CHAPTER VI

OPERATIONS IN CAPE COLONY UP TO LORD ROBERTS'S ARRIVAL

We must now once more pick up the threads of the military operations at the point where we left them in the closing chapters of the last volume. The series of disconnected advances which ended at Stormberg, Magersfontein, and Colenso had left the force originally destined for the march to Pretoria scattered along a front of 500 miles, nowhere strong enough for an effective advance, nowhere able to withdraw for the purpose of concentrating without leaving a serious gap. Had the Boers taken advantage of the moral effect of their victories and of their possession of interior lines in order to direct a concentrated attack on any one of the scattered British forces, or to fall upon their communications, the situation would have become serious in the extreme. Fortunately, they knew nothing either of scientific strategy or of vigorous offensive action, and the defeated British army was everywhere left in possession of the strategic initiative. But for the moment the British on their side felt no desire to resume the offensive. It was not so much the case that they were disheartened by their losses—though it cannot be denied that an undue importance was attached to these, not only by a public ignorant of the meaning of war, but even by soldiers whose judgment was warped by the trifling casualties of savage warfare—as that the leaders had lost that confidence in the tactical value of their troops which is the foundation of all bold strategy. The effects of modern rifle-fire, as shown in the last few battles, had produced a state of bewilderment from which the army required a little time to recover. All that was
necessary was that it should hold its own for a few weeks. Reinforcements were arriving daily, the new Commander-in-Chief would speedily follow, and then the relief of the beleaguered garrisons and the march to the Boer capitals would be resumed with a new spirit and with certain success.

But we must first revert to certain important decisions taken by Sir Redvers Buller, during the critical week that preceded Lord Roberts's appointment, which were destined to have a far-reaching influence on the whole course of the war. On receipt of the news of the reverse at Stormberg, Buller sent orders to Cape Town that the first brigade of the 5th Division to arrive should be despatched to support Gatacre, while Sir C. Warren should go up from Port Elizabeth to Naauwpoort with the remaining brigade to take his allotted place in the intended general concentration for the passage of the Orange River. These were the first orders Warren received when he landed on December 13. Warren had, with Buller's approval, been given the "dormant commission" to succeed to the chief command in South Africa in case of the latter's disablement or death. Having himself forsaken his central directing position for one at the front, Buller was particularly anxious that his possible successor should not place himself in the same awkward predicament, and sent special injunctions to Cape Town that Warren was on no account to go to the front north of Orange River Station. Great then was Buller's annoyance when, without previous consultation or warning, he received a telegram from Lord Lansdowne on the 14th announcing that Lord Wolseley had ordered Warren to proceed to Modder River at once to take over the command of Lord Methuen's force, and recommending that Methuen should be employed on the lines of communication. He immediately ordered Warren to stay where he was, and on the 16th sent a strong protest to Lord Lansdowne against this interference with his discretion, an interference as unjustifiable as, it must be admitted, it was exceptional.*

Buller's own plan of action with regard to Methuen was,

* See Evidence, War Commission, 15314-1532S and 21259-21262.
at that moment, quite different. His first thought on getting
the news of Magersfontein on the 12th was not that Methuen
was unfit to command, but that Methuen's reverse threatened
once more to frustrate or at least defer the execution of the
original plan of campaign, which he was hoping to resume in
a few days' time, as soon as he should have extricated White
from Ladysmith. To have to relieve another Ladysmith on
the Modder River was by no means to his liking. Accord-
ingly he telegraphed to Methuen that unless he felt strong
enough to make another attack immediately he was to fall
back on Orange River. The message was received with
dismay at the headquarters by the Modder (December 13).
But reluctant as Methuen was to abandon the ground he had
gained by his first three battles, and confident as he was of
holding his own with a force of 12,000 men and 30 guns
in open country, he was not prepared, without breathing
space or further reinforcements, to set his defeated troops
a second time to the task of turning Cronje out of his
intrenchments. He put the alternative to his brigadiers,
but, except Pole-Carew,* they all voted for retirement.
Regretfully Methuen made his preparations for retreat on
the morrow.

But by the morrow other considerations came into play.
Buller's order had created no less dismay at Cape Town,
where General Forestier-Walker, commanding the lines of
communication, and Colonel Wynne, Buller's acting chief of
the staff, superintended all arrangements in close consultation
with the High Commissioner. Not that the imperative
objections to allowing Methuen to be cut off and invested at
Modder River were not fully understood at Cape Town, but
it was felt that if Methuen could continue to hold his own
at Modder River, without in any way sacrificing the quality
of his force as a mobile field force, or running serious risk of

* Pole-Carew, who at this meeting only urged that the force should
stay where it was, was so impressed with the disastrous effect that would
follow the retreat that on leaving the council of war he had a scheme
worked out for an immediate advance by Jacobsdal and Brown's Drift,
which he laid before Methuen in the middle of the night, without inducing
the latter to change his mind, but with the result of delaying the retire-
ment for further consideration of the scheme in the morning.
permanent interruption to his communications, it was preferable to keep him there till the arrival of reinforcements, due in the next few days, rather than run the serious risks, both with regard to the fate of Kimberley and to the possibilities of a rising in the colony generally, involved by a retreat to Orange River. Questions addressed to Methuen on this point elicited such satisfactory assurances that on the 14th Forestier-Walker telegraphed to Buller strongly urging that Methuen should be allowed to remain till reinforced by the 10th Brigade of Warren’s division. Buller acquiesced that same afternoon in time to countermand Methuen’s retreat, which had fortunately been delayed over the 14th for a further consultation with his brigadiers.

The plan now was that Warren should go up to Orange River with the 10th Brigade, which was just arriving, and wait for the 11th to follow to De Aar, whereupon the whole division was to move up to Modder River. Warren, as senior, would then take the command of the whole force, though without displacing Methuen in command of his division, relieve Kimberley, and proceed to advance upon Bloemfontein, accompanying his advance by the construction of a railway from Modder River eastwards by Jacobsdal.* On the 16th Buller ordered Methuen to begin work at once on this railway and to fill up with six weeks’ supplies, and that same evening Warren, who had been busy collecting a colonial intelligence staff and making other preparations for operations on a large scale in the Free State, left Cape Town for the front. But next morning, while Warren’s train was winding its way across the bleak Karroo, Buller received the Secretary of State’s message urging him to make another attempt to relieve Ladysmith † and suggesting that he might make use of the reinforcements now arriving. He decided to bring the 5th Division round to Natal. Arriving at De Aar on the 18th, Warren received a telegram ordering him back to Cape

* See War Commission Evidence, 14963. Vol. ii., pp. 175, 176. The idea of this railway scheme seems to have been in Warren’s mind on the journey, and on landing he consulted Colonel Girouard, who, on the strength of his Sudan experience, declared the scheme possible. It was then communicated to Buller, who took up the idea warmly.

† Vol. ii., p. 464.
Town, and on the 21st he and his division* sailed for Natal. Buller's change of decision was much regretted at the time by Cape Colonists, who remembered the part Warren had played in Griqualand in 1878 and in Bechuanaland in 1885, and it must have been a keen disappointment for the general himself to exchange the prospect of an independent command on the scene of his former successes for unfamiliar ground and for a subordinate position under a chief whom he scarcely knew.†

But though Buller now abandoned the idea of sending the 5th Division up to Modder River, he no longer considered Methuen's position critical enough to necessitate retirement, and replied with confident assurance to the anxious queries of the High Commissioner, ever alive to the danger of a general rising in the colony and to the consequent possibility of Methuen's isolation. On the 26th Lord Roberts endorsed Buller's decision by a telegram from Gibraltar expressing his desire that Methuen should stay at Modder River unless actually forced to retire. And so Methuen stayed on, intrenching himself in his camp, sending out patrols, and generally awaiting developments. Tents were sent up and a standing camp formed. The reconstruction of the high level railway bridge over the river, the laying of railway sidings—including about a mile of the proposed railway to Bloemfontein—and the accumulation of enormous quantities of stores were busily proceeded with so that everything should be ready for an early resumption of the advance on Kimberley. Little active warfare was carried on near the camp itself. But the outworks of the camp were pushed well forward, at one point to within 1,500 yards of the outermost shelter trenches of the enemy, and a regular daily cannonade of the Boer position was carried on, at a range of 6,700 yards, by the naval 4·7 inch gun at the ganger's hut a mile north of the station. The line of communications was steadily strengthened, and

* Excepting two battalions—1st Yorkshire and 2nd Warwickshire—who had already got up to De Aar and were left there in view of the unsettled state of Cape Colony.
† Before sailing Sir C. Warren was offered the alternative by Sir A. Milner of leaving his division in order to organize the defences of Eastern Cape Colony, a proposal which, however, he did not accept.
by the end of the year General Elliott Wood, R.E., who now took over the whole section from De Aar to Honeynest Kloof, had some 11,000 men under his command.* Considering the reluctance of the Boers at that period to attack intrenched posts, a reluctance signally manifested on the occasion of Prinsloo's abortive raid on the line of communications on December 7,† this force was more than sufficient to prevent any permanent interruption of communications.

The retention of Lord Methuen's force in front of the Magersfontein trenches was, as things turned out, one of the most fortunate decisions in the whole war. It effectively dispelled all doubt as to the nature of the Magersfontein reverse, making it clear, to friend and foe alike, that the force was not broken but only checked, and ready to resume the offensive whenever the suitable moment should come. The retreat to Orange River would not only have been a difficult operation in itself, but would have left the Boers free to concentrate their forces on Kimberley or on central Cape Colony, where their successful advance—especially if combined with rebellion in the west—would have rendered the position of the force at Orange River quite as insecure as it was at the Modder. Retreat would have almost compelled the Boers to take the initiative. As it was, the camp and the occasional shelling proved an irresistible temptation to them to continue a purely passive defence, a defence, moreover, conducted under most unfavourable conditions. For we must always keep in mind that Cronje’s lines at Magersfontein were not, like Wellington's at Torres Vedras, the outcome of a deliberate scheme of strategy. They were the

* The following were the detailed dispositions on December 20: Honeynest Kloof, half Munster Fusiliers; Enslin, two guns "P." Battery, R.H.A., Australian Infantry and M.I. and 1st Gordons; Belmont, four guns "P," R.H.A., and Canadian Regiment; Witteputs, two companies Duke of Cornwall’s L.I.; Orange River, 2nd Dragoons, 37th R.F.A. (four guns), 38th R.F.A., two companies M.I., six companies D.C.L.I., 2nd Shropshire L.I., and details; De Aar, 4th R.F.A., 37th (two guns), 2nd Warwicks, 1st Yorkshire, 1st Essex, two companies M.L., and details; Hanover Road, one company M.I. The rest of the enormous line from De Aar down to Cape Town was guarded by small detachments of the Duke of Edinburgh’s Volunteer Rifles.

† See vol. ii., p. 888.
result of hasty tactical improvisation by a force which had hurried down from Mafeking just in time to stop Methuen reaching Kimberley. While Methuen, with his railway behind him, was able to supply his men and horses abundantly and to pile up large reserves, the Boers had to create their line of communications after they arrived there. The organization of the wheeled transport required to supply from Bloemfontein the 10,000 burghers on the western border was a very heavy strain on the capacities of the two Republics, and, no doubt, was a contributing cause of the immobility of the Boers at the front during these early months of the war. Even so it was found impossible to bring up forage in any sufficient quantity, with the result that on the sandy Griqualand veld Cronje's horses rapidly lost condition or even died, and that a steadily growing proportion of his force, amounting by February to fully a third, was unmounted—a weakness destined to come to light before long. And not only was the Boer line of communications inadequate in carrying power, but it was also strategically false, running as it did parallel to the Boer position and within easy striking distance of the British force.

No attempt was made by Cronje to improve the position of his force after Magersfontein. The main line of trenches was considerably strengthened, it is true, but nothing was done to render the exposed left flank of the position at Jacobsdal more secure. Field bakeries, smithies, and all the other apparatus of a standing camp sprang up at the great triangular wagon laager at Brown's Drift, convoys of water-carts plied regularly between the river and the trenches, and in the midst of all this Cronje settled down to wait for the next frontal attack. It was in vain that De la Rey and Christian De Wet—who had arrived after Magersfontein to take up the position of "Fighting General" in command of the Free State commandos with Cronje*—urged him to allow

* At this time the Free State contingents at Magersfontein were quite independent of Cronje, and De Wet's military superior was C. J. Wessels, Free State head commandant on the western border, whose headquarters were at Kimberley. Soon after, by an arrangement between the two governments, Cronje was given command over all the forces at Magersfontein and Wessels over all those at Kimberley, Free Staters and
them to take 1,500 men in order to make an attempt on Methuen's communications south of the Orange River; he was determined to keep the whole of his 8,000 men under his hand. A scheme for catching a supply train and blowing up the railway immediately behind Methuen was indeed decided on by the end of December, and De la Rey and De Wet, with 700 men and two guns, passed through Jacobsdal on January 4 to carry it out by a night attack. The guns lost their way; the bulk of the commando, disliking the task, slipped away on the road; the rest arrived just too late for the train; finally, the attempt to wreck the permanent way was frustrated by the precipitate flight of the burghers who carried the dynamite. The expedition ended in mutual recriminations and a stronger disinclination than ever for such adventurous exploits. Failing an effort to invest or dislodge Methuen, it might have been possible to deceive him as to the strength of the Boers at Magersfontein and to have made a determined attempt to get into Kimberley or to deal more effectively with French or Gatacre. But though De la Rey was sent with a few hundred men to Colesberg on the 7th, this was done not so much in pursuance of any definite plan of concentration as in order to prevent the town being recaptured by the British, in other words, in pursuance of the general policy of passive defence. The only operation on the western frontier in which the Boers took the initiative during this period was one of absolutely no strategical significance.

The little settlement of Kuruman lies 120 miles northwest of Kimberley. A mission station, the original nucleus of the place, a court-house, a few traders' stores and a native village, constitute the whole of this westernmost outpost of civilization in that sparsely inhabited and almost desert region. For the maintenance of law and order among the scattered farms and native kraals of the district, Kuruman

Transvaalers alike. On De la Rey's departure De Wet succeeded him as second-in-command of the Transvaalers, and thus became second-in-command of the whole Magersfontein force. On January 11 Wessels's term of office expired, and Commandant J. S. Ferreira was elected as his successor.
is also the headquarters of a detachment of Cape Police. At the outbreak of war this detachment consisted of thirty-five policemen under Captain Bates, who, acting under instructions from Colonel Kekewich at Kimberley, at once proceeded to put the place in a state of defence. The able-bodied white civilians, to the number of thirty-three, were enrolled as special police. Another fifty or sixty Bastards and natives were also called up, but only fourteen of these could be provided with rifles, and the rest were mainly employed in digging, carrying water, etc. A camp was selected on rising ground in the middle of the village and fortified by a chain of small sandbag redoubts built round it and connected by trenches or loopholed stone walls. On November 12 Field-Cornet J. H. Visser arrived with 300-400 Transvaalers and rebels at Phokwane, some seven miles to the east, and demanded the surrender of Kuruman. Captain Bates sent his refusal, hoisted the Union Jack, and manned his trenches for the attack. The attempt to rush the place was easily checked, but heavy firing went on for a whole week, at the end of which Visser abandoned the siege and retired towards Vryburg. Kuruman now enjoyed a fortnight's rest, during which it destroyed the Boer schanzes and strengthened its own earthworks. On December 5 Visser returned, having gradually brought up his force to 1,000-1,200 men, including a Free State contingent under Field-Cornet Wessels. For the next ten days the Boer efforts were concentrated on the redoubts on the eastern side. The schanzes were brought to within five hundred yards. But so good was the shooting of the defenders that even now the Boers lacked the courage to rush the handful of men opposed to them in open daylight. A series of night attacks was begun, but though the Boers got close up to the redoubts and even made hasty shelters within thirty or forty yards of them it was not till the night of the 16th that some sixty or seventy of them succeeded in rushing right up to Brown's redoubt, held by nine men, and pushing the sandbags down on the heads of the defenders. They were beaten back with some loss, but had succeeded in effecting their object in so far as Brown's and Dennison's redoubts, whose loopholes had been rendered
useless, were evacuated and were occupied by the Boers on the following night.

But though there was only one redoubt left on the eastern side, which protected the approach to the water, the Boers made no really determined effort to capture it, and in spite of a fairly heavy fire kept up every day and most nights they seemed to get no nearer to the reduction of the stubborn little garrison. A curious incident happened on Christmas Day. Wessels proposed an armistice which Bates accepted but which Visser and the Transvaalers refused to recognize. Neither of the Boer commandants would acknowledge the other’s authority or yield his point, and eventually matters were settled by the Free Staters going down to the river to bathe and spend the day with the defenders of the entrenchments opposite to them, while the Transvaalers and the rest of the defenders went on fighting. After Christmas the attack revived rather more vigorously, but without making much impression, till January 1. That morning the Boers brought up a 7-pounder cannon and set to work destroying the remaining redoubt on the eastern side. It was not till the ninetieth shell that they succeeded in effectively breaching the redoubt, but the next few shells after that drove out the little garrison, who got into the shallow trenches alongside, where they met with so heavy a converging fire from the riflemen in the Boer schanzes that they hoisted the white flag at 5 p.m. Captain Bates, seeing the whole of his eastern defences carried, the rest cut off from the water, and being nearly at the end of his ammunition, decided to follow suit. Thus Kuruman was surrendered after a very creditable defence by the little garrison, which succeeded in keeping on an average ten times their number of Boers occupied during the most critical weeks of the war. The total British casualties at Kuruman only amounted to three killed and fifteen wounded; the Boer casualties were probably somewhat heavier.

While the Boers wasted their time and ammunition against Kuruman they neglected the really fruitful opportunities that lay closer to the theatre of war, and even allowed the British to catch them napping and to inflict a small but yet decided reverse upon them. The organization of rebellion
on the western flank of Methuen's communications was an obvious and necessary step. A strong commando moving about in the triangle between the Orange and Riet rivers would soon have beaten up a large force of recruits. An even better field for such operations was offered by the vast regions across the Orange River. Yet it was not till the end of December that small recruiting parties crossed the Riet and that a camp of some 200 rebels of the Douglas district, under Commandant Scholtz, was collected at Sunnyside farm, some thirty miles north-west of Belmont. Its formation did not escape the notice of the British patrols, and Lieut.-Colonel T. D. Pilcher, who commanded at Belmont, secured permission from General Wood to attack them and, if successful, to reconnoitre as far as Douglas. His force* had been brought up to some 1,600 men by the arrival on December 29 of 250 Queensland M.I. under Colonel Ricardo, and of these he selected 200 Queenslanders, 40 Regular M.I., one company of Canadians, and two guns of "P" Battery, R.H.A., to compose his flying column. General Wood at the same time arranged to send the Greys, under Colonel Alexander, and some mounted infantry from Orange River to Mark's Drift, near the junction of the Orange River and the Vaal, while another mobile column under Colonel Alderson was to march from De Aar to Prieska, some 120 miles, to damp down the incipient rebellion in that district.† From the Modder River camp, meanwhile, General Babington was to march west to prevent the Magersfontein Boers crossing the Riet to interfere with Pilcher's movements.

To ensure surprise in a district full of Boer sympathisers was not easy, but by giving out that he was marching to the east of the railway and by actually starting a column in that direction on the 30th, Colonel Pilcher provided that the Boers at Sunnyside should receive reassuring news from their friends a few hours before he hoped to reach them.

* Royal Canadian Regiment, two companies Duke of Cornwall's L.I., 60 Munster Fusiliers M.I., 30 S.E. Company M.I., two guns "P" Battery, R.H.A.
† The danger of rebellion in Prieska had already once been averted, in November, by a surprise visit by a party of Rimington's Guides.
On the afternoon of the 31st he marched his little column eighteen miles to Thornhill farm, asking loyalist farmers on the way to see that none of their natives left the farm that night, and posting some of his Queenslanders to supervise the carrying out of the same measure of precaution where the owners were not above suspicion. To secure the mobility of the whole column, the company of Canadians was conveyed in ten ten-muled buck-wagons, which also carried the supplies and ammunition. The two companies of Cornwalls left Belmont at the same time for Richmond farm, with orders to march to Thornhill next morning as a support.

Starting at 6.15 A.M., and moving by a somewhat circuitous route in order to keep under cover of some hills, Pilcher had got within striking distance of the laager by 10 A.M. Major De Rougemont, R.H.A., with the two guns, the Canadians, and the Regular mounted infantry, was sent north-east to engage the enemy, but not to press home the attack. At 11.25 the guns opened on the laager. Many of the Boers bolted precipitately; the rest swarmed on to a kopje in front of the laager and became engaged with the Canadians and mounted infantry. As soon as the firing opened, Pilcher sent the Queenslanders to carry out an enveloping movement on the Boer right flank. An hour later they were in action, and, working skilfully from ridge to ridge, eventually made their way among the loose rocks strewn over the bare kopjes to within fifty yards of the Boer flank. Some more of the Boers escaped before this movement was completed. But the rest were fairly pinned, and after three quarters of an hour’s more fighting hoisted the white signal and surrendered. Seven wounded and 31 unwounded prisoners fell into Pilcher’s hands, while some 15 or 20 dead Boers were left on the field. The British casualties were only two killed and two wounded.

The next day Pilcher entered Douglas. The rebels had hastily fled, but the loyal inhabitants welcomed him eagerly, and begged that a detachment should be left behind to hold the village. This was beyond the scope of the expedition, so after sticking up some proclamations and making a demonstration of crossing the Vaal, Pilcher left Douglas at eight next morning, taking with him some 90 loyalist refugees. A
march of 23 miles brought him to Thornhill farm that night. On his way he received a message from Modder River that 600 Boers, who had crossed the Riet at Koedoesberg Drift without any opposition from Babington, were moving against him. Fortunately, however, the sound of his firing across the Vaal in the morning had caused them first to march to Douglas, and it was not till the 4th that they moved in the direction of Thornhill. Pilcher, hearing that they intended to attack at dawn on the 5th, moved off after dark and returned to Belmont. The other columns similarly made their way back to their bases.*

Trifling as were the immediate results of Pilcher's expedition, its indirect effects were not unimportant. The rebellion in the Herbert district would, if unchecked, have immediately propagated itself south of the Orange River, and have seriously interfered with Lord Roberts's plans. Sunnyside delayed the southward spread of rebellion by at least a month, and when it broke out the main decision of the campaign was falling, and fresh troops were available for its suppression. The moral effect was even greater. After all the reverses of the last few weeks, a success, however small, which showed that British troops could be handled with skill, and could surprise as well as be surprised, was hailed as a welcome augury for the new year which it opened. And the news that this success was gained by British regulars, Australians, and Canadians, fighting side by side, and each trusted with an equal share in the task, coming at a moment when the voluntary patriotism of every part of the Empire was displaying itself in the raising of emergency forces, was everywhere taken as a sign of the opening of a new era of Imperial co-operation.

Having thus secured his communications from the west, Lord Methuen decided to make an offensive demonstration towards the east, and to interrupt the Boer forage convoys from Fauresmith to Jacobsdal. A force of cavalry† under

* A garrison of 100 New South Wales Mounted Rifles under Captain Antill was, however, left at Prieska by Alderson.
† 9th and 12th Lancers, Victorian Mounted Rifles, and "G" Battery, R.H.A.
General Babington left Honeynest Kloof on January 8, and marched east, very slowly and cautiously, through Ramdam, finding the country wholly deserted. A small mixed force under Major Byron reconnoitred at the same time to within a few miles of Jacobsdal, which it reported held in some strength, while Colonel Pilcher, with his Queenslanders, came out from Belmont and joined Babington, whereupon the whole force returned to the line without achieving any result more tangible than the destruction of Commandant Lubbe's farm.* Though Babington encountered no opposition, there was a small Boer force further south under Commandant Jacobs of Fauresmith engaged in watching the garrison at Orange River. These Boers had recently (December 13) surprised a British patrol near Zoutpan's Drift, twenty miles above Orange River station. But they did not attempt to prevent the establishment by General Wood on January 7 of a strongly fortified post on each side of the drift, which added considerably to the security of the communications, and helped to screen the movements of our troops from observation.

On the eastern as on the western flank of the theatre of war in Cape Colony the Boers showed their incapacity to turn their success to good account, and after Stormberg, as after Magersfontein, it was the British who, without risking operations on a large scale, kept the initiative in their hands. With his main body at Sterkstroom, at the junction of the Dordrecht and Indwe Railway, strong outposts to north and north-east at Bushmanshoek and Penhoek, and a detachment of Cape Police camped in front of Cyphergat so as to overlook the whole open stretch from Molteno to Stormberg, Gatacre was, in spite of his defeat, well placed both for defence and for the resumption of the offensive as soon as reinforcements should reach him. But all the reinforcement Buller eventually decided to spare was an extra field battery,

* General Babington ordered Lubbe's farm to be burnt on the ground that it had been freely used as a rendezvous for Boer scouts. His action, though acquiesced in at the time by Lord Methuen, cannot be regarded as warranted by military exigencies, and elicited a perfectly justifiable protest from the Boer presidents.
the 79th, and a strong battalion, the 1st Derbyshires,* which joined him on the 16th and 17th; and, to enable the latter to come up, the remnant of the unlucky Northumberland Fusiliers, barely 500 men, were sent down to garrison East London. His whole force, including communications, thus amounted to over 6,000 men. Colonel Smith-Dorrien, of the Derbyshires, took over the command of the infantry, and soon had his men hard at work strengthening their positions with entrenchments, and practising attack formations. Active operations were for the present confined to the mounted troops, and more especially to a handful of picked scouts organized by Captain the Hon. R. De Montmorency, V.C., of the 21st Lancers, and inspired by their leader with a spirit of daring and enterprise that made them the terror of Boers and rebels, and served more than anything else in these critical weeks to re-establish British prestige and prevent the spread of rebellion in the Eastern Province.

After successful skirmishes along the line of the Indwe Railway on December 21 and 22, De Montmorency on the 23rd, with 50 scouts, followed by another 100 men and an armoured train, engaged some 300 rebels twenty miles out, and, turning them out of position after position, drove them into Dordrecht. Meanwhile Colonel Dalgety, with 240 men of the Cape Mounted Rifles collected from the native territories, now able to look after themselves, had just entered the area of war at Clarke's Siding, seven miles east of Dordrecht. Next morning he occupied Dordrecht, to the discomfiture of the rebels and of the newly arrived Free State landdrost, who beat a hasty retreat before him, but to the great delight of the loyal inhabitants. He was reinforced on the 28th by 100 Cape Mounted Rifles with four 7-pounder guns from Penhoek. But on the 29th Gatacre came to the conclusion that Dordrecht, forty miles from Sterkstroom, was too far out to be permanently tenable, and ordered Dalgety to draw in to Bird's River Siding, seventeen miles nearer and within supporting distance of Penhoek. Before retreating, however, Montmorency with the Dordrecht force successfully engaged some 500 Boers with a

* The 78th and 61st (Howitzer) Batteries also reached Queenstown, but were ordered to Natal after Colenso.
gun at Labuschagne’s Nek, north of Dordrecht, on the 30th, renewing the fight before daybreak next morning in order to rescue a party of 35 men who had been left behind in a donga.

On January 3 the Boers moved out from Stormberg 1,000–1,500 strong. Joined by the Dordrecht district commando, they attacked the police camp in front of Cyphergat, at the same time occupying a steep hill called the Looperberg, north of Bushmanshoek, up which they dragged a couple of guns. Their plan apparently was to prevent any attempt to relieve the police camp from Bushmanshoek. However, the 150 police under Inspector Neylan, aided by a company of Kaffrarian Rifles, kept the Boers at arm’s length long enough to allow reinforcements to come up from Sterkstroom. These, in conjunction with the mounted infantry and colonials at Bushmanshoek, soon cleared the Boers out of Cyphergat, and a few shells from the 79th Battery, which arrived early in the afternoon, sent them hurrying down the Looperberg and across the hills back to Stormberg. The Boers were fortunate to get off so easily, for if more artillery had come up and the Penhoek force had been ordered to co-operate, many of them might have been cut off on the Looperberg. The hill was subsequently occupied by the Kaffrarian Rifles, with two naval 12-pounders.

A period of comparative inactivity followed. Gatacre’s eastern flank was fairly secure, especially now that Sir H. Elliot’s levies closed the native territories to the Boer forces. A wide turning movement against Gatacre’s communications was thus out of the question, and in any case these were fairly strongly held, a mixed force mainly composed of colonial volunteer corps being stationed, at Queenstown, and other detachments distributed down the line to East London. Gatacre’s weak flank was the left. On this side there was nothing between him and the Port Elizabeth line of railway—held by 400 of the Grahamstown First City Volunteers and 500 of Prince Alfred’s Volunteer Guards from Port Elizabeth at Cradock, supported by 200 of the Uitenhage Volunteer Rifles at Cookhouse—except a small detachment of volunteers at Tarkastad, thirty-five miles south-west of Sterkstroom. To have attempted to defend this flank was out
of the question, and Gatacre, by demonstrating eastwards and drawing the attention of the Stormberg Boers to that side, probably made the best use of his force. The fact is that the great gap of 180 miles of broken country that separated Sterkstrom from De Aar was one that it was quite impossible to hold defensively with the forces then available in South Africa. There was only one possible way of keeping the Boers from pouring into the heart of Cape Colony, raising rebellion on every side, and compelling the abandonment of the advanced positions at Modder River and Stormberg. That was to demonstrate vigorously against some point which the Boers were anxious to hold, and thereby to concentrate them in its defence and keep them concentrated till reinforcements arrived. How the Boers were shepherded and kept occupied during these anxious weeks the following pages will show.

The Boer occupation of Colesberg, the evacuation and reoccupation of Naauwpoort, and the arrival of General French at that important junction on November 20 have already been related.* The reoccupation came not a day too soon. The speech-making and other festivities attendant on Schoeman’s entry into Colesberg were coming to an end, and his commandos were beginning to clamour for a further advance. Attempts had already been made to wreck the railway line west of Naauwpoort, and at the moment of French’s arrival a detachment of the Johannesburg German commando under Field-Cornet Brall pushed through Philips-town and reconnoitred to within sight of De Aar, with its weak garrison and vast accumulation of stores. French’s instructions were to secure Naauwpoort, cover the railway communication between De Aar and Port Elizabeth, and, on the arrival of reinforcements, to push forward, reoccupy Colesberg, and generally clear the situation in readiness for the resumption of Buller’s advance on Bloemfontein. But he realized at once that even the first part of his task could not be fulfilled by a purely passive defence, and that even with the small force available it was better to tackle the enemy, and keep his attention concentrated at one point, than to attempt to hold so extended a line with inadequate

garrisons. He therefore decided to begin demonstrating actively against Colesberg without delay.

Early next morning French started on a reconnaissance up the railway line towards Colesberg, going as far as Arundel Station, 17 miles from Naauwpoort and equi-distant from Colesberg, without seeing any signs of the enemy. Just beyond Arundel the railway passes through a range of broken kopjes, varying from 50 to 200 feet in height. Two or three prosperous farms with their orchards and plantations nestle picturesquely under the southern slope of the range. On the far side French looked over the open Karoo veld stretching away on the left of the railway for eight miles to the flat-topped hillocks behind Rensburg Station, but narrowed on the right by the line of the Taalboschlaagte kopjes pushed forward from Rensburg to within six miles of Arundel Nek. Behind these ridges—where a Boer laager was reported—lay another stretch of open plain before the railway plunged into the maze of rock-littered kopjes that formed a rampart in front of Colesberg. North-west and north-east the veld was broken up in every direction by ridges, clusters, and single kopjes of every height and shape. Having once taken in the look of the country, French lost no time in deciding on his plan of campaign. This was to occupy Arundel at once, and using that convenient and easily defensible position as his pivot of operations to work forward among the kopjes on either flank, pushing his patrols well out in every direction, so as to screen his own communications, to check the Boer excursions towards De Aar or Rosmead, and eventually, by threatening the enemy's flanks and lines of communication, to force them to fall back towards the Orange River. In other words, he would try to beat the Boers at their own game.

He communicated his plan to Cape Town that same afternoon, coupling with it a request for two and a half battalions of infantry and some squadrons of cavalry. His own force at the moment, even after the arrival that evening of two companies of the 2nd Mounted Infantry, ordered in from Hanover Road, and "R" Battery, R.H.A., and of the remainder of the Black Watch on the 22nd, amounted to
barely 1,600 men.* Nevertheless, after devoting another day to strengthening the local defences of Naauwpoort, he fully intended occupying the Arundel position on the 23rd. This time, however, French found the Boers in possession. A party about 100 strong were posted on the hill immediately north of the station, supported by a larger force with two guns on some kopjes still farther north. The mounted infantry suddenly came under fire and fell back hurriedly with the loss of a few men, while an attempt on the part of a Boer detachment to outflank the little force was frustrated by the detaining of a handful of cavalry whom French had brought up in his train to do patrol work on arriving. To turn the Boers out of the Arundel positions by direct attack was more than French could as yet undertake. So the next few days were devoted to the strengthening of Naauwpoort and the sending out of patrols in every direction. This policy of caution was fully endorsed by Sir R. Buller, who, on his arrival in Natal, telegraphed to French to "maintain an active defence without running any risks," repeating his injunction a few days later in a message urging a policy of "worry without risk."

The arrival of two squadrons of the 12th Lancers on the 25th and of "O" Battery, R.H.A., on the 27th was balanced by the withdrawal on the 27th of half the Black Watch to Orange River. On the 28th French was informed that the line of communications to Port Elizabeth was put under his orders and that he was to occupy Rosmead Junction. He at once ordered up the colonial volunteers to Cradock, and early next morning despatched two companies of the Berkshires with a squadron of the 12th Lancers to Rosmead with orders to take up a position and patrol the four railway lines that meet there. The move was no sooner taken than Buller countermanded it, and the detachment returned on the 30th, the Lancers passing through Middelburg, where they met with an enthusiastic reception from the loyalist inhabitants and with depressed silence on the part of the

* Viz., half battalion 2nd Berkshires, 2nd Black Watch, 75 New South Wales Lancers and 5th Lancers, 25 Cape Police with two 9-pounder M.L. guns, "R" Battery, R.H.A., and 200 2nd M.I.
disloyalists, who had been on the look-out for a promised Boer commando. The commando was, as a matter of fact, not very far, and the very next day French found himself obliged to send 150 mounted infantry to Rosmead, who arrived just in time to frustrate the attempt of a party of about 100 Boers to seize the junction and destroy the Tafelberg bridge on the Cradock line. The mounted infantry were replaced by detachments of the 1st Suffolks, who arrived at Naauwoort on December 1; but by the 5th French was able to replace the Regulars at Rosmead with colonial volunteers, and on the 14th he was finally relieved of the responsibility of looking after the Midland line.

Meanwhile French had not lost sight of his original objective, but had constantly patrolled the line up to Arundel. The rest of the Black Watch and the 12th Lancers went off to join Methuen on the 1st and 2nd, but the arrival of the New Zealand Mounted Rifles, under Major Robin, on the 2nd, and of the Carabiniers on the 5th, brought up French's total strength to over 2,000 men, of whom nearly half were mounted. He was at last ready to carry out his plan, and on the 7th Colonel T. Porter, of the Carabiniers, went forward with the bulk of the mounted troops, occupied Arundel without serious opposition, and, pushing on, established himself in suitable positions west of the railway, three and a half miles north of the station. On the following morning French brought up two companies of the Berkshires by rail and proceeded to a reconnaissance in force of the Rensburg and Taaboschlaagte kopjes, moving forward his mounted infantry in the centre and working his cavalry round the flanks of the position. The reconnaissance soon disclosed the fact that the kopjes were strongly held by some 2,000 Boers with three or four guns, and information gathered from a prisoner led French to the conclusion that the total strength of Schoeman's force was over 4,000 men. During the next few days Arundel was organized as a standing camp, while Porter's patrols continuously harassed the flanks of the Boer position, inflicting some loss on the enemy in their skirmishes and, what was more important, absorbing his whole attention and preventing him from moving.
The Boers replied by extending their flanks and occupying Vaal Kop, a double-topped hill standing a little in front of their right wing on the Rensburg kopjes, and Kuilfontein farm, some three miles further north-west of this. They were cleared out on the 11th, after a short fight, and Vaal Kop was occupied by a squadron of Carabiniers, under Major F. S. Garratt, and two guns of "R" Battery. Between the 10th and the 14th French's mounted force received an important accession in the shape of the Inniskilling Dragoons and 10th Hussars.

General Schoeman had now been a whole month at Colesberg. His force, which had numbered nearly 2,000 men at the time of French's arrival, had since then been increased by reinforcements from Pretoria and Johannesburg, by Free State commandos originally stationed on the Basuto border, and by strong detachments of the Bethlehem and Kroonstadburghers from Natal, to a total of over 3,500. He had thus throughout enjoyed a large superiority of strength over General French. This superiority he had not made the slightest attempt to turn to account, but had contented himself with complete inactivity, while French was gradually strengthening his base and communications, and receiving fresh accessions of troops. The occupation of Arundel had roused Schoeman from his torpor sufficiently to induce him to advance his headquarters to the Taalbosch-laagte kopjes, but it was not till the seizure of Vaal Kop that he began to realize that he would have to take more active measures.

He now decided to make an attempt to get round the right flank of the little force at Arundel, cut it off from its communication with Naauwoort, and, if possible, capture it. On the night of the 12th strong parties were sent forward to occupy the hills east and south-east of Arundel, and by dawn on the 13th some 1,800 Free Staters and Cape rebels, under Commandants Du Toit, Steyl and Naude, with two guns, began the attack. But the British were not to be caught napping. Porter's dispositions were quickly made. With the Berkshires (three companies) and two 9-pounders in the centre, the New South Wales Lancers and New Zealanders...
on their left and the mounted infantry on their right, the Arundel position itself was quite secure against a frontal attack. The rest of his force, six squadrons of cavalry and four guns of "R" Battery, Porter sent out two or three miles to the east to meet the more serious danger of envelopment. The horse gunners soon silenced the Boer artillery, and after some hours of skirmishing the cavalry succeeded, by about 2 p.m., in completely heading off the enemy's southward movement and forcing them to fall back towards their original positions. On the right wing the Boers meanwhile occupied Kuilfontein farm, but were turned out by the fire of the two guns at Vaal Kop. The casualties on both sides were insignificant. Coming, as it did, so close upon Stormberg and Magersfontein, Porter's successful cavalry action had a moral value quite apart from its immediate result in safeguarding the position at Arundel from further attack. French fully realized this, and at the risk of abandoning his own plans, offered on the 15th to send the whole of his cavalry round to Modder River to enable Methuen to retrieve his position. The offer, arriving while Warren's division was still under orders for Modder River, was declined, and, in view of the success of French's own operations and Cronje's inactivity, was not reconsidered afterwards.

On the 16th Commandant Haverman began shelling Vaal Kop from the Rensburg kopjes while Field-Cornet P. de Wet brought round a gun and a pom-pom and began playing upon the reverse of the kopje from the north-west. At the same time the burghers began cautiously advancing to the attack. French, who attached great importance to the maintenance of Vaal Kop, had reinforced the post after a personal reconnaissance on the previous day, and its garrison now consisted of a company of mounted infantry, a squadron of 10th Hussars, and two guns "R" Battery, the whole under Colonel Tudway, commanding the 2nd Mounted Infantry. But the cross-fire on the exposed slopes of the kopje proved very trying, and, without waiting to consult French, Tudway decided to evacuate the position, a movement executed with most disorderly precipitation by some of the troops.

This incident impressed French with the necessity of
keeps in closer touch with the outpost line, and on the 17th he moved up his own headquarters to Arundel, at the same time rearranging the distribution of his forces. Appointing Major-General Brabazon, who had arrived to command a cavalry brigade, as his second-in-command, he divided the outpost line into two sections separated by the railway, assigning the eastern one to Colonel Porter, and the western to Colonel Fisher of the 10th Hussars, while keeping a strong reserve immediately under his own hand.* On the 18th he carried out a reconnaissance against the enemy’s left flank, and then shelled them out of Jasfontein farm buildings and kopjes, an operation in which the New Zealanders had the first opportunity of showing their sterling qualities. Reconnaissance after reconnaissance followed during the next ten days. The casualties involved by this constant “feeling” with the enemy were slight on either side and the immediately tangible results not very apparent. But the moral effect in mystifying and discouraging the Boers and in giving French and his men the confidence and resolution that comes of full knowledge of an enemy’s position and familiarity with his methods was very great, and of special value at this critical time when puzzled depression reigned in most other British camps.

One result of French’s activity was the cessation of all Boer expeditions against the line of communications, and with that menace removed more troops could be spared for forward movements. On December 21 Philipstown was occupied by a detachment from De Aar, and on the 26th the 1st Essex were transferred from De Aar to Naauwpoort, enabling French to bring the Suffolks forward to Arundel. Two days later his command was greatly reinforced, in efficiency if not in numbers, by the arrival of Major Rimington with a squadron of his Guides. Conscious of his growing superiority, French now decided to drive the Boers out of their positions by turning their right flank, and orders

for this operation, based on the skilful reconnaissances carried out by his intelligence officer, Captain Lawrence, 17th Lancers, were actually written, when, on the 29th, information came in that the Boers were of their own accord evacuating Rensburg and falling back on Colesberg.

The Boer force had during this period been reinforced to fully 4,500 men. It was therefore still superior to the total force under French's orders in actual numbers, quite apart from its preponderance in mounted men, and its freedom from anxiety as regards its communication. But the persistence and boldness of the British reconnaissances, and their ever-growing extension on either flank, had created in the minds of the burghers a conviction that French was being enormously reinforced, and that conviction soon developed into a nervous apprehension lest they should be surrounded and cut off in the Rensburg kopjes by the vastly superior British forces. They had no confidence in Schoeman, and the more energetic P. de Wet, who had just, owing to Grobler's illness, been temporarily appointed acting head-commandant over all the Free State forces south of the Orange River, was not yet in a position to inspire his subordinates with a more resolute spirit. A Krygsraad met on the 27th, and decided that the Rensburg position should be given up at once—ostensibly on the ground of its deficient water supply—and new positions taken up round Colesberg. At the same time urgent appeals for reinforcements were transmitted to Bloemfontein and Pretoria.

One of the oldest settlements in South Africa—the home of Paul Kruger's infancy—the little township of Colesberg lies securely ensconced in a hollow girt on all sides by hills which form three sides of a rough square. Of the faces of this square, each about five miles long, the southern and eastern, rising abruptly in a battlemented wall of serried kopjes from a perfectly open plain, form an ideal fortress. The western face is less clearly defined. Rising steeply from the town, which nestles at their foot, to a height of from 200 to 300 feet, the hills sprawl irregularly outwards, some in long slopes, some in jutting spurs and ridges, nowhere offering a clearly marked position for defence. The northern
side alone is open; from every other direction Colesberg lies hidden from view—except from one point only. Three miles west of the town, separated by a mile of open plain from the outlying spurs of the western face, rises one of those extraordinary detached hills peculiar to South Africa, and more especially to the region of the Great Karroo. Over 800 feet high, with steep boulder-strewn slopes rising evenly towards a krantz or “coronet” of short precipitous cliffs, Coles Kop from its round flat top looks over all intervening heights down on to the tin roofs and into the dusty streets of Colesberg, and forms the one central figure for the traveller amid the perplexing tangle of the landscape. West and north-west of the Colesberg cluster of hills the plain stretches for six or seven miles to a long chain of hills, through which, at Rietfontein, or Plessis Poort, passes the road running due north from Colesberg for eighteen miles to the wagon bridge over the Orange River—relic of the old transport riding days—while further west, at Bastard’s Nek, crosses the road to Petrusville. East and north-east is broken and hilly country. Through this the railway, which enters the Colesberg square through a gap in its southern face and emerges at its north-eastern angle, after sending off a short branch line into Colesberg itself, runs for twenty miles down to Norval’s Pont.

The southern face of the square formed the centre of the defensive position now taken up by the Boers, and here Schoeman intrenched his Transvaalers—the burghers from Johannesburg and its suburbs, the Krugersdorpers, and the Johannesburg Germans—and most of his guns, still trusting that the British general would, like his colleagues elsewhere, ram his head against this almost impregnable front. The wings were in consequence weakly held. The left, covering the railway, extended for some three or four miles south-eastwards in prolongation of the centre, and was manned by the commandos from the southern Free State and the Basuto border. The right wing, covering the alternative communication with the road bridge, was thrown right back along the western face of the square, with outposts extending north-westwards as far as Bastard’s Nek, and was held by the
Heilbron and Bethlehem burghers. Small commandos were laagered at both the bridges over the Orange River.

French heard of the evacuation of Rensburg too late to harass the Boers in their withdrawal. But he at once pushed forward (December 30), and successfully located the enemy's new positions by a general reconnaissance with his mounted troops. The immediate result of the reconnaissance was the occupation in force of the deserted position at Rensburg as a new pivot of operations, which the Berkshires were at once set to work strengthening by intrenchments. At the same time Colonel Porter occupied a hill, subsequently known as Porter's Hill, barely two miles from the south-western angle of the Colesberg kopjes, and possessing the same advantage as an observation post, point of contact, and screen, that Vaal Kop had possessed when the enemy were at Rensburg.

He decides to turn Boers out of Colesberg.

The next, and more important, result was the formulation by French of his plan for driving the Boers out of Colesberg. So far from resting content with the satisfactory result of six weeks' continuous operations with an inferior force, he held, in the true spirit of generalship, "that naught was done while aught remained to do;" and, thoroughly alive to the indication of moral weakness furnished by the Boer withdrawal, he decided that his action should be immediate, before the enemy should recover their nerve, or even, awakening to a realization of his weakness, wrest the initiative from him. As regards the general line of attack the reconnaissance only confirmed the opinion which he had already formed at Arundel. A frontal attack on the intrenched Boer centre was the last thing he had thought of. Of the alternative flank attacks that upon the Boer left and the railway communication to Norval's Pont possibly offered the largest results. But it involved a tremendously wide extension, and would expose his flank and line of communications to serious danger of a sudden counter-attack in broken country. A move against the refused Boer right was not only shorter and better protected against a flank attack by the open ground in front of the Boer position, now so usefully commanded by Porter's Hill, but it offered far better tactical features for the attack. And if the Boer communication with Colesberg Wagon Bridge,
Lieutenant-General Sir John French, K.C.B.,
Commanding Cavalry Division, 1899-1900.
Commanding in Cape Colony, 1901-1902.

By kind permission of Messrs. Macmillan & Co., from "With General French and the Cavalry in South Africa."
which he would thus command, was perhaps less vital to the Boers than that with Norval's Pont, it was probably important enough for them to regard its loss as rendering Colesberg untenable, while from the point of view of the subsequent direct advance on Bloemfontein—to which, we should never forget, all French's moves were intended to work up—the seizure of the Wagon Bridge was an objective whose strategical importance could hardly be overrated. These were sufficient reasons to determine French's choice.

A further personal reconnaissance on the morning of the 31st settled the final details of the plan. By midday orders were issued. The attack was entrusted to Colonel Fisher, who was to march that afternoon with the whole of his brigade, the whole of the brigade division of artillery—except two guns of "R" Battery—the four companies of the Berkshires, and some mounted engineers, to Maeder's Farm, eight miles north-west of Rensburg. A night march of nearly five miles from Maeder's would bring the infantry to the nearest outlying spur of the western face of the Boer position, which French intended them to seize and occupy, while Fisher was to take on the rest of the column and, occupying the spurs and kopjes further to the north, work round and seize positions commanding the Colesberg Bridge road. To cover the attack, and to prevent the enemy massing upon the flank to be assailed, Porter was directed to make a strong demonstration from Porter's Hill against the centre of the Boer position. For this purpose his brigade was strengthened by the New Zealanders and two guns of "R" Battery, but was ordered to spare a squadron of Carabiniers to Major Rimington, who, with this squadron and with his Guides, was ordered to move round the enemy's left flank towards Achertang, making a show of force as if to threaten the railway to Norval's Pont.

Marching from Rensburg at 5 p.m.—the infantry in wagons, for French was determined to risk no repetition of the Stormberg failure—the column reached Maeder's at 9 p.m. At 12.30 a.m. on New Year's Day it started again, the infantry and mounted infantry leading. The road to Colesberg was followed for two and a half miles, and then
the column turned north-east across the veld. It was a dark, moonless night and, in spite of all precautions, the two rear companies of the Berkshires lost touch, but were recalled in time to reach the objective of the attack before dawn. A Boer picket, suddenly awakened, was brushed aside, and Major McCracken and his men found themselves in possession of the western end of the hill destined henceforward to bear his name. The Heilbron commando, 600 strong, under Commandant Van Vuuren, had been responsible for its defence, but, negligent or panic-stricken, they were not there to dispute its capture, and only by degrees began to open a sputtering fire on the Berkshires from the eastern portion of the hill, from a kopje to the north-east called Gibraltar, and from the ridge, subsequently known as the Kloof Ridge, 1,000 yards to the north.

The mounted troops had halted to the east of Coles Kop, where the first glimmering of light brought them a string of pom-pom shells from the Boer main position. French, who was at Coles Kop, ordered Colonel Eustace to shell the western face of the Boer positions, and about 4.15 A.M. an artillery duel began between the ten British guns drawn up in line of batteries on the open plain and the Boer guns, two pom-poms and a 15-pounder captured at Stormberg, safely screened among the hills. After nearly three hours the Boer guns ceased, and French ordered Major Sir J. Jervis to take "O" Battery close up to McCracken's Hill and help to keep down the now heavy rifle-fire from the enemy at the other end, who had meanwhile been reinforced from the centre by the Germiston burghers under Commandant Gravett. An attempt on the part of the enemy to outflank the British left by working along the Kloof Ridge was checked about 9 A.M. by the carbine fire of the Hussars and mounted sappers, and by Major Burton's "R" Battery, which had trotted west to meet the movement. The hills at the western end of the Kloof Ridge, forming the kloof or valley which gave it its name, were now occupied, but further attempts, not very vigorously pressed, on the part of the cavalry to work round to the north were frustrated by the Bethlehem burghers under Naude, who had hurried out from their laager just in
time to occupy the heights west of the Wagon Bridge road, and towards 2 p.m. the firing on this side gradually died down. The total British casualties for the day were only 1 officer and 6 men killed and 21 men wounded, the Boer casualties rather heavier.

On the right Porter had meanwhile been vigorously engaged with the Boer centre, pushing his demonstration to the point of attempting to carry an outlying position with his New Zealanders, and most effectively keeping the Boers pinned to their trenches. Still further east Rimington, who with his two squadrons had left Jasfontein at midnight, pushed boldly round the Boer flank to within three miles of Joubert Siding on the railway. From here he could look right into the Boer camps east of Colesberg, and successfully repelled an attack by a small party of Boers sent against him by Commandant Du Toit. This party was in fact the advanced guard of a considerable force with which Schoeman had that very morning intended to make a comprehensive attack on the British right, if French had not anticipated him by attacking first. It was this strengthening of the Boer left, coupled with the energy and boldness with which Porter and Rimington bluffed the large force opposed to them into a purely passive defence, that made the success on the British left possible.

That success was indeed incomplete owing to the failure of Fisher's column on the extreme left to carry out the task assigned to it. But for this, French was fully convinced that he could have occupied Colesberg that self-same afternoon.* Even so, though for the moment he was but hanging on to the ground he had gained, French was confident that he only wanted slight reinforcement to take Colesberg, and telegraphed to Cape Town for a battery, a battalion of infantry, and two cavalry squadrons. The next two days were chiefly spent in strengthening the positions secured in preparation for a further move when the reinforcements arrived.† The Berkshires and mounted infantry remained

* See French's despatch of Feb. 2, 1900.
† During the night of the 2nd a loaded supply train standing in Rensburg station slipped down the incline towards Colesberg and came to
on McCracken's Hill with their camp down at the Kloof, while the 10th Hussars on the Kloof Hills were replaced by six companies of the Suffolks. Two sections of “R” Battery were kept east of Coles Kop in support of these positions. Fisher's cavalry brigade with the rest of the guns was to patrol the left flank, but owing to the scarcity of water its bivouack had to be thrown as far back as Maeder's. Rensburg, Porter's Hill, and Maeder's were connected by field telegraph.

French had not been mistaken on the 1st in believing his enemy to be thoroughly demoralized by his bold and sudden attack. All day long Schoeman had been sending agitated messages to Bloemfontein, and very little more would have sufficed to lead to a general stampede of the burghers from Colesberg, where they believed they were in danger of being completely enveloped. But the comparative quiet of the next day enabled them to recover from their confusion, and the arrival of the Johannesburg Police from Natal encouraged them sufficiently to decide to attempt a counterstroke. When the British cavalry returned to camp on the evening of the 3rd, Piet De Wet moved out of Colesberg with 600–800 men, four guns, and two pom-poms, and occupied a number of low kopjes about a mile north and north-west of the Kloof. At daybreak—completely surprising the small picket of Inniskillings, which was all that Fisher had kept out to patrol this important section—the Boers opened a determined attack on the left flank and rear of the Suffolk position. With great promptitude and initiative the two supporting sections of “R” Battery, under Lieutenants Lamont and Talbot-Ponsonby, came into action against them, while the Suffolks on their side kept up a brisk rifle-fire. When, in addition to this, the 10th Hussars with two guns of “R” Battery moved out from Maeder's and began working round the rear of the Boers, while the four guns of “O” Battery shelled them heavily in front, the majority of the

grief in a broken culvert close to the Boer position. It was impossible to save it, and in the course of the day the Boer shells succeeded in igniting the débris and destroying most of the stores.
burghers lost heart and bolted across the open plain with the 10th Hussars and a squadron of Inniskillings in pursuit. A small party took up a covering position in some rocky ground. The 10th Hussars, gallantly led by Fisher, carried the position by a dismounted attack, in which Major Harvey was killed, but the delay had effected its purpose and the Boers got away safely. Some 200, however, still contested the low kopjes north-west of the Kloof. Under cover of a heavy cross-fire from the horse artillery, Captain De Lisle, who had just arrived from Hanover Road with two more companies of the 2nd Mounted Infantry, worked round under cover to the foot of the hills and dismounted his men for the attack. De Lisle’s skilful leading and the excellent shooting of the men soon caused the Boers to make off in small parties, and when towards 3 p.m. De Lisle finally carried the position, only some 35 remained to fall into his hands as prisoners. The total British casualties were again only 20 or 30. The Boer losses, apart from prisoners, were heavier, and, coupled with the effect of their failure and the fright of the cavalry pursuit, reduced them once more to a state of profound discouragement. Only the knowledge that considerable reinforcements were on their way still kept them in their positions.

Meanwhile French was already receiving the reinforcements he had asked for. The 1st Battalion Yorkshire Regiment, the 4th Battery, R.F.A., and a squadron of colonial mounted infantry from Rosmead arrived on the 4th, and one and a half squadrons of the composite regiment of Household Cavalry on the 5th. The whole of the Suffolks were now concentrated at Kloof Camp; the Essex were moved up to Rensburg and Porter’s Hill, setting free Porter’s brigade and the New Zealanders for more active work; while the Yorkshires, distributed between Rensburg, Arundel and Naauwpoort, looked after the communications. French was now ready for another attempt on Colesberg, and a careful reconnaissance on the 5th satisfied him that the key of the position was a large hill, known as Grassy Hill, 3,000 yards east of Kloof Camp. This hill not only completely commanded the Wagon Bridge road and Colesberg station, but its capture,
by taking in reverse Gibraltar and the eastern end of the Kloof Ridge, would also render untenable all the Boer positions on the western side and immediately compel the evacuation of Colesberg. At 6 P.M. he issued orders for the storm's operations. The mounted forces and horse artillery on the left flank, together with the 4th Battery and detachments from the Suffolks and Berkshires, were to start from near Kloof Camp at 5 A.M. and operate from north and west, so as to capture Grassy Hill, while Porter demonstrated against the Boer centre as before. The whole plan, in fact, was practically a repetition of the plan that had proved so successful on the 1st, but with this difference, that this time French assigned the command to Colonel Eustace, R.H.A., instead of to Colonel Fisher, and that, with his troops so much nearer the enemy's position, he considered a night march and night attack superfluous. After the experience of the past few days, French had every reason to expect that this comparatively easy operation would be crowned with success, and may well have looked forward, as he returned to his camp at Rensburg that evening, to spending his next night under a roof in reconquered Colesberg.

At 7 P.M. Colonel Eustace brought round to the General an urgent request from Colonel Watson, commanding the Suffolks at Kloof Camp, to be allowed to take Grassy Hill by a night attack with half his battalion. Watson had already made the same suggestion to French earlier in the day, when he accompanied him on his reconnaissance, but had been refused. This time, however, French, having every confidence in Watson, yielded to his importunity, and gave him a free hand to carry out this part of the operations in his own way, only directing him to inform troops in the vicinity of the change of plan. The orders for the general turning movement, nevertheless, still held good.

Soon after midnight Colonel Watson marched out of camp with A, B, D, and H companies of his regiment, the men wearing soft shoes and carrying 200 rounds of ammunition. It was not till the first halt that he explained the objective of the march, informing his subordinates that no very serious resistance was likely to be offered, if indeed the
hill was occupied at all, and laying the very greatest stress on the necessity of all rifles being unloaded, and of the assault being delivered with the bayonet alone—a warning which he again repeated at the next halt, when he once more took care to explain to the officers precisely what he intended each company to do. About 3 A.M. the little column arrived without incident at the watercourse at the base of the hill. From here a gradual slope, with an occasional outcrop of shaly rock forming in places steps of two or three feet rise, leads up for some 700 yards to the near crest of the hill; the ground then rises very gently for 200 yards to the further crest before falling away steeply on the side towards the Wagon Bridge road. It was this rear crest that the Boers held, only a few sentries being thrown out as far as the western edge of the hill. So far from the hill being unoccupied, 200 Heilbron burghers were assigned to its defence, of whom fully half were actually on the hill in readiness, while the newly-arrived “Zarps” were camped close by.

About two-thirds of the way up the force halted in quarter column while the rise above was reconnoitred. Then H and D companies advanced, accompanied by the colonel. As they reached the crest a single shot was fired by a sentry. But the men pushed straight on across the almost level summit, and were already half-way across when suddenly a burst of firing broke out from the further edge. With a loud cheer H company charged, but the rush died away in face of the withering fire. Thinking the best chance of success lay in getting his men back below the crest and rallying them together with the rear companies for a second attempt, Colonel Watson gave the order to “retire.” The fatal word, repeated from man to man in the dark, broke the cohesion of the whole. More than half the men rushed blindly down the hill and eventually returned to camp. The rest were inextricably mixed, and though Colonel Watson and the company officers attempted to re-form them, and gallantly led them forward in repeated bayonet charges which almost carried home into the Boer position, their efforts proved unavailing, more especially as the Heilbron men were now reinforced by
a strong party of police led by Lieutenant D. S. Maré. Shortly before dawn Watson himself was killed, and most of his officers killed and disabled. The support of Eustace's guns, which came into action with daylight, was too late to convert failure into success, and about 5.30 a.m. the remnant of the attacking force, now practically surrounded at 50 yards' range, surrendered. The failure of the Suffolks' attack seems to have paralyzed the whole force, and though the carrying out of French's original plan was still not impossible, no attempt was made to retrieve the disaster by turning the right flank of the Boer position and renewing the attack in broad daylight.

This unsuccessful affair, which, like Magersfontein, demonstrated the superiority of the magazine rifle over the arme blanche, even in the dark, cost the British 11 officers and 150 men, of whom 5 officers and 32 men were killed or died of their wounds, 4 officers and 48 men were wounded, and 2 unwounded officers and 70 men made prisoners. What was far more serious for French than the actual loss in men was the loss of the moral superiority he had so successfully won for himself, and the loss of an opportunity that was not to present itself again; for before French was ready to resume the attack, the reinforcements so urgently clamoured for by Schoeman had arrived, bringing the Boer force up to fully 6,000 men. The Boer loss on January 6 was 9 killed or died of wounds, including Lieutenant Maré, and 26 wounded. The victors treated their wounded prisoners well, and were most sympathetic and courteous to the British burial party which went out on the following morning. They readily gave their help, and a pathetic scene took place at the open graveside. A grey-headed burgher asked leave to make an address. In a rough, simple way he deprecated war and the sacrifice of human life, and prayed for the time when all men should live at peace with each other. Then the assembled burghers sang a psalm.

The unlucky Suffolks were now sent down to Arundel and Port Elizabeth to re-officer, their place at Kloof Camp being taken by the Essex, whose defences were in turn taken over by the Yorkshires. The left flank was now as strong as
ever, but for the moment French decided not to press his operations against a point where his enemy was now strongly reinforced and on the alert. A move to the right would both act as a diversion and prevent the Boers making a turning movement on this side, where they had up till then been successfully held back by the mere pretence of a force. A reconnaissance on the 7th along the hills to the east of the Boer position, and almost up to the railway, led French to fix on Slingersfontein Farm, eleven miles north-east of Rensburg, as a suitable base for a mobile force acting on this wing. On the 9th, under cover of a demonstration and bombardment along the enemy’s centre and right, Porter occupied the farm and adjoining hills with the Carabiniers, New South Wales Lancers, New Zealanders, four guns “O” Battery, a mounted section R.E., and two companies of the Yorkshires. On the 11th French moved out from Slingersfontein against the enemy, who, under Schoeman and De la Rey, the latter of whom had just arrived from Magersfontein, had occupied the northern part of the long ridge running from near Slingersfontein towards the railway, and other positions covering the line. At one stage in the action the Household Cavalry had secured a good position on the Boer left flank, and French hoped to push the enemy back westwards and get across the railway. But the arrival of a strong Boer force from Norval’s Pont frustrated this hope, and French gradually retired his men. An attempt on the part of Major Hunter-Weston with a detachment of his mounted R.E. and half a squadron to cut the railway and telegraph further east was also checked when just on the point of success. The Boer force which arrived so inconveniently was the Johannesburg commando from Natal, part of the reinforcements which had been steadily arriving during the last few days, and had been specially hurried up in anticipation of a British attack by a telegram from P. De Wet early in the morning.

De la Rey now took over the command of the Boer left with a force of about 1,000 men, mainly composed of Johannesburgers and of the Johannesburg Police under Van Dam, and soon began to make his arrival felt. On the
13th he shelled Slingersfontein camp at long range. This
reconnaissance he followed up on the 15th by a determined
attempt to make Porter's position untenable by capturing
the high, steep hill, afterwards known as New Zealand Hill,
 immediatley to the north-west of the camp. The northern
extremity of the hill was held by a weak half company of
Yorkshires under Captain Orr, posted in two parallel sangars
at the top of the slope, while some 60 New Zealanders under
Captain W. N. Madocks (Lieut. R.F.A.) were disposed on
the eastern side of the ridge. At daybreak some 300 Boers
posted themselves in the rock and bush-covered kopjes to
north and east and began firing on the British sangars, their
fire steadily increasing in intensity from 6.30 till about
10 A.M., by which time the British hardly dared look over
the sangars to fire. Madocks had already sent out a strong
flanking detachment to a spur on the east of the hill to cover
the dead ground on the eastern slope. Suddenly, about
11.30, he heard the crack of Mauser rifles quite close on his
left. Sending another small party to work along the west
slope of the hill, Madocks ran across to the Yorkshire
sangars, only to find them in possession of the Boers, and
the Yorkshires lying about among the rocks on the summit,
officerless and thoroughly helpless. Under cover of the fire
a party of about 50 Boers had climbed unperceived up the
dead ground on the steep north-western end of the hill. A
gallant handful of "Zarps" at their head, led by Sergeant-
Major van Bouillon, had crawled right up to the forward
sangar and then, leaping suddenly to their feet, had wounded
Captain Orr, killed the colour-sergeant, and driven out the
men.

The Boers were already swarming up on every side, but
with rare presence of mind Madocks took command of the
wavering men and giving the words, "Fix bayonets—
charge!" rushed forward at their head. The secondary
work was recaptured, but the Boers, taking cover behind the
first sangar, kept up a murderous fire at point-blank range.
Again Madocks tried to charge, but only two men came over
the wall with him. Escaping almost miraculously, he made
his way back to cover and called aloud for his own men.
A moment later a dozen New Zealanders came tearing over the crest and into the sangar. A brief pause for breath, and then Madocks once more gave the word to charge. Four men leapt over the wall together: Sergeant Gourlay, Madocks, Trooper Connell, and Lieutenant Hughes. Gourlay and Connell were shot as they leapt. But the charge had already succeeded, helped as it now was by the fire of the little detachment Madocks had sent round the left flank. The Boers turned and bolted down the hill, hotly pursued by the New Zealanders. A minute later the whole hillside and the surrounding kopjes were alive with retreating Boers, on whom a heavy fire was directed. Twenty-one dead Boers were subsequently found at the foot of the hill, and many other casualties were inflicted in the retreat. The British lost eight killed and a proportionate number of wounded. For once the tactics of Majuba and of Nicholson's Nek had been foiled in the moment of success by a junior officer's forethought and courage. But for Madocks's charge all would have been over in a few minutes, but even the charge could not have saved the hill if the flanking detachments had not confined the attack to its narrow northern end.

On the 16th occurred the only other "unfortunate incident" beside the Suffolk affair which happened to French's force during the whole of his operations. A patrol of 25 New South Wales Lancers under Lieutenant Dowling were cut off to the east of Slingersfontein by a party of Pretoria Police under Lieutenant P. C. De Hart, and forced to surrender after a creditable attempt to break clear, in which Dowling and Sergeant-Major Griffin were killed.

The left flank meanwhile was not forgotten. French himself reconnoitred towards Bastard's Nek on the 10th, and during the fight on the 11th De Lisle, with a small force, pushed north of Bastard's Nek, and by a skilful reconnaissance ascertained that the Boers were in force at Plessis Poort and occupied the ridges up to Bastard's Nek. On the 14th Major Allenby, of the Inniskillings, with a small mounted force was sent right round by the west of Bastard's Nek to
threaten and, if possible, damage the Wagon Bridge. Allenby got within 5,000 yards of the bridge, where he found a commando in laager. After firing a few shells at it he retired, the Boers from Plessis Poort making an ineffectual attempt to cut him off. The positions already secured were steadily improved. On the 11th, by the enterprise and energy of Major Butcher of the 4th Battery, R.F.A., a 15-pounder was dragged up the almost precipitous side of Coles Kop, followed by another on the 16th. By sinking the trails the gunners were able to range to nearly 9,000 yards. The material effect at this range was inconsiderable, but the annoyance to the Boers, who suddenly found shells dropping into all their laagers, and were forced to shift camp and stow themselves away in inaccessible and inconvenient valleys, and the sense of insecurity created, well repaid the effort. Even better evidence of the tenacity with which French clung to the advantage he had gained on this side on New Year's Day was the retention of the Berkshires on McCracken's Hill. Separated by a dip barely 500 yards across from the enemy on the other end of the hill, and subject to constant artillery and rifle-fire, this admirable regiment had held on for a fortnight and was to hold on for twice as long again to the position they had so successfully seized. Their maintenance of so exposed and difficult a post and the smallness of their casualty list furnish a most instructive instance of what can be done by a proper combination of intelligence in the selection of ground, skill in the construction of cover, and good shooting.

Summary of the operations

With Lord Roberts's arrival the Colesberg operations entered upon a new and, perhaps, less interesting phase, which will be more appropriately dealt with in conjunction with the larger policy to which they then became subordinated. But the operations already described provide quite sufficient material for an appreciation of the work done by General French in his campaign in front of Colesberg. Of the strategical results of that campaign it is enough to say that, beginning with a mere handful of men, French at once checked the invasion of Cape Colony, saved the important Midland line of communications, and covered the exposed
flanks of Methuen’s and Gatacre’s forces. From the moment
that he began advancing he attracted to Colesberg a constant
stream of Boer reinforcements withdrawn from the very
points where the main issue of the war was afterwards decided.
The moral result of an almost unbroken series of successes,
however small, at this critical time, and in the region of Cape
Colony, where the consequences of rebellion would have been
the most disastrous, was hardly less important. As regards
the tactical methods so successfully employed by him, they
may be described as a scientific adaptation of the Boer tactics,
of which he had already had a brief but convincing experience
in Natal. The constant feeling for the enemy’s flanks, the
widely extended line of mutually supporting positions, the
laagers distributed in rear—these were Boer tactics and nothing
else. What was more than mere Boer tactics was the insight
into the enemy’s plans, the untiring aggressiveness, the
scientific concentration of force in order to strike a blow, the
skilful co-ordination of the different arms. French’s success
is often attributed to the fact that he commanded a mounted
force at a time when others had nothing but infantry. But
as a matter of fact his mounted troops at no time formed half
his total strength, or a third of the strength of the mounted
enemy opposed to him. It was his skill in using them, and
using them only for purposes which infantry were not equally
fitted for, that made them so effective. The full and con-
tinuous utilization of the whole of his force was, indeed, the
secret of his success throughout. No other general at this
stage of the war wasted fewer men on his communications
and containing forces, none brought a larger proportion of
his men into the firing-line at the point of attack. French
was, no doubt, well supported. In Major Douglas Haig he
possessed an invaluable staff officer, one of the few in the
whole Army capable of doing real general staff work. The in-
telligence, under Captain Lawrence, was admirably conducted,
and the completeness of the telegraphing and signalling
arrangements between the different positions contributed no
little to the security of so scattered a force. The good work
of the troops themselves—the steadiness of the Berkshires,
the gallantry of the New Zealanders, the ubiquitous and
absolutely untiring activity of the two horse artillery batteries—has already been dwelt on in the narrative. But neither was French exempt from his share of more average troops, of inactive and hesitating commanders. And in any event the good work of the troops is no detraction from the merits of a leader, but only, in most cases, an additional testimony to the quality of his leadership.