where is your manhood, where the courtly bearing of the Englishman, of which I have heard so much—and seen so little?"

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I. O. "Really, Miss Pretorius, if I may say so, I think that you exaggerate the case. Unfortunately we are at war. You claim consideration on the score of loyalty. Are you astonished that I should have mistaken your attitude towards us? Your two brothers only yesterday were in arms against us. One is wounded, the other a prisoner in our hands. Is it surprising that I regarded you as their accomplice in rebellion?"

Miss P. "I am surprised at nothing that an Englishman may do. But why should I be compromised because my brothers have taken up arms against you. Am I not of an age to formulate opinions of my own? or is it that you consider that we poor Africander girls have no intelligence, that our opinions must of necessity be bound up in those of our men-folk, that we have no mind above the duties of the drudging *hausfrau*? No, sir; I am an Africander loyalist—more loyal by far than the renegade white who brought you here. And if you wish to know the reason of my presence at Britstown, I am not averse to telling you, provided you will not claim to have the information as a right."

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I. O. (with a touch of penitence in his voice, which for a moment caused a smile to flicker round the corners of the girl's mouth) "Of course, Miss Pretorius, I have no right. You will persist in misunderstanding me."

Miss P. "It is a simple problem. I am loyal, as I have said; but I am a daughter and sister first, patriot later. In a fit of meaningless bravado, tempered perhaps by some compulsion from over the border, my old father and brothers had joined a rebel commando. You, with a naïveté which I had hardly expected in you, and for which I liked you, told me the objective of your column—information which meant everything to me, and perhaps to you, for you looked as if you would have liked to have bitten your tongue out after you had parted with it. I, with the honest intention of saving my father and brothers from you, rode out to them that night. I then knew nothing of Lotter's and Hertzog's men. If it had not been for the fighting, I should be now back again at Richmond Road. As it is, my poor wounded father in the next room is sufficient reason for my presence here."

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I. O. (who, English-like, was all sympathy at once) "Oh, it was your father then that you brought with you in the Cape cart. I hope that he is not badly wounded. May I see him?"

Miss P. "There would be no object in your seeing him, as he is at present asleep. No; he is, not severely wounded. He is shot through the shoulder,—luckily it has missed his lung."

I. O. (with unaffected solicitude) "I am indeed sorry for you, Miss Pretorius; those last forty-eight hours have been full of trouble for you. But I doubt if you know the worst!"

Miss P. (suddenly paling, and losing for the moment her self-control) "The worst!—surely you have not burned our farm? You are not burning farms in the Colony!"

I. O. "No, not your farm; but I am afraid your sweetheart has been badly hit!"

Miss P. (with evident relief and surprise) "My sweetheart!"

I. O. "Yes; the guide whom we took from your farm. He tried to escape, and was unfortunately shot."

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Miss P. (laughing outright) "Oh, Stephanus! He is no sweetheart of mine. How could he be? He is only a bywoner!"

I. O. "But you told me that he was when I first suggested taking him with me!"

Miss P. "Did I? It was not the truth, then; it was only an addition to the part I was then playing."

I. O. "How do I know that you are not still playing a part?"

Miss P. "If I am, then it is a very sad one. No; you may trust me now. I have played my part, and if anything that I could do for you would stop this dreadful war, I would gladly help you!"

I. O. "You can help me, if you will; but after what you have said about my want of manners, I am afraid to ask you a question."

Miss P. "I have forgiven you that; and now that you do not claim the right to question me, I do not mind answering you if I can!"

I. O. "How, if your object was to save your father, did it happen that Lotter was informed of our presence at Richmond Road?"

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Miss P. "I expected that you would ask that. I did not tell him personally, nor would I in any circumstances have done so. But the fact that I arrived in great haste in the small hours of the morning had a peculiar meaning to the commando, and it was not necessary for me to open my

mouth. I daresay to-night there will be one hundred Africander girls in the saddle in different parts of the Colony. When the urgency is great, a girl is more reliable than a Kaffir. It is one of our means of communication. There; is not that an admission worthy of a loyal Africander?"

I. O. (holding out his hand) "Good-bye, Miss Pretorius."

It would have been difficult to analyse the Intelligence officer's feelings as he strode back along the Britstown main street to keep his appointment with his brigadier. He was at a loss to understand two things,—the anomalism of his second meeting with the Pretorius girl, and the latter's attitude towards the Tiger. He could not divest himself of a feeling of suspicion that all was not quite as it appeared. There is no walk in life which breeds distrust in one's fellows so rapidly as that of military Intelligence. And although the Intelligence officer had only formed an atom in this great structure of British incompetency in South Africa for two days, yet sufficient had been borne in upon him during this period to cause him uneasiness as to the sincerity of motive in those that moved round him. It is said that the only person that a race-horse trainer will trust is his wife, and that as long as he trusts her he remains an unsuccessful man. We cannot say what truth there may be in this ancient turf adage; but we do know that administrative work successfully performed in the Intelligence Department of an army in the field leads a man to place the lowest estimate upon the integrity of his fellows. The first lesson is of an inverse nature, and compels a man, however he may dislike the procedure, to believe those who move about him to be knaves, until he has had opportunity to test their honesty. Young in his knowledge of the people against whom he had been warring for eighteen months, the Intelligence officer was exceedingly puzzled at the strange anomaly presented by the Africander girl he had just left. He could not help feeling that this daughter of a nation which he had led himself, if not to despise, at least to depreciate, had fathomed him in two short interviews, while he had penetrated little beyond the surface of her feminine attractions and lively wit. He was puzzled at the outcome of his interview, even perhaps a little alarmed at the manner in which he had been treated—shocked at the erroneous estimate which he had formed of Dutch women after eighteen months in their midst. But this rebuff had served its purpose: it had sown in him the seeds of that appreciation of our enemy which will have to generally exist if we are ultimately to live in peace and concord, united as fellow-subjects, with the people of South Africa.

It was now already dark, and the Intelligence officer had some little difficulty in finding the house in which the general had taken up his headquarters. The main street was still full of revellers, bursting with Colonial *bonhomie*, but strangely lacking in topographical information. In fact it seemed doubtful if the general's house would ever be found, and the weary Intelligence officer was rapidly losing his temper, when chance again came to his aid. A horseman came galloping down the street. A little man in civilian attire—all slouch-hat and gaiter. He seemed to be in a desperate hurry, as he was flogging his tired and mud-bespattered animal unmercifully with his *sjambok*. It was a beaten horse; and just as it came level with the Intelligence officer, it stumbled, half recovered itself, and then fell heavily in a woeful heap. The Intelligence officer pulled the little civilian on to his feet, with a soft admonition about the riding of beaten horses. The civilian shook himself, and turned to his prostrate horse with a curse. But the poor beast had no intention of rising again. It had lain down to die.

"It can't be helped; the news I bring will be worth a horse or two anyhow. I must leave it, saddle and all, until I have seen the general."

"Do you know where to find him?" hazarded the Intelligence officer. "I am looking for his house now."

Civilian. "Well, I ought to; I've not run a store in this town for five years not to know my way about. But who may you be?"

Intelligence Officer. "I'm staff officer to one of the columns which came in to-day. I've been trying to find headquarters this last ten minutes."

Civ. "Come along with me. I must get there at once. I've just come in from Houwater. I was sent out by the commandant to follow up Brand, and I have located him and Hertzog. I tell you I have come in fast—never went faster in my life. Devilish nearly got cut off. My word, I bore a charmed life to-day. Well, here we are. I shall go straight in. The new general doesn't know me, but he soon will. The commandant knows me: he knows that when I come with news there is something worth hearing."

The little civilian bounced up the steps and dived into the lighted hall of the headquarter's villa, before orderly or sentry could stop him. A tall Yeoman stepped up to the Intelligence officer, and saluting with more dignity than alacrity said, "Beg your pardon, sir; but I am the general's orderly, and he told me to tell you that he would only be a few minutes here, and that if you wouldn't mind waiting he would join you immediately."

Waiting for a general is a serious undertaking, and the Intelligence officer was tired. Moreover, he did not know where the camp was, or when he would be expected to take over from the chief

staff officer of the column. But on active service all these things work out in their own time, so he just sat down on the whitewashed steps of the verandah and lit a cigarette. The tall Yeoman orderly did likewise on the far side of the entrance. The Intelligence officer smoked in silence for some time, engaged in the occupation most welcomed by tired men on service—thinking of better times—until the nightmare of the column, the orders for the morrow, the supplies and the camp, broke in upon his reverie.

Intelligence Officer. "Do you know where the camp is?"

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Orderly. "Yes, sir; it is about half a mile from here."

I. O. "You can find your way there in the dark?"

Ord. "Yes, sir; it is straight down the main street, and then the first to the left. It would be impossible to miss it."

I. O. "What do you belong to?"

Ord. "I don't quite know what I belong to now. I came out originally with the 218th Company Imperial Yeomanry; but they have gone back home."

I. O. "Then what are you doing out here now?"

Ord. "Well, you see, sir, I came to the general as orderly about four months ago, and I liked being with him so much that I did not rejoin the company. As a matter of fact, we were away down in Calvinia District; I don't quite see how I could have got back to them, even if the general would have let me go. I haven't seen the company since I was wounded at Wittebergen seven months ago. I joined the general from Deelfontein Hospital!"

I. O. "I hope that your billet has been kept open for you in England."

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Ord. "I sincerely trust it has, sir; but I have missed a season's hunting. I don't intend to miss another if I can help it."

I. O. "The devil you don't. What do you do at home?"

Ord. "I hunt four days a-week in the winter, and in the——"

I. O. "I mean, what is your job?"

Ord. "I haven't much of a job, sir; I'm the junior partner in an engineering firm, and as we do some very big things in contracts, there isn't much left for me to do except amuse myself!"

I. O. "Then whatever made you come out in the ranks?"

Ord. "It suits me, sir. I am not fond of responsibility: besides, if every one who could afford it had taken a commission in our company, we should have been all officers, with no one to command!"

I. O. "I call it most sporting of you."

Ord. "No; not exactly sporting. It was no idea of sport that brought me out here. It was a sense of duty. Were you out here, sir, during the Black Week—the Colenso-Magersfontein period? You were. Then you have not realised, and you never can realise, what we in England went through during that period. I went down to my stables one morning, and my groom came up to me and asked if he might leave at once. In answer to my look of surprise, he said, 'It's this way, sir: I feel that the time has come when we shall want every man who can ride and shoot to defend the country. I can do both, and the country is not going to be defeated because I can ride and shoot, and won't. I want to join the Yeomanry!' I let him go, and thought over his estimate of the situation all day. If the country's honour lay in my groom's hands, how much more must it lie in mine—the employer of labour? I made up my mind before dinner, told my wife before going to bed, and here I am, sir."

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Nor was this an extraordinary case. There must have been in South Africa during the second phase of the war many hundreds of men—one might almost say thousands—actuated by the same spirit, impelled by the same feeling, as this rich contractor and his groom. Men who felt that the nation had desperate need of their services; men who voluntarily undertook the risks and perils of a soldier's life, not from any hope of preferment, not from love of adventure or mercenary advancement, but from true patriotism—a sacrifice to meet the nation's call in the hour of her need. But that day soon passed. The tide turned, and clash of arms ceased upon our own frontiers and within our own dependencies, and the din of war sounded faintly from the heart of the enemy's country. Then true patriotism failed; the men who had gone forth with their country's acclamations returned as their obligations expired. There were no patriots of the same class found to take their places. Yet the exigencies of the struggle required even more men than had been in the field when Lord Roberts made his extreme effort to retrieve the earlier misfortunes. Then it was that we committed another of those many errors in judgment which have marked the conduct of the campaign. We believed that in December 1900 the edifice of the Boer resistance was crumbling to its foundations,—that it was like a mighty smoke-stack, already mined at its base, and but requiring fuel at the dummy supports to bring the whole structure in ruins to the ground. We called for the fuel. The cry went forth for men—men—men. Any men; only let there be a sufficient quantity. The war was over. Had not the highest officials said that it was over. The recruiting-sergeant went out into the highways and hedges to collect the fuel for Lord Kitchener's final operation. It mattered not the quality—it was only quantity. The war was over. The gates of the Gold Reef City would again be open. Then the mass of degraded manhood which had fled from Johannesburg at the first muttering of thunder in the war-cloud flocked from their hiding-places on the Cape Colony seaboard and fell upon the recruiting-sergeant's neck. Mean whites

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that they were, they came out of their burrows at the first gleam of sunshine. Greek, Armenian, Russian, Scandinavian, Levantine, Pole, and Jew. Jail-bird, pickpocket, thief, drunkard, and loafer, they presented themselves to the recruiting-sergeant, and in due course polluted the uniform which they were not fit to salute from a distance. The war was over; there would be no more fighting, only a quick march to Johannesburg, and disbandment within reach of the filthy lucre which they coveted. And so new corps were raised, with spirit-stirring titles, while old, honoured, and existing regiments were sullied beyond recognition by association with the refuse and sweepings from the least manly community in the universe. Such fuel could not even clear the dummy supports at the base of the Boer resistance. It refused to burn. It could never have burned in any circumstances. These men had no intention of fighting. Their appearance in the field gave new life to the enemy. New confidence, and free gifts of rifles, ammunition, clothes, and horses. Men could not be found to command them, for to place confidence in their powers meant professional disgrace. These men had not come to fight. They had enlisted only to reach Johannesburg, and they refused to fight. Surrender to them brought no qualm or disgrace. They possessed no faculty sensible to shame. Then the enemy hardened his heart. And who can blame him? He had ever been told that the supply of British fighting material was limited. He found these creatures in the field against him. He stepped up to them, and disarmed them without an effort. Then he said, we have exhausted their supply of real fighting men. They are now forced to place this spurious article in the field. We will persevere just a little longer. If we persevere till disease shall further destroy their good men, we must win in the long-run. The error in judgment which allowed of the enlistment of these men has perhaps done more than anything else to prolong the war. If any doubts remain, let the curious call upon the Government for a return of arms and ammunition surrendered to and captured by the enemy between November 1900 and November 1901, and then, if the answer be justly given, judge of the necessity of arsenals for our enemy.

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The brigadier had finished his interview with his superior, and the clink of glasses had shown that the general had not sent him off without a stirrup-cup. He came out upon the verandah, and called for his orderly.

Brigadier. "Hullo, Mr Intelligence; I thought you were lost. Come along here out into the road. I want to speak to you, but we must be careful not to be overheard; this place simply teems with rebels. (*They advanced into the Broadway, the orderly following at a respectful distance.*) Now, look here, we are to have a big fight to-morrow. You saw that funny little beggar in the hat. Well, he wasn't playing at robbers, though you would never have known it. He was really bringing the good news to Ghent—killing horses all the way. He's a local Burnham, and passing good, according to the commandant. Well, he's located Brand, Pretorius, and our old friend Hedgehog^[23] at Houwater, and we are going out to give battle. More, they believe that De Wet has doubled back towards Strydenburg, and is trying to link up with these Houwater gentry, as the latter have collected horses for him. Now, our bushranging robber reports that Brand has an outpost of thirty men at a farm on the Ongers River, twelve miles from here, covering the Houwater-Britstown Road. We are to take a surprise party out to-night and round them up. If we succeed, we will run a very good chance of bringing off quite 'a show' to-morrow. So we must get along now, and get out the invitations for the tea-party. The 'Robber' is to meet us here in two hours, and the old man has lent me fifteen of Rimington's Tigers, who are 'fizzers' for this sort of *shikar*."

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It would be an artist, indeed, who could analyse and adequately describe the feelings of a man parading for his first night-attack. The magnitude or insignificance of the enterprise is immaterial. The feelings of the young soldiers from the New Cavalry Brigade as they paraded with the hard-bitten swashbucklers, Rimington's Tigers, were identical with those of the army advancing across the desert to the assault at Tel-el-Kebir; of Wauchope's Highland Brigade blundering to disaster in the slush and bushes before Magersfontein; and Hunter Weston's handful of mounted sappers, who so boldly penetrated into the heart of the enemy's line to destroy the railway north of Bloemfontein. A night-attack must of necessity always be a delicate operation. Shrouded in the mystery of darkness, men know that their safety and the success of the enterprise is dependent upon the sagacity and coolness of one or, at the most, two men. They must be momentarily prepared to meet the unexpected. The smallest failure or miscarriage—the merest chance—may lead to irretrievable disaster. Men who can face death without flinching in the light of day often quail at the thought of it in the darkness. The mental tension is such that once men have been overwhelmed during a night attack, like the beaten ram of the arena, it must be weeks, even months, before they can be trusted to face a similar situation. No man who has ever taken part in night operations will forget his first sensations. The recurring misgivings bred of intense excitement. The misty hallucinations, outcome of abnormal tension. The awful stillness of the night. The muffled sounds of moving men, exaggerated by the painful silence of the surroundings. You long—with a yearning which can only be felt, not described—that something may happen to break the overpowering monotony of this prelude to success or disaster. Some outlet to your pent-up feelings. If only some one would shout, or the enemy surprise you, or—

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thank God! relief has come,—it has begun to rain!

As the little column of adventurers from the New Cavalry Brigade trudged on in ghostly silence, great drops of icy rain began to fall—harbingers of a coming storm. A shudder of satisfaction passed through the ranks, from the "Robber" leading the forlorn-hope, with the Intelligence officer and the leader of the Tigers beside him, to little Meadows and his troop of the 20th Dragoons in rear. Then, preceded by a brief ten minutes of inky darkness, the storm broke. It does not rain in South Africa—water is voided from above in solid sheets. A wall of beating rain pours down, obliterating the landscape by day, intensifying the darkness by night. The column came to a halt; the horses, unable to face the downpour, in spite of bridle, bit, and spur, swing round their tails to meet it. And before a collar can be turned or a coat adjusted every man in the column is drenched to the skin. For ten minutes perhaps the deluge lasts, then fades away as rapidly as it came. And as one by one the misty features of veldt reappear, you can hear the passing rainstorm receding from you, still churning the veldt surface into sticky pulp. The officers re-form the column, and the journey is continued. But though the respite has been short, it has been valuable; local inconvenience acts as a sedative to the nerves. Besides, there is less silence. The track that was parched and spongy has now become soft and slippery. Horses flounder and slide. Wet mackintoshes swish against the animals' flanks, and hoofs are raised with a rinsing, sucking sound. But there is man's work afoot. As the rain-mists sufficiently clear, the "Robber" is able to take his bearings. The head of the column has now reached the foot of a long low-lying ridge. The end cannot be seen; but the "Robber" explains that the farm where the Boers should be lies in a small cup at the foot of the farther end of this ridge. The column has already reached the place where it will be advisable to leave the horses. If they are taken farther along, the Boer picket, which is probably stationed on the ridge, may be disturbed. Now, even if a horse should neigh, it would be mistaken for one of the many brood-mares belonging to the farm. The march has been admirably timed; it still wants two hours to daybreak. It will take fully half this time to work along the ridge, overpower the picket if there is one, and surround the farm.

"Dismount—Number threes take over the horses." The word is passed from man to man in whispers. There is some little noise. Exaggerated by the situation, it sounds a babel. Can any enemy within a mile have failed to hear it? A rifle-butt hits against a stone. A horse, either pulled by the bit or terrified at some night-horror, backs and plunges, and disturbs the whole section. A smothered curse, as in the *melée* some man's foot is trampled. Surely such a noise would wake the dead! No; the men fall in at the foot of the hill. They are told to lie down and wait. The horror of that waiting! There is a sound on the side of the hill. A boulder has been shifted. The men clutch their rifles, the click of a pistol cocking is clearly audible. Then a form looms up. The "Robber" signals silence. The figure is approaching. It is only the Kaffir scout, who had been sent on in advance to locate, if possible, the picket. He comes up and hangs his head upon his hand. He has found the picket, and this is his way of demonstrating that the two Boers comprising it are asleep.

Harvey of Rimington's takes command. He issues his orders, first to his own men, then to the whole. They are simple: "Fix bayonets. I will take the Kaffir with me. When I hold up both my hands, the left section of fours will follow me. You know what to do; mind, not a shot is to be fired. The force will advance up the hill extended to two paces, and halt as soon as it reaches the summit. If we are discovered by more than the picket, Rimington's will rally on me, the 20th on their own officer. Remember, your line of retreat must be to the horses."

Then the advance began. Slowly the men toiled up. It seemed impossible to make the ascent in silence. Men must trip in darkness over rough ground—tripping men with rifles in their hands make what appears to be a fearful clatter. By hypothesis it would seem impossible to surprise even a sleeping picket. But you have only to be on picket duty once to realise how full the night is of deceptive noises. In reality the advance was made with praiseworthy silence. Just as the top was reached, the Kaffir plucked Harvey's arm. His veldt-bred eyes could see that which was still obscured from the white man. "Near, near!" he whispered in the captain's ear. Harvey raised both his hands above his head. Silently, but with the agility of cats, the four lean Colonials followed him. Six paces on, and under the shelter of a rock appear the forms of two men, asleep, and rolled in their blankets. It is not necessary to describe what followed. A leap forward by four lithe figures with shortened arms, a sinuous flash of steel, a sickening thud and gurgle, one choking wail, and all was over, and two farmer-soldiers had paid the extreme penalty for the betrayal of the trust their comrades had placed in them!

Five minutes for breathing-space. Then the little line was reformed diagonally along the tabletop of the ridge. Half the game had been won. It now remained to complete the *coup*. If the unexpected did not happen, there was no reason why the farmhouse should not be surrounded by daybreak. But in war it is the unexpected which does happen. Slowly the thirty men worked along the plateau towards the point of the ridge. Two-thirds had been traversed, when suddenly two figures appeared against the eastern sky.

"Reliefs for the picket,—d—n!" muttered the Rimington captain, and as the truth flashed upon him came the challenge in Dutch—

"*Wie dar?*"

"Follow me, Rimington's!" and the nearest men joined their captain in a dash to reach the men. But it was too late. Up came the Mausers. Two wild shots, and the relief had turned and was rushing down the hill towards the farm. If it had been day, all might have yet been saved by pace. But in night operations you cannot take these risks, especially when only one man in the force knows the exact position of the objective. Harvey rallied his men on the ridge, and even before he

could place them in position, Mausers were popping from below, disclosing the kraals and outhouses of the farm.

"We must stop up here till daybreak. They will be gone before that. Well, there will be no surprise of Hertzog at Houwater to-day, all through a turn of rank bad luck!" and the Rimington captain commenced to fill his pipe, for his long abstinence from tobacco-smoke by reason of the night-march had been his particular grievance since the column had left Britstown.

FOOTNOTES:

[23] Hertzog.

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VI.

ToC

A POOR SCENT.

"There will be no surprise of Hertzog at Houwater to-day."

The Rimington captain had summed up the results consequent upon the night-attack with considerable accuracy, and as his party, in obedience to orders, worked down the banks of the Ongers River covering the right of the combined advance upon Houwater, there was abundance of evidence to show that Hertzog and Company had little intention of becoming enmeshed by the ponderous strategy set in motion against them. Nor was the weather favourable. The storm which had preceded the night-attack was one of those lowly pitched thunder-clouds which, caught in a craterlike valley enclosed by kopjes, revolved in a circle until it had spent itself. It took some hours of morning sun before it was finally dissolved. Consequently when the advance-guard of the force which was formed by the New Cavalry Brigade topped the great sloping glacis, inclining for all the world like an under-feature of the Sussex Downs, into the stagnant morass which is Houwater's most prominent feature, the last Boers were disappearing into the labyrinth of Minie Kloof beyond. But there was just sufficient excitement to take the cold and stiffness, bred of a miserable march, out of the bones of the men. The pom-pom unlimbered above the drift, and spent, at an impossible range, a belt of its tiny bombs. A spare dozen of Rimingtons, who had pushed farther forward than the rest, lightened their bandoliers by a few cartridges, and then, unmolested, the miniature British army marched into possession of its *point d'appui*.

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You who have only seen the British soldier at his worst, that is, when he is buttoned into a tunic little removed in design from a strait-waistcoat, or when the freedom of the man has been subordinated to the lick-and-spittle polish of the dummy,—you who glory in tin-casing for your Horse Guards, and would hoot the Guardsman bold enough to affect a woollen muffler,—would have opened your eyes with amazement if you could have sat on the slopes of the Houwater drift with the staff of the New Cavalry Brigade and watched the arrival of the co-operating columns to their common camping-ground. First came two squadrons of Scarlet Lancers, forming the nucleus of somebody's mobile column. No one would have accused them of being Lancers if they had met them suddenly on the veldt. Helmets they had none. How much time and money and thought has been spent over the service headgear for our men! We have seen it adapted for this climate; altered to suit that; a peak here, a bandage there. But Thomas is the best judge of the helmet in which he prefers to campaign, and you may rest assured that he will choose the most comfortable, if not the most suitable. The Scarlet Lancers had been separated from their helmets for many months. In fact, the manner in which the gay cavalry man rids himself of his legitimate headgear and provides himself with a substitute rather smacks of the supernatural: for instance, our own 20th Dragoon Guards had not been in the country more than ten days, yet there was barely a helmet to be seen amongst them. Substitutes had been found somewhere. The more worn and disreputable the substitute the happier the owner, despite the fact that all his past glories centred round a shining helmet or jaunty lancer cap, irresistible in plume and polish. But it was a great spectacle to see the survival of the fittest squadrons of the Scarlet Lancers filing past. There are half a dozen Cavalry Regiments against whom no one could throw a stone—the 9th and 16th Lancers are of these. But it would be invidious to particularise too much.

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"Who the h—ll are these fellows?—are they tame Boers?" chirped a subaltern from the 20th, who for the day was galloper to the brigadier.

A bearded ruffian, whose only costume was a flannel shirt and a pair of seedy check trousers, but whose eye was as keen as a hawk's, and whose shining "matchlock" had seventeen

notches^[24] along its stock, caught the subaltern's query.

"Yuss," came the answer, "we are tame Boers, the very tamest. My pal 'ere is President Kroojer, this 'ere's Botter, and hi am De—e—Wet!"

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Cheery fellows; after fifteen months of war there was little about self-preservation that you could have taught them. Lean, sinewy, and bearded kind—they represented the English fighting man at his best. And well might the inexperienced have asked if they were Boers. Lance and pennon were gone. Barely a tunic or regimental button remained to the two squadrons. Their collective headgear would have disgraced a Kaffir location, and their boots were mostly the raw-hide imitations of the country. But they were men. Rags and dirt could not conceal that fact. Theirs was not the dirt of sloth and sluggard. The essentials were bright and clean. There was not a man of the 150 attempting to represent two service squadrons who had not at some period balanced his life against his proficiency with the rifle, and who had not realised that on service his firelock was the soldier's best and staunchest friend. Nor were the officers easy to distinguish from the men. A shade cleaner, perhaps; but they, too, were rough-bearded, hard bitten by long exposure and responsibility. How different from the exquisites of popular fancy! Gone the beauties of effeminate adornment. Gone the studied insolence of puppyhood—that arrogance of bearing traditional with the British officer in times of peace. These were the men who had been eyes and ears to French's magnificent cavalry, who had ridden unflinchingly to the relief of Kimberley, who had more than held their own against fearsome odds at Diamond Hill. Did you hear that boy give an order? It was a man who spoke, and a man of resolution and understanding, yet judged by a standard in years he should still be a Sandhurst cadet.

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The regulars are followed by a squadron of Yeomanry,—the old original yeomanry, and, 'pon one's honour! it is hard to distinguish them from the Lancers. They, too, have been a year in the country. It takes all that to make any mounted regiment, however educated your material. You may make the men in less, but not the officers, and, all told, the officers are the essential in every corps. This is illustrative of another of our mistakes: we have sent back our Volunteers just when they really became efficient. These very men were under orders for home. Knowing what we know of the capabilities of young and green troops in mounted war, we may say with confidence that the authorities were ill advised when they failed to enforce the clause "until the end of the war," which was part of these men's undertaking. It has been the same all through, the exigencies of the service have been sacrificed to satisfy garrulous impatience on the part of home-abiding politicians.

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The New Cavalry Brigade had been freshly provided with transport. Half was very excellent mule-transport; the balance was composed of heavy trek-waggon, with lumbering ox-teams. Futile expedient. The disadvantages of the one outweighed the advantages of the other. It is only a matter of weeks since a public outcry was raised—by ignorant critics it is true—because Paris's convoy was overwhelmed in detail, that officer having done what every other successful column commander has done, allowed his ox-waggon to march on ahead of his more mobile transport, in order not to delay the progress of the column. What chance of success lies with the officer content to passively hug ox-waggon instead of pressing on against his mobile foe? None: yet half the column commanders have been content to parade the country as escort to drays packed with merchandise. When a man has been found enterprising enough to leave his ox-transport under escort, and to form a striking arm with such part of his force as is mobile, you turn and rend him if the dead-weight which has cramped and curtailed his action falls into disaster. Thus, in your ignorance, you call for the professional martyrdom of the only men who have served you honestly and well. Why don't you strike at the system, which, when it equips these columns, sends the commanders forth with the millstone of ox-transport round their necks? Do you imagine that an officer, possessed of the same dash which in the past has built up the traditions of our mounted arm, selects to move with heavy transport from choice? With him it can only be a Hobson's choice. He must take what he can get or nothing. And having secured what chance will give him, he must make the most of it or fail. If he takes risks and succeeds, his luck will have been abnormal. If, taking the risks, he fails once, he will, in all probability, be sacrificed to the yapping of the curs who voice the taxpayer, or to the vanity of some less competent senior. These sweaters give no second chances. If he steers the middle way, and is sufficiently plausible in the tale he tells, he may carry on to the end of the war, or the leave season; perhaps even, if he is sufficiently cautious, he may worm his way into an honours list. For it is the good, not the bad, that the modern system breaks.

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It is one thing for the mounted men of a column to come into camp, another for the transport. Houwater presented an ideal place for the bivouac, with its running water, its solitary building—half farm, half store—at the drift, and its complement of oat-straw. But the *vlei*^[25] from which the place takes its name was the very deuce for wheeled transport. All is fair in "love and war." This being a creed very staunchly adhered to by the private soldier when campaigning, the mess-servants of the staff of the Cavalry Brigade saw fit in the early morning to steal a span^[26] of mules which had strayed from the protection of their rightful owners. Now the Brigade state *fourgon* with a span of four mules was a big enterprise, and if treated gently might have ministered to the comfort of the staff for many months. But no; the brigadier's servant and the mess-waiter, who was a high-spirited and intelligent dragoon, sought to vary the *ennui* of the march, and to assert their superiority over the Kaffirs in the matter of stage-driving, by taking the *fourgon* and its half broken team full gallop down the incline terminating in Houwater *vlei*. A playful and exhilarating expedient, which ruined the brigadier's spring vehicle for ever and a day, and denied the staff many home comforts for that and some consecutive nights....

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The soldier, officer or man, who finds himself without a bivouac in the middle of a camp,

experiences for the moment much the same sensations as a "broke" man in the streets of London. Of the two, the officer has the worse time. A private soldier will be able to approach some one or other of the company cooks with the certainty of a rough welcome. If he is wise he will arrive armed with some stray piece of driftwood to add to the stock of fuel. Thus will success be assured, for Thomas of all men is the most unselfish. In the first instance, if he be a staff officer, he has probably too much to get done in a short space of time to think about his creature comforts. Then, if the ordinary channels have failed, he has probably too much diffidence to propose himself upon the hospitality of his fellow-comrades. In this manner is the simile of the "broke" man in midst of London's wealth maintained. Brigadiers, of course, do not starve; they would not, even if they possessed no *bandobust*^[27] of their own. Some squadron mess claimed the chief of the Cavalry Brigade for the evening, and, probably, fed him well. But the juniors of his staff were without home, and it was long past dark before the Intelligence officer could think of food. His first duties were orders for the morrow. The officer in supreme command had been weak enough to have been accompanied by a cable-cart. Lord Wolseley may cavil at correspondents and call them the curse of modern armies; but we are constrained to think that if a tired staff-officer were consulted he would save the cream of condemnatory epithets for the cable-cart, which makes his night horrible with useless telegrams. The nightmare of that midnight message, with its probable four pages of closely written ciphers! Those fine popinjays in starched kerseys and pink frills, who live in luxury at railway centres, think that it adds to their dignity if they convert their most trivial messages into cipher. Little do they consider the poor tired being whom they rob of hard-earned rest to open out that cipher. It pleases them. They have nothing to do in the evenings. The coding of a message to them is of the nature of an after-dinner game of backgammon. But to the aching head that has to decode it in the small hours of the morning by the fitful light of a grease-wallowing dip it is no game, no pastime. The cable-cart may have its uses; but many a score of worn-out staff-officers must have blessed the grass fire which has destroyed the ground-wire in their rear, and thus given them a few hours of unbroken rest.

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After orders and the minutiae of brigade duties came intelligence. The only building at Houwater Drift is a ramshackle half-way house—a familiar landmark of the veldt. This *winkel* was managed by a half-bred German; the farm inadequately protected from the elements half-a-dozen greasy Dutch *fraus* of various ages and a single decrepit black boy. Here indeed was a fund of information,—such being the channels through which the British Intelligence usually is worked. The Divisional Intelligence first took them in hand. Then "A" column, then "B" column, and lastly our own ranged them before the witness-table. It would have taken a veritable K.C. to have sorted the truth from the aggregate of falsehood which had been arrived at by the time it was our turn. The Intelligence officer had taken possession of the showrooms of the *winkel* to serve him as an office. This Shoolbred of the veldt was but a sordid shelter—walls and counter of mud; floor, sun-dried cow-dung and sand. Ranged upon the shelves was a strange medley of merchandise. All edibles had been removed by the Boers; there only remained what we believe the trade terms hard and soft goods. A pile of stinking sheep-skins, a few rolls of questionable longcloth, two packets of candles, some sheep-shears, gin-traps, and a keg of tar. As the Intelligence officer wearily set about his business of cross-examination, he was interrupted by the entrance of the Supply officer. This youth, as has previously been shown, was possessed of ready resource,—so much so that he annexed the two sole remaining packets of candles before unburdening his mind.

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Supply Officer (dropping the candles into the deep recess of the pockets of his "coat-warm-British").^[28] "Are you aware, old boy, that we don't get any grub to-night?"

Intelligence Officer (wearily). "And why?"

S. O. "The reason is quite simple. Those mess-servants have driven the mess-cart into the *vlei*, and in the *vlei* it will remain all night."

I. O. "I can't help that. I always said that the general's man was a fool. He is not only a fool but a d—d fool!"

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S. O. "Now, look here. You may think that you're a useful feller and doing a lot of good. But let me tell you that you are going over the same ground that better men than you have already passed (*pointing to the winkel-monger*). I have seen, at least, a round dozen of Intelligence officers examining that man. Well, what the deuce is he worth to you after that, either as a framer of fact or flinger of fiction? Try and be useful. We have got to feed to-night. Now, we can't go round to the messes and cadge for food. Nor shall we see our mess-cart. (*The Intelligence officer nodded assent.*) Then why do you detain our only chance? Here, Mr Squarehead (*taking the winkel-monger by the ear*), come and provide food. I have got two fowls and some potatoes, and you and the *fraus* between you have got to make a mess of pottage, and be right quick about it, or you will never see another sun rise."

There were protestations of inability on the part of the forced labourers. But the Supply officer soon overcame all these, and in an hour the staff of the New Cavalry Brigade were able after a full meal to curl up for the night on the high-scented floor of the *winkel*.

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An orderly from the general almost cannoned into the brigadier as he stood shaving by the light of a candle. There was a brusque rejoinder, and the man handed in a note. The brigadier read the

slip of paper handed to him while he stropped his razor. The orderly who had brought the message stood stiffly to attention until the brigadier finished his apology for a toilet. Having washed and struggled into his tunic, the officer commanding the Cavalry Brigade was in a position to give his undivided attention to his correspondence. He strode over to the four packing-cases, which in their disguise as tables represented the brigade mess, and called for his Intelligence and acting staff officer. That officer's toilet took even less time than that of his chief, for he just rolled out from between two blankets, and appeared ready made, as it were, for the day's wear and tear.

Brigadier. "Here, you lazy scoundrel, read that" (*and he passed the slip of paper over to his subordinate.*) [149]

I. O. "These are orders, sir."

B. "It was not necessary to send for you to discover that. But how does it affect the orders you issued last night?"

I. O. "It cancels them. Instead of taking us north-east, it will take us due west toward the Prieska Road as soon as we strike Beer Vlei."

B. "It looks as if Mr Brass Hat over there is going to dry-nurse me. My orders are to co-operate with him—not to follow him about like a dog at heel. I'm not sent here to be at the beck and call of every column commander a day senior to myself. I am here to catch Bojers^[29]—not to tramp about roads in the rear of other people. This is not co-operation; it is aiding and abetting 'refusal' tactics. Now look here, Mr Intelligence; just let us examine our information, and if we are right and Brass Hat is wrong, I'll just send him back a note which will keep him halted all day wiring to Pretoria for permission to cast me into irons. Now, what is his information?" [150]

I. O. (reads) "Information arrived late last night that Pretorius and Brand have taken the road to Prieska. This is confirmed by the scouts who went out last night. The enemy retired over Minie Kloof and halted at a farm on the far side of the pass."

B. "Therefore the officer commanding the New Cavalry Brigade, having covered the whole force over Minie Kloof, will halt and allow the brave general to pass through his brigade, and then follow him along a Karoo road into Prieska. So these are this sportsman's ideas on the co-operation of columns. They are about equal with his conception of the military methods most adapted for catching the present edition of 'Brother.' What is our private information?"

I. O. "That Brand, Hertzog, and Pretorius with four hundred men left this yesterday afternoon,—the former with the intention of making for Prieska; the two latter, with the bulk of the force, to fulfil an order from De Wet to concentrate with him upon Strydenburg."

B. "I forget how you came by this information?" [151]

I. O. "From the German storekeeper here, sir. He's a good sort of fellow, and the Supply officer has taken him on as a conductor. The man was present in the store when the messenger arrived with the communication from De Wet."

B. "'M, yes. But may not he have been told to tip us this yarn on purpose? Have you any other information confirming this theory?"

I. O. "Yes, sir, in two places. One of the old dames in the farm here dropped a remark which the Tiger pounced upon at once. Her spring-cart had been sent by Hertzog into Strydenburg to get ammunition, as the orders were then for Brand to attack Britstown, and they expected to use up the available supply in so doing. The ammunition would have arrived with De Wet. That is circumstantial evidence; but last night about 2 P.M. I got the following from the cable-cart. It is from our friend the De Wet expert, dated last night from Orange River Station (*takes out paper and reads*): 'Despatches captured ordering concentration of all available commandoes at Strydenburg to meet De Wet on the evening of the 26th'—that is to-night, sir." [152]

B. "Will old Stick-in-the-mud have got that, too?"

I. O. "I presume so, sir!"

B. "Then this is a clear case of 'bilk' on his part. I will go over and see him. I will be at Strydenburg, as I intended, by midday to-morrow, if I have to mutiny in doing so. My orders of last night stand until I come back."

The brigadier was returned in ten minutes, by which time the crude mutton chops, fried in bacon fat, which formed the daily staple of the staff breakfast, were laid upon the packing-case. The Brigadier sat down on his biscuit-tin and took a deep draught of tea. He then seemed sufficiently fortified to give expression to his feelings.

B. "Well, of all the electroplated figure-heads with which I have come in contact in a long and varied military career, that man is the most unmentionable. He is eloquent in his estimation of you, Mr Intelligence. I told him that I could not agree with him upon any one point he put forward, and that it would be childish in the extreme to waste 2500 men in chivvying a mythical 200. He then grew angry, and told me he had got his orders and had given me mine. Well, if this is what is meant by co-operation, I'll never get within speaking distance of a column with which I am told to co-operate again. Issued fresh orders! Instead of being within striking distance of Strydenburg to-night, we shall be messing about in the Beer Vlei. Old Stick-in-the-mud does not mean 'going,' that I full well see. What a sin it is!" [153]

And we can readily indorse this comment upon the evils of seniority, which, while giving a cover to impotence at the head, dwarf, handicap, and crush individual energy in the junior. How

much separated these two men in age? It may have been a couple of years. Even if in the Army List it had been a single day, the result would have been the same. The so-called experience of seniority—which too often in this war has spelled incompetence or unsoldierly timidity—has been able to subjugate the wiser counsels of the junior, and crush out of his action that fire and energy of purpose which alone could have brought success. As in the present case, the senior deliberately ignored the advice of the man with whom he had been ordered to co-operate, and taking advantage of the few lines which gave him preference in the Army List, ordered him to deviate from a scheme which in his heart of hearts he must have known was the only one which could promise adequate results,—it might also be said any results at all. Perhaps a study of developments such as these will furnish some clue to an explanation of one of the gigantic puzzles of this South African campaign.

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FOOTNOTES:

- [24] A gruesome record of successful shooting.
- [25] Dutch, swamp.
- [26] Team.
- [27] Hindustani, arrangement.
- [28] Official designation of the field-service regulation overcoat.
- [29] Jocular rendering of "Burghers."

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VII.

ToC

"POTTERING."

"Well, if that place is held, it would take Lord Bobs and the 'Grand Army' three days to turn it," and the brigadier dropped his glasses to the full length of their lanyard.

The brigade, doing advance-guard to the whole concentration, had crossed the great prairie which lies north of Houwater, and the covering cloud of mounted *éclaireurs* was already disappearing into the shade of the mountain fastness in front of us. The giant outcrop of volcanic rock which is known as Minie Kloof rises, with that directness peculiar to the vast South African table-land, sheer from a prairie as level as a billiard-table. A succession of rocky flat-topped parallelograms, featureless save for the one sealed pattern of nature's architecture of the veldt. To the nomadic traveller and man of peace, landmarks as barren and bare as the great ironstone belts of Northern Africa, which constrain the power of the unwilling Nile until she surges in angry cataract through such niggard opening as they will allow her. To the man of war, a veritable Gibraltar; a maze of possibilities in defence; a stupendous undertaking in attack, an undertaking which will brook neither error nor miscalculation, and from which nature has eliminated much of the element of chance on the one side to place it to the credit of the other. Of such a kind were our Colenso, Magersfontein, Stormberg, and Spion Kop heights. You at home at your ease, taking in from the map in a second a perfunctory impression of the topography, which it would take a cavalry brigade half a day to verify, talk glibly of turning this position and out-flanking that. Know ye that the lateral problem, which in the pink and green of the atlas would appear so simple, may be for miles a gridiron of parallel and supporting positions. That the well-considered turning movement put in motion at the first streak of dawn may be, and probably will have become, a plain and simple frontal attack by sunrise, through circumstances that no man, not even Napoleon himself, could foresee or control. Then this being given, why not deal leniently with such men as have served you well, and who may be trusted to profit by experience dearly purchased? but the other class, the man who has prostituted the fighting excellence of the British soldier in the shock of war by appealing to the chances of war, without due care and forethought—why, it is your duty to destroy him: your bitterest strictures even will not meet the punishment such a one deserves.

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"If a life insurance agent were to turn up now, I should take him on!" And the brigadier had every cause for anxiety, for the under-features of Minie Kloof could swallow a thousand men, and still leave a mocking enemy in possession of the salients. Troop after troop of Dragoons broke into extended order, and spread away to either flank. The front became wider and wider, and yet no rifle-shot. The main body and the guns halted and waited, momentarily expecting to hear that intonation of the double echo, which in a second would change the whole history of the day. But

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it never came. The little brown specks, which had vanished into the shadow of the mountain, commenced to reappear amongst the stunted vegetation on the crests. At first it needed strong glasses to distinguish the moving bodies from the clumps of blurred bush-shadow. Then out twinkled that little star of light which means so much to the general in the field. Gaily it caught the rising efforts of the sun, and threw to brigadier and staff the welcome news that the summit of Minie Kloof was clear.

"Thank Providence for that! we will be in Strydenburg to-night," and the brigadier cantered on into the pass while the main body of his command moved leisurely after him towards the natural fastness. It must have been from places on the great South African tableland such as this that Rider Haggard drew his inspirations to invent the hidden kingdoms of Central Africa—charming rock-bound empires familiar to us all. How many will there be who have trekked through and through the new British colonies, and not been struck with the many mountain-locked valleys which abound! Valleys as fertile and pleasant as any in the legends of fairy tale; or, to be less fanciful in simile, as bright in being and as difficult of approach as Afridi Tirah in early autumn. Such a valley we found within the outer barrier of Minie Kloof. A valley small in its proportions, it is true, but none the less fertile. A dainty brook of crystal clearness gave life to the barren hillsides. The silt of a thousand years of summer torrents had furnished each niche and recess with a mould Goshen-like in its richness. Here, amongst luxuriant groves of almost tropical splendour, nestled the inevitable farmstead,—a white residence which had once possessed some architectural beauty, and an outcrop of barns and subsidiary mansions unpretentious in design, squalid in arrangement. The staff of the New Cavalry Brigade dismounted before the farmer's door and called for refreshment. For the moment one possessed the mental vision of a pink-cheeked milk-maiden—the panel-picture of civilised imagination—short of skirt, dainty in neck and arm, symmetrical and sweet in person and carriage. It is of such that the thirsty soldier dreams. The vision came. A slovenly hack from the kitchen obeyed the summons. With dirty hands she thrust a still dirtier beaker of milk upon us, and spat ostentatiously to emphasise the spirit of her hospitality. It takes much to stifle the honest thirst of war, but this was more than human nature could support, and the uninviting bowl passed round the staff untouched until it reached the less fastidious signallers. Five minutes at the crystal brook was worth all the ministrations of Dutch milkmaids.

It then became necessary to seek for information. It was a barren field of search. The surly men-folk of the sordid dwelling lounged out and met all inquiry with studied insolence. Even the Tiger could make no headway. He was met with recriminations. The Dutchmen recognised him as a neighbour, and ill disguised their disapprobation of his present circumstances. Information was at a deadlock, though in reality there was little to be learned. The brigadier halted just long enough to water the horses, and then it was forward again for the last climb over Minie Kloof.

It was slow work. The scouting of an outcrop of mountain by cavalry is always slow work, especially if that cavalry is under an officer who will have the work done well. But like all things, good or bad, it came to an end, and as the autumn sun grew vertical, the head of the column passed down into another great plain which sinks northwards into the Beer Vlei.

"Thank Providence the 'push' was not stuck up in that place," said the brigadier as he halted to watch the waggons down the last incline. "If old man De Wet is to be at Strydenburg to-night, with Britstown as his objective, we should have had him here to-morrow morning. I have only seen a worse country in the colony down Calvinia way. That was the most deceptive playground that I was ever inveigled into. But it was as deceptive to 'brother' as it was to us. Both sides lost themselves about twice every half-hour. Hostile pickets and outposts constantly rode into one another. I remember one night we had just settled down in camp when in rode three Boers. They came up to the lines of one of my scallywag corps with utmost unconcern—halted in all good faith right up against the horse-lines. 'What commando is this?—is it Judge Hertzog's?' A Natal corporal was the man nearest to them, and he was a quick-witted fellow. He slipped back the 'cut off' of his rifle as he answered, 'I guess not—but there is our commandant over there. You had best go and ask him whose commando it is; but you must just hold your hands above your head before you speak to him. He is a peculiar man, our commandant!' The men surrendered to him without a murmur, and seemed to think it was a good joke. But I daresay three months of a Bellary sun in the Shiny has caused them to change their opinions."

The column swung out into the great dry Karoo prairie. It was a comfortless trek. Earth and sky seemed to have forgotten the rain of preceding days; or it may have been that the storms which had distressed us had been purely local, for we had struck a great waterless plain which showed not the slightest sign of moisture. The shuffling mules and lumbering waggons churned up a pungent dust; a great spiral pillar of brown cloud mushroomed out above the column; no breath of air gave relief from the vertical rigour of the sun; the great snake-like column sweated and panted across the open, reporting its presence to every keen-sighted Dutchman within a radius of fifteen miles.

We have seen the beauties of the Karoo; but we cannot blind ourselves to its defects, for they are the more numerous. At its best it is a great stagnant desert, studded here and there with some redeeming oases. Its verdure smacks of the wilderness. Stunted brown and grey, the heather from which these rolling steppes take their name is stranger to the more clement tinge of green, which is the sign of a soil less sapless. Yet a peculiar fascination militates against a general condemnation of the pitiless Karoo. One cannot altogether banish from one's mind the memories of a summer night upon those wastes. Those of you who have laboured in the desert of the Egyptian Soudan will realise what is meant—can feel as we feel towards the veldt of the Karoo. There is in that mysterious, almost uncanny, fascination of those cool nights which

succeed a grilling day a something which you always look back upon with delight. What this influence is, you can never precisely say; but it is impossible to forget it....

At midday the New Cavalry Brigade came to a halt at some mud holes, which furnished sufficient clayey water to allow the sobbing gun-teams and transport animals to moisten their mouths. Water for the men there was little, except the pittance which they were allowed to draw from the regimental water-carts. Neither was there shade from the merciless sun. The six inches of spare Karoo bush, though it served as a nibble for the less fastidious of animals, was useless either as bed or shade; other vegetable growth there was none within sight. Men crawled under waggons and water-carts if they were fortunate enough to find themselves near them, or, unrolling their blankets, extended them as an awning, and burrowed underneath. The oppression of that still heat! Fifty yards away the atmosphere became a simmering mirage; the outposts lost all semblance of nature's form, and stood out exaggerated in the middle distance as great blurs of brown and black. But it is only a passing inconvenience. In an hour or two the strength of that great, fiery, pitiless sun will be on the wane: if it were otherwise, then, indeed, would the Karoo be a desert. So you doze—it is too hot to sleep—and thank Fortune that you have not to march during the furnace hours of the day. And as you doze, parched and sweating, a little blue-grey lizard pops out from beneath the cart beside you, and, climbing gingerly up the stem of a solitary karoo-bush, surveys you with great, thoughtful, unblinking eyes. He is a complacent little beast, of wonderful skin and marking; and if it were not for the palpitation of his white waistcoat, it had been difficult to say he lived. You wonder if he too feels the heat. You think he does; for he opens his pink maw and sways his sprig of heather, to make for himself that breeze in the still air for which you are panting. You close your eyes, and smile to think that such a little thing as a karoo-blended lizard can interest you. A sound catches your ear: it is the upbraiding note of the bustard. Again and again you hear it. A covey of these birds must have been raised. As the clatter of their cry dies away, you distinguish the muffled strokes of a galloping horse. This is significant. No man in his senses would gallop in this heat unless his mission was serious. Nearer and nearer comes the horseman. You hate to move, though you hear the rapid breathing of the horse and the complaints of chafing leather.

"Where is headquarters?" demands a voice in authority.

Your dream and rest is over; for are you not the general's flunkey? You jump to your feet.

"Where have you come from?"

Orderly (as he hands in a written message). "From the officer commanding the advance-guard." The message runs: "Patrol on left front reports large force of Boers, estimated 500 strong, to be behind the rise three miles to the right of the solitary flat-topped kopje on our left front. Patrol has fallen back upon me."

This information is laid before the brigadier, who is half asleep under the mess-cart.

Brigadier. "How far is the flat kopje from us?"

Intelligence Officer. "About four miles, sir."

B. "Intervening country?"

I. O. "Flat as a polo-ground, sir."

B. "Oh, send out a troop to get touch with them. I'll bet it's only a flock of ostriches or a mirage. Tell the troop not to get compromised if they should find Boers in greater strength than themselves. Hold another troop and the pom-pom in readiness to support, if there should be anything. But it's not reasonable that there should be 500 Boers so near us at this hour. It is too late for our Houwater friends, and too early for ole man Christian.^[30]"

I. O. "Very good, sir."...

Almost immediately upon the despatch of the troop, the main body of the co-operating command marched up to the clay pools. The two generals met to discuss the situation. The meeting of generals in the field nearly always lends itself to the picturesque. We know that it is a favourite theme for the artist's brush. And even in this utilitarian age, when the genius of man has shorn war of much of the panoply with which the calling of arms is associated in peace, there is something attractive in the sight of the communion of great soldiers in the field. The glory of war is not all cock-feathers and steel scabbards. In fact, the brilliant colours which blend so well with the pasture-green and brick-red of Europe would offend the eye if grouped upon the russet veldt—would seem as incongruous as a flamingo perching upon a hay-rick. It is an interesting picture. The two generals standing together a little apart from their staffs, which mingle in friendly intercourse. The lines of dismounted orderlies holding the horses from which the officers have just dismounted. The senior general is a tall spare man, just overlapping the prime of life. It is more than the powdered dust that makes his moustaches appear so fair. He is a man careful of his personal appearance. From head to foot his uniform of modest brown fits him as would a glove—to borrow from the sayings of a fair cousin across the Atlantic,—the fit of everything is so perfect that it looks as if he had been melted and poured molten into a khaki casing. The sombre dirt colour is relieved by the scarlet and gold upon his peaked cap and collar, and the long string of kaleidoscopic ribbons on his breast which tells of many tented fields—and maybe as many "fields of cloth-of-gold," for it does not take war alone now to decorate the breast, or to bind spur-straps across the instep of a knight. The brigadier stands in contrast to his senior. He is as tall a man, more commanding in carriage, but of very different temperament and gait. It is no studied negligence which has arranged the careless inconsistency of his dress. It is but the mind speaking through the person. He wears nothing that has cost a tailor a minute's thought to

shape. His staff cap is set askew; his badges of staff distinction have obviously been sewn into position by some unskilled craftsman—probably his soldier servant. His tunic tells its own story of two years' campaigning in the rough; while the Mauser pistol strapped to the nut-brown belt which Wilkinson designed to carry a sword, speaks eloquently of the wearer's appreciation of the latter weapon as part of a general officer's service equipment. But as you look at the two—the one dandy and smart, the other rough and workmanlike—you can feel the personality of the junior, while the senior means no more to you than a clothier's model. This may not convey much to the average layman. But men—illiterate, uncultured, fighting men—see and appreciate all this, and it means much to them. Know, therefore, that there is no keener judge of human character and human mind than the cherub of the gutter. It is from these gutter-snipe, grown into men, that the fighting ranks of the great British army are filled.

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The generals were discussing the situation, as far as their respective staffs could discern from their speech and attitude, amicably enough, though the brigadier was pressing some point. In reality he had renewed his protest against his senior's decision of the morning, and was endeavouring to influence him into a change of policy and plan. But the stern usage of the service decrees that the public convenience should be ordered by the man whose name ranges first upon the Army List schedule, and that the junior should press his arguments in deferential rather than aggressive language. But by dint of argument, and some short reference to the senior members of the staff, a compromise was arrived at in order to meet the wishes of the brigadier.

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General. "I tell you that I don't like it; neither do I see any object in the move. After the handling which he has had from Plumer, Prieska can be the only line open to De Wet."

Brigadier. "But all my information is in an opposite direction, sir. It distinctly—"

G. "I don't think that your information is worth much. What can that boy know about it? He has been gulled by all the old wives' fables on the line of march."

B. "Well, sir, leaving De Wet out of the question—I have been promised a convoy at Strydenburg, and I have yet to pick up my brigade. A squadron of the 21st Dragoon Guards and the whole of the Mount Nelson Light Horse, which Plumer has not assimilated, is now straining every nerve to catch me up."

G. "When do you meet your convoy, and how far behind you are your details?"

(Now the brigadier had invented the convoy on the spur of the moment. It was true that he had been promised a convoy, but that promise had not indicated Strydenburg as the rendezvous. But seeing that he had scored a point he turned at once to the Intelligence officer.)

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B. "When is our convoy due at Strydenburg?"

Intelligence Officer. "Possibly to-morrow evening, sir. The day after to-morrow at the latest." (Luckily the Intelligence officer had been following the conversation, and the answer came glibly enough.)

G. "H'm, that places another complexion upon it. But it is suicidal, reckless, to allow convoys to meander about the veldt in this inconsequent manner. What about your details?"

(The brigadier having struck a "lead," had wasted no time in figuring out his estimates.)

B. "Well, sir, I would suggest that you let me halt here for to-day. My details are just one day behind me now. They will catch me up to-morrow. In the meantime I will send a strong patrol—a reconnaissance rather—into Strydenburg, starting this afternoon, pick up the convoy, after which I will join you at any point you may select. I shall then be a useful fighting body; now I am only a gun escort!"

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G. "Yes, yes; it would be dangerous for either you or your details to be wandering about in this disturbed country alone. I agree with you, Colonel; but you must allow that in view of the present circumstances it would be inadvisable for us to be caught in detail."

One cannot blind oneself to the fact that all this is very childish. But then the man who undertakes life in the army must be prepared to be a schoolboy to the end of his service. It ill becomes a brigadier or any officer wearing his Majesty's uniform—as the expression goes—to practise small deceits even to bring about a situation calculated to be for the public convenience. Yet what other course was open to the brigadier! For reasons which are evident from his conversation, his senior had determined not to recognise him as an independent force, but to hug him until all danger real or imaginary was past. It is the trammels of discipline such as this that breaks the hearts of the stalwarts in our service, and racks the national war-chest to the bottom. Can you blame the brigadier, alive to the pressing exigency of the situation, when, having exhausted the man-to-man arguments of common reason, he descended to the practice of a subterfuge to defeat the purpose of a man whose only object appeared to be to satisfy his own personal peace of mind? Yet we doubt if the senior was conscious of the futility of his direction. He had one object in view. He was possessed with the single desire to avoid disaster. In its limited sense his action was laudable enough; but what would the owner of a racehorse say to the jockey who, after having ridden a sound horse in a race, volunteered the information that he had never extended his mount out of consideration for its sinews? The care of the jockey is parallel to that of fifty per cent of the men who have led columns in this war—except that there has been no judge in the box to balance the merits of each case. The judge has been far away in Pretoria, and the jockey has furnished his own estimate of the running....

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So the New Cavalry Brigade remained out-spanned by the mud-holes, while the other column passed through it and bore away in search of the Prieska Road. The rearguard of the moving

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force was brought up by a Colonial corps, which had originally been raised in Natal by the brigadier of the New Cavalry Brigade. Of course the *personnel* in the ranks had long since changed. Changed, be it said with regret, for the worse. But there was still remaining a small percentage of the original stock—stock that had been second to none. As the rearguard passed through, a great burly corporal cantered to the packing-case table at which the staff of the New Cavalry Brigade had just settled down to lunch, shouting, "Say, where is the ole man?"

The brigadier rose with a smile.

Corporal. "I heard that you were here, sir, and I couldn't go by without speaking. Lord, what a sight for sore eyes it is to see you again!—if there were only more like you. (*Then extending his hand.*) Come, sir, put your hand right here—it is a good day's work to have again shaken hands with a man." And then the corporal was off in a cloud of dust. But it had been an interesting and instructive incident. Without a doubt the man was Yankee; but he had served all through the Natal campaign, from Willow Grange to Bergendal, and his honest appreciation of his old chief almost brought tears to our eyes, and was of more value than all the ribbon and tinsel that a crowned head can bestow.

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"That," said the brigadier, "is one of the finest men, amongst many fine men, whom I have enlisted. I was recruiting for my 'push' down in Durban. I used to go and get the fellows off the ships as they came in. That fellow came over with a man who was running a cargo of mules. I well remember when I broached the subject to him. His answer was characteristic: 'Say, colonel, what do you want us for? Is it for a straight scrapping with Boers, or is it to meander about as a town garrison?' 'If you join me you shall be "scrapping" in a week from to-day.' 'Will you give me your hand on that, colonel?' I acquiesced, and straightway was able to enlist practically the whole ship's company—and I never want to command a better lot. Did I ever tell you about the Boer spies? Well, in the early days of recruiting in Natal several Dutch agents were enlisted. They were paid by the Transvaal to enlist in British corps. When we got to Mooi River one of these men was discovered—recognised as an ex-Pretorian detective. That corporal came to me and volunteered some advice. 'You prove him a spy, colonel, and then turn him over to us: you won't have any more spies after that.' I had the suspect up. There was not a shadow of doubt about his identity, so I just said to the sergeant-major, 'This man is your property—the fair name of the corps is in your keeping; there's a convenient donga over there!' I never saw the man again, nor did I ask what happened to him; but this I do know, that on the self-same evening five men came to me and asked to be allowed to resign. They came with faces as white as the coat of that mare over there. 'Yes,' I said as I looked at them, 'you may go. You leave for the good of all concerned, yourselves included.' And since that day I was never troubled by the enlisting of Dutch agents."...

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"The best laid schemes o' mice and men
Gang aft a-gley,"

and the dust of the column moving towards the Prieska Road was still hanging over the horizon when a staff-officer came galloping back to the New Cavalry Brigade. He brought written instructions to the brigadier which nullified for ever the Strydenburg scheme. "The G.O.C. directs the O.C. the New Cavalry Brigade to remain halted until he is joined by such details as are following him along the Britstown Road. As it is essential that the pass over Minie Kloof should be kept clear pending the arrival of the aforementioned details, the G.O.C. directs that the proposed reconnaissance to Strydenburg be abandoned, and the troops which would have been used for the reconnaissance be sent to hold Minie Kloof. As soon as the New Cavalry Brigade is complete, it will follow with all speed upon the direct road to Prieska. Under no circumstances are other arrangements to be made."

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The occasion was not opportune for an expression of the brigadier's feelings, but his silence was eloquent. There was no hope for it: it was a written order from a senior, and we had no choice but to obey.

It is said by some that Christian de Wet is the best general that the war produced from the ranks of our enemy. It is not our present intention to debate upon this subject; but this much can be said with confidence, that he has been the most fortunate of leaders. On every occasion in which he has been hard pressed, when to all intents and purposes he has found himself at the end of his tether, the pendulum of fortune has favoured him in its swing. Often enough he has saved his skin through the culpable stupidity of his pursuers. But even when he has almost been cornered by the very best of leaders and men that the British Empire can produce, the law of chances has stood by him. A meddling contradictory telegram from headquarters, a thunderstorm or a swollen river, has times without number saved the slippery commandant at the eleventh hour. Take the present instance. It subsequently proved that if the brigadier had, as he intended, moved upon Strydenburg, and arrived there on the same day that he was directed by his superior officer to stand fast and hold the Minie Kloof, he would have arrived at his goal practically simultaneously with the guerilla chieftain. The New Cavalry Brigade would have borne down upon the little Karoo hamlet, fresh and in the full spirit of men new to war and "spoiling for the fight"; men just sufficiently blooded in their preliminary skirmish to have confidence both in themselves and in their general, and—and this is the exasperating nature of the story—while the British troopers would have ridden robustly into battle, De Wet and his following were in no condition to receive them. Unprepared for the arrival of fresh troops, spoiled of guns, train, and ammunition, kicked and harried by the gallant Plumer's tenacity, riddled and torn by Nanton's armoured trains, harassed by Heneker and Crabbe, panting for rest, they would have been no match for blood-seeking dragoons and a Horse Artillery battery that had been studying range-finding in South Africa ever since the battle of Magersfontein. All we can do is to shrug our

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shoulders and say, "The pity of it!" while we pay the extra twopence in the income-tax which our confidence in effete leaders, and disinclination to recognise, and make soldiers recognise, that our army is a national institution, has cost us.

It so happens that in war the rank and file know little of what is taking place, and, one is inclined to add, care less. Consequently those in the brigade who had no knowledge of the state of affairs existing with regard to Strydenburg were delighted at the prospect of a halt. At this period of the campaign halts were rare, and men looked to them in much the same spirit as the average house-holder in England looks to a spring cleaning, since, provided there is water, an "off afternoon" will allow of a little of the cleanliness which hard trekking renders impossible. The Dragoon Guards had not been long enough in the country to feel the necessity of a thorough overhaul of their linen. But the Horse gunners were old soldiers, and as soon as the intended halt became common knowledge the men stripped the shirts off their backs and indulged in the luxury of sand-baths where water was not available. This may appear a simple operation, but those who have campaigned long upon the veldt will know that a change of clothes exposes not the least of "the horrors of war."

But, halted or moving, there is no cessation of trouble and anxiety for the staff of any unit engaged in active service, and when the brigadier issued his orders to meet the instructions of his superior officer, his acting staff-officer discovered that the column was two troops short. One troop had been missing ever since the first day out from Richmond Road, the other had lost itself that morning in Minie Kloof. This may sound absurd, but it is not an isolated incident; and if we are to believe the evidence of those who marched with the "Grand Army" into Bloemfontein, it was not a matter then of troops that were missing, but fifty per cent of the whole army, and so badly missing that it took the quartermaster-general's department a fortnight of solid labour to definitely find them. The inexperienced youth could get no help from his brigadier. Since the arrival of the message from the main column that officer had not been approachable. But with the aid of the good-natured gunner major and the opportune return of the troop which had been detached in the morning, as the brigadier had surmised, on a wild-goose chase after a mirage, it was possible to apportion some sort of a force capable of holding a salient in Minie Kloof without totally denuding the camp of adequate fighting strength. But it is on occasions such as these, when isolated detachments are scattered broadcast, that disaster is courted. Luckily it is only once in a hundred times that the enemy has been in a position to accept the free gifts offered to them.

FOOTNOTES:

[30] Christian de Wet

VIII.

STILL POTTERING.

To the delight of the men and disgust of the brigadier, day broke without bringing any further orders to the New Cavalry Brigade. So it remained halted in the great open prairie which fringes the Beer Vlei. It may also be conjectured that De Wet and his following, as they were stripping the adjacent little township of Strydenburg, learned with satisfaction that the British columns, which lay round him like the spokes of a wheel to the axle, were as immobile as usual—Plumer from the force of circumstances, the others for the reasons set down in the preceding chapter. But the cunning guerilla had no intention of dallying at Strydenburg. It was not part of his strategy to spend two consecutive days in any one spot unless bent upon the reduction of a garrison. Even British column commanders at times have been known to shake off their lethargy. He just remained in the town long enough to replenish his quartermaster's stores department and to take over the fresh ponies which Hertzog had collected for him, and then moved north in three columns, trusting to pass between the spokes of the imaginary wheel before Plumer had collected himself. Brand, with a thin hedge of Free Staters and rebels, was left as a decoy to cover Strydenburg, while the three columns made for Marks Drift in the loop of the Orange River, south-west of Kimberley. And as De Wet put the first day's plan of these movements into progress, the New Cavalry Brigade, by order, remained halted, covering the entrance to the pass at Minie Kloof.

The men, however, were delighted. For the first time for many weeks they were able to turn

round and attend to their own personal comfort, to change their under-clothes and to sort their kits. The soldier man on service loves to sort his kit. The very fact that he is able to shake out his modest bag to the bottom spells "holiday," and in latter-day trekking holidays for the men were rare. But even holidays can bring their heart-burnings, and about the breakfast-hour a howl of despair went up from the Horse Artillery lines. A casual stroll through the ankle-deep heather to Freddy's quarters repaid those sightseers who had energy enough to be interested in camp excitements. The horse-gunner major had long felt annoyance at the turnout of his Kaffir boys and teamsters. The predominant attribute of the Kaffir is vanity, an attribute which he possesses in common with all savages and most white men. The reason for this vanity we will not pursue, as we have nothing to do with the ethics of masculine conceit: it is sufficient for this history that it exists. Vanity has caused the Kaffirs of South Africa to acquire about fifty per cent of the British army tunics which have landed in that continent. Thomas Atkins, as a rule, is not over-blessed with money, consequently he cannot resist the temptation of the five golden sovereigns which the Kaffir is prepared to give for any scarlet tunic which is not in the last stage of decay. The transfer of uniform came to such a pitch that an army order was issued on the subject. Not that an army order was sufficient to stay the general traffic in British uniforms, but it furnished such right-minded soldiers as the horse-gunner major with the "cue" which they required. Freddy's Kaffirs had struck a new and green regiment, and being themselves near the end of a six months' contract, they were "full of money." Consequently at Britstown, where money had possessed extra fascinations for the British soldier, the "boys" attached to the battery had been able to lay in a very complete outfit in Line regimentals. The halt gave Freddy his opportunity, and he had every kit laid bare. The revelation was wonderful. There was not a driver or *voor looper* who had not his scarlet jerkin. Many, indeed, had two, to say nothing of forage-caps, field-service caps, dragoon overalls, and gunner slacks. The Kaffirs had at first looked upon the kit inspection as a joke. But they lapsed into a puzzled silence when they saw their belongings cast upon a common heap. Their great white eyes grew bigger and bigger, and their repulsive lips wider and wider apart, until, when the last bag had been ransacked, the torch was applied to the pile of clothing. Then they realised the blasting of all their hopes, and with one accord they gave vent to the despairing yell which had attracted the attention of the camp. They became like men possessed. Smiting themselves heavily upon the head with their fists, they went through the paroxysms of negroid lamentation. One could almost feel for them, great bronzed children that they are. They had worked hard for months, shared the privations and dangers of war with the white men, in order that they might return to their kraals bedecked as they thought in all the glory of the white man's clothes. To them the Utopia of life would have been their homecoming. The admiration of chattering women, the acclamation of piccaninies, and the hideous smile of their paramount chief as they humbly presented him with a battered helmet in a semi-decayed state of pipe-clay finish. But Freddy was no philanthropist when the honour of the uniform which his family had worn for two centuries was at stake. And he was right. The dignity of the King's uniform is precious before all philanthropy: "These brutes in Gunner Uniform—never! They may keep their kharki; but I will not have our uniform outraged in my battery, whatever other people may think!"

The native question throughout the war has furnished an interesting study. It cannot be claimed that, under the circumstances existing in South Africa, good will result from this tremendous struggle for existence and paramountcy between two white races. It must always be remembered that South Africa will, similarly with India, be held by the dominant white race with the sword. It is not for us to trace here what troubles may be in store for the white races in the far future. The situation in the present and near future appears unsatisfactory enough. The untutored mind of the Ethiopian does not appreciate the finer ethics of social intercourse and the equality of mankind. Freedom to his reasoning means independence; to possess independence, to the semi-savage, is a proof of power. The inherent vanity of the aboriginal then finds scope, and the nation which cringed and quailed under the sjambok of the Boer will be the first to rebel against the equity of the Briton. And what have we done during these long months of military occupation to counteract the evil effects of war. Nothing: Briton-like we have selected to work upon exterior lines. We have lived in the present, secure for the future. Who has attempted to follow the train of thought which has been uppermost in the native mind? Yet it would have been simple enough to have analysed their minds. Will it not have been somewhat of this kind?—"The Boers were few and the British were many. Yet it has taken the British months to stamp out the Boers who were few. Moreover, we have done all the scouting for the British—without us they themselves could have done nothing. Also of what value are the British soldiers? They are paid 30s. a-month. We—and we are black men—are paid by the British £3 and £4 a-month. Therefore we must be twice or three times as good as the British soldiers! And look how the British treat us. How different to the treatment we received at the hands of the Boers. The British must be afraid of us!" And in the abstract this reasoning is sound. We do treat the native as if we were afraid of him. We do treat him so that he might justly compare himself favourably with the British soldier. We take it for granted that this illiterate black son of the south will know, as we do, all the troubles and standards of the labour market: will discern the reason, which to us is obvious, of his princely pay. But this is where our crass stupidity overtakes us. The native does not arrive at his conclusions through the same channel of thought as we do ourselves. How could he? And as we only use him to suit our own convenience, and remain reckless of the interpretation which he places upon our actions, we shall only have ourselves to blame, when, having pandered to the inherent vanity of the black, we suddenly find him at our throats. Not that we believe that the natives are sufficiently advanced to render our hold in the country insecure. But they have been pampered by us enough to make them imagine vain things, and vain imaginings may result at no distant period in a repetition of that rapine, pillage, and massacre of isolated white settlements, which has ever furnished the saddest stones in the cairn of our great Empire.

As the sun rose it brought news from the Prieska Road. The helio twinkled out another message from the general: "Good water at Rietvlei, four miles on. Move on to Rietvlei, form your brigade there, and await orders from me." Almost at the same moment the helio from the summit of Minie Kloof called us up. "Have brought along two squadrons of the Mount Nelson Light Horse and a troop of the 21st King's Dragoon Guards. Pushing on as fast as possible"—signed, "Brigade-Major New Cavalry Brigade."

The brigadier appeared completely uninterested. He received the information of his coming reinforcement and the general's latest orders without comment, and having eaten his breakfast, returned to his tent. For the time being the brigade had become a cipher. The only really satisfied person in the camp seemed to be the Intelligence officer, who saw in the arrival of the real brigade-major an end to the multiform duties which had been thrust upon him. The brigade stood fast, and presently, riding out of an almost opaque pillar of dust, the brigade-major and his detached command came meandering into camp. The arrival of the reinforcement moved the camp to interest. Much had been heard of the Mount Nelson Light Horse, which had been specially raised against Lord Kitchener's demand for more mounted men. The Mount Nelson Light Horse rode into camp. The gunners, who had turned out *en masse* to welcome their comrades, just put their hands in their breeches pockets and turned away with the single interjection, "Good heavens!" The dragoons, who were younger soldiers and less versed in veldt lore than the gunners, essayed a cheer. A fitful answer came back from the dusty arrivals—it might have been compared with the foreign cackle by which the clients of a Soho boarding-house give voice to their admiration of the tune of the dinner-gong. The brigadier came out of his tent and stood in the open, bareheaded and in his shirt-sleeves. Soldier without ribbons—frank, open, and gallant English gentleman. His expert eye ran down the ragged ranks of his newly acquired legion. He had commanded Colonials during the hardest fighting in Natal. The Dragoons might not be judges, but nothing escaped his time-tested eye. He caught each detail, the Semitic outline of half the profiles, the nervous saddlepoise of the twice-attested Peruvian, the hang-dog look of the few true men among the ranks, who shrank that a soldier should find them in their present associations. The brigadier's moustache hid the working of his mouth. Then the ludicrous setting of the scene appealed to his light-hearted nature, and, laughing heartily, he turned to his staff with the single comment, "Gadzooks! they conspire against the fame of my fair name. There is only one place in the wide world that I can lead that 'push' to, and its name is Stellenbosch!"

But if the Mount Nelson Light Horse couldn't fight, they could talk. They were full of second-hand blood. Had not a troop of theirs been captured by De Wet, had not their men and officer witnessed De Wet's cold-blooded outrage upon a British officer! All this was news to the New Cavalry Brigade, and in view of a popular desire to lionise De Wet, it will not be ill-advised to put the history of his action upon record. We will not refer to the cruel murder of Morgenthal, preceded in modern history by the murder of Macnaghten by Ackbar Khan, or the pitiless treatment of the prisoners taken at Dewetsdorp in December 1900. To us this one incident is sufficient. When De Wet crossed to the south of the Orange River in the vicinity of Norval's Pont the troops which Lyttelton set in operation against him from Colesberg were too late to head him, and in the course of his doubling—and De Wet broke back with considerable skill—he captured a small proportion of his pursuers. These men having been pilfered of much of their wearing apparel, including boots, could only with the greatest difficulty keep pace with the rapid movements of their captors. It must be remembered that the sleuth-hound, Plumer, was on De Wet's trail, and the Boers had no time to waste if they were to evade him. There came a time when the half-starved, almost naked, and footsore prisoners could move no more. All the food that they had been given was in live kind,—sheep that they had to kill, quarter, and dress themselves. Cooking was out of the question, as the elements were against them, even if they had possessed the necessary appliances. Half-way through an exhausting march—flight would perhaps better describe the nature of the movement—these wretched prisoners lay down, and refused to move another foot. The threats and chiding of their escort were in vain. Then some one rode forward and informed De Wet. The guerilla captain galloped back to the tail of the column, and, worked up into a paroxysm of rage, demanded the senior officer amongst the British prisoners. A tall English gentleman stepped forward.^[31] In a moment the guerilla's arm was raised, and the cruel sjambok of rhinoceros-hide fell across the Englishman's face, leaving a great blue weal. The arm was raised for a second blow; but the Englishman, prisoner though he was, and though his life hung in the balance, closed with his brutal captor. Other Boers, doubtless feeling the sting of the blow as keenly as the recipient, separated the pair before the unarmed Englishman found the ruffian's throat. But the blow had been struck,—an unarmed prisoner of officer rank had been chastised, an act of savagery fit to rank with the cold-blooded murder of an envoy. Yet the day will doubtless come when ignorant English people will vie with each other to do honour to the man who struck the miscreant blow. They will be persons ignorant of the feeling which permeated the army in South Africa. As the news spread round the camp, by common consent it was agreed that De Wet should never be handed up alive if it fell to the lot of the New Cavalry Brigade to bring him to his knees.

In obedience to the superior command, the whole brigade in the afternoon sauntered on the four miles set down in the general's message. The day had been a repetition of the one which had preceded it—one of those burning karoo afternoons, which seem to sap the very soul out of all things living. The feeling of dejection which pervaded the staff seemed to have communicated itself to the whole column, and the New Cavalry Brigade slunk rather than marched into camp. It was not a cheerful camping-ground—a solitary farm-house of the poorest construction, and two shallow, slimy pools of water were the only attractions which it could claim. The men soberly fixed their horse-lines, and rolled over to sweat out the trials of the heat until sundown. The

brigadier, who was still in his Achilles mood, retired to his waggon. The new brigade-major, who was the only man with any spirits left at all, busied himself with arranging for the night-pickets and nursing the Mount Nelson Light Horse. But over a bowl of tea, which the mess-servants arranged by four o'clock, the brigadier seemed to revive; and he had just become approachable when the colonel of the newly arrived contingent sauntered up to the mess-waggon,—a big, rather ungainly man, who arrived with all the self-assurance of one in authority.

Colonel (looking round the group of officers at tea and singling out the Brigade-Major, whom he knew). "Which is the brigadier?"

Brigadier (who had totalled the new-comer's checks in one brief glance). "I am that unfortunate. What can I do for you?"

C. (saluting casually) "Glad to meet you, sir; I thought that I would come round to introduce myself—especially as I have some bad news!" [199]

B. "A truly noble action, and one which is likely to ingratiate you here. What is it?"

C. "Nothing more or less than my men and horses are dead-beat. They will have to halt here at least two days before they will be fit to move. I have——"

B. "My dear colonel, have some tea; or perhaps you would prefer some whisky-and-sparklet? You bring me the best news that I have heard to-day!"

C. "Thank you, sir; but I am serious about——"

B. "Of course, of course you are serious, and I should have been delighted to have left you and your regiment here as long as you pleased—the longer the better. Only I shall probably have orders to move with my whole force before daybreak, and that being the case, I am afraid that your 'robbers' will have to move too, 'dead-beat' or not."

C. "But I assure you, sir——"

B. "There is no need to assure me of anything, colonel. I have absolute confidence in your knowledge of the state of inefficiency existing in your regiment. Only I will beg you to remember in future that I am the judge as to the capabilities of movement of the units composing this column. But let us discuss the prospects of peace, or some other less abstruse subject than the Mount Nelson Light Horse. In the meantime, colonel, just to emphasise what I have said, my Intelligence officer has orders to go out to those farms over there to see if he can get suitable guides. I have ordered him to take a troop of your men. He will start in fifteen minutes. Won't you stay for your drink?" (The lion of the slouch-hat persuasion was reduced to the lamb; he saluted, and sidled away while the brigadier replenished his tea-cup.) [200]

Brigade-Major. "That is about his size, sir. He has been more trouble to me in my march from Hanover Road than the whole of the truck, ox-waggon included."

B. "I know them. I knew that man's character from the tilt of his hat and the cut of his breeches. He will probably prove a good swashbuckler if kept in his place. But he came up here to divide authority with me, and only one man can command this crush, and only one man is going to. These fellows, if you let them, always become saucy as soon as they pin ostrich feathers into their hats. They are welcome to the feathers, but they must drop the sauce. So cut along, Mr Intelligence, and see that you get that troop up to time. I don't mind if you lose it; but you must be back yourself sometime to-night. I want a reliable guide to take me anywhere within a radius of twenty miles, and all the information that you can incidentally pick up. If we hang about here much longer, we shall find ourselves let in for a night-attack, and a night-attack with a Town Guard crowd like my new addition is to be avoided." [201]

The Intelligence officer went off to find the Tiger and get his horse saddled up. He had reverted to his legitimate duties at once, and was not sorry that the brigadier had detailed him for this particular duty, though he felt that his mission had been designed rather as a lesson to the colonel of the Mount Nelson Light Horse than as a necessary precaution for the safety of the camp. But it took the troop a powerful long time to turn out, and when at last twenty men were mounted, they looked for all the world as if they were a party of criminals about to be driven to the scaffold. The Tiger whispered to the Intelligence officer—"We shall have to go easy with these fellows. If we were not here, they would march out of camp with both hands above their heads. They are the class of men who will become panic-stricken at a dust-devil, and surrender to the first cock-ostrich they meet!" [202]

This may have been an exaggeration. There were some good men in the corps, men who had fought well in the earlier days of the campaign. But they were few and far between, and as events were to show, there were not sufficient of the proper stamina to leaven the whole.

The farms which the brigadier had indicated were situated at the foot of a spur of rocky excrescence which ploughed into the veldt from the north of Minie Kloof. They were only five miles from the camp. But that five miles proved too much for the escort. Whether it was physical weakness or incipient mutiny it matters little. The men just crawled along. So slow was the progress that the Intelligence officer, afraid of being benighted, selected four of the better mounted from the troop and pressed on to his objective, leaving the escort to follow at such pace as they found convenient. The first farm lay in a small kloof right against the hillside, and the approach was so masked that the little party of scouts rode to within two hundred yards of its whitewashed front without as they thought declaring themselves. A rise in the ground and a hillock gave all the cover that the Tiger deemed necessary, and he suggested that the four troopers should be sent up a donga, which would enable them to climb the reverse of a second [203]

hill which overlooked the farm, while he himself went forward, covered by the rifle of the Intelligence officer from their present position. To the first part of the scheme the Intelligence officer agreed, but he reversed the order of the latter arrangement. Having seen the troopers well on their way, he left the Tiger to cover the advance, and rode leisurely himself towards the farm. It was a very ordinary farm—not flush with the ground, but standing on a plinth of brick like an Indian bungalow. A great solemn quietness reigned over the whole kloof, not a living soul was visible, and the footfalls of the horse sounded strangely exaggerated as the solitary rider approached the verandah. Presently a dog stirred, trotted out into the sunlight, and barked furiously. It disturbed the inmates of the house; a girl hurriedly opened the upper swing-back of the door, looked out, and then closed the door with a bang. This was suspicious, and the Intelligence officer let his hand drop to the wooden case of the Mauser pistol strapped to his holster; his thumb pressed the catch, and he threw the pistol loose, keeping his hand upon its stock. Then to his shout of "*Wie dar!*" the upper portion of the door was again gingerly opened. The same face appeared, that of a round blue-eyed Dutch girl. She turned her impassive gaze upon the visitor, who, by way of opening the conversation, taxed his limited knowledge of the vernacular so far as to ask for a little milk.

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"Milk!" the girl answered in passable English. "Yes; I will get you milk. Just wait!"

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She seemed a long time finding the milk, and the Intelligence officer began to feel the situation oppressive. He would have liked to have turned his head to see if there were any sign of his troopers being in position on the hill above him. But he had that indescribable feeling which often inspires a man with the belief that his every movement is being watched by unseen eyes. Those of you who have been tiger-shooting on foot will readily appreciate the nature of this sense. Yet, though he peered through the open door, his eyes could discern no movement or his ears any incriminating sound. Presently the girl returned with a glass of milk upon a tray. She opened the lower half of the door, and came demurely to the edge of the verandah. The Intelligence officer put out his hand to receive the glass, when in a moment the girl lowered her elbow and soused the contents of the glass full into his face.

"Hands up!" in stentorian tones from the doorway; and through a white mist of milk, the Englishman had a vision of the business end of two rifles pointed at him at short range, held by rough bearded customers, and of a white-faced girl convulsed in laughter. The sobering effect of the metal throat of a rifle a few inches removed from your breast is considerable, and the Intelligence officer was a captured man. But for a moment only. Something swished past his ear, and a great star appeared in the white-washed plaster, just a foot above the Dutchmen's heads. The Tiger had risen to the situation. The girl's laughter died out, the two men ducked, and made instinctively for the cover of the door. The Intelligence officer had an eighth of a second in which to make up his mind. To have been truly sensational he should have covered the Burghers with his Mauser; but he was more practical, and by the time the men recovered their equanimity he was galloping as fast as his pony could lay legs to the ground back to the hillock where the Tiger was lying ensconced. Then he realised the extent of the hornet's nest into which he had blundered. Rifles cracked to right and left of him, like stock-whips in a cattle-run. But it is hard to hit a moving body. Many who took part in the battle of Omdurman will remember how a single Emir on a scarecrow of a horse galloped unscathed along the whole length of the British division advancing round the base of Jebel Surgham, though every man in the firing-line did his best to bring him down. Similarly the Intelligence officer braved the gauntlet, and reached temporary security round the base of the Tiger's hillock without harm. There was no time to waste. The Tiger was down to his horse and mounted almost before his officer realised he was safe.

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Tiger. "Come along, sir; it's been a near thing, but we have just time if we gallop for it!"

Intelligence Officer. "But the flanking party; we must not desert them!"

T. "We can do them no good. They must take their chance—for God's sake, gallop, sir!"

The Tiger indeed spoke the truth; it was a near thing. They had not placed a hundred yards between them and the hillock when dismounted enemy were at the top, and the ground round the fugitives throwing up little puffs of dust as the bullets struck.

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Their luck was in, and after a perilous three minutes, they were clear of immediate danger, as the popping of rifles from the rise in front of them gave evidence that the officer in charge of the supporting troop had risen to the occasion. If he had been a better soldier, he might have lain low, and let the fugitives entice their pursuers after them to their own destruction. But this had not occurred to the youth who had recently changed the pestle and mortar of a chemist's dispensary for the sword of a mounted infantry leader, and he did his best, in a suitably excited manner.

The Tiger's story was interesting. "Just as you halted at the farm, sir, I caught sight of the glint of a rifle on the top of the hill which we had sent the troopers to occupy. As I knew that it could not be our own men, I at once realised that we were in for it. They had seen us coming. I knew that the troopers were lost men—the Boers would let them blunder up the kopje, and when they arrived at the top, utterly blown and useless, would disarm them without firing a shot. Everything now depended upon the chance of my having escaped notice. It was impossible to warn you without firing my rifle, so I looked round to see if I was being stalked. I could see no one on my track, so I just lay still and waited developments at the farmhouse. I saw the girl throw the milk, and I then calculated that a shot placed between you and the men would so disconcert them for the moment that you could be able to get away.

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"As soon as you turned, the fat was into the fire, and I found that they were lying up for us all

round. It was a mercy that they never spotted me before I fired. I suppose they concluded that five went with the flank scouts instead of four only. Anyhow, there must have been quite thirty of them, and we now know that they are there."...

"Well, young feller!" said the brigadier when the Intelligence officer reported himself, "what has all the shooting been about?"

He listened to the story, and remained thoughtful for a moment. Then he handed the Intelligence officer a message, which ran as follows:—

"From De Wet Expert, Hopetown, to O.C. New Cavalry Brigade, Prieska or vicinity.

"De Wet was at Strydenburg last night. Repeat to," &c.

Brigadier. "What do you think of that?"

Intelligence Officer. "We have lost a big thing. But may we not be in the right position to-night? It seems to me that I must have run my head right into them."

B. "I am afraid not. We have just touched up the 'red herring'; but, great Scot! what a chance has been taken from me. Argue it out. Balance the probabilities. This is what I make it. Hertzog joined De Wet at Strydenburg last night. Hertzog joined him with the information that three columns had moved out of Britstown, by way of Minie Kloof. Three columns would be too much for De Wet in his dilapidated state; so he has just thrown out a patrol to observe us, while he has struck elsewhere. If he is still intent on going south, he will pass between Britstown and De Aar. But I doubt if he tries the seaboard trick. If I know him, he will double back along his original line. He is a sly old fox. You may bet all you are worth that you blundered into his observation patrol, and that we have lost the best chance of the whole war simply through the idiosyncrasies of a stupid old man. I shall not trouble about your friends any more to-night!"

An hour after dark four sorry objects, stark-naked save for their vests, and with putties bound round their feet to replace their boots, staggered into camp. They were the four troopers of the Mount Nelson Light Horse which had furnished the Intelligence officer's flanking party. As the Tiger had surmised, they had fallen an easy prey to the Boers on the top of the hill. These had stripped them of all their clothes, and, after herding them in a donga for a couple of hours, had sent them back into camp with Commandant Vermaas's best compliments. They were to tell their general that De Wet would be in Britstown that night, and that he had passed within four miles of our camp with his whole force that afternoon.

"That settles it," said the brigadier. "They would not have pitched that yarn if De Wet had been really going to Britstown. You can mark my word, he has gone north."

The words were still on the brigadier's lips when a native came in with a message in cipher from the general. It read as follows:—

"Reliable information points to De Wet being at Strydenburg. Concentrate there with me by midday to-morrow. I shall take the Zwingelspan Road, which will bring me out into the hills north of Strydenburg. You will take the Kalk Kraal-Grootpan Road, and install yourself on Tafelkop, south of the town. Arrange to have your guns in position by noon. Do not try to open up visual communication with me. Such a course might give information of our movements to the enemy. Send a receipt of this message to Zwingelspan, so as to arrive not later than 10 A.M. to-morrow." Signed, "N—, Chief Staff-Officer. *P.S.*—Am afraid that De Wet will have taken your convoy."

Brigadier. "Was there ever a worse atrocity perpetrated than this? If he had only been man enough to have done this twenty-four hours earlier, when I implored him to do so, he might have been the greatest hero of the war by this. But here, Uncle Baker (to the brigade-major), just you send for that saucy fellow who commands the cyclists of the Mount Nelson Light Horse, and tell him that he and his cyclists have got to fight their way into Strydenburg by 10 A.M. to-morrow. Tell him that if he gets a message off to Pretoria before 10 A.M. to-morrow, it's as good as a D.S.O. for him. Tell him he must be prepared to fight like h—l, only don't frighten him too much: just tell him enough to keep him looking about him, otherwise his gang will get captured in detail by the first Burgher they meet. He may start when he likes. If I can get a message through to K. first, it won't matter how much I mutiny afterwards!"

FOOTNOTES:

[31] Major (now Lieut.-Colonel) Bogle-Smith.

TO A NEW COVERT!

The cyclists of the Mount Nelson Light Horse trundled out of camp with some show of bravery. They had left Cape Town 100 strong. The journey from Hanover Road to Britstown had reduced their numbers by fifty per cent. The bare fifty still with the brigade were the survival of the fittest after a week of rain at Hanover and another week of struggling with Karoo tracks ankle-deep in dust. But the men tried to show something of a front as they pedalled out of camp. Their captain was an enthusiast. He had, however, but poor material into which to infuse his enthusiasm; and at any time South African roads are as demoralising to wheel-men used to a macadamised surface as the bouldered bed of a stream would be to a traction-engine. These same cyclists were the men who had scorched up to the Picquetberg Passes when ten men and a boy threatened Cape Town with invasion; and the memory of the wave of military enthusiasm which convulsed the great seaport from Greenpoint to Simon's Town was still worth something to them as, over-weighted, they struggled with the Karoo. [215]

"You may not think it," said the brigadier, as he wrestled with the mutton, which is the staple food of the veldt breakfast-table, "but I am anxious about those fellows,—d—d anxious. But it is no use having cyclists if they are only to loaf about in camp. I use them much in same spirit as an inexperienced pyramid player breaks up the balls at the beginning of a game. I trust that out of the crowd just one may get home. The captain is a hearty fellow, and will probably make his way into Strydenburg; but he is about the only one that it would be worth betting upon. I should be sorry to lose him, for I like enthusiasts; but as for his gang, I would willingly present the lot to 'brother.' I had some cyclists down Calvinia way. I found that on a down gradient they were terrors, but when any climbing came their way they afforded 'brother' any amount of fun. The cyclist, to be any use in war, must have roads and luck; otherwise, as Scout or messenger, he is valueless. It is all very well for faddists to prophesy a future for them. I like to see them working out their own salvation: pictures of dismounted cyclists behind stacks of bicycles prepared to receive cavalry fill me with delight. I like to anticipate the glee of the cavalry which has forced them to dismount for action at some disadvantageous spot, and then, while they are doubling up their machines as a *chevaux de frise*, shoots them from the cover of a hay-stack at a thousand yards." [216]

Brigade-Major. "But surely, sir, there must be some use in cycles for military purposes. The French, for instance, use them almost exclusively for carrying messages in their manoeuvres!"

Brigadier. "True for you. But then in France they have roads. Though even with the best of roads there is a limit to their utility. Behind an army they are excellent; in front of an army their value is still problematical. Even down in Calvinia, where Burghers were scarce and main roads fair, they rarely carried a message as safely and as quickly as a mounted Kaffir. They are vulnerable all round from other causes than the hazards of war. Machine vulnerable, man vulnerable, and in a country like this, where the roads are not masked by hedgerows, they furnish a kind of 'running-deer' to every Burgher observation-post, and, as far as I can judge, an observation-post is to be found on every kopje!"... [217]

It will be seen from the above that the brigadier had no intention of undertaking the wild-goose chase which had been proposed to him. The missive which he had sent to Strydenburg had been cunningly constructed. It ran: "Local information indicates that the invaders have doubled back to the north, evidently with the object of recrossing the Orange River. I am moving with all reasonable despatch upon Hopetown. I was in touch with scattered parties of enemy last night. Have just sufficient supplies to take me into Hopetown." The message was addressed to Chief, Pretoria, and repeated to the lieutenant-general commanding the operations to suppress the invasion. Knowing that the cyclists might draw blank at Strydenburg, a second copy of the message was sent by the hand of a Kaffir, to be delivered at the telegraph office in Britstown. As events turned out it was the cyclists' telegram which went, and, as intended, upset the apple-cart which the general subsequently tried to drive over the brigadier's prostrate form. In the strict letter of the military law which, in so many cases, subordinates individual initiative and sound judgment, the action taken by the brigadier was indefensible. But as a matter of fact the mutiny was not so terrible as it at first appears. Setting aside the common-sense issue which ought to guide officers in senior commands when accepting orders from a superior, it should be remembered that the brigadier had only been directed to co-operate with the officer who had now taken unto himself the position of supreme command. Lord Kitchener himself, at the meeting on the De Aar platform, had given the brigadier a roving commission, to be controlled only by orders from Pretoria and the lieutenant-general at De Aar. Consequently he resented his free action being clogged by a senior whose only object seemed to be a desire to hug him and his force as closely as possible for self-protection against imaginary dangers. The brigadier, who was in every way as capable a soldier as any in South Africa, had not spent eighteen months in following, or being followed by, Boers, without arriving at a very shrewd estimate of their tactics. The lore of the chase in which he was engaged, as he read it, pointed to a break back on the part of the main body of the invaders in the direction of the Orange River; and having balanced his conception of the situation with his conscience, he considered that the most serviceable move he could make was to place himself and his brigade upon the railway at Hopetown. And so having sent the cyclists to smell out the land of Strydenburg, the New Cavalry Brigade, working in three parallel columns, fringed round the east end of the Beer Vlei and struck north-east, with the [218] [219]

backs of its rear-guard turned on the Karoo for ever.

"How about Zwingelspan?" queried the brigade-major, remembering the written instructions in the general's missive. [220]

"Let it rip," was the laconic reply from the brigadier. "With this crowd of Vermaas's hanging about I am not going to risk patrols other than cyclists, and I am certainly not going to push on in force!" This was final, and the extended front of the brigade opened out across the veldt, throwing out its feelers like the tentacles of some slowly crawling monster. Through highland and lowland it wound, rummaging the isolated farmsteads, ploughing through ravine and mealie patch. But though wild-fowl rose chattering, and, scolding bitterly, circled round the scouts, though springbok trotted leisurely away from the front of each several column, though sullen girls and gaping Kaffirs peered from beneath the eaves of farmsteads, no sign of hostility was to be found in all this life. It was the same old monotonous drudgery of the veldt again. The same merciless sun, the same sapless and parched surroundings. As the day wore on men longed for the crack of a rifle to ease the burden of the monotony. The country, too, grew more hilly, and fearing that he might be attacked in detail, the brigadier reduced his front, till by four in the afternoon the brigade to all practical purposes had concentrated. Then it was that the advance-guard struck a great white road, ankle-deep in dust. This veldt track was so rigid in its alignment, that for the moment it might have been taken for a turnpike road fallen upon decadent days. But the local colour of its surroundings did not support the comparison, and the reason of its being loomed up gauntly in the middle distance. A great square of whitewashed building, which, strange to relate, was overshadowed by quite a number of trees, giving it an appearance not unlike the first attempt which a Bengali merchant makes at a country residence, when success in commerce renders it imperative that he should improve the circumstances of his dwelling. But though in the first instance the general appearance of the farm was forbidding, yet, on examination, it presented several qualities which are valuable to the soldier. An infant *barrage* closing the drainage slope in a depression formed an artificial water-pan of no mean dimensions. A pair of zinc-fanned windmills worked two artesian wells with such success that the purest drinking-water abounded; and the result of all this moisture was the nearest attempt at a lawn that any single man in the brigade has seen in the length and breadth of South Africa outside Cape Town and its suburbs. A great stack of forage added to the military assets of the locality, and the brigadier just looked at the water and the lawn, and said, "A land flowing with milk and honey,—this is where I shall camp. I could not resist camping in such a spot even if I had old man De Wet dead beat a furlong from home!" And it was indeed an entrancing spot to the Karoo-worn warrior. Just one of those delightful oases which do exist, but which do not abound in Cape Colony. Upon them stand the best and oldest farms, for when the forebears of the present owners first struck them, they had no need to good farther afield in search for a desirable anchorage. If more of these enviable spots had abounded, even the barbarity of British rule would not have driven the *voortrekkers* into wholesale emigration across the soapy waters of the Orange River. [221]

After the usual worries of settling into camp—mule-drivers leading animals to water in the drinking reservation, and commanding officers making themselves disagreeable—there was time to turn one's attention to the inmates of the roadside mansion. The great whitewashed bungalow seemed to be alive with inhabitants. The Intelligence officer went about his business with the air of an expert, and in two minutes the head of the house, a fine old specimen of the patriarchal Boer, and his son, a poor slip of a man, were standing before him, hat in hand, while women-folk of all ages and fulness of costume peeped from every convenient crevice in the background. The general attitude of the household was that of humility, in contrast to the usual reception which the column had experienced in the majority of Karoo farms. And presently the cause for the deference became apparent. The gaping children in the main entrance were thrust aside, and a woman of magnificent proportions pushed in between the two humble men. The old man mumbled something about his daughter-in-law, while his callow son looked, if possible, more sheepish than at first. The Intelligence officer for his part could hardly keep his countenance. The lady had donned her best. Her ample form was swathed in the rustling folds of a magnificent silk gown which had evidently been cut in the days of the crinoline attachment. Her hair, showing signs of the rapidity with which its present gloss had been applied, was knotted somewhere adjacent to the neck; and not satisfied with nature's adornment, this prehistoric beauty had fixed a great white ostrich feather in her well-greased tresses, which drooped down upon her neck and shoulder. The Intelligence officer bowed deeply in order to keep his feelings in due subordination. The lady was not slow to introduce herself. Dropping one armful of a skirt that was so voluminous that it had to be held in both hands, she limply took the officer's hand. [222]

Frau. "Good morning. I am Mrs Van Herden; this is my man^[32] (*indicating the meek son of the house*). We are glad to see you. Will you have some coffee?" (And as she spoke a microscopic Kaffir maid appeared with the inevitable coffee on a tray.) [223]

Intelligence Officer. "Thank you, madam, but I must first search the house and outhouses."

F. "You are welcome to do that. We are perfectly loyal. Have you not heard what the Van Herdens did in the Kaffir wars, and my grandfather was Scotch." [224]

I. O. "It is only a matter of form, madam. Any one could see that you were loyal!"

F. "Are you a general, mister?"

I. O. "No; I ought to be if I had my deserts; but I am the next best thing. I'm the general's secretary." (Thereupon the old man grunted approval, while the chorus of gaping maids nodded an endorsement behind him.) [225]

F. "Can I see the general, Mister Secretary?"

I. O. "That depends upon the information which you give me now. Why do you wish to see him?"

F. "My children have never seen an English general; besides, this is the first time that the English have ever been to the house; we should like to cook a dinner for the English general!" [226]

I. O. "But your children have seen Burgher generals?"

F. "Oh, yes; they are nothing. We had Commandant Brand here yesterday!"

I. O. "When did he leave?"

F. "Early this morning!"

I. O. "Which way did he go?"

F. "He went out on the veldt; they took the Strydenburg road. But they were Free Staters; you cannot say where they were going. They would tell us Strydenburg, and then go somewhere else. You see, they knew that you were close!"

I. O. "How many men had he with him?"

F. "Only a few. It was a small horse commando, perhaps twenty. All Free Staters!"

The old patriarch, who had been fumbling in his pocket, now produced a slip of paper which he presented to the Intelligence officer. The writing on the paper ran as follows:—

"O.V.S. Receipt for Property Commandeered.

"Taken from Jan Van Herden, of Melk Kraal, Cape Colony, two sacks of mealies, 500 bundles of oat forage, two mules, four sheep, for the use of O.V.S. commando. [227]

"This receipt to be presented for repayment at the end of the war to the O.V.S. Government.

(Signed) "ADRIAN FISCHER,
Corporal, O.V.S. Forces.

Dated "February ——".

I. O. "Who is Fischer?"

F. "He is Brand's adjutant!"

I. O. "I thought that you said there were only about twenty in the commando. They and their horses must have been hungry to eat four sheep and 500 bundles of oat hay. I should say that there must have been more like fifty of them!"

F. "That may be, we did not count them. But can we ask the general to dinner?"

I. O. "That depends. First, I must go through your rooms."

Followed by the whole family, the Intelligence officer passed through to the various rooms, furnished and upholstered in the stereotyped Dutch fashion, till they came to the end of the long house. Here a closed door barred their way. [228]

I. O. "What is in there?"

F. "Nothing—it is only my daughter and her 'man'; they have only been married a few days, so we let them live apart. (*Throwing the door open.*) You may go in, of course. We are jingoes, we have nothing to conceal."

The Intelligence officer entered the room to find an overbearded young man and a very touselled, plump young lady sitting sheepishly hand-in-hand. They rose as he entered and stared vacantly at him. The man was a mean specimen of the Dutchman, tall and thin, narrow chest, and sloping shoulders. An aggressive red beard for one so young, growing backwards after the fashion prevailing with the Sikhs. A cadaverous wretched creature, yet doubtless with strength enough in his forefinger to make the seven-pound pull of a rifle.

The Intelligence officer's eyes ranged the room, which was bare enough to have satisfied the most ascetic of honeymooning couples. Half a glance was sufficient to prove to him that the frau had been speaking the truth, so he turned upon the pair and shot at the man a question so sharply that he started, "Do you know the road to Zwingelspan?" The man recovered himself slowly, and then affected that look of imbecility which is invariably the Dutchman's effort at self-protection when he is cornered by a question which he does not wish to answer. But his new-found mother-in-law was evidently anxious that nothing should occur to irritate the visitor, for she blandly answered his question herself. "Of course he knows the way to Zwingelspan. Why, he lives there himself!" [229]

I. O. "Then he is the very man I want. (*To the man*) You must come along with me over to my cart and wait there in case the general wants a guide to Zwingelspan between this and midnight."

A complete silence overtook the whole group after the Intelligence officer had delivered himself of this speech. It seemed as if he had inadvertently upset some plan. But the only thing he noticed at the moment was that the pale face of the bride, as she stood limply in front of him, grew a shade paler, and that her great blue eyes filled with tears, which poised a moment on her eyelashes and then trickled down her cheeks. If, as the Intelligence officer was only too ready to surmise, he had upset an elaborate ruse to shield one of Brand's special envoys, then the girl was [230]

an accomplished actress; but if, as possibly was the case, she was moved to weeping in anticipation of peril to her husband or lover, then she had adopted a course most likely to serve her purpose with the man about to place himself between her and the man she loved. There are few British officers who can persevere in a distasteful task in face of the reproach furnished by a silent weeping woman.

I. O. (softening the authoritative tone in his speech) "You need not be distressed. I promise you we will not take him farther than Zwingelspan, even if we take him there at all."

Weeping Bride. "If you take him, how shall I ever know what you will do with him? You say here that you are going to Zwingelspan; but we know that you are not going there. You would not tell us if you were. Besides, the British were at Zwingelspan this morning, and you are following the Boers." [231]

F. "Oh leave her, Mr Secretary, she is only a child, and she loves her 'man.' She is afraid that you will take him, and that the Boers will catch him with you and treat him as a traitor!"

The Intelligence officer led the man out to hand him over to the Tiger, when the latter returned from "noseing" round the outhouses. Though perplexed in his mind as to the real attitude of the inmates of the farm, yet he had elicited something, namely, that information would be sent to the nearest armed Burghers that the column was not bound for Zwingelspan, and that a British force had been at Zwingelspan that morning. The latter was important, since the only force which could have been at the pan was the main force, which meant that the general had been up to time in his advance on Strydenburg, while the New Cavalry Brigade had failed in the tryst.

The brigadier's comments on the intelligence surmises were short and quaint. "Quite so. But I am not here to sweep up De Wet's red-herrings. The old man will probably strike half-a-dozen of Brand's or Vermaas's men when he reaches Strydenburg, if my cyclists haven't turned them out. We, crossing the trail to-night in our journey north, may strike something big. Anyway, we will have the satisfaction of knowing that we are playing the game every time. And that being the case we will let the old fat frau cook us a dinner to-night!" The brigadier, who had estimated De Wet's movements with consummate foresight, did not of course know that the replenished Plumer had picked up the guerilla's back trail from Strydenburg, and was, at the moment that the New Cavalry Brigade was bivouacking, practically running him in view.... [232]

It was, all considered, a very creditable repast which the good lady of Melk Kraal prepared for the brigadier and his staff. But on occasions such as this it is the custom of the hosts to sit round the walls of the dining-hall while the honoured guests feed alone at a table in the centre. In this case the ladies and children of the household lined the walls, taking an active interest in the serving, which was at the hands of a couple of Kaffir girls. There were no courses. The whole of the dinner was put upon the table at once, and it consisted of boiled mutton hacked into hunks and swimming in a greasy slop; fowls so boiled that the flesh had lost its resistance and become a mere pulp; a mess of ochre-coloured boiled pumpkin, boiled mealie[33] cobs, and boiled coffee of the consistency of treacle. In fact, everything boiled and boiled to death. A repast truly characteristic of the Dutch, who are most carnivorous in their choice of food, and far too feckless and lazy to spend time and trouble over such a common function as eating. It was the meal of a people devoid of imagination and artistic taste. None the less it was the best that the house could produce; and as the guests had taken the precaution to bring their own liquor, it was a change from the tinned delicacies of the modern active service meal. The banquet closed with a quaint incident. The Intelligence officer had brought in his pocket a bottle of *crème-de-menthe*. The hosts were invited to drink from the brandy-bottle, which they did with the relish of experts in the art of neat spirit drinking. To the hostesses was shown the consideration due to their sex, and they were offered the green concoction of peppermint. There is little of that coyness in the Dutch composition which is met with in the civilisation of the West: each lady of the household received her glass demurely and tossed off the contents, pouring it, after the manner of Dutch spirit-drinkers, ungracefully far into the mouth. The old Frau smacked her lips. "But it is good," she said naïvely, and then taking the bottle from the table she poured out the whole contents into a tumbler and emptied it with one gulp down her capacious throat. [233]

The brigadier was equal to the occasion. Raising his glass, he said, "Madam, may I be permitted to drink your health and to thank you for your hospitality." Madam smiled blandly, in no wise inconvenienced by the severity of the potion which she had absorbed!... [234]

But the good-humoured revelling of the dinner-table was shortly to be changed for the stern reality of war. The brigadier and his staff had barely bid farewell to their happy hostess and returned to their bivouac when the voice of a tired and excited man was heard calling to be directed to headquarters. It was the captain of cyclists who had started that morning before daybreak for Strydenburg. The man's face was a study when, having flung himself clear of his machine, which was clanging like a *teuf-teuf*, he presented himself in the solitary tent which during halts served the headquarters of the little column as a living and sleeping apartment. In the dim light of a flickering candle, it seemed that he was swathed in a sheet, so thick and white was the crust of dust which covered him from head to foot. He staggered into the mess-tent, swayed a moment, tried to salute, and then dropped in a heap on to the camp chair offered to him. [235]

Brigadier. "Give him some brandy."

After a long drink from the brandy-bottle the little captain of cyclists recovered sufficiently to smile at his own weakness.

Brigadier. "Well, have you been fighting—where's your crush?"

Cyclist Captain. "Fighting—there never has been such fighting in this war, it has been simply bloody!"

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B. "Sanguinary, my boy; well, are you the last survivor? You rather remind me of the last man of the poet's imagination."

C. C. (dejectedly) "It has been a long, sad, and terrible day. Harvey of Damant's is mortally wounded, and I have had a man wounded!"

B. "The devil you have. I thought at least that you must have been annihilated. Where are the rest of you, then?"

C. C. "Lost or captured, I am afraid. Seventeen were captured in succession at the top of one rise. I only got through by the skin of my teeth and the luck of there only being three Boers at the top of the hill."

B. (unconcernedly) "Horrid adventure! What luck there were not four Boers! But give me a detailed story. Have you been into Strydenburg? have you seen any of the staff of the other column?"

The following is a paraphrase of the story which was eventually elicited from the cyclist captain:—The cyclists, who broke down on the heavy roads at the rate of about four an hour, kept up a steady pace until they were some five miles from Strydenburg. Here going up a steep rise they tailed out somewhat, and seventeen were captured in rotation by three burghers ensconced in the nek over which the up gradient passed. The captain and five others all came up together, and in the scuffle he and three of his men succeeded in getting through. Later on they were fired at by Boers just outside Strydenburg, into which town they rode simultaneously with an advance-guard of Damant's Guides. The Boers, who, with the exception of the rear-guard under Vermaas, had left and gone north on the preceding day, just as the Brigadier had surmised, had destroyed the telegraph office, but the local operator, who had hidden away an instrument, by attaching the broken wire to a piece of garden fencing was able to get through to De Aar, and in half an hour the brigadier's "Clear the line" message was ticking off in Pretoria. This all happened three hours before the co-operating general entered the town. In the meantime the advance-guard of Damant's Guides, as soon as they heard that the New Cavalry Brigade was not on the road, pushed out to occupy the Tafelkop Hills outside the town. Harvey took the cyclists with him. And a very gallant little fight they had, in which three of the Guides, though sorely wounded, held up and captured the five men who had wounded them. Owing to his lust for blood it was late in the day before the cyclist captain was able to find the general. This officer had a despatch ready for him to take back to his own brigadier. The return journey had been effected without other mishap than that of extreme fatigue, which difficulty the captain alone had been able to surmount: the rest of his cyclists, if not prisoners, were spread-eagled over the veldt at such spots where death had overtaken their machines.

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Now what was written in the despatch which the cyclist officer had brought is not known to the chronicler of the adventures of this brigade. But it was evidently couched in not over friendly language, for the brigadier's face worked with annoyance as he read it. Having read it he tore it up into very small pieces and sat for a moment or two staring steadfastly at the candle.

"Anything serious, sir?"

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Brigadier. "No; the old man is peevish,—says that my disobedience of his orders has caused us to lose De Wet. That he has washed his hands of me, and that it only remains to report me to a higher authority. To be philosophical, he has some grounds for his peevishness if he really believes that he has ever been nearer to De Wet than the latter gentleman desired. But you get no return in an argument with seniors—they have the whip hand of you every time; so here, ole man Baker, bring out your stilus and tablets and write out brigade orders. Two hours hence we march direct on Hopetown. Mr Intelligence, mark out a route, and mind you have a good guide. Everything on a night like this will depend on your guiding." Such is the history of a transformation scene which is of common occurrence when men make war. A camp sleeping heavily and peacefully at midnight, in a couple of hours may have disappeared, to be found sorrowfully toiling along in the dark on some venture bent....

The Intelligence officer had reason to congratulate himself that he had already got his guide held by the ear by the Tiger, as it is a big undertaking to conjure up guides on notice only given an hour before midnight. The guide himself was not best pleased, and aped that air of imbecility which on occasions similar to this is the Dutch form of passive resistance. But the Tiger took him in hand, primed him with a few simple truths and the history of some imaginary executions, so that he waxed more communicative when he found himself in the centre of the advance-guard of twelve dismounted dragoons with fixed bayonets,^[34] with which the brigadier when night marching was accustomed to head his advance-guard.

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There is a limit to the fascinations of a night march if you have to make many of them, especially if it is undertaken without the definite promise of a fight on the following day. Men and horses dog tired, yearning for sleep; the hundred and one irregularities which would find no place in daylight. The weary waiting that intervals may be corrected, the hitch with the advance-guard, the difficulty of loading the supply-waggon. The irritability of the chief, growing in intensity as he strikes match after match against his watch dial. Semi-mutinous resistance of orders on the part of Irregulars; lamentations from the major of the battery, whose horses have been standing hooked-in for the last half hour. How impossible it all seems,—how heartbreaking; yet everything shakes down eventually, and the great dark caterpillar, bristling with armed men like a woolly-bear, creeps forward into the veiled uncertainty of night.

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The advance-guard has moved off, the brigadier is just waiting to see the baggage fairly started, when a sudden spark gleams out from a knoll above the camp which the falling-in night picquet has just evacuated. A bullet whirrs noisily overhead. "Martini," conjectures the brigadier. "I wonder what that means!" Two minutes later another spark flashes out from the same spot, and a leaden messenger buries itself with a skirr and a thud, within ten yards of the little group of officers.

"Not bad for a chance shot—we'll see if they are going to persevere!" Swish, came a third shot singing away harmlessly overhead. [242]

"Sniping!" said the brigadier. "I would hang that beast if I could catch him. Look here, gallop down to the officer in command of the rear-guard and tell him to send a couple of quick-witted fellows to stalk that sniper. I will give five pounds if he is brought in alive."

The messenger galloped out into the darkness, and as the last of the waggon transport turned into the right track, the staff cantered northwards in the direction of the head of the column, reckless of the solitary bullets which at intervals whistled through the still night air.

Considerable tension attaches to the head of a night-marching column, especially when moving through an unreconnoitred country. And in spite of the little text-books with smart covers, it is more often in unreconnoitred country that the soldier is called upon to operate than otherwise. Consequently the Intelligence officer forgot all about the sniping incident, and busied himself with being ready to answer the many queries of an imaginative major in command of the advance-guard. Five miles of the journey had perhaps been made—at least it was at the third halt that word was passed up that the brigadier wanted to see the Intelligence officer. The brigadier had dismounted at the head of the battery. [243]

"Hullo, Mr Intelligence, we have got the sniper—and it would beat a very Solomon to give judgment in a like case. Strike a match."

The little flame burned up and declared to the astonished view of the Intelligence officer the face and figure of his guide's weeping bride. There was no sign of tears now. The girl stood with her hands clasped behind her back, her mouth firmly closed, and looked her captors full in the face. It was a fine figure, seen for a moment in the uncertain light of the lucifer shaded from the wind. *Cappie* blown back behind her head, ill-concealing the wealth of glistening hair, pale determined face, full of defiance, and thrown-out chest across which the leather bandolier still hung in damnatory evidence. How different to the limp and weeping woman of the afternoon. A second and the little slip of pinewood had burnt out. [244]

Brigadier. "What do you make of it?"

Intelligence Officer. "Magnificent woman—damnable undertaking."

Bystander. "Magnificent she-cat!"

Prisoner. "You steal my husband, and because I would do my best to stop you, when the men were afraid to attack and offered you food instead, you call me names. Give me back my husband and let me go, or if you would shoot me, shoot and be finished with it."

Brigadier. "My dear young lady, no one will hurt you or call you names. You shall have your husband back as soon as we have finished with him. Until that time, I am afraid that you must stay with us, but you shall be properly looked after. I cannot afford to let you again be as naughty as you have been to-night. Hand her over to the supply officer,—he's acting provost-marshal, is he not? (*Then turning to his staff*) What a little vixen! That gives you a very considerable insight into the temper of these loyal Cape colonists: to think that while we were supping with this young lady's mamma she was planning a little sniping party, as a revenge against us for breaking in upon her honeymoon!"... [245]

FOOTNOTES:

[32] Dutch method of describing a woman's husband.

[33] Maize.

[34] British cavalry at this period of the campaign were armed with rifle and bayonet.

True to that instinct which finds the Boer the most insanitary race laying claim to a civilisation of any standard, the squatters who settled upon Hopetown as a site suitable for a village chose a situation as insalubrious as any to be found on the fringe of the Karoo. In a cup-valley of mean dimensions, the little collection of shanties which group round the church and town-hall lay tucked away in the folds of the bare dusty hills, so that if tracks did not converge upon the village with consistent regularity there would be no evidence outside a narrow radius of its existence. It was not until the advance-guard covering the New Cavalry Brigade topped the actual bluff above the hamlet that the temporary importance of Hopetown was realised. The dip in which the village lay was black with the transport of many columns, and the dust and smoke raised by the thousands of animals and hundreds of cooking fires formed a heavy haze which, covering the township as with a pall, hung half-way between the level of the valley and the overhanging brae where the advance-guard stood halted. It was not an inviting picture. The dust and vapour seemed unable to face the perpendicular violence of the midday sun; the only perceptible movement in the middle distance was the shimmer of the atmosphere, squirming as it were under the relentless heat; while the great pall of dust and smoke, as if ashamed to raise its head, mushroomed out against the hillsides with undecided edging.

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As we stood gasping for some breath of air to relieve the burden of oppressive heat, it seemed that the valley was some great stew-pot of the *inferno*, and that Hopetown was simmering at its bottom.

The brigadier cantered up to the advance-guard, and throwing his reins to his orderly, made a brief survey of the topographical approaches to Hopetown.

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Brigadier. "Well, there is not much of De Wet left in this corner of the world. All the commandoes^[35] of the Hunt seem to have forgathered here and to be having a day off. What a hole of a place—ideal, no doubt, from the Dutchman's point of view. Why, the smell of it reaches up here. But here comes a robber in a pink 'beaver'; we shall soon know all about it."

A diminutive boy in staff kit cantered up and demanded information about the column.

Staff Officer. "What column is this?"

B. "The New Cavalry Brigade."

S. O. "Never heard of you. Who told you to come in here? Who commands you?"

B. "Steady, my fledgling, one question at a time. You are given to heaping matters, I see, which is a bad habit in one so young. I will answer one of your questions, the last one. I command this column: and now you will answer me. What columns are in Hopetown?"

S. O. "Sorry, sir, but——"

B. "Don't apologise. I know I don't look like a general, but it doesn't help you out of your difficulties to say so. You only slip into it worse every time; now, then, to the columns?"

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S. O. "Knox's, Pilcher's, Plumer's, and Paris's."

B. "Good; and what is the latest news about De Wet?"

S. O. "He has broken out east across the railway; half his force went up north and half crossed by Paauwpan or Potfontein."

B. "Who are on him?"

S. O. "I am not quite sure; but I hear that Haig, Thorneycroft, Crabbe and Henniker are either following him or trying to cut him off."

B. "And what are four columns doing halted here in this *dorp*?"^[36]

S. O. "They are all stone cold."

B. "The price of losing De Wet. Now, young feller, just you hie back to *your* general, Charles Knox, I suppose, and tell him that the New Cavalry Brigade is coming right in here, but will not worry him long, as it has orders to be off to-night. (*The youth salutes and goes to the right-about, while the brigadier continues to his staff*) Just as well to let Knox know that I am on my own. I must invent a special mission from Pretoria, otherwise he may seize me like the last fellow, and the future state of this column might then be worse than the first."

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In the meantime the brigade led down into the noisome basin which holds Hopetown, and took up temporary quarters on the first patch against the water into which it could squeeze its long line of transport. It wedged in between two columns, and the bad condition of both gave evidence of the severity of the work in which they had recently been engaged. As columns, when they had first entered upon the chase after De Wet, they had each been five or six hundred strong; now, perhaps, between them they could count five hundred mounted men, while of this number not more than a third were fit to do a twenty-mile trek at a better pace than a walk. Yet each, three weeks earlier, had started from the railway newly equipped with remounts.

If any are sufficiently interested to cast about for a reason for the hopeless state of the columns in the Colony at this period, they may possibly find in the experiences of the brigade a solution of the remount question which has so puzzled the more intelligent students of the war. The column newly equipped at the railway was generally worse off for horse-flesh and less mobile than the force which had not been within reach of the Remount Department for months. The procedure was in this wise. The column commander struggled gasping into the haven of relief afforded by the railway. He had barely issued to his men and horses a full ration when the telegraph began to

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talk. Down came the brief little order from Pretoria, "You will entrain for Cypher Ghat without delay. Trains will reach you by three this afternoon." In vain would the column commander plead for rest for man and beast. The fiat had gone forth. All protest was met with a single reiteration of the original order, with perhaps the adjunct, "Remounts will be awaiting you to replace casualties." What chance had the horses which had been overridden and under-fed for the last twelve days? Those which could hobble were thrust into close, dung-blocked trucks, and whirled away any distance from fifty miles to a thousand. Water they got when the railway officials saw fit to arrange the necessary halt in the necessary place, rest for them there was none. But the column commander who was new at the job could plume himself that he would be restocked and start with a new lease of life at his destination. Vain thought! He found awaiting him at the end of his journey either the sweepings of the country-side—such animals as had been rejected as unfitted for military service by marauding Boer and pushing column leader in turn, and finally collected by the zealous "crawler" and duly reported in the "weekly bag" as captured from the enemy. Or if sweepings were not available, he would find waiting for him absolutely soft and raw importations, which had cost the taxpayers £40 apiece a few weeks previously,—the one as useless for the purpose required as the other. Rejection by a not over-fastidious enemy disposes of the one; of the other it was as mad a proceeding as taking a horse straight off grass and backing him to win you a stake at even weights with trained horses. The millions of the public money which lie wantonly strewed over the South African veldt would appal even the most phlegmatic of financiers. The waste in horse-flesh is inconceivable; and the man with the stiff upper lip who refused to realise that it takes gentle breaking to bring the troop-horses to the perfection which enables them to cover for six consecutive days thirty miles a-day with 20 stone on their backs, has added pence to the present burden of the income-tax. The taxpayer is naturally upset. He has cause. He seeks mental relief in philippics against the cavalry officer,—the man to whom he owes so much. He damns his intelligence and damns his breeding, and then, having railed sufficiently, pays cheerfully, with heavy self-satisfaction that some one has at least been put in his proper place, and that a lesson so necessary has not really been so dearly purchased at the price. Poor innocent fools! the British taxpayer brings to mind that dear fat smiling millionaire, denizen of a West End club, to whom every day impecunious fellow-members would propose a game of *picquet* or *écarté*, well knowing that it was the quickest way in London to earn a certain £200. Your Commissions may sit upon the educational standard of your officers, upon the sequel to your own folly in remount purchase: but will your inquiry ever reach the foundations of this edifice that you have condemned? I think not. One or two scapegoats will satisfy the British public upon those few occasions when it rises up in a thirst for blood. Willingness to pay rather than interfere will do the rest. And the spirit of apathy which is characteristic of the nation, in spite of the occasional outbursts of interested indignation, will prevent a true disclosure of the horrid facts as long as the war is unfinished. Once a peace is ratified the national interest in both the present, past, and future state of its army will be as abruptly and effectually severed as the magazine charge in the Lee-Enfield rifle when the cut-off is snapped home, forgetful of the fact that our next enemy may not be as merciful as the Boer; that he will not stand by and reap no benefit from our failures; that in a few brief hours a situation may arise in which no wealth of bullion can save us. It will take just one disaster such as this—a disaster which will carry annihilation with it—to cause the British nation too late to take just stock of its limitations. Then in grief it will remember that he whom it treated as a mad *fakir* was indeed a true prophet.

The state of the New Cavalry Brigade, as it wedged itself in between the two ghosts of mounted columns, was in itself an object-lesson. Those who have followed the interests of this little command through the foregoing chapters will have seen that it had not been called upon to make any exceptional effort to sap it of its reserve forces. In fact, it had simply been marched and countermarched along dusty tracks at the whim of a superior officer. Yet under this mild usage the column had arrived back at a base with 25 per cent of its animals useless and an equal proportion whose days of usefulness were numbered. The sole reason for this was the fact that the animals had never been trained to long distances in a trying climate with 20 stone on their backs. The care of the brigadier or the watchfulness of the squadron officers availed nothing when the green remount was put to the twenty-mile test. But you will say, How, if this is really the case, was it to be avoided? An intelligent anticipation of events should have told those who started their campaign with the advantage of the three months' failure of their predecessors what would be the approximate remount requirements. The British nation would have backed the demands of this intelligent anticipation, not in thousands, but in millions, and by so doing would have saved not thousands but millions. If the original remount depots had been other than "Siberias" for incompetent officers from the outpost line, or if the recommendations of the senior cavalry and remount officers had been listened to, we should have had less of the saddling of raw horses straight from the train and ship,—less of the stupidity which expected them to do the work which can only be done by a system of gradual and careful training and acclimatisation. It is as suicidal and expensive to put green horses into the field as it is to put untrained men. Yet at this period of the war we were practising both these expedients, and wondering why the Burgher was not subjugated, and why the income-tax steadily increased.

The stories of sinful waste and incompetent groping for a means out of the tangle do not connect themselves intimately with this history. But no doubt remains that the system which was at this period in practice was vicious in the extreme. In a word, the whole of the British mobile strength in South Africa was directly based on the railway communication. This gave a column at the utmost a twelve days' lease of life, which meant that the troops must keep within a six days' march of the permanent way or starve. This limited the area of effective operation; and while we were wasting our energy and horse-flesh against the enemy's raiders, the bulk of their resistance

was calmly ploughing beyond the reach of castigation. The convoy may be slow and may be vulnerable, the fortified post may be isolated and invite attack; but as military expedients in a large country both are superior to the base-bound column.^[37]

The brigadier left the brigade-major to settle the column into its quarters, and taking the Intelligence officer with him, made straight for the hub of Hopetown's universe. The hotel and the telegraph-office stood close together. Outside the former a little scarlet flaglet fluttered, its double point showing that the general officer who sported it claimed divisional rank,—a quaint claim at this period of the war, when lieutenant-generals were parading the theatre at the head of little *paarde kommandos*^[38] three to four hundred strong. The brigadier spotted the flag, and then edged off to the telegraph-office. "We will first make things straight with K. Then we will consult this new horror with the oriflamme that we have stumbled into!" Three tired clerks, two soldiers and a civilian, were trying to cope with the telegraphic efforts of five columns. The brigadier dictated his message to the Intelligence officer. It was a bare announcement of arrival, duplicated to Pretoria and De Aar.

Telegraph Operator. "There is no chance of any private wires going through for at least forty-eight hours; post would be quicker!"

Brigadier. "Then you will just have to clear the line."

T. O. "Can only do that for general officers."

B. "That is all I ask you to do,—so here you are!"

T. O. "Beg pardon, sir; but are you a general,—you are not like most generals. Yes, sir, it's nice and short. I can get this off in about five minutes. They clear the line, of course, at De Aar; we are only working to De Aar. I have quite a lot of messages for you, sir; they have been coming all last night." (The operator handed out the bundle of telegraphic jetsam.)

The telegrams contained the usual proportion of hysterical nonsense from the De Wet expert and various intelligence and departmental centres; also a direct order from the general at De Aar to proceed without delay to Orange River Station and there entrain for Jagersfontein Road in the Orange River Colony. This at least was satisfactory, as it meant without fail good-bye to the hated Karoo. The news telegram was interesting reading, though a little indefinite in its wording. In the light of subsequent knowledge the information which it conveyed was much as the brigadier had anticipated. De Wet, after the sack of Strydenburg, had doubled north,—in fact, had almost retraced his original line. He had thrown a feint up in the direction of Mark's Drift, and thus drawn the pursuit temporarily off the true line, but had as suddenly swung to the east. Here he had again been struck by the indefatigable Plumer, temporarily renovated and with sufficient steam up to take him a short spurt. That spurt was sufficient to rob De Wet of his last impedimenta, to cause him to bifurcate in his flight. Part of the pursued rabble went north, half hurled itself across the Cape Government Railway in the vicinity of Paauwpan. Plumer's spurt was just too short to bring about the definite result required, and he crawled into Hopetown to further revive his energy. In the meantime it was learned from prisoners and other sources that the group of fugitives trying to cross the Orange River north of Hopetown was Judge Hertzog's and Pretorius's party. Brand had made the passage at Mark's Drift, while De Wet, with the ex-President, was still in the Colony heading for Philipstown. Then hope ran high. The Orange River was in flood, while stops were in front of and south of the harried guerilla. Thorneycroft and Henry in the vicinity of Colesburg; Crabbe and Henniker on his tail; Grenfell, Murray, and others strung out in an ever-decreasing circle! Swollen river in front, desperate Englishmen behind, what chance had the residue of the invaders now! But the brigadier shook his head as he pricked out the positions on the map. "There is no mention of troops moving down from the north. What does Napoleon say about rivers as barriers in war?—he classes them as negotiable obstacles, after deserts and mountains, right low down on the scale. Flood or no flood, ole man De Wet will cross that river just wherever and whenever he pleases; and if we have no one north of it either to pick him up or to head him while crossing, he will get clear away, and we shall have let slip another opportunity, by crass stupidity and failure to make use of the very signal advantages which circumstances have placed in our way. Plumer and my brigands get to Orange River Station to-night. Even if they have truckage waiting for us, we shall not march clear of Jagersfontein Road until the day after to-morrow. That will give ole man De Wet twenty-four hours' clear lead. I must say that I cannot see the hand of genius in the fitting of this plan to the map. This is the line that both Plumer and I should take—Orange River Station, Ramah, Luckhoff, Fauresmith. One of us halt at Luckhoff; Kimberley send a column to Koffyfontein; Bloemfontein another to Petrusburg and Abramskraal; while Fauresmith and Jagersfontein form bases for columns sent to them from Springfontein; and then with a consistent and strong line of outposts we might have stopped his main road north, although we should be too late to man the river. But, anyhow, I'll have a try at convincing them at headquarters that I am a better man outside than inside a cattle-truck. So here goes. Mr Intelligence, paper and ink and take it down, and mind it is to go in cipher!" The brigadier then roughly drew a comparison in the saving of time involved by a direct march upon Fauresmith from Orange River Station and transport by rail, closing the message with a promise to be in Fauresmith the second day after leaving the railway.

It then became a question of a square meal at the caravanserai. The concentration of five columns had taxed the capabilities of the little hostel beyond endurance. All that they could furnish was milk and butter. But they were prepared to cook any food that was brought, so with an effort it was possible to arrive at a meal. There was no lack of entertainment, however. One of the columns had sent out 300 men and a pompom in pursuit of Hertzog's fugitives, and the force had just returned with quite a haul of prisoners. They had come across the rearmost of them as

they were in the act of crossing the river in a rickety punt, which vessel had been scientifically rendered unseaworthy by a well-directed belt of pompom-shells. Examination of the bushes on the near bank of the river showed that dozens of Boers had literally gone to earth. The river approach was full of rain-fissures and water-cracks, and the men spent the whole morning actually bolting burghers from cover, much in the same manner as a pack of beagles is well used to aid sportsmen to shoot a rabbit-covert.

It was not until you found opportunity to see these prisoners that you realised what this war meant to these farmer guerillas, and the influence which the failure of De Wet's invasion must have made on the subsequent operations. Amongst the whole 200 prisoners that were brought in that day, there was only one man—a man who called himself Hertzog's secretary—who was completely dressed. The majority had neither coats nor boots; and their remaining costume was in the last stage of decay. Nor had the inner man been nurtured any better than the outer. They were emaciated and drawn with hunger and hardship. They rose out of their holes with their hands above their heads like great gaunt ghosts with saucer eyes. They were in such a state that surrender brought to them no pangs of remorse. They welcomed it as a means to live, and their ravenous supplication for food was not the least pathetic setting to the scene. They are a strange paradox these people. One could not help admiring the patriotism—or is it magnetic power of their leaders?—which kept in the field, in spite of all its dismal horrors of death and suffering, men who had but to surrender to return to their share of the comfort of living. If it is true patriotism, then you feel inclined to raise your hat. But if it is only fear of the knout, then hanging is the best end you could wish the leaders, who are able to control such suffering, and who, in the hope of personal advancement, refuse to alleviate it. But what is more humiliating than anything else, is the realisation that these miserable creatures are an enemy able to keep the flower of England's army in check, to levy a tax of six millions a-month upon this country, and render abortive a military reputation built upon unparalleled traditions. This is indeed a bitter reflection, a painful reminder that the advance of science has placed the athlete and the cripple almost upon an equality in armed encounter.

It was an interesting gathering that partook of dinner in the quaintly boarded little dining-room of the Hopetown tavern. Four column commanders and their staffs filled the tables, which betimes were the mess-boards of the bank clerks and shop-walkers of the village. The soldiers, however, had some right to be in temporary possession, since the viands were their own. The two little serving-maids, daughters of a Dutch proprietress, were alive to the unusual importance of their duties, and had carefully prepared for the part. Print dresses were dispensed with, and they stood arrayed in their Sabbath frocks, covered with the becoming apron-pinafore which the country affects, and with carefully braided hair. Quaint little maids—why should we quiz them?—they were there dressed and determined to do their best. At the first table sat a middle-aged major-general, a man of kindly face and habit. As a soldier—a fierce, intrepid leader—can you not remember the day when he lay amongst the scrub of the Modder bank with his chest laid bare by a raking bullet, and refused to be carried to hospital,—even entreated the doctors to let him carry out the mad effort, worthy of a Marshal Ney, which had been intrusted to him, and which all but cost him his life. Yet, so strange is the complex nature of the Englishman, this man, whom the breath of war could rouse to a courage almost superhuman, spent his leisure in the toils of artistic photography, and evinced more demonstrative pleasure over a successful plate than in a battlement of arms made sweet in victory.

At the next table sat a leader of another kind, or rather a different development of the same type of quiet unassuming English gentleman,—the gallant, thrusting, never-tiring Plumer. Small spare man of dainty gait and finish, yet moulded in a clay which hitherto has shown no flaw in the rougher elements of the soldier. It is no inconsiderable tribute to his sterling qualities as a leader that he gained both the confidence and devotion of the rough Bushboys from the Antipodes, with whom he was associated. But however dainty and unassuming the shell, it is the spirit which fashions the man, and he who would continue in the shade of Plumer's banner must ride with all the cunning he may possess to prove himself worthy of the lead he follows. At another table sits Pilcher, the man on wires. Hot-headed he may be, yet withal crafty in war: worthy representative of the race of young soldiers which the Nile has bred. Then there was our own brigadier, as buoyant in spirit and as light of heart as any of his ancestors who played the gallant in the Court of Versailles, yet possessing beneath the veneer of gaiety a steadfast tenacity of purpose, which favoured the quartering added from the north of the Tweed. The room was full of men—men who for eighteen solid months had been engaging in the stern realities of war. The leaders who had exercised the balance of life and death, the juniors who had looked a thousand dangers squarely in the face. If success in war was only made up in the excellence of fighting men, then England could stand out pre-eminent. Unfortunately, success lies in business-soldiers *plus* fighting men. It is in her business-soldiers that England's weakness lies.

It is only when the intention is to do something desperate that one is able to appreciate the obstructive temperament of military officialdom. The whole system teems with "wait-a-bit" thorns; and in such rare cases when difficulties do not exist, some jack-in-office is certain to arrive with the sole object and intention of inventing them. Now, the brigadier had put forward a simple and rational plan,—so simple and rational that the lieutenant-general at De Aar had willingly acquiesced, for this general was at least a man to whom his juniors might look and be certain of support. But after the general there arose a pack of snarling juniors, whose only energy seemed to be expended in an endeavour to frustrate the plans of others. The brigade had orders to march by night the six miles which separate Hopetown from Orange River Station, but long before it took the road the departmental spirit of opposition had commenced to make itself felt.

First came a "clear-the-line" message from the transport officer, ordering the brigadier to hand over his mule-transport to another column commander. It is true that he promised to re-equip him with mule-transport at the destination of his railway journey; but the brigadier had had experience of the director of transport's promises. This was an impediment which it was possible to ignore; but it was followed by another more serious. The supply people appeared to have been hurt on the score of the short notice which had been given to them, and raised a host of difficulties. But the climax was reached when the Intelligence Department volunteered the information that it would be useless for the brigade to apply for maps, as they had none in stock; but they added, "As a substitute we are sending the best local guide procurable."

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The brigadier had met the first of these hindrances with equanimity, but the last burden upset the camel's load. "Did you ever see such fellows? they are bent on thwarting me every time. I shall ignore them right through; the only attention the man who has the audacity to offer me a low horse-thieving local expert as the substitute for a gross of maps deserves is to be court-martialled and stamped out of existence on sight. You need not telegraph all that, Mr Intelligence; but you may send a message to the general in De Aar to inform him that, having received his orders, I shall leave no stone unturned to carry out the scheme he has sanctioned, in spite of local obstruction. That is to be the sense of the message, and it ought to cover any subsequent act of disobedience which we undertake. Don't make answers to any of these subordinate fry; we will just march at nine o'clock to-night to Orange River Station, raid the place of such rations as we can lay hands on, and then, maps or no maps, take off our caps to Cape Colony for ever."

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It was just as well that the brigadier had made his own arrangements, for both Plumer and Pilcher forgathered at Orange River that night, and the stationmaster, with the bonhomie bred of a long period spent in disappointing everybody with whom he came in contact, informed each column commander in rotation that the best he could promise them was truckage sufficient for one squadron on the following day, two squadrons perhaps on the second day, and the whole of the mounted troops ordered by rail certainly not before a week or ten days. We just ask you to make a short study of this situation. The episode which is here related was not a farce—far from it: it was a serious endeavour on the part of the British army in South Africa to capture or destroy a noted brigand called De Wet. A possibility of bringing about this desired result was certainly within view, and the British army was straining every nerve to avail itself of a unique opportunity. To the humble subaltern, who was but a microscopic atom of that huge British army, this herculean effort partook rather of the nature of burlesque than of serious war. But it was nothing to the burlesque which was shortly to be enacted on Orange River Station platform.

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As day broke other columns concentrated on the station buildings, until the inartistic surroundings of the little centre became black with men and animals. In appearance it might well be likened to a swarm of bees in temporary possession of a window-frame. Amongst the troops waiting for rolling stock was a wild company of over-sea Colonials—men of independent character and fine physique, who had already done their year in the country, and to whom the sight of a permanent way and the smell of a station-yard brought memories of homes in a distant land, and transports tossing on Table Bay, and a promise that had been made to them by some one, that they should return home the next time they touched the railway. Their dash after De Wet had been undertaken rather in the spirit of a favour. And now they were on the line again, rumour had it that their belated truckage had been ordered to convey them back to the Orange River Colony. They accepted this rumour as a breach of faith, and feeling ran high in the contingent—ran so high that it overlapped and swamped the tiny pillar of discipline which thirteen months of campaigning had built into the constitution of the corps. The climax was reached on the morning of the concentration at Orange River Station. The colonel commanding the over-sea Colonials stood chatting with our brigadier. We were waiting for the shoddy platform buffet to open its hospitable doors, when suddenly we were aware of the whole of the Colonial contingent marching in correct files on to the platform. A full private was in command. He issued his orders clearly. "Halt!"—"Pile arms!"—"Stand clear!"—"Fall out!" And then a deputation of three advanced towards us. They saluted their colonel with all military punctiliousness, and stood as stiffly to attention as is possible with the irregular.

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Colonial Colonel. "What does this mean, men?"

Spokesman. "If you please, sir, we have mutinied" (*the supporting deputation gravely nodded their assent*).

C. C. "The devil you have!—but do you realise what it means when you mutiny on active service?"

S. "Well, you see, sir, it is putting it rather strongly, perhaps, to say that we *have* mutinied. But you see, sir, our time is up, and we have determined not to go on the trek any more. Our last trek was a favour. We were promised that we should be sent home the next time we struck the railway, and we hold by this promise."

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C. C. "Men, don't be fools. Go back to your camp. You have no need to believe that faith will be broken with you. But think of the example you are setting to the rest of the troops here! Think of what the people at home will say! You don't realise what you are liable to for mutiny."

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S. "Well, sir, we don't exactly mean this as mutiny. This is just a protest against being kept out

here against our will and agreement. You will accept it, sir, in the spirit that it is given—a protest, sir!"

C. C. "Very good. Go back to your lines!"

The deputation saluted, returned to the fallen-out contingent, which gravely unplied its arms and marched back to its lines, amid a little desultory cheering from some few by-standers who realised what was taking place.

The brigadier turned to the Colonial colonel and said, "Well, that is the quaintest attitude that I have ever seen taken up by a body of men. Do they often treat you to these protests?"

C. C. "Sometimes. They are children in many respects. I can tell you they need gentle handling. They have made their protest, and for a week or so will be quite satisfied. I even fancy that I shall be able to get them to do yet another trek if the authorities insist; but it makes it devilish hard for us to deal with these fellows, when faith is so constantly broken with them. They are as quiet as mice when I get them away from the railway. But once they see metals they smell sea-water, and it upsets them. They are fine but quaint fellows!"

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The brigadier acquiesced. He would have been just the man to have commanded these men. And he would have improved a situation such as the one we had just witnessed. Yet it would be impossible to overrate the delicacy of that situation. A tactless man, full of the power which long generations of military discipline has built round the sanctity of a commission, in a few short sentences would have converted the scene of incipient mutiny into open intractable rebellion. As it was, the mutiny was taken in the spirit in which it had been made, and terminated to the satisfaction of all concerned.[39]

The New Cavalry Brigade became almost complete at Hopetown, as the brigadier was able to collect his last missing squadron of the 21st King's Dragoon Guards, which hitherto had been taking part in the De Wet hunt with another column. A portion of the Mount Nelson Light Horse, however, was still missing; but the brigadier did not worry about them, and felt himself complete, as he took the precaution to issue orders that he was about to proceed by rail to Jagersfontein Road. But, as the narrative of the next forty-eight hours is to show, the military system prevailing in South Africa was such that it was only by a miracle that the most sagacious of leaders were able to accomplish any exceptional result by strategy. The brigadier had schemed to bring about a result which could only be arrived at by the most rigid concealment of plan and direction.

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It must be borne in mind that the Boers at this period of the campaign had the most perfect system of intelligence. There was not a district in the Transvaal or Orange River Colony which was not under the command of a local commandant, who with a following of fifty to a hundred men maintained a system of observation-posts throughout the length and breadth of his district, and who apparently had the means of conveying to some central organisation early intelligence of the movement of every British column. This may appear to the casual observer as an enormous undertaking, but in reality it was nothing of the kind. It was absolutely essential to the Boer cause that a considerable portion of their less valuable fighting material should thus be distributed over the length and breadth of the guerilla area. Owing to the great distances to be traversed in South Africa, every Dutchman had a local knowledge of his own district which could never be acquired in a country of rapid communication such as England. To local men were apportioned the network of observation-hills in which the country abounds. They lived upon the hill-tops all day, and returned either to farms or other places of security during the night. Their method of inter-communication was either by Kaffirs or mounted messengers, and in this way news could travel by relay as easily and rapidly as it is carried by a similar system amongst the natives of India. Any Kaffir will dog-trot ten miles in two hours; consequently without much effort Boer information would travel a hundred and twenty miles in twenty-four hours. Added to this, every woman remaining upon a farm was of the nature of an intelligence agent, and after the women had been removed, for the most part to the concentration camps, the majority of Kaffir kraals served the same purpose. It was this means of information which made the Boer resistance possible: it was to this system of espionage that De Wet owed the success of his meteor-like career.

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The Intelligence centre at De Aar being unable to furnish the requisite maps, took upon itself to supply "the best local guide procurable." It is mainly to the services rendered by this local guide that De Wet owes his escape on this particular occasion. The brigadier was fully alive to the existence of the Boer local espionage; but it must be said with truth that he had not realised to what extent De Wet's *clientèle* included the men who possessed the confidence of the De Wet expert and the intelligence faculty at De Aar. If he had realised this he would have been content to have made his dash, trusting to the almost supernatural instinct of the Tiger. As it was, to the general regret, the Tiger was allowed to sever his connection with the column, to be replaced by one of the many "sitters upon the fence" who have for months conducted to the prolongation of the war.

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The latest information with regard to the movements of De Wet had been signalled by Haig, who appeared to hold the view that he had the arch-guerilla hemmed in against the unfordable flood of the Orange River in the immediate neighbourhood of the Colesberg waggon-bridge. Now the brigadier, as has already been shown, did not believe in the unfordability of rivers. Moreover, the Orange River in front of us was falling, and further information, which had been arrived at through a rather peculiar channel, furnished us with the details of a letter of instruction which had been sent by De Wet when at Strydenburg to Field-cornet Botmann, then commanding the local commando in the Fauresmith district, instructing him to collect as many horses and Cape-carts as possible, and to keep them in readiness at Philippolis in order to expedite his (De Wet's)

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journey north. Basing his plans upon this information, the brigadier determined to place himself on the line Jagersfontein-Fauresmith just at the moment when De Wet halted to catch his breath at Philippolis. He would then detach half his force to cover his right, facing south, leaving it to Plumer or other troops despatched from the railway at Jagersfontein Road to cover and close his left flank. To frustrate the vigilance of Botmann's observation-posts it was the brigadier's intention to make Fauresmith by forced marches. It had to be considered that there was only a small margin in which it would be possible to arrive at Fauresmith with advantage. Too early an arrival would have warned and headed De Wet before the flank-detached column was in position to effectually co-operate; while dalliance on the line of march would have missed him altogether. It was a manœuvre which could not have been successful without some element of luck, but which was destined to be rendered still more difficult by the co-operation of the local guide. [282]

As it was, the man was not taken into the brigadier's confidence until he issued his marching orders to his force, a bare two hours before the column was destined to take the road. The guide had joined the command with all the pomp and dignity attaching to a following of five mounted native retainers. He was an Africander of a most marked type, and opened his connection with the Intelligence officer with the information that he was not an ordinary guide, that he only took his instructions from the officer commanding the column, and that he reported alone to him. The brigadier smiled at his pedantry, remarking that if he did his job it did not matter much to whom and by whom he made his reports.

In order to facilitate the early movement of the brigade, it had moved across the now historic railway-bridge at Orange River and camped in the Herbert district, with the report that Kimberley was its destination. For the sake of precaution the brigadier had thrown out a strong outpost into the hilly country covering the road to Ramah. Shortly after midnight, the Intelligence officer was sent out with the final instructions to this outpost. As he stumbled amongst the rocks he saw in the dim light which the young moon diffused a mounted native moving along a track below him. The native would have remained unrecognised, as the distance was considerable, if his horse had not been a piebald of peculiar marking. The mounted native "had the legs of" the Intelligence officer; but as he disappeared in the shadows of night the Intelligence officer's apprehensions were allayed by hearing the man challenged by a picket from the outpost. In five minutes the Intelligence officer reached the picket to find the native gone, and the corporal in charge stated that the man had shown a pass signed by the Intelligence officer, Orange River Station. This hardly appeared to be satisfactory; but the corporal, like so many young British non-commissioned officers, had had no directions concerning native scouts and passes, and not being trained to take upon himself precautionary responsibility, had been duly frightened and coerced by the scrawl of a hieroglyphic on a remnant of blue paper. [283]

The Intelligence officer considered the whole affair with great suspicion, and when he returned to the headquarters bivouac he walked down to the new guide's *entourage* and took stock of his "boys" and animals. One of the five "boys" was missing, also a piebald pony which had caught his eye earlier in the day. The Intelligence officer held his peace, but, armed with this information, determined to watch future developments, and flung himself down on the roadside to snatch half an hour's sleep before the forward march should commence. [284]

It was the brigadier's intention to seize Luckhoff—a little hamlet situated half-way between Orange River and Fauresmith—that morning by a *coup de main*. To accomplish this he detached half his force without baggage, under the command of the colonel of the 21st, to move as rapidly as circumstances would permit, and to occupy and hold the town until he himself arrived with the main body later in the day. The newly acquired guide was detailed to accompany the advance column. By nine o'clock in the morning this advanced column was in position to bear down upon the little prairie township. The colonel of the 21st, well versed in the tactics best suited to surprise a village on the open plain, extended a squadron into a horn-like formation, and galloped, as he imagined, to the surprise of the inhabitants. The sequel was very different to what had been expected. Save for women, the village was deserted, while from the high ground and hills to the north-east, a fully prepared posse from Botmann's commando opened a heavy rifle-fire on those cavalymen who had been detached to occupy the farther approaches. Our Intelligence guide, who by some means had disappeared during the later progress of the advance, was at once in evidence as soon as the town was entered. He rode straight as a die to a small store which ornamented the main street. Ultimately it proved that he was the owner of this store. [285]

The first comment of the intelligent reader will be that the action of the guide was clumsy, both in design and execution, and that a column thus duped deserves to meet with ill success. The guide's action was undoubtedly clumsy, but it must be remembered that he had had long experience of the British: he knew as well as every other man of similar calibre in South Africa how far he could afford to play with their forbearance. As far as the staff of the New Cavalry Brigade was concerned, once the guide was admitted to the confidence of the general the possibility of checking his further machinations was beyond their reach. The fault lay with those who had given him his credentials. Yet there was no proof against the man: he allowed that the store was his, he admitted that he had sent one of his natives on ahead of the column, claimed that he had permission thus to use the native, who, he assured us, was one of the most trusted and loyal scouts that the British had. For what reason had he sent him? The answer was simple enough. He had only sent him with a message to the man who was looking after his store, with instructions not to open it after daybreak lest it should be looted by friend and foe alike. It was a pity, as it subsequently proved, that we failed to make him produce this loyal boy. [286]

The only remark in the way of comment made by the brigadier was to the effect that "One only learns by experience." He refused, and doubtless rightly, to accede to the wishes of others on his [287]

staff that the man should be executed out of hand. He promised to send him back to Cape Colony, where, doubtless, he would give a satisfactory explanation, and return again to some position of trust and honour in the British service.

People in England, and those who have had experience of this extraordinary campaign, will never realise the extent to which the British army in South Africa has reposed confidence in knaves and scoundrels. For one man that may have been shot or hanged, there will have been a hundred who have gained the confidence of the British to betray it either to their own use or that of the enemy. No one could ever know or assess the extent of the knavery which has arisen, flourished, and grown fat in this long-protracted war. And what a field for sharps and knaves! Was not the control of the whole country in the hands of straightforward and fair-thinking English officers,—men whose word was their bond, and who never thought to distrust their fellow-men, until their fellow-men thrust their barefaced iniquities upon them. Believe me, that under the Southern Cross it is not the Dutch who are vile. [288]

But although we could not hope now to fall upon the arch-guerilla with the full weight of first surprise, yet from the nature of the situation in which he had been engaged during the last three weeks his theatre and resources were of necessity circumscribed. The situation even yet presented possibilities, and the brigadier settled to remain longer in Luckhoff than he had originally intended, sending a patrol to reconnoitre the Orange River. This patrol met with some success. It was commanded by the same pessimistic subaltern who had commanded the advance-guard from Richmond Road. Again it was his fortune to chaperon the Intelligence officer in a quest for information. It was a fifteen-mile ride to the nearest portion of the river, consequently it was late in the afternoon when the patrol entered the hilly tracts of country which covered the immediate approaches to the yellow stream. As the advance-guard of the party topped a little nek, they rode into a group of five burghers. The British dragoons had the advantage, as the burghers had only that moment emerged from the river, which they had crossed with the aid of rafts manufactured from drift-wood and rushes. Not a shot was fired, and the men surrendered gladly the only two rifles remaining to them. [289]

One of the most curious traits in the burgher character has been displayed in the manner of his capitulation. He will always tell you that he is pleased to surrender, that it is an end he has been longing and praying for for months, and yet until the actual moment which necessitates surrender he will strain every nerve to avoid capture, will suffer every privation and hardship; endure hunger, thirst, disease, and sickness, rather than walk the few miles which separate him from the British outposts. Take the case of these men who were just captured: after a most harassing campaign, they had gone to the risk and pain of crossing a rapid river in full flood; having crossed at infinite peril, they welcomed the advent of the hostile patrol which deprived them of their liberty, and far from making expression of resentment, availed themselves of the opportunity to surrender, in an attitude which ill disguised their eagerness. [290]

Moreover, they were loquacious. They had crossed the railway at Paauwpan with the remnant of De Wet's fugitive commando. In the neighbourhood of Philipstown the guerilla had ordered a general break-up of the whole of his remaining commando. At certain points along the Orange River it was said that boats were hidden for the purpose of effecting a crossing. But this particular party, having been unable to find one of these boats, and having been shot at by various patrols from pursuing columns, had effected the passage of the river in their own original way but to fall into our hands. As far as De Wet and President Steyn were concerned, these men professed to be able to speak with authority. Reduced to a single Cape cart, they had determined to cross at Botha's Drift. Their crossing was to have been covered by a commando collected by Botmann at Philippolis, and they themselves, in common with all the dispersed burghers, had orders to concentrate within four days at Philippolis, where supplies, horses, and ammunition would be awaiting them. All this, as it coincided with previous knowledge, was valuable information, and the patrol hurried to make the return journey to Luckhoff. [291]

FOOTNOTES:

[35] Jocular term borrowed from the Dutch for small British columns.

[36] Dutch village.

[37] It is interesting to note that eventually this reasoning was brought home to the direction of operations in South Africa. After practically a year of the unsatisfactory groping referred to in the text, the conception of the blockhouse system enabled mounted troops to operate far into the vital interior of the country without returning to the railway. It must be understood that the main use of the blockhouse-line was not to stretch an impassable *chevaux-de-frise* from point to point, but to furnish a series of posts, which ensured the safety of the convoys that followed their trend. By this means it was possible to keep columns operating in the interior supplied with food and forage. So much so, that towards the end many columns had not been near a town or railway for weeks. The conception of the "drives," which ultimately brought the peace movement to a head, was an afterthought, which is commonly attributed in South Africa to the sagacity of that intrepid and versatile young cavalry leader, Colonel Mike Rimington.

[38] Dutch mounted columns.

[39] This very contingent continued to serve with distinction for quite a considerable period

 XI.

FULL CRY.

Luckhoff, in normal circumstances, has little to distinguish it from the many rural villages scattered over the South African veldt. If anything, it is more squalid than the general run of fourth-rate hamlets. But when the New Cavalry Brigade went into billet there, it was more or less a deserted and plundered village. The inhabitants may have totalled a hundred souls, the large majority of whom were women and children; and we should not have found these in possession if our Intelligence guide had been able to give earlier notice of our coming. As is the case with all these hamlets, the inhabitants who had escaped the clutches of the "clearing-up" columns were in the possession of *caches* in the neighbourhood, where they hid away as soon as the dust-clouds on the horizon forewarned them of the near approach of a British column. Many columns had already "been through" Luckhoff, from Clements in the early days, to Settle moving in stately magnificence with thousands of cattle and hundreds of women in the preceding spring. Each marauder in turn had left something of a mark, but none had left so bare a skeleton or had stamped so plainly the impress of horrid war as a column of somebody's bushmen. The brigadier had planted his little red pennant in front of the villa of the absconded Predikant. It was the only house in the place which had any pretension to decorative finish. But when the staff took possession it was a sorry pigsty. In its halcyon days a part of the house had evidently been in the possession of a young mother, for two of the apartments were knee-deep in a disordered heap of female apparel, intermingled with the tiny garments which mothers store away—small socks and bonnets tied with pink and blue. The ruthless hand of man had ransacked each drawer and crevice, and all that calls forth the sacred care of women lay tossed and tumbled in the dirt of floor and passage. To those who had time to think, a sad, heart-rending sight, pitiful evidence of the degrading influence of war. During the first year of the struggle there was not a man in the British army who would have pushed a woman aside to ransack the sacred corners of her chamber. But war's brutal influence in time blunted the finer instincts. How could it be otherwise? The longer a struggle is protracted the fiercer and more bestial it will become, until at last familiarity with the final arbitration of the beast deadens the better influences of human reasoning. As one saw upon every hand the ruin of these homes—many of which showed evidence of refinement bred of wealth and education—one felt the pity of it all, and cursed the leaders who in their spirit of tin-pot patriotism had pushed a struggle, already hopeless, to its most barbarous issue.

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Looting was not allowed. That is true, but how was it to be prevented?—where can you draw the line between legitimate requisition in war and brutal plunder? Can you punish the men who in the morning followed you without flinching in the face of death, because in the evening you find them searching in a deserted house for a 'kerchief, waist-band, or baby's sock to send as a memento to the mother or sweetheart waiting patiently at home? Is there not some extenuation for the man whose "pal" has been ambushed and butchered, when he gleefully places a match to the murderer's byre or dwelling? Place yourselves in the position of the fighting man before you consider actions which are inseparable from partisan warfare, and bear in mind that if the leaders of the enemy had capitulated when it was first evident that they were a beaten people, there would not have been a tithe of the brutality and suffering which marked the final phases of the struggle. The story of the Predikant was strange. Himself a firebrand of the most dangerous nature, he had preached an anti-British *jehad* with all the force of his ecclesiastical rhetoric. Yet his three sons were of other clay. One, a staunch trooper of Thorneycroft's, had died a soldier's death on Spion Kop's shell-swept summit; another, an athlete of no mean order, had served in Lord Robert's bodyguard; while the third was still fighting against the people of his kind as an officer in some other British corps. The two daughters, both married to *veldt kornets*, were already widows it may be, for the irony of fate is infinite, by their brothers' rifles.

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We found one Britisher in Luckhoff, and he was a Scotsman. His story was plausible; but though it had satisfied other column commanders, it did not find the same credence with our brigadier. According to the man's statement he was neutral. Had been neutral since the outbreak of war. He was an engineer in the Koffyfontein mines, and since these had closed down he had come to Luckhoff and made a living by market-gardening. Two circumstances conspired against the continued freedom of this so-called Scotsman. The first was the fact that he quoted our Intelligence guide as a reference for his good conduct; the second, that we had found a steam flour-mill at work in the vicinity, and circumstantial evidence pointed to our market-gardener as the *mechanicien* in charge. This being given as the real reason for his presence in the hamlet, there was no need for his sojourn to be continued, as we had closed down the safety-valve until the boiler burst, and wrecked the mechanism of the engine. Flour-mills, even when worked by

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market-gardeners of doubtful neutrality, can be of service to a starving enemy.

The brigadier determined to halt a little in Luckhoff to procure if possible more definite information. About midday this information came, from both ordinary and extraordinary channels. As the headquarters sat at lunch a mounted messenger arrived from Orange River,—a small spare Hottentot or Griqua, who weighed about five stone, and who had been put upon a horse and told to cover fifteen miles an hour until he found us. The message he brought was in point of fact a confirmation of the information which we had gleaned already from our prisoners of the preceding evening. "De Wet, and with him the President," ran the message, "crossed the Orange River at Botha's Drift at three o'clock to-day (yesterday). By mistake gap in circle let him through. Crossed without transport and with smallest following. Presumably will go north. Plumer cannot leave Springfontein until early day after to-morrow (to-morrow). Must leave you to act exactly as you think right. Co-operate if possible with Plumer!" [298]

Brigadier. "Presumably will go north! Well, that is the most ingenuous expression of opinion that I have ever heard. A man crosses from the south bank of a river to the north, and by an extreme effort our friends of the Intelligence are able to conjecture that he will go north. He certainly has the northern field open to him. It is worthy of the information slips issued by our friend the D.A.A.G. for Intelligence at Bloemfontein for the guidance of the columns in his districts: 'Everything in this shop window sixpence halfpenny; take your choice every time.' As usual, we shall have to work out our own salvation. Mr Intelligence, the map!"

The map was duly spread upon the Reverend Predikant's mahogany board, and with the aid of a slip of paper the distances measured off. The brigadier sat back in his chair, drawing meditatively at the bent stem of his Boer pipe. When the measuring was over he remained silent a moment and then gave his opinion of the situation. [299]

Brigadier. "They evidently have no one operating down from Bloemfontein, otherwise they would not quote Plumer. It is just as evident that De Wet slipped across the river at some spot where it is not precisely convenient for any of our Colony brigands to pursue him. That is, we are their only hope and the only mobile people within reach. De Wet crossed the Orange River yesterday afternoon, therefore, according to our information, he should have slept at Philippolis last night. As a rule De Wet never sleeps in the same place on two consecutive nights. But his arrival at Philippolis was in rather peculiar circumstances. He didn't arrive a successful swashbuckler cocking his hat with all his plans made, but a washed-out fugitive with all his plans to make. Therefore the chances are that he won't have got very far on his way from Philippolis to-night. Probably he won't make a start until to-morrow morning. He knows that his right is clear. He knew last night or early this morning that we had arrived at Luckhoff. He will have information by this that we have halted this morning, and that the Riet River is in flood. Therefore it is plain that he, taking us as an average British commando, can leave Philippolis at daybreak to-morrow, cross the Riet, and destroy the Kalabas bridge behind him without inconvenience from us. At least that is the map reading of this picnic. It is a short fifty miles from Philippolis to Fauresmith; we are thirty miles from Fauresmith. A British commando halted to-day would not reach Fauresmith until evening to-morrow; a Boer *paarde kommando* will have done its fifty miles by the time one of our 'crawlers' outspans for breakfast. Now, old man Baker, get out orders. For public guidance, we march at four o'clock for Koffyfontein and Kimberley, going d—d slow; for private information, as soon as it is dark we will change direction and be in possession of Fauresmith as soon after daybreak as possible. Whoever is in possession of Fauresmith will be in possession of the bridge over Riet River. Mr Intelligence, it will be your business to make it sufficiently well known in this metropolis that our destination is Koffyfontein for Kimberley. Don't make them suspicious by being too emphatic about it." [300]

Brigade-Major. "Very good, sir; but we shall have to cover at least forty miles!"

B. "True for you; what's the odds?"

B.-M. "Only the ox-transport. It can't reach Fauresmith by daybreak, night-marching. There ain't anything of a moon—in fact it's going to be devilish dark with all these clouds about."

B. "True again: but we will dodge all that. As soon as we have changed direction to our true line, we will leave the transport to come along as best it may: it can follow us to Fauresmith."

B.-M. "What escort shall I give it?"

B. "How many dismounted men are there? It can have just as many cripples as we possess. I am not going to worry about transport. If I am wrong in my calculations and De Wet attempts to cross behind me, I want that transport to deceive him. He would never dream of it being unprotected. He cannot be in any strength; besides, I shall want every mounted man I have got for my scheme. The transport, ox and mule, must take its chance. But see that it doesn't straggle. The mule can keep up with us as long as possible, but it must keep together. Likewise the ox-transport, taking its own time, must keep closed up. I assure you the only object of these people on this journey will be to get away. Two blocks of moving waggons will mystify them, not attract them. Right away,—not a word about the change of direction until after dark—not even to C.O.'s. Tell 'em any story you like." [302]

The Intelligence officer had barely got outside when a tall and even good-looking native attracted his attention by raising his battered hat and murmuring "kos." The man, a magnificent specimen of the Basuto savage, was quivering with emotion, and he pointed to a great grey-white weal which showed across his neck and open breast.

Intelligence Officer. "Sjambok?"

Basuto. "Yah, Boss!"

I. O. "How did you come by this?"

The native, who was of more than average intelligence, then told the following astounding story. He was one of the five native scouts employed by the new Intelligence guide. The morning that the New Cavalry Brigade had left Orange River Station, he had been sent forward by our friend with a letter to Commandant Botmann, and, finding that he was not at Luckhoff, the Basuto had warned the acting landrost^[40] there of the approach of the British, and had then ridden on to Philippolis, and was there when De Wet and Steyn arrived; and in the truly expressive language of the native he told of their dejection and the dispiriting nature of the speech which the ex-President had made to the assembled burghers. He also furnished the valuable information that De Wet had issued instructions that all stray burghers and Brand's, Wessel's, Akermann's, and Kolbe's commandos should concentrate with him at Petrusberg, whither he was proceeding on the following day with his personal bodyguard under Theron. As the brigadier had anticipated, De Wet was halting a day to allow his stragglers to concentrate. In all he would have about 300 men and forty Cape carts. But at Petrusberg they would concentrate to about 1200 or 1500. The Basuto had ridden through from Philippolis that night, and had arrived back at Luckhoff only half an hour ago. The blow which was responsible for this disclosure of his master's perfidy and the Boer plans was by reason of a favourite horse. In order to ensure the safe delivery of his message, and not dreaming that it would go all the way to Philippolis, the Intelligence guide had mounted the Basuto on his best horse. This best horse had caught the eye of a Winburg burgher in Philippolis, and he had relieved the Basuto of it, leaving him to make his way back upon some scarecrow. *Hinc illæ lacrymæ.*

The Intelligence officer smoothed over the Basuto's ill-will with fair-mouthed promises, and led him to understand that if he went back to his master and suffered in silence for a short period longer he would be handsomely rewarded. But, said the dignified savage, "he bad man—always bad man, telling d—d Dutchmens always. Boss give me gun, no more telling Dutchmens!" The Intelligence officer pacified the man by promises of an execution in the near future, and then went to the brigadier with the information and an earnest conspiracy against the guide's life. However, the evidence was not conclusive enough for the brigadier. "What proof have you that it is not all a plant on the part of your friend, Mr Intelligence? Besides, I would never hang a white man on the evidence of a black. I am bad at the 'black-cap' game, but I'll tell you what I will do. I don't want any more of this guide; tell him that we are going to Kimberley, and that he can go back to Orange River at once; write a letter to the De Aar Intelligence coves, and tell them we are bound for Kimberley, seal it heavily with sealing-wax, and then, if your 'pal' is the bandit you represent him to be, he will read it and send it to De Wet to-night. If he is not a knave he will deliver it some time to-morrow night, when we shall be out of the ken of the De Aar folk, and the lie won't matter." And so it was arranged....

It has been pointed out earlier in this narrative how often De Wet has owed his freedom, and incidentally his life, to the leaning of the law of chances in his favour. Times without number a sequence of extraordinary circumstances has conspired to defeat the best-laid plans which have been made to enmesh him. It is not intended to deny that the man was possessed of a peculiar genius which constantly of itself freed him from the dangers to which he was exposed. But beyond this there were instances, not so rare as the world would believe, when his genius failed him, and it was upon these occasions that Providence stepped in and furnished a balance against which it was impossible for human endeavour to prevail. It will never be maintained that in the present case the brigadier had divined an infallible scheme. But, as will be seen, the operation of circumstances so dovetailed with the brigadier's appreciation of the situation, that though no certain opportunity was foreseen of seizing the arch guerilla in his bed, yet there was every promise that he would be forced to play a hand with the cards against him,—a circumstance which no Boer—not even De Wet—liked or understood. One such a chance had presented itself before, when a senior influence intervened and kept the New Cavalry Brigade from falling upon Strydenburg. In the present case the intervention was to be made by the elements, and even then the energy and wit of the capable soldier who was in command brought the brigade within an ace of a success which would have made all concerned famous in the history of this war.

At four o'clock the advance-guard opened out on the plain north of Luckhoff, and drew the fire of the observation post on the hills through which the trail to Koffyfontein passes. There would have been no necessity to caution the advance-guard to slowness; and the main body just sauntered on, while commanding officers were asking themselves whether the brigadier was mad or inebriate to plunge into a night march of this character when his object was only to get to Kimberley. The good ladies of Luckhoff watched the last of the transport disappear over the nek into the darkness of gathering night, and then sent their eight-year-old sons or Kaffirs to recall such of their men-folk as lay hid in the neighbouring *caches*, while the observation post sent a galloper to the next point, that the news might be patented that the column had taken the Kimberley road. By sundown the head of the column had made about six miles, and a halt was called to allow the baggage to close up. As soon as it was sufficiently dark the change in direction was made, and the head of the column left the road and plunged into the trackless veldt, it being estimated that a compass bearing due east would bring it by daybreak within easy reach of the parallelogram of hills in which Fauresmith and Jagersfontein lie. But the favour of Providence was withdrawn: the night, which had been born in suffocating heat, suddenly changed to piercing cold, and great zigzags of white lightning, clutching at the heavens like the claws of some gigantic dragon, heralded a tempest of unwonted fury. And presently it came preceded by a blinding sandstorm, which told how much the burnt surface of the prairie yearned for moisture.

That night it drank its fill, for when the flood-gates burst asunder a very deluge was loosed upon the earth. The great storm voided its burden in such rivers of water that in a moment, in spite of waterproof and oil-skin, every man in the force was as drenched as if he had plunged into a stream. Nor was it a passing downfall of temporary duration. It deluged in unbroken stream for the best part of an hour. Automatically the whole force came to a standstill: checked, bedraggled, and miserable, it stood it out. To advance was impossible; each depression in the veldt was a sheet of water, in places inches deep. The whole crust of the earth had become a sticky sodden morass, and in this mire the column lay bogged and helpless. Guns and waggons sank axle-deep, their drunken alignment proving that for the time being they were immobile. Horses, mules, and oxen struggled and floundered for a foothold, sinking with terror-stricken sobs and distressful moans until their bellies were level with the slush. A hideous scene!

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There was nothing that man could do: until such time as the natural drainage of the plain and the parched substratum absorbed the superfluous moisture, the brigade was as helpless as a steamer with a broken screw-shaft. Mercifully for the staff, the catastrophe had overtaken the brigade within a mile of a fair-sized farm; and eventually, after much labour in the mire, the brigadier and his immediate following were able to claim its hospitality. Luckily it was occupied. A smiling good-natured *frau*, on the stout side of thirty, with a bevy of girls ranging from two to twelve, was endeavouring to cope with an inundation of sodden troopers from the advance-guard. It was a nice farm, and to our astonishment Madam Embonpoint proved to be an English Africander. Her husband was in St Helena, and since the outbreak of war she had worked her husband's property single-handed. Madam was anything but hostile; but she prayed that we would not break into her slender store of provisions, since she had ten mouths to feed, and the pinch of war was near at hand. Otherwise we were welcome to such hospitality as her roof would afford us, and she was prepared to cook and prepare for us any food we might have with us. It chanced that the officer of the advance-guard was a captain of the Mount Nelson Light Horse. He was one of the few in that corps who had impressed himself favourably upon the brigadier, consequently the chief did not burst into abusive satire when he discovered this officer in the act of boiling a turkey in the farm kitchen. Now, in spite of the wet and disappointment, the brigadier had lost none of his usual gaiety of nature. It is often the case with the best soldiers, the more adverse the circumstances the lighter their spirits.

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Brigadier (commencing to divest himself of his wet clothes in front of the fire and pointing to the turkey), "Honestly come by?"

Captain (closing the lid of the pot with a snap), "Yes, sir; the last of our tinned food, sir!"

B. "Seen the tin for the first time to-day, I should think. But what are you going to do with it? You have got to clear your robbers out of this. This is my booth for the night!"

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C. "I realised that, sir, and I said to my subaltern that as it was a cold night we would just open our last tin and offer it to the general as a sign of affection, arguing that if he accepted it in the spirit in which it was given, he would ask us both to dinner."

B. (now in his shirt), "Hearty fellows both. No man born of woman would like a boiled turkey for dinner more than I should, in spite of the fact that it was only killed an hour ago by a captain who should have known better. You are both asked to dinner. Madam, had you not better withdraw?" (This to the lady of the house who had just entered.)

The scene was indeed a strange one. A rough Boer kitchen lit by a dingy dip. The light of the yellow flame impeded by "truck" suspended from the rafters—a side of mutton, some *biltong*, strings of onions and beetroots. In the corner a more or less modern fire-range, in front of which stood a group of officers, comprising the brigadier, his staff, and the two officers of the advance-guard, all in various stages of *déshabille*, some trying to get warm, some to dry their wringing clothes, and others to stoke the fire and boil a pot. Add to these the plump hostess and her tribe of all-aged daughters, whom no exposure of masculine limbs and under-dress seemed to terrify. This did not look like catching De Wet—but then much may take place between midnight and daybreak.

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A chapter could be filled with the miseries which the troops suffered that night, and this being the case, it would be ungracious to dilate upon the sumptuous nature of the feast within the farmhouse. Let it suffice that during its discussion the brigadier cast over the situation and was ready, with the coffee which Madam Embonpoint contributed to the entertainment, with his plan to amend the chaos which the elements had made of his original undertaking.

Brigadier (stirring his cup thoughtfully until the hostess was out of the room). "Mr Intelligence, what do you make the distance between this and the pass this side of Fauresmith?"

Intelligence Officer. "Three- to five-and-twenty miles, sir."

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B. "Have you any one who knows the way?"

I. O. "Yes, sir, there is a man in the Light Horse who has done some transport riding in the Southern Free State, who says he knows something about it."

B. "Better and better (turning to the captain of the advance-guard). Now, I am going to put you in the way of a very big thing. You are senior captain in your corps, are you not?"

Captain. "Yes, sir, senior captain, adjutant, and second in command; we have got no majors!"

B. "That is all right then. Well, I want you to start on at once with two squadrons, and to push on to Fauresmith. I fancy that you will find it has dried up a bit now, and as these storms are usually local, it is quite possible that you may strike better going as you get along. When you get

into the hilly country about Fauresmith, go cunning, try and get as close as you can without being seen, and find a position from which you can hold the road leading from Fauresmith to the Riet River. Come over here and look at the map. Now, if you get off by midnight, you ought to make two miles an hour until daybreak. That is twelve miles; the remaining ten you will do inside two hours. If you are sniped, push on; but if opposed in force, do your best, only let me know. Now, these are my plans (*pointing on the map*). You see the parallelogram? well, you go slap-bang into it. I shall come along as fast as I can with the ground in this condition. I shall, if you come into touch with the enemy in force, send two squadrons and two guns direct to the bridge over the Riet north of the parallelogram, and two squadrons and two guns south of the parallelogram, while I come on with the rest in your direction. Now, your business is, first, not to let yourself be seen; secondly, so to arrange yourself that if De Wet and his crowd get to Fauresmith before we are up, to manœuvre and keep him there until we arrive. It is a difficult job, I allow; but I know that you are the man to make the best of it. Get your men to understand that now they have the opportunity of making a reputation. The brigade-major will give you all this in writing. You may pick your squadrons. Now, get along, and don't waste time!"

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While the two squadrons of Mount Nelson Light Horse were picking their way out of camp that night, and while the rest of the brigade was turning into its miserable bivouac, the staff "bedded down" in the drawing-room of the farmhouse. With so large a family of girls, good Madam Embonpoint could only arrange one spare bedroom, and that was reserved for the brigadier; but the rest dragged their sopping valises into the parlour and trusted to get five hours' sleep before a daylight start....

To add to the chagrin of the brigade, and to further demonstrate the singular Providence which ever seemed to attend De Wet in his movements, even unto the eleventh hour, it was found that the force had bivouacked on the very fringe of the storm. As is so often the case with these South African storms, the rigour of the downfall was local, and while the brigade had been so badly caught that it was practically impossible for the teams to move the guns without the aid of drag-ropes, half a mile away the surface of the veldt was unaffected and the going good. This discovery caused the day to dawn with brighter prospects, and as soon as the sodden column, free of its transport, felt the sounder bottom, it shook itself as would a retriever after a swim, and settled down to a swinging drying-trot. The brigadier had theories on the methods to be employed in the kind of war-game with which he was confronted; and he determined, if possible, to be in front of the Boer pickets and observation-posts, realising that two circumstances were in his favour. The concentration ordered for Philippolis should have reduced the strength of the Boer watchmen, and the rain of the preceding night, while rendering sentinels less inclined for the bitter vigil of early morning, had laid the tell-tale dust, which, as a rule, is the greatest impediment to secret movement. He threw out a troop to go very wide on either flank, in order to serve the double purpose of capturing any shirking Boer pickets which might chance to be alarmed at the later arrival of the transport column, and of guarding against De Wet's commando slipping past across the back trail. As the daylight strengthened, and showed that the going improved, everything pointed to a successful ride on the part of the two squadrons which had been pushed forward in the night. By seven o'clock the men had begun to dry, and as the object of the hunt leaked out, a general improvement was apparent in the spirits of the force.

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The first information which came in to headquarters, as the whole force moved rapidly forward, came from the Basuto scout, whom the Intelligence officer had relieved of his obligations to the Intelligence guide as soon as the latter had been dismissed. His information was serious: he reported that a party of twenty-five Boers had crossed our trail just about eight o'clock, and, travelling fast, had gone in a north-easterly direction. The brigadier cross-examined the man closely, and seemed satisfied as to the truth of his story.

Brigadier (turning to his staff) "We shall be fairly in it, if we have any luck, I don't think that these fellows who have passed behind us are De Wet's actual advance-guard. They are probably a patrol that he has thrown out to look after his exposed flank. He knows that we were at Luckhoff, and he would not have moved without telling off some one to watch us. Now, these people have seen us and passed behind us; but as we have luckily struck and covered the trail of the advance squadrons, they don't know that we have a force six hours ahead of us. Probably they have sent back to De Wet, who will be from one to two hours' distant from them, to inform him, if he puts a spurt on, he can be through the Fauresmith passes before us. If only the Mount Nelsons can hold him, we shall get even with him yet."

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By nine o'clock the Fauresmith hills began to loom up above the dead level of the veldt, and as the trail of the advance squadrons was still steady and we had no news of them, there was every reason to be satisfied that they had successfully made their goal. The situation at least was increasing in interest. A little after ten the column had reached the foot of the Fauresmith hills, and the brigadier wisely called a halt, determined not to commit his troops to the hilly tracts until he had heard something from his advance squadrons.

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But the next information regarding the enemy was not destined to come in from the advance-guard. The column had just off-saddled when a dishevelled trooper with a blanched face galloped up to the tiny group of trees beneath which the brigadier and his staff had dismounted.

Brigadier. "Hullo, here's a man who has seen his own ghost. We shall have some news now. Who are you?"

Trooper. "Please, sir, I belong to Mr Crauford's patrol—it has been annihilated!"

B. (soothingly). "Now dismount, and tell us all about it. What do you belong to!"

T. (*dismounting*). "Mount Nelson Light Horse, sir."

B. "I thought so; now let us have the story."

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T. "Well, sir, there was Mr Crauford, and Sergeant Mullins, and——"

B. "Never mind their names. How many men had Mr Crauford with him?"

T. "About six, sir; and I am the only one left alive to tell the tale!"

B. "How truly awful! and if you don't get on with it your tale will outlast all of us as well. (*Roughly*) Now, throw it out,—what happened?"

T. "Well, sir, you see that farm over there (*pointing to low seam of grey hills about four miles distant on our left flank, at the bottom of which nestled a homestead*), we were riding up to it quiet-like, when suddenly, as we were passing a kraal, up jumps about fifty Boers and calls us to "ands up.' We wouldn't "ands up,' and they shot us down to a man, and——!"

B. "Wait—how did you get away from the general battue?"

T. "I don't exactly know, sir; I kind of found myself galloping for all I was worth, and the bullets just 'umming that thick and awful, that I kept on asking myself the whole way home 'ow it was I managed to escape!"

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B. "You may go. Stop! where's your rifle?"

T. (*for the first time realising that he had not got a rifle*). "I must have dropped it, sir, in the scrimmage—it was awful 'ot, sir!"

B. (*brutally*). "Off you go; you ought to be ashamed to talk to honest men. (*Then turning to the brigade-major*.) Look here, Baker, though I don't believe the man's story *in toto*, or would believe any man who in panic had thrown his rifle away, yet something has happened, and either our men on the left have fallen in with the party of Boers who crossed our trail this morning, or we have let slip the whole 'bag of tricks,' and De Wet is through us. Just you take another squadron of the Mount Nelsons and see what has happened on the left. You can also take the pom-pom. Unless the enemy are in strength don't stay out there long, as I shall probably move on before you are back. Anyway I shall leave a signal-station on the hill above us!"

Brigade-Major. "Very good, sir."

B. "Wait a moment. As the rain-storm has dished my original plans, I shall probably, as soon as I hear from Fauresmith, send half my force direct to the Kalabas bridge, and take the rest to support the Mount Nelson squadrons. But I can make no definite statement until I have some idea of De Wet's force. Gad! I wish I knew where Plumer might be at this moment, or whether there is any one behind De Wet. Without information or maps, this is an uphill game!"...

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In half an hour the brigade-major's little command was within a thousand yards of Liebenbergspan farm. Here they met five woe-begone men tramping wearily towards them. They were Crauford's patrol, stripped of most of their clothing, and desired by the Boers to make their way back to their column with all compliments of the season. The subaltern was very dejected, for he was a boy of the right spirit; and it is a strain upon one's dignity as an officer to be turned loose on the veldt with only a flannel shirt as a dress, and a pair of putties tied round the feet in the place of boots. It was not his fault: he had sent on a man to reconnoitre the farm. This man was our friend who had come in in the morning. As he failed to search the kraal, the Boers had let him past, and had waited for the main body of the patrol, which they had "held up" at short range. The scout, who had passed through them, heard the shouts of "Hands up!" and galloping for dear life, had been able to get clear and pitch the brigadier his terror-bred fable. Apart from taking their clothes, the Boers had treated the prisoners well. They were a party of fifteen men, very poorly clad but well mounted, under a commandant of the name of Theron. Crauford, who was a young English Africander, had, while a prisoner, made good use of his time. His captors did not realise that he understood Dutch, and he had gleaned from their conversation that they were, as the brigadier had anticipated, part of De Wet's screen. They were very much upset at the size of the British column, and had not been prepared for its presence so close to De Wet's line of advance. But as they discussed it among themselves they considered that De Wet would be in front of the column, proving that they had no knowledge of the two squadrons detached during the night. All this was such valuable information that Baker dismounted a man and sent Crauford back to the brigadier as fast as he could gallop. He himself kept on, as Theron's party was still in occupation of the farm.

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The farm stood at the foot of a low brae. It was only a rise, and as the Boers appeared to take no notice of our approach, not even troubling to efface their presence, the brigade-major determined, under cover of his pom-pom, to gallop over it. Half a squadron on the right, half a squadron on the left. He called up the captain commanding the squadron and gave him his instructions. The man at once began to make difficulties, and suggested a different mode of attack.

Brigade-Major (severely). "I have told you what I want you to do. Kindly go and instruct your troop-leaders. As soon as you are extended, canter, and improve your pace when you get sufficiently near. That knoll on the right and the rise on the left both command the farm, and you will find that the enemy won't stand. Good Heavens! man (*as the captain again began to demur*), there are only about twenty of them; surely you are not afraid!"

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The man did not mean going, neither did his squadron. They dallied over extending, and it was quite a quarter of an hour before they began to move forward. The brigade-major dashed to the

head of the right half-squadron and tried to infuse some little enthusiasm into them. But no; it was the very worst squadron of the Mount Nelsons, and when the brigade-major commenced to gallop he found that he was only followed by four men. But this even, added to half a belt from the pom-pom, was sufficient for the Boers: they ran to their horses, which were grazing by the kraal, mounted, and galloped over the rise, without firing a shot. As vultures swoop down upon carrion, so the Mount Nelsons, as soon as it was seen that the rise was clear of the enemy, swarmed down to the looting of the farm. The brigade-major's face was a study when he and the Mount Nelsons' captain met in the verandah. All that he said would not add to the artistic sense of this narrative; but he closed his remarks with the following: "If I catch a man of your regiment touching a single article in this farm I will shoot him myself. Get your men back to their positions, sir. They won't fight; I'll be d—d if they shall loot!"

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In war situations develop rapidly, and the brigade-major had barely dismissed his now sulking junior, when a silver glitter from above the halting-place of the brigade brought the laconic message, "Return at once without delay." Precisely at the same moment a messenger came dashing down from the rise above the farm, and excitedly reported that a long line of Cape carts was rapidly crossing the left front. The brigade-major started the squadron back at a trot, and stayed behind for a few moments to make an investigation of the new development. It was quite true, six Cape carts and about thirty men were crossing his front from right to left at a good pace. They were a long way off, and even if he had not had peremptory orders to return, it would have been hopeless to have attempted to pursue them with such material as he had in hand.

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Brigade-Major (*snapping his glasses back into their case*). "You may put it down, Mr Intelligence, in that voluminous diary of yours, that our quarry has escaped. They have slipped us. Come along; we must canter on and see what the brigadier has in pickle for us!"

But, as subsequent events were to prove, the brigade-major for once was in error....

We found the brigadier impatiently awaiting us, with half the battery hooked in, and the 20th Dragoons standing to their horses. He did not wait for rest or explanation; but as soon as we cantered in with the pom-pom, gave the order for the column to advance. The mule-convoy had come in in our absence, and it had orders to follow us as best it could.

Brigadier. "Look here, you fellows; I really am sanguine for the first time since I have been engaged in this kind of 'follow your leader.' Just about half an hour after you left, our friend the turkey-expert of last night sent in a red-hot man with a message that he had held up the main body of a Boer commando in a pass just west of Fauresmith. He wasn't in position to stop the advance-guard, which went through with about six Cape carts; but he had since captured the Boer picket on the pass and had turned the main body—consisting of about thirty Cape carts and 400 burghers—back, and when he wrote they were halted in Fauresmith."

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Brigade-Major. "We have seen that advance-guard. But is there no other way by which the enemy can get to the Riet: by swinging round between Fauresmith and Jagersfontein, for instance?"

B. "We can't hope that he will stay and wait for us in Fauresmith. Of course there will be a way round; but he may delay, he may try and force his way past the turkey-expert, and then we may be there first. I sent Goven on with the 21st and two guns at once to strike a bee-line for Kalabas bridge—to reck for nothing, only to get there. But we have neither guides nor maps that can give one any idea of the true lie of the country. I could only furnish him with the direction and the ordinary inaccurate sheet-map."

B.-M. "And what do you intend doing yourself, sir?"

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B. "We will just push on hell-for-leather for the position which the turkey-expert is holding; and then if he is being attacked, and wind and tide will allow it, we will just hurl ourselves into ole man De Wet, smother him, or perish in the attempt."

The hills about Fauresmith differ little in formation from the general character obtaining in South Africa. They divide the veldt into a series of rough parallelograms. The brigadier had estimated that we were distant from Fauresmith only about four or five miles, while the inaccurate map showed that when the 21st Dragoon Guards had started, they only had about eight miles to cover before they would reach the Kalabas bridge over the Riet. Therefore the brigadier was satisfied that if he was able to stop the bridge with the 21st and get touch with De Wet's main body before dark, he could deal with it with the force he had kept in hand. But it would be absolutely essential to gain touch that night, and once having gained it, to push through to a conclusion at once. The interior of the first parallelogram allowed the force to advance with an extended front, and six miles of smart trotting brought it to Brandewijnskuil, where the Fauresmith road passes over a stream tributary to the Riet. To the east of this drift, between it and Fauresmith, rise the glacis-like slopes of Groen Kloof—well named, for the whole country here is green, and the immediate neighbourhood of the drift is not unlike many rural spots to be found in Surrey. Bushed as with a hedgerow, the road sinks into the drift, to appear again on the far side, cutting its way between a rough-edged turf upon which geese and goats are browsing. To the left stands a whitewashed cottage, with a corral of stunted shrub and a tree or two. Beside it, in a creeper-grown shed, are the appliances of a blacksmith's craft—yes, just for the moment it might well be Surrey. But we have no time to stay and admire or to soliloquise over scenery. There is men's work ahead. A mounted messenger is dashing down the track in front of us, as if hell and a thousand devils had been loosed behind him. He hands a scrap of paper to the brigade-major, and then throws himself from his horse, which stands motionless with heaving sides and dripping flanks.

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Brigadier. "Read it. Who is it from?"

Brigade-Major. "From the officer in command of the two squadrons of Mount Nelsons. He says: 'Groen Kloof, 3.15 P.M.—Boers about 200 strong demonstrated against me, while the convoy made a circle round out of range to north-east. I was unable to prevent this. Convoy is going as fast as it can due north. You could cut it off. Am holding this until you reinforce. No casualties; have six prisoners.'"

Brigadier (taking out his watch). "It is now 3.40. Goven started at 1.30; he ought to be at the bridge well in front of those coves. If he is, we've got 'em. Here, Baker; take the rest of this crush straight for the north-east corner of this sheet of the map. As soon as you reach the corner, make a right angle, steer north-west, and you ought to come out just on the tail of Brother and his Cape carts. Now, off you go; report to Colonel Washington, but I shall expect you to keep the show going. Gad! it's the chance of the campaign, if the Riet is still in flood!"

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B.-M. "Very good, sir. But where will you be?"

B. "I shall be here. This is where the transport will outspan to-night. I shall keep the turkey-expert up on the top of Groen Kloof all to-night, in case Brother tries to break back that way! But wherever you find the enemy, go for him bald-headed: it is the only chance!"

B.-M. "But if I find that he has crossed the river? If the other column should not be in position?"

B. (deliberately) "If he has got across the Riet, come back at once with your tail between your legs. Pursuit in those circumstances would be useless. But use your own discretion if it comes to a near thing. Tell Freddy that you've my instructions to fight; you and Freddy ought to be able to convince Washington, and Twine, his second in command, is fighting stuff. Good-bye, and good luck to you; spare neither man nor beast. (*As the brigade-major rode off, the brigadier turned to the Intelligence officer.*) Now, Mr Intelligence, I want you also to make yourself useful. I want you if possible to get to Goven and acquaint him of the situation. It is of vital importance that he should know how the force behind him is distributed. Even if they are attacking him at the bridge, do your utmost to get to him: the best of forces present flanks that are possible to single men. Just tell him that Washington with half the force is bearing down upon the bridge from the north-east; that Groen Kloof is held by our own coves; that I am here with the baggage, and its escort of sick, blind, halt, and lame; that if Washington gets into them, he is to leave just enough men to make the bridge secure, and hurl his hoplites in to the help of Washington. Now, ride cunning; you may have a difficult job. I should keep well to the left. Good-bye, and good luck to you. Ride cunning!..."

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The Intelligence officer rode out on his lonely mission. Luckily he had changed his horse after the affair at Liebenbergspan, and being well mounted, he felt fairly confident. He first steered north-west, hoping to strike off the *spoor* of Goven's column. But when after four miles he failed to find it, he opined that he was making a detour which, if persevered in, would not bring him to his destination by nightfall. He therefore changed his direction to due north, and put spurs to his horse. He was working along the inner edge of a great veldt-basin, and getting a little uncomfortable as to his direction; and alarmed that he saw no traces of the column, he dismounted in a kloof, and climbed to the top of the edge of the basin. Beneath him lay a track, standing out white against the veldt. There was just a short breadth of veldt, and then the country became very broken and hilly. Within two hundred yards of the spot which he had chosen for his reconnaissance stood a small farmhouse. But it was not the farmhouse that attracted his attention; it was a pillar of dust which showed to the north along the track. He took out his glasses. There was no doubt about it,—it was a body of mounted men and some transport going away from him. They were not more than a mile away; and if it had not been for the dust, he could almost have counted the force. "It is De Wet," he inwardly reflected; "he is going right into Goven's arms; and for Boers to make all that dust, they must be travelling fast." He turned his glasses down to the south; there he could find no sign of living thing upon the track. He was just debating in his mind what would be the right course to pursue, when he heard a voice behind him, "Beg pardon, sir, but them is Boers; they have just all gone past here!" He turned round to find a British dragoon standing stiffly to attention behind him.

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Intelligence Officer. "Who are you? and where the devil have you come from?"

Trooper. "Please, sir, we belongs to a patrol that was sent out by Captain Charles, and we got lost."

I. O. "Where are the others? where are your horses?"

T. "I have got the three horses down in the nullah there. The corporal and the other man are down in that farm, sir; at least that is where they went before the Boers came."

I. O. "In that farm? Why, the Boers will have got them; they must have passed quite close to the farm!"

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T. "They did that, sir; but I never seed them get them. I expect that they was under the beds when the Boers passed."

I. O. "Did you see all the Boers pass?"

T. "Yes, sir; there was about a thousand, two waggons, and a lot of carts. Some was riding horses, and others riding in the carts."

I. O. "Were they going fast?"

T. "Yes, sir; just as fast as they could, shouting and swearing and calling to each other. They

seemed dreadful pressed for time!"

I. O. "We had better see if those other fellows of yours are still in the farm. Have you got your rifle loaded?"

The Intelligence officer and trooper walked down to the little homestead, and as they approached the door out stepped the two most scared and astonished dragoons that South Africa has ever seen. They were escorted by a bevy of smiling girls. When they saw their comrade safe and sound in the company of an officer, they became absolutely nonplussed. But the Intelligence officer got the following history out of the corporal:—

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Corporal. "Well, sir, we were sent off as a patrol on the right flank, and somehow among the kopjes we lost touch, and about an hour ago we reached this place. I left the horses under cover with Smith, and I took one man and went to reconnoitre the farm. We found this nice old lady inside, who speaks English; and she told us that she hadn't seen any English troops, but that a small party of Boers had passed in the morning, who had stopped and had some coffee, but who seemed to be in a hurry. The good lady asked us if we would have some coffee. Well, sir, we were very thirsty and hungry-like, so we sat down, and they gave us some coffee and cake and things; and just as we were eating, the old lady rushed in and said the Boers were coming, and hustled us into a small bedroom. Well, sir, we looked through the window, spy-like, and there, sure enough, were about ten Boers on horses galloping past the house. They were mostly quite young boys, but there were some greybeards amongst them. They seemed in a great hurry, for only one just stopped at the house, and he only stayed a moment. Then more and more passed, riding along in no formation, and all seeming in a hurry. Just one or two turned aside and had a word with the people of the house, but none of them got off their horses. Then an ambulance-waggon came by, and quite a string of Cape carts: the last cart had four horses in it, driven by a nigger, and it stopped quite five minutes at the farm. Two men, who kept on shouting orders to the passing Boers, were sitting in the back of it——"

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Intelligence Officer. "What were they like?"

C. "One was a stout man with a long black beard; the other had a grey beard and puffy eyes. The people here now tell us that they were Steyn and De Wet."

I. O. "Why the devil didn't you shoot them?"

Trooper (coming to his comrades aid). "How was we to know, sir, as how they were generals? they just looked two comfortable old civie blokes. Besides, we had left our rifles standing in the next room!"

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I. O. "How many Boers would you say went by?"

C. "I should say four or five hundred, sir; they was going by in driblets for the best part of half an hour."

I. O. "Who are the people in this house? I can't understand their attitude in screening you here. You have had the most remarkable experience. What an opportunity!"

C. "The lady, sir, is an Irish lady, and she is a very good friend to her countrymen!"

The Intelligence officer then cross-examined the owner of the farm, and she corroborated all that the corporal had said. Both De Wet and Steyn were in the four-horsed cart. They asked her if she had seen any kharkis recently; about the state of the Riet River, and the distance to Kalabas bridge; and before driving off impressed upon her the necessity of putting any of the English off the scent who might be following. As they drove away De Wet shouted back, "They are close behind." This information raised the Intelligence officer to a high standard of excitement, for he now felt sure that the brigade was well in upon the right scent. Already he found himself listening for the sound of Goven's guns. Collecting the three troopers who had been nearer to the person of De Wet than other armed Britishers had for some time, he turned back into the veldt basin and pushed forward northwards. The sun was now nearly down, but that was nothing: buoyed by a great excitement, the Intelligence officer was possessed of only one idea, which was to be in at the death. But a bitter disappointment was in store for him.

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Corporal (pointing to the left rear). "Please, sir, there is the column."

The Intelligence officer could scarcely believe his eyes—the thought was too appalling, too ghastly to be true. It was true, nevertheless. Instead of arriving at the bridge, the column had lost direction, and, without an adequate guide or map, had become entangled among the hills. Lost, without forage or food, beast and man weary beyond expression, while De Wet was crossing the Riet over Kalabas bridge, the stop which should have been there was endeavouring to retrace its steps back to camp. As the Intelligence officer realised the truth great tears welled up to his eyes.

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It was midnight before the mess servants could turn out a meal at Brandewijnskuil for the staff. Two doleful candles but added to the depression bred of the hour and the disappointment which was uppermost in every mind. We had had our chance and failed. The brigadier alone was philosophic: his natural gaiety would not allow of depression: his manly spirit would not collapse against the ruling of the laws of chance.

Brigadier. "Wake up, you coves, and come and have some dinner. We have lost ole man De Wet;

but that is no reason for you all to behave as if we were in for a funeral. Thank Heaven that you are alive. You would probably have all been scuppered if we had got up with the ole man. He would have fought until he was blue in the face!"

Brigade-Major. "I've got the orders out, sir. Start at 3 A.M.!"

Brigadier. "That's all right, but we won't see any more of De Wet. We were too hot on him today. All we shall find when we cross the Riet at daybreak to-morrow will be *spoor* leading in every direction. They will dissolve to a certainty. But though we have failed, we have had a run for our money, and finished a d—d good second. But no maps and no guide are big things as penalties go, and, all considered, I think that the 'crush' has run devilish well. What have your prisoners got to say, Mr Intelligence?"

But Mr Intelligence, having drunk his soup, was sound asleep in his blankets....

FOOTNOTES:

- [40] Another curious episode in this strange campaign can be observed here. We had been in nominal possession of the Southern Free State for many months, during a considerable period of which the local administration had been administered by British agents. Yet throughout this period Boer landrosts were also appointed, and whenever a commando strong enough to assert the Orange Free State authority was in the vicinity, immediately took over their duties. Often, it is believed, the same men acted for both belligerents. When Judge Hertzog made his tour of the South-Western Free State immediately before entering upon his invasion of the Colony, he reinstated the Boer administration in all the southern townships.
- [41] De Wet never moved without an advance-, flank-, and rear-guard, removed from him to a distance of about six to eight miles. This screen always gave him ample notice of any British troops in the vicinity, thus enabling him to change his direction and suit his action with calmness and deliberation. These screens were always composed of picked men.

L'ENVOI.

With the crossing of the Riet the history of this De Wet hunt ceases, for everything came to pass precisely as the brigadier had foreseen. The brigade arrived at Kalabas bridge before daybreak, prepared, if a tangible enemy was still in front, to take up the running again and pursue the line to an end, no matter the cost.[42] But the soft ground on the far side of the river gave evidence of thirty trails. The commando had scattered to the winds, and as, with cunning foresight, De Wet and his following had removed every living soul, Boer or Kaffir, from the vicinity of the bridge, no evidence of his presence remained. To pursue a fugitive in a solitary Cape cart with a brigade would have been absurd, and so, when five miles on at Openbaar there was no sign of the solitary tracks again converging, the chase was abandoned, and the brigade halted to await the arrival of its mule and ox convoy. That evening Plumer, who had detrained at Jagersfontein road, crossed the Kalabas bridge and reported Haig to be in rear of him at the Spitz Kopjes. It will be seen therefore that Plumer was twenty-four hours too late,—through no fault of his, be it said, but simply because he made the journey from Orange River station by train. Plumer pushed on upon the conjectured De Wet trail, which he still considered hot enough to follow. He lost it, as the brigadier had foreseen, in the vicinity of Abraham's Kraal. The new cavalry brigade moved more slowly into Bloemfontein by way of Petrusburg and the historic field of Driefontein.

At Bloemfontein some changes took place in the staff and composition of the brigade, and the writer of this narrative, to his infinite regret, severed his connection with the brigade. He had been promoted into a new battalion which was being raised at home, and after twenty months his turn had come to say good-bye to the veldt. As the brigadier bade him farewell in the Bloemfontein Club he clapped him good-naturedly on the back, saying, "I believe that it is all a hoax this story of yours about instructions to proceed home by the first transport. I don't believe that you will ever get farther South than that farm at Richmond Road!"

[343]

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ToC

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THE END.

FOOTNOTES:

- [42] The orders issued this night to the brigade were very instructive, and showed what a real soldier the brigadier was. If he considered that the circumstances demanded an effort he was prepared to take any risk and to make every sacrifice. The orders stated that if it became necessary to pursue, the convoy would be sent back by the shortest route to the railway, that the mounted men would have to live on the country without supply, and such men whose horses gave in would have to walk east against the course of the sun, which line, after 20 to 25 miles, would bring them to the railway, where they could stop the first passing train.
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Typographical errors corrected in text:

Page 195: Dewetsdrop replaced with Dewetsdorp

Page 257: directy replaced with directly

On page 321, the word battue is not a typographical error. A battue is a hunt in which beaters force the game to flee in the direction of the hunter.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ON THE HEELS OF DE WET ***

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