CHAPTER XI.

OPERATIONS IN THE ORANGE RIVER COLONY* (continued).

Towards the end of June, 1900, when the columns which Lord Roberts had organised (see p. 135) were in motion in the east of the Orange River Colony, C. De Wet had under him some 8,500 men, with twenty or more guns. His principal lieutenants were Martinus Prinsloo, J. H. Olivier, Fourie, Froneman, Haasbroek, Visser, De Villiers (of Harrismith), Paul De Villiers, Crowther, Roux and Piet De Wet.

Sir L. Rundle, based on Winburg, and on Basutoland through Ficksburg, held a line Winburg—Trommel—Ficksburg, with entrenched bodies (2nd Worcestershire regiment) at Ladybrand and Thabanchu. With the VIIIth division he occupied the following posts: Ficksburg, Willow Grange, Hammonia (17th brigade, Major-General Boyes), Klip Drift or Scheeper's Nek (1st Leinster regiment), Laager Spruit (Headquarters Colonial division), six miles south of Senekal, and Trommel, where he himself was. North of Sir L. Rundle was Clements, with Headquarters at Senekal, also based on Winburg; north-east of Clements, Paget was at and near Lindley; north again, Mac-Donald was at Heilbron; while Ian Hamilton had just arrived at Heidelberg (Transvaal). The northern and western columns were now to act against Bethlehem, which was still in the occupation of the enemy; and after its capture Clements was to operate against Harrismith.

On June 27th Sir A. Hunter, now in command of Ian Hamilton's force, after the latter's accident, marched south from Heidelberg.

June 27th, 1900.
Sir A. Hunter leaves Heidelberg.

* See maps Nos. 38, 53 and 54, and Freehand sketches in the map case.
Heidelberg, crossed the Vaal at Villiersdorp, and at midday, July 1st, occupied Frankfort. Two days later he was joined by MacDonald, with the Heilbron column,* and on July 4th both forces moved towards Reitz in parallel columns, the western under Sir A. Hunter, the eastern under Bruce Hamilton. Early on July 7th Reitz was reached without fighting.

Clements and Paget, after clearing the country between Senekal and Lindley, joined hands on July 2nd, and, marching abreast six miles apart, advanced on Bethlehem. The enemy fell back in a south-easterly direction. On July 3rd, Paget's left front and flank were guarded by about 800 mounted men, under Colonel A. M. Brookfield, who was to make a wide sweeping movement and rejoin the main body that night near Bakenkop. Brookfield's artillery consisted of four guns of the 38th battery R.F.A., and two of the C.I.V. battery; his mounted troops were a detachment of Australians, chiefly men of the 4th contingent from South Australia, 14th battalion I.Y., one company I.Y. Scouts, and part of Prince Alfred's Volunteer Guard, a corps raised in Cape Colony. From the beginning of his march Brookfield was harassed by the enemy's sharpshooters. At about 10.30 a.m. his scouts discovered that the Boers were awaiting him with three guns on some ridges which crossed his path. Brookfield posted his own artillery on a long kopje running parallel to and about 4,000 yards' range from that held by the enemy. At the foot of the hill stretched a wide field of mealies, or Indian corn, which was carefully searched, and found to be unoccupied by the enemy. The guns above were then posted in sections, with an interval of 100 to 150 yards between each section, that of the C.I.V. on the left; but owing to the configuration of the ground, each pair was invisible to the others. The party of Imperial Yeomanry, escorting the 38th battery, at first lined the edge of the mealie field, a little to the right front of the guns; but as the engagement opened, Major H. E. Oldfield, who commanded the battery, ordered the escort to the right rear, as he considered the men to be too much exposed to the enemy's

* Less 1st Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, and two 4.7-in. Naval guns left to hold Heilbron.
shells. On reaching the ground allotted to him, the Yeomanry officer found that from it he could see neither the guns nor the enemy, and was therefore useless as an escort. More than once he reported this to Oldfield, but was ordered to remain where he was. The gap between the central and left sections of guns was filled by the Australians, and the outer flank of the guns of the C.I.V. was protected by a party of mounted men. The main body of the Imperial Yeomanry was kept in reserve, some distance back on the plain behind the hill crowned by the artillery; two miles still further back a strong party of the same corps held high ground to watch the rear.

Now for some hours proceeded an artillery duel, during which the enemy developed two more guns, one from his main position, the other from a knoll which partially enfiladed the right of Brookfield's line. But the shells which burst incessantly over the British kopje did little harm; and Oldfield, who was beginning to run short of ammunition, ordered his guns to cease fire, as he wished to reserve his strength to co-operate effectually with the main column, which he expected was soon to make itself felt on the left flank of the Boers. His men accordingly lay down about twenty yards from the guns, and only the C.I.V. detachment kept up a slow fire. The right and centre of the kopje thus appeared lifeless and deserted, and the Boers, believing that they had silenced one battery, determined to capture it. Whilst a swarm of marksmen demonstrated strongly against the side of the kopje where the C.I.V. guns were in action, about 100 stormers crawled unnoticed through the thick mealies below the hill, scaled the slope, and at 3.15 p.m. suddenly sent a heavy volley at very short range upon the right-hand section of guns, commanded by Lieut. W. G. Belcher. The gunners rushed to their posts, but could only fire a single round of case before the attackers were upon them. Belcher fell dead; all his men who were not killed or wounded were captured, and the two guns taken. At this moment, Oldfield, who had been to the left of the line of guns, hurried up towards Belcher's detachment; he, too, was struck down, mortally wounded. In the centre matters were equally grave. On the first alarm Captain
G. A. Fitzgerald, who was in charge of the second section of guns, sent for his limbers. One only managed to reach him; and largely owing to the exertions of a sergeant named Adams, a gun was rescued, and driven to assist the C.I.V. pieces. The second limber fared badly. The three drivers and all the horses of the team were killed or wounded, whilst attempting to restore order Fitzgerald was disabled, and thus a third gun passed into possession of the enemy. On the left the C.I.V. detachment, commanded by Major G. McMicking, was in great straits. The guns were run trail to trail, shelling the Boers advancing on the left, and in the direction from which Mauser fire appeared to be coming from the right. Not a single British rifleman was to be seen on the ridge. The escort on the left of the C.I.V. detachment had disappeared; of the Australians who had been distributed in three detachments, two parties, in obedience to an order received by their commanding officer, Major J. Rowell, were in full, though orderly, retreat. Over all the field there was uncertainty and confusion; and had the enemy followed up his successful surprise by a vigorous offensive, the whole of Brookfield's command might have been routed. But the burghers lost time in securing their prisoners, and it was well employed by Captain C. E. D. Budworth, R.A., attached to the C.I.V. artillery. Galloping to Rowell, who, with Captain A. E. M. Norton and B. troop of the South Australian Bushmen, still lay in rear of the ridge, he urged him to order an attempt to recapture the guns. Without hesitation Norton's men turned and charged uphill full in the face of a venomous fire. For a moment the Boers stood; then they broke and fled down the hill, followed by a hail of bullets from the Australians, who, greatly to their disappointment, were prudently forbidden to pursue them. It was noticed that many of the burghers wore helmets and military cloaks of British pattern, taken from prisoners who had been captured elsewhere; so that if their advance had been seen at all by any of Brookfield's column, they must have been mistaken for friends.

As soon as the Boers were off the ridge, their guns began to play heavily upon it. But the drivers of the battery, helped by
two Yeomanry officers and some of their men, succeeded in dragging the derelict guns to the C.I.V. detachment, which, thus reinforced, finally drove off the party which was threatening the left of the position. One of the rescued guns was served throughout the remainder of the day by drivers from the C.I.V. detachment.

The casualties in the 38th battery were one officer killed and two wounded (one mortally); other ranks, one killed, six wounded and eight missing. As soon as order was restored the advance was resumed. The Boers fell back altogether, and Brookfield's detachment went on to rejoin the main body, as arranged, near Bakenkop. Paget's guns had for some time been heard on the right, and the complete withdrawal of the enemy from before Brookfield had been largely due to his operations.

Paget had found the enemy in a strong position which barred his way between Bakenkop and Bronckhorstfontein. Attacking the former with the 1st Royal Munster Fusiliers, the 2nd King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, a squadron of the Middlesex Yeomanry, and two guns of the City Imperial Volunteers, Paget drove all before him back on Bethlehem, and bivouacked at Leeuwkop, where his outposts were continually disturbed by fire. Clements, co-operating on the south, had shelled the enemy's artillery positions all day, but had taken no further part in the engagement. Next morning, July 4th, Paget and Clements continued their movement. Paget sent out a reconnaissance to the north-east, to make certain that his left was clear, and then went on, over open country, to Blaauwkopje, fifteen miles north-west of Bethlehem. Clements bivouacked at Sterkfontein, after pushing the Boers from Bankfontein on to Kaffir Kopje, whence they covered the passage of their wagons over the Valsch with two guns. On July 5th, in accordance with instructions from the Commander-in-Chief, Clements sent the 2nd Bedfordshire regiment and the Malta M.I. back to garrison Lindley, and with the remainder of his force advanced to Bontjeskraal without opposition. Simultaneously, Paget reconnoitred the positions which the Boers were reported to be holding in front of Bethlehem, and following his mounted
troops further to the south than he had intended, was forced
to fight to extricate them, which caused a few casualties.
He had thus crossed Clements' line of advance and coming up
on the latter's right he bivouacked at Waterval. It was now
found that the enemy, with his left strongly posted on Wolhuters
Kop, was holding the hills to the south-west, west, and north-
west of the town—on an arc the chord of which was the Reitz—
Bethlehem—Fouriesburg road. At daybreak on the 6th, the
British piquets were heavily shelled, and Paget, moving forward,
took up a position north-west of the town. Soon afterwards
Clements, the senior officer, sent a flag of truce into Bethlehem,
with a message demanding surrender before 10 a.m. De Wet's
refusal was received about noon, and at 12.30 p.m. operations
were resumed. The mounted troops were pushed out widely
right and left to turn the enemy's flanks; but so extended was
the position, and consequently so great the distances to be
traversed, that the infantry advance was much delayed. Paget
moved to his right front, against Wolhuters Kop, while Clements
directed his attack on Vogelsfontein, a kopje to his left front.
The stubborn resistance of the Boers had not been overcome
when night fell. Paget gained ground by an assault delivered
by the 1st Royal Munster Fusiliers and the 2nd King's Own
Yorkshire Light Infantry; but the mounted troops, owing to the
difficult nature of the country and the obstacle presented by the
Liebenbergs Vlei river, failed to turn the flanks. Neither could
Clements' own force do more than hold the enemy on the left.
The result of the day was a thorough reconnaissance of the
enemy's position, which Clements hoped to seize on the next.

On the morning of the 7th, after a searching artillery prepara-
tion, in which the firing of the two 5-in. guns (6th company
Eastern division R.G.A.) was most effective, a general assault
was made on Wolhuters Kop and the ridge west of it. Clements
launched the 1st Royal Irish regiment, supported by four com-
panies of the 2nd Wiltshire and covered by a cross-fire of artil-
lery, at the hostile centre, about half a mile north-west of
Bethlehem. The resistance was slight, and at 8.45 a.m. the Royal
Irish had carried the position, capturing a 15-pr., which proved

July 7th, 1900.
The action at Wolhuters Kop.
to be the gun of the 77th battery lost at Stormberg.* Paget and Clements then advanced, and occupied Wohluters Kop and Vogelsfontein, while two companies of the Royal Irish pushed on to the north-east crest of the former. The Boers were now seen to be in full retreat, and stragglers were shelled as they left Bethlehem. Early in the afternoon the troops entered the town, the capture of which had cost Clements and Paget 106 casualties.

The comparative ease with which De Wet had been driven from strong positions was to be explained by the fact that he was only fighting to delay the British advance until his main body should have secured its retreat to the mountains in the neighbourhood of Retief's Nek. On the previous day, the Boer leader had learned that Sir A. Hunter was moving on Bethlehem from the north, and was already approaching Reitz. Knowing that he was not strong enough to resist the triple combination being brought against him, De Wet at once decided to abandon Bethlehem, and to fall back on the mountain strongholds surrounding the Brandwater basin, whither the bulk of the forces of the Orange Free State had already retired.

On entering Reitz on the morning of July 7th, Sir A. Hunter ordered the 2nd cavalry brigade to Viljoenshoek, twenty miles to the south. From that place Broadwood was able to open heliographic communication with Clements, who informed him that he had just occupied Bethlehem. Two days later, Sir A. Hunter reached that town; on the 11th he received orders to assume command of the combined forces, that is, the VIIIth division and the columns of Paget and Clements, the last-named of which had marched on the 9th towards Senekal to refit. The troops now under Sir A. Hunter were as follows:—

VIIIth division and Colonial division (Lieut.-General Sir L. Rundle), disposed on a general front, Ficksburg—Biddulphs Berg.

12th brigade (Major-General Clements), awaiting at Biddulphs Berg, near Senekal, the arrival of supplies from Winburg.

* See Volume I., page 301.
2nd cavalry brigade (Brig.-General Broadwood), at Bethlehem; 800 men, six guns R.H.A., and one Vickers-Maxim.

2nd Mounted Infantry brigade (Brig.-General Ridley), at Bethlehem; 1,400 men, six guns R.H.A.

Highland brigade (Major-General MacDonal), at Bethlehem; three battalions.

20th brigade (Major-General Paget), at Bethlehem.

21st brigade (Major-General Bruce Hamilton), at Reitz, under orders to march on Bethlehem.

Two batteries R.F.A. and two 5-in. guns, also at Bethlehem.

The 3rd cavalry brigade (Brig.-General J. R. P. Gordon), which had accompanied Sir A. Hunter as far as Reitz, was on its way back to Heilbron, bound for Pretoria, in strength 800 sabres, six guns R.H.A., one Vickers-Maxim, and 375 mounted infantry.

The situation was now clear. The Boers, reported to be 6,000 to 8,000 strong with some 20 guns, had retired to the south of Bethlehem, and were holding entrenched positions of great natural strength in the recesses of the Brandwater basin. The tract in which they sought refuge lies on either side of the Brandwater river, which flows, from north to south, to join the Caledon river at a point some twenty miles above Ficksburg. On the south the Caledon river formed the boundary of the neutral state, Basutoland; the three other sides are walled by a mountain range which rises in an almost continuous chain, though its sections were known by various names, such as the Witte Bergen on the west and the Roode Bergen opposite. These mountains are pierced only at a few points; throughout their entire length there are but five passes or neks suitable for wheels, viz.: Commando Nek, Slabbert’s Nek, Retief’s Nek, Naauupoort Nek, and the Golden Gate, the road over the last being so difficult that it was rarely used by wagons. Not all the enemy had as yet withdrawn behind these passes. On July 11th his dispositions were discovered to be as follows: At and north of Naauupoort Nek was the Bethlehem commando, 600 men and eight guns, under Prinsloo; Retief’s and Slabbert’s Neks were held in strength by C. De Wet, with about 4,000
men and numerous guns, the main laager being at Kaffir Kop, six miles from Retief's Nek; Nelspoort was watched by piquets, and Commando Nek strongly guarded. On July 13th, a party of Royal Engineers, with an escort, engaged in repairing the Bethlehem—Senekal telegraph, had a brush with the enemy, suffering eight casualties.

Sir A. Hunter proposed to close in on the gathered Boers from the west and north simultaneously, moving on Nelspoort from the west, to block, and if possible force, Slabbert's Nek; to attack Retief's Nek, and close the pass of Naauwpoort. After clearing the passes, the target was to be the Brandwater basin and the bull's-eye Fouriesburg, which the Free Staters had now proclaimed the capital of the Orange Free State. Yet, until he should have obtained provisions for his troops, and ammunition for his guns, Sir A. Hunter did not feel justified in making a forward movement.

Sir L. Rundle, who had already been instructed by Lord Roberts to hold in strength the line Ficksburg—Hammonia—Biddulphs Berg, moved the Headquarters of the VIIIth division, the 16th brigade, and the Colonial division to Wit Kop, from which he drove the enemy's piquets. On July 12th and 13th, he reconnoitred towards Witnek, which was found to be strongly held, and established the Colonial division in a position within 2,000 yards of the Nek, whilst the Klip Drift Nek garrison was pushed in towards Rooikranz. Sir L. Rundle had been originally intended to operate against Slabbert's Nek; but, on the 14th, consequent on information received from Sir Godfrey Lagden, the British Resident in Basutoland, that the Boers were concentrating on Commando Nek with the intention of attacking Ficksburg and breaking out to the south-west, Sir L. Rundle was ordered to block the line from the Basuto border to Nelspoort. Sir L. Rundle, therefore, having received from Clements a reinforcement of 400 mounted men (Colonial division), moved his Headquarters, on July 15th, towards Rooikranz. He took with him three companies Imperial Yeomanry, two guns R.F.A., four companies 2nd Scots Guards, mounted infantry of the 2nd Manchester, 700 mounted men and six guns of the
Colonial division (Colonel E. H. Dalgety), as well as Driscoll's Scouts, 400 mounted men, Colonials and Imperial Yeomanry (Lieut.-Colonel H. M. Grenfell), and the 21st Bearer company. At Wit Kop, and opposite Witnek, he left Major-General B. B. D. Campbell, with two companies Imperial Yeomanry, four guns R.F.A., 2nd Grenadier Guards, four companies 2nd Scots Guards, 700 dismounted men of the Colonial division, and half the 21st Field hospital.

As the advance guard of this force approached Rooikranz, the enemy opened with musketry fire from the two hills at Bezuidenhouts Kraal, but were soon dislodged and driven back to Nelspoort, to the east of Rooikranz.* Rooikranz itself was found to be held in force, and Sir L. Rundle proceeded to shell the position from the west. Towards evening the enemy brought up considerable reinforcements from Nelspoort. On the same day, July 15th, the 2nd cavalry brigade (Broadwood) and the 20th infantry brigade (Paget) were sent out along the Senekal road, with the object of heading the enemy if he should attempt to break out in that direction, and pinning him to the ground until Sir A. Hunter could strike at his rear. On that very night the quarry most desired escaped the closing net.

General C. De Wet had for some time marked with foreboding the trend of the British operations. From the first he had opposed this retreat into mountains, which he knew would prove not a sanctuary but a trap. So strongly had he represented the dangers to his colleagues, that a plan for a universal break-out in three divisions was agreed to, and its details actually settled. De Wet's own party, escorting Steyn and the Government, was to be the first to depart; and on the night of the 15th he made his way with 2,600 men, four guns and 460 wagons over Slabbert's Nek, and struck for the north, fully expecting the rest to follow him on the next evening. It will be seen how, his strong grasp removed, the force which he quitted fell to pieces behind his back. Only one small band of Free Staters was to come after him over the passes; as for the rest, their leader saw them no more.

* Casualties in Sir L. Rundle's force, July 15th—Two killed, four wounded.
The flight of De Wet’s commando was quickly discovered, though some time elapsed before it was known whose leadership had contrived the escape. Broadwood and Paget, with Ridley, were soon on his heels, and all through July 16th harassed his rear in the neighbourhood of Klipscheur and Bultfontein. But to pursue De Wet was not now the main issue; and Paget, desisting, left to Broadwood and Ridley an eventful chase of which the history must be deferred.

Whilst they began the hunt, Sir L. Rundle’s mounted troops scouted south of Rooikranz, and a force under Lieut.-Colonel H. Martin from Klip Drift Nek advanced to about three miles west of the same place. Sir L. Rundle now realised that, before moving further southward, the Rooikranz position must be blocked. He therefore requested Sir A. Hunter to send a part of Clements’ force to relieve Campbell from the duty of holding Haasbroek about Wit Kop—Witnek, and thus to prevent him from joining De Villiers at Rooikranz. This relief was carried out, two days later, by the arrival of Colonel G. W. Hacket Pain, in command of the 2nd Worcestershire and 2nd Wiltshire regiments and four guns; and on the 19th Campbell brought his troops down to Rooikranz North. At the same time, Sir L. Rundle’s mounted troops began to close in towards the south of Rooikranz, plying the enemy with artillery and long-range rifle fire, and Grenfell’s force was despatched to rejoin Clements, who was then about a mile to the west of the Zand river. Sir A. Hunter, also, had made a reconnaissance towards Retief’s Nek and Slabbert’s Nek, whilst Rimington’s Guides had moved in the direction of Naauwpoort, meeting with small but constant opposition.

On July 20th, Bruce Hamilton was despatched, with the 1st Cameron Highlanders—the only battalion of his brigade with him at the moment—the 7th M.I., and the 82nd battery R.F.A., to occupy Spitz Kranz (Spitz Kop), about nine miles south-east of Bethlehem; this kopje was reported to overlook and command the approaches to Naauwpoort Nek, whilst possession of it was necessary to enable Bruce Hamilton to get into touch with the columns on his right. Some 400 Boers
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were on it whom Bruce Hamilton engaged throughout the day. Progress was slow, but by nightfall the British had gained a position about a mile and a half from Spitz Kop, with the loss of two officers and seven men wounded. At 8 a.m. on the following day, the operations were resumed: with loss of three men killed and three officers and sixteen men wounded, Bruce Hamilton seized the kopje with the Cameron Highlanders, and held it, with a view to blocking Naauwpoort Nek.

Leaving Campbell's force opposite Rooikrantz, Sir L. Rundle moved on the 20th to Hammonia, with the Headquarters of the VIIIth division. There he assembled three and a half companies Imperial Yeomanry, Driscoll's Scouts, thirty mounted Colonials, seven guns R.F.A., two guns Cape Mounted Rifles artillery, 2nd Scots Guards, and the 1st Leinster regiment.

The following is a summary of the dispositions on July 21st:

Sir L. Rundle's Force.

*Ficksburg and Willow Grange.*—One and a half battalions of infantry, one company Imperial Yeomanry, four guns R.F.A., fifty Colonial division.

*Hammonia.*—One and a half battalions of infantry, one company Imperial Yeomanry, two guns R.F.A., 280 Colonial division.

*Rooikrantz.*—One battalion of infantry, one company Imperial Yeomanry, four guns R.F.A., 100 Colonial division.

*Rooikrantz, north of Bezuidenhouts Kraal.*—One battalion of infantry, two companies Imperial Yeomanry, four guns R.F.A., 700 dismounted Colonial division.

*Biddulphs Berg.*—Half a battalion, one gun, thirty Colonial division.

*Senekal.*—Half a battalion, one gun, seventy Colonial division.

*Trommel.*—Three companies of infantry, two guns.

*Rietzpruit* (twenty miles west of Senekal).—Two companies of infantry, two guns.

*Ladybrand.*—Five companies of infantry, one and a half companies Imperial Yeomanry.

*Thabanchu.*—Three companies of infantry, one and a half companies Imperial Yeomanry.
Near Hammonia (Rundle’s Movable column).—One battalion of infantry, three companies Imperial Yeomanry, ten guns, 700 Colonial division.

Major-General Clements’ Force.

Wit Kop—Witnek.—Two battalions of infantry, four guns, about 100 mounted infantry.

Palmietfontein.—One battalion, one section Field guns, two 5-in. guns, 400 mounted infantry.

Major-General Paget’s Force.

Bultfontein.—One and a half battalions of infantry, six guns, 250 mounted infantry.

Southern Corner Sebastopol.—One battalion, two guns, sixty mounted infantry.

Sir A. Hunter’s Original Force.

Bethlehem.—Four battalions of infantry, twenty guns R.F.A., two 5-in. guns, 200 mounted infantry (Major-General MacDonald).

Half-way between Bethlehem and Naauwpoort.—One battalion of infantry, six guns R.F.A., one Vickers-Maxim, 550 mounted infantry (Major-General Bruce Hamilton).

Now that De Wet had escaped, the strength of the enemy holding the passes and inside the Brandwater basin was estimated at 5,500 fighting men, exclusive of the Harrismith and Vrede commandos, which were also said to have made their way out by Witzies Hoek and the Golden Gate. Sir A. Hunter now issued orders for closing in on the enemy, and arranged for a combined forward movement to be made on July 23rd. Sir L. Rundle was to bombard the position with every gun; Clements and Paget to concentrate for an assault on Slabbert’s Nek, while Sir A. Hunter himself intended to attack Retief’s Nek with MacDonald’s Highland brigade, two 5-in. guns, the 5th battery R.F.A. and two sections 76th battery R.F.A., Lovat’s Scouts, and Rimington’s Guides, with the addition of Lieut.-Colonel B. D. A. Donne’s force from Meyer’s Kop (1st
Royal Sussex, and the 81st battery R.F.A.). To carry out these orders, Sir L. Rundle, on the 22nd, moved to Willow Grange, four miles north of Ficksburg, with the following troops: Three and a half companies Imperial Yeomanry, Driscoll's Scouts, four guns R.F.A., 2nd Scots Guards, 1st Leinster regiment and (detached from the garrison of Ficksburg) two companies 2nd Royal West Kent, two companies 1st South Staffordshire regiments and two guns R.F.A. He first pushed three companies South Staffordshire across the Willow Grange plateau, towards July's Kop, with skirmishing which cost him seven casualties. Sir A. Hunter, on the same day, marched from Bethlehem, and bivouacked for the night at Bishop's Farm, under Vaal Kranz, about eight miles north of Retief's Nek. This completed the preparations, and next morning fighting began all along the line.

On the south Boyes advanced from Ficksburg on Zoutkop; Sir L. Rundle from Willow Grange on July's Kop; Colonel T. R. Main, with part of the garrison of the town, from Harmonia on Abrikoo's Kop; Dalgety's Colonial division on Moolman's Hoek; and Campbell bombarded the enemy's position at Rooikranz. On the north Hacket Pain, at Wit Kop, pushed forward towards Witnek, and kept up a heavy fire on the Boers in that position; Clements, having marched from Besters Kop, at 10 a.m. joined hands with Paget, some two and a half miles north of Slabbert's Nek, and while their combined forces proceeded to attack that pass, Sir A. Hunter and MacDonald launched their assault on Retief's Nek, a few miles to the north-east.

As soon as they had effected a junction, which had been somewhat delayed by a stampede of the horses during a gale, Clements and Paget moved on towards Slabbert's Nek. Their mounted troops reconnoitred the Nek and watched the flanks; the artillery and infantry advanced to the foot-hills at the entrance to the pass. The Boers were found to be strongly entrenched on a ridge barring the Nek, and upon high hills which rose on either side of it; the ground, which sloped like a mansard roof from its summit, forbade a direct attack. The
best approach seemed to be a spur which ran down from the enemy's left, and this Grenfell's mounted troops on Clements' right flank were ordered to capture. But the Boers, sweeping the spur from the caves and rocks which crowned it, checked the attack at the lower slopes, and Clements reinforced Grenfell with two companies 1st Royal Irish regiment, ordering him to hold on whilst he tried elsewhere. Still refusing his own left and feeling that of the enemy, he then threw two companies 2nd Wiltshire regiment against a second spur beyond Grenfell, that is still more to his right, and at the same time pushed forward the 1st Royal Munster Fusiliers, of Paget's force, near enough to hold the enemy in his central trenches. The Wiltshire, essaying to attack, were checked, as the mounted troops had been, when half-way up the spur, and darkness fell with success by no means assured. There had been forty-two casualties. But the work had been more effective than it appeared, especially that of the artillery, which, incessantly bombarding, had silenced the four guns brought against them, and severely shaken the enemy in his trenches. That night a patrol of Brabant's Horse, reconnoitring the western heights of the position, gained the summit unopposed. Seizing the point of vantage with a squadron of the same corps, at 4 o'clock next morning (24th), Clements sent four companies Royal Irish regiment and two companies Wiltshire regiment, under Lieut.-Col. H. W. N. Guinness, up by this side, and at 8 a.m. the highest peak was gained under cover of a cloud which fortunately lay upon the summit. There was a little firing; for the Boers, completely turned, beat a hasty retreat, whilst Guinness, swinging southward, cleared the crests below which Grenfell and the Wiltshire companies had been checked the night before. At 11 a.m. Clements ordered a general advance, and his force took possession of the evacuated positions without further losses.

An arduous march throughout a night of rain, snow, and intense cold, had brought Sir A. Hunter's force within striking distance of Retief's Nek on the 23rd. That obstacle was even stronger than Slabbert's. Precipitous heights stood like gate-posts of colossal proportions on either side of the entry. A
third, of a conical shape, projected from the main ridge further away towards the British left front. This Sir A. Hunter perceived to be his only point d'appui, and at 9 a.m. he sent against it the 2nd Black Watch, whilst all his artillery thrashed the hostile ridges. The General then decided to await the arrival of the force from Meyer's Kop, whence Donne was bringing the 1st Royal Sussex regiment and the 81st battery R.F.A.; and a pause ensued. These troops came up about 1.30 p.m. and Sir A. Hunter developed his attack. Against the height to his right of the Nek went the Royal Sussex; against that on the left the 1st Highland Light Infantry. Both encountered strong opposition, which was only kept from being decisive by the powerful practice of the united artillery. The Royal Sussex, definitely checked, progressed not at all; the Highland Light Infantry fared better, clinging stubbornly to the base of their hill, though for a long time they could do no more. From the Black Watch came the action which loosened the enemy. Covered by the 5th battery R.F.A., that battalion had first gained a footing on the conical projection on the left, then pushed on to the main crest behind, thus coming up on the flank of the defence, which instantly began to crumble. Darkness enabled the Highland Light Infantry to win the height above them. At dawn on the 24th the 2nd Seaforth Highlanders, circling wide around the left, completed the turning movement by getting upon the crest beyond the Black Watch. By midday Retief's Nek had fallen, and the troops of Sir A. Hunter and MacDonald, amongst whom there had been eighty-six casualties, bivouacked in the Brandwater basin, near Retief's Nek Farm. The position at Witnek was also abandoned during this afternoon, and the Boers were reported to be retreating, from all directions, towards Fouriesburg.

The enemy was now hemmed in on three sides, and his sole chance of breaking out of the basin was in the direction of Harrismith, by way of Naauwpoort Nek, or the Golden Gate. To seal these exits at once was imperative, and Sir A. Hunter ordered MacDonald and Bruce Hamilton to hasten to bar them from outside.
On the morning of the 25th Sir L. Rundle occupied Commando Nek with his mounted troops, and then advanced through the Nek, to a farm three miles on the road to Fouriesburg, with four companies Imperial Yeomanry, Driscoll's Scouts, six guns R.F.A., 2nd Scots Guards and 1st Leinster regiment. At the same time the troops at Hammonia, Ficksburg and Rooikranz were ordered to close in on Fouriesburg.

Despatching MacDonald (Highland brigade, two 5-in. guns, Lovat's Scouts, and the 5th battery R.F.A.) to join Bruce Hamilton, and leaving Donne (six guns R.F.A., 1st Royal Sussex and 2nd Bedfordshire) to hold Slabbert's and Retief's Neks, Sir A. Hunter moved the remainder of the troops to Uithoek, nine miles in the direction of Fouriesburg, within three miles of which he pushed a mounted reconnaissance. That day MacDonald, marching by a bad cross-road towards Naauwpoort Nek, joined Bruce Hamilton, near midday, when the united forces moved on to Middelvlei and bivouacked.

At 5 a.m. on the 26th, Sir L. Rundle advanced to General's Nek, and sent Driscoll's Scouts on to Fouriesburg. Arriving there at 11.45 a.m. the Scouts found that the Boers had just evacuated the town, leaving behind 115 British prisoners of war. These told the Scouts that the burghers intended to return and take them away. As soon as this had been reported to Sir L. Rundle, he sent forward the remainder of his mounted troops, and followed with four companies Scots Guards, four companies Leinster regiment, and two guns R.F.A., who made a forced march of twenty-five miles during the day. Sir A. Hunter also entered Fouriesburg with his mounted troops in the afternoon, but finding it already in Sir L. Rundle's possession, returned to his camp, three miles north of the town. The enemy having retired to the east, Hacket Pain was now ordered to move from Witnek to Retief's Nek, to relieve Donne, who was instructed to proceed with his force and an additional 300 mounted men under Colonel C. R. Burn (6th battalion I.Y.), from Fouriesburg, to join the Highland brigade outside Naauwpoort Nek.

On July 27th, Sir A. Hunter's northern force marched into Fouriesburg; and, on the 28th, the pressure on the enemy was
kept up by Sir L. Rundle with two battalions, and by Clements and Paget, each with a battalion and a half. Clements, who commanded the advance guard, was soon engaged with the Boers, who fought a tenacious rearguard action all day in the vicinity of Slaap Kranz ridge. The action, which resembled that at Retief’s Nek in its tactical features, was opened by a wing of the 2nd Wiltshire and the 1st Royal Irish regiment, who advanced against the heights flanking the precipitous Nek which they were unable to take before dark. At midnight the Scots Guards, who had seized a commanding knoll in front of the Boer left at dusk, went on and rushed the main position behind, finding it abandoned. The casualties during the day amounted to four men killed, three officers and twenty-seven men wounded.

In the meanwhile, the main body of the enemy was striving to make its escape from the Brandwater basin by Naauwpoort Nek and the Golden Gate. The former loophole had already been blocked from outside by MacDonald, who had established at H. Naude’s Farm, facing it, the 2nd Seaforth Highlanders, two guns 82nd battery R.F.A., one 5-in. gun, 5th M.I., and Burma M.I. In effecting this MacDonald and Bruce Hamilton had met with considerable resistance on the 26th, to the north and north-east of the Nek; but they succeeded in driving the enemy out of the kopjes, and taking up a strong position, commanding the pass, at a distance of three and a half miles.

This now left open to the Boers only the Golden Gate, towards which, on July 27th, MacDonald and Bruce Hamilton marched with all speed, bivouacking at Darvel’s Rust, ten miles from Naauwpoort Nek, that night. At 6 a.m. next day, leaving MacDonald’s brigade at Darvel’s Rust, Bruce Hamilton, with the 1st Cameron Highlanders, four guns 82nd battery R.F.A., one 5-in. gun, Lovat’s Scouts, and the 7th M.I., drove the enemy from successive positions, and reached Stephanus Draai Nek at nightfall. Lovat’s Scouts now returned to Darvel’s Rust, where also Donne’s troops from Slabbert’s and Retief’s Neks joined MacDonald, who immediately disposed them as follows: Four guns 76th battery R.F.A., Bedfordshire regiment, and
Burn's mounted troops (about 350) were despatched to H. Naude's Farm, to release the two guns 82nd battery R.F.A., 5th M.I., and Burma M.I., all of which, together with the Royal Sussex regiment, were sent on to join Bruce Hamilton.

On the 29th, that General, before he was aware that reinforcements were on the way, moved on with the small force at his disposal, viz.: 1st Cameron Highlanders, one 5-in. gun, four guns 82nd battery R.F.A. and the 7th M.I. The country was difficult, and the Boers opposed his advance; but at midday he was reinforced by the Royal Sussex, and gained a bivouac some six miles north of Solomon Raatze's Farm (Eerste Geluk). On the same day, MacDonald took his troops back to H. Naude's Farm, and thence reconnoitred Naauwpoort Nek, which he found deserted by the enemy. He consequently occupied the pass with a garrison of the Bedfordshire regiment, four guns 76th battery R.F.A., and Prince Alfred's Volunteer Guard, returning with the remainder of his troops to Darvel's Rust. At 5 p.m. he received a message from Sir A. Hunter telling him to suspend hostilities unless attacked, as General Prinsloo had surrendered unconditionally.

This event had thus come about: No sooner had C. De Wet disappeared from the Brandwater basin than the commandos which remained behind, dissatisfied with, or uncertain of his successor in command, thought it necessary to elect a fresh Commandant-General. Three candidates were present of equal rank, viz.: Prinsloo, P. H. Roux and Olivier. On July 27th the election took place, and caused immediate confusion; certain commandos nominated Prinsloo, others stood by Roux, who had been De Wet's own choice; but the chaos was increased by the fact that the votes of the more distant commandos had not been received at the time when Prinsloo, thinking himself elected, and abandoning hope at the same time, asked for an armistice. Even then the other commandants, although they had authorised Prinsloo to treat for peace, had forbidden him to agree to any terms until they had been submitted to them; and they had declared that they would not consider unconditional surrender. Whether he exceeded his authority or not,
whether, indeed, he were in truth Commandant-General or not, Prinsloo unreservedly capitulated, in the name of all the commandos present in his jurisdiction. He had, indeed, attempted negotiation. At 7.15 a.m. on the 29th, Sir A. Hunter received a request for a four days' armistice. This was refused, and the troops advanced beyond Slaap Kranz ridge. At 4.30 p.m. Sir A. Hunter received a second message, in which Prinsloo agreed to surrender next morning. At 9 a.m. on the 30th, Prinsloo and Crowther gave themselves up at Slaap Kranz, their capitulation being shortly followed by the whole of the Ficksburg and Ladybrand commandos. Next day the Senekal and Winburg commandos laid down their arms, and a large number of Boers came in from outside the Golden Gate to Bruce Hamilton, who by that evening had gathered in 1,216 rifles, 671 horses and a 12-pr. gun. On the same day flags of truce had been sent to all the Boer leaders in the neighbourhood informing them of the capitulation. This news was received by, amongst others, Commandant Olivier, who was not within the basin, but outside the Golden Gate with 1,500 to 2,000 men and nine guns. Olivier would consent to do no more than halt, pending news from Prinsloo; getting none, he marched off, refusing to abide by a decision which he considered unjustifiable, and made by an officer whom he did not allow to have any authority over the army and himself. Roux, on the other hand, who was within the cordon, surrendered, though unwillingly; for he too disallowed the authority of Prinsloo. Nevertheless that leader, whether usurper or not, assuming command, like de Wimpffen at Sedan, only to be forced to surrender it immediately to his enemy, had sealed the general fate.

The catastrophe took place near Slaap Kranz. The total number of prisoners taken (inclusive of those who surrendered to Bruce Hamilton) was 4,140, with three guns, two of which proved to be those captured from U. battery R.H.A. at Sannah's Post.* Over 4,000 horses and ponies, a large number of rifles, and upwards of a million rounds of ammunition, besides wagons and stock, also fell into Sir A. Hunter's hands. The majority

* See Volume II., Chapter XVII.
of the burghers appeared to greet with relief the turn of events; they were exhausted physically and morally, and Sir A. Hunter granted them certain concessions, such as permitting them to ride their horses, instead of walking, into captivity; and, on reaching Winburg, the weakly amongst them and the old men and boys were to be allowed to proceed to their homes, in charge of such private wagons and draught oxen as the British Government did not wish to hire or purchase for its use. After giving in their arms, the surrendered burghers were conducted to Fouriesburg, marching in batches of 200, each party under escort of twenty Imperial Yeomanry from the VIIIth division. During the next few days the whole were conducted on, in two columns, by Paget and Bruce Hamilton, to Winburg, whence they were conveyed by rail to Cape Town.