CHAPTER XXI.

EVENTS IN THE EASTERN TRANSVAAL*

(Continued from Chapter XVII.).

NOVEMBER, 1901—JANUARY, 1902.

During the first half of November, 1901, there was a comparative lull over all the Eastern Transvaal whilst lines of blockhouses were pushed on along the Wilge river, and across the southern angle from Wakkerstroom to the Swazi border. Plumer, Colville, Sir H. Rawlinson, Garratt and Pulteney continued raiding in the south, whilst Bullock supervised the blockhouse building. Spens, returning by Botha's Pass into the Orange River Colony early in the month, came back into the Transvaal on the 17th, and remained for the next ten days at Standerton, into which town also came Allenby's and W. P. Campbell's forces. All these columns made small but constant profit in men and stock, the most considerable being the capture of a laager and fourteen Boers near Mahamba on November 8th, and a week later of another laager and twelve Boers at Plat Nek, both effected by Colville with his mounted troops; Major E. A. Wiggin, 13th Hussars, commanding the 26th battalion M.I., having a large share in the successes. A patrol of the 2nd West Yorkshire regiment under Second Lieutenant E. T. Welchman surprised and secured eight Boers in the Pongola Bosch on the 18th. Altogether about 100 of the enemy's fighting men were taken in operations too trifling for detailed narration. This was small gain, and it was plain that the main hostile bodies had now to be sought once more upon the High Veld, that vast tract which columns and armies had so often crossed and recrossed, leaving no traces more permanent than those of ships upon the ocean. On expanses like these the Boers could long fend off either defeat

* See map No. 56.
or starvation, and though in truth they were being slowly filed down by isolated captures and surrenders, their numbers were still sufficient to render such a process well-nigh interminable, and enormously expensive in men, animals, and money to the British army, wasting itself in carrying it out. How, then, to master these giant meadows and their roving populations had become the main problem of the Eastern Transvaal. Lord Kitchener had long been occupied, and was now well advanced with schemes of which the map and measure alone can suggest the magnitude; nothing less, in short, than the fencing in of whole provinces with blockhouses and entrenched posts, which constantly contracting towards a common centre, would eventually choke each area in their grip as the ancient chambers of torture crushed their victims with converging walls. Something of this has already been referred to in these pages. Already in the Eastern Transvaal a line of blockhouses ran from Wakkerstroom to Piet Retief, a chain of posts from Greylingstad up to Wilge River station. Now (November 16th) whilst the South African Constabulary were ordered to advance their chain eastward from the line Wilge River station—Greylingstad to that of Brugspruit—Waterval station, Clements was to build blockhouses from Standerton across to Ermelo, to be extended later to Wonderfontein and Amsterdam, thus gridironing the High Veld into irregular rectangular figures enclosed by forts and the armoured railways which parcelled out its prairies into areas of manageable size. The immensity of labour and material entailed by these tasks must here be passed over in silence;* let it suffice to remember how far and in what quantities workmen, fabric and tools had to be transported, how often to be employed in remote spots, and in the presence of the enemy, and in how many different directions at once these fortified lines were being projected.

To protect the advance of the Constabulary posts a strong covering force was necessary. Early in November Major-General Bruce Hamilton, having been placed in command of all operations in the Eastern Transvaal south of the Delagoa

* See Appendix 2; and map No. 58.
Bay railway, led six columns into the field, and disposed them in various positions. These columns were gathered as follows: from Standerton, Colonels E. H. H. Allenby's and W. P. Campbell's (the last-named soon to be divided into two separate commands under Lieut.-Colonels F. D. V. Wing and G. G. Simpson); from near Springs, Colonel C. St. L. Barter's (lately Bewicke-Copley's); from Brugspruit, Colonel C. J. Mackenzie's (lately Benson's); from Wonderfontein, Lieut.-Colonel E. C. Ingouville Williams' with Lieut.-Colonel the Hon. C. G. Fortescue; from Volksrust, Colonel Sir H. Rawlinson with Lieut.-Colonel H. K. Stewart, whilst Brigadier-General J. Spens on his return to Standerton was sent to cover the construction of the Standerton—Ermelo chain of blockhouses, his column eventually forming a seventh under Bruce Hamilton's command. Behind these troops the work of building was rapidly pushed on. By November 22nd it was completed, and Bruce Hamilton, establishing his Headquarters in Bethel, prepared for more active operations.*

On the last day of November his troops faced eastward from the Delagoa Bay railway at Middelburg through Bethel down to the Vaal, with Mackenzie, Fortescue and Williams on the left; Barter, Wing and Simpson with the General in the centre; Sir H. Rawlinson next, and Spens on the right, standing on the bank of the Vaal. Allenby was posted in a supporting position behind the right centre. Still further to the south-east Plumer and Pulteney were at Brereton awaiting the subsiding of many flooded streams before marching northward to co-operate in the great movement which Bruce Hamilton was about to undertake. On December 1st, whilst Barter remained to hold Bethel, the line advanced, the trio on the left reaching Carolina on the 2nd, Bruce Hamilton and the centre halting between the source of the Vaal and Ermelo, Sir H. Rawlinson and Spens drawing near to that town from the south-west and south. On the 3rd Ermelo was entered by the centre and right, and the columns at once found themselves in the presence of the enemy.

The approach of so strong a line of British troops had put

* For gallantry on November 23rd, Lieutenant L. C. Maygar, 5th Victorian Mounted Rifles, was awarded the Victoria Cross.
the commandos in a ferment, which their admirable scouting only served to increase when from end to end of a hundred miles of front came only the word "the enemy!" Their position, in truth, would have spelt ruin to forces less mobile. They had been taken by surprise, and already there was but little space for manœuvring between the storm travelling from the west and the lee shore of the eastern frontiers of the Transvaal. Paardeberg and the Brandwater basin had intensified a hundredfold the Boers' natural terror of a cul de sac. With one accord they began to penetrate in small bodies the interstices of the line of columns, and Bruce Hamilton saw that unless he struck rapidly and on all sides he would have to turn and seek his quarry on the spaces behind him instead of in front. Such an emergency, one scarcely to be met with in any warfare but this, formed the strongest test of the acquired rapidity and elasticity of an army which, until this campaign, had not been remarkable for either because the need had so seldom arisen on a large scale. Nor could there have been on the spot any commander more able than Bruce Hamilton to snatch advantage from situations whose duration was to be measured in moments. Yet, surrounded as he was by dissolving hostile bodies, the most adroit General would have been helpless without good information. In war the power to strike is as widely dissociated from as it is dependent on the knowledge of where and when to strike: witness the spectacle, common in history, of strong armies wasting their vigour in purposeless blows, or so bewildered that they refrain from striking at all. Fortunately at this juncture Bruce Hamilton had the services of Colonel A. Woolssampson, the Intelligence Officer who had so often marked down the game for Benson. Tracking now the shifting units of the Boers, he was able to guide his commander to a series of successes which struck terror throughout the Eastern Transvaal.

On the very day of his entry into Ermelo Bruce Hamilton, informed that hostile bodies had filtered through his right wing, took all the available mounted men from the columns of Spens and Sir H. Rawlinson, and marching all night, fell upon a large laager at dawn on December 4th, capturing ninety-three prisoners,
116 horses, fifty-five carts and wagons, and a vast quantity of signalling and other gear. On the 9th he struck again, this time west of Bethel—so far had the enemy penetrated his lines—with results which make it doubtful which were the more amazing, the endurance or the valour of his men. By a march of thirty miles by night he brought the horsemen of Sir H. Rawlinson’s, Wing’s and Williams’ columns upon the laager, which fell to an assault worthy of fresh troops. Nor did the discomfiture of the Boers end here; for six miles they fled before Hamilton’s inexhaustible troopers, who by the end of the day had killed seven and secured 130burghers and all the camp stuff, riding then over twenty miles more into Bethel with their booty. Retracing his steps towards Ermelo on the 12th, Bruce Hamilton received intimation of another laager twenty-five miles north-east of Bethel. For the third time he hurried through the night, with Sir H. Rawlinson’s, Wing’s and E. C. I. Williams’ men, to burst at dawn upon the encampment and send its occupants flying over the veld. Once more a six-mile gallop in pursuit rewarded the soldiers, who garnered eighty-six of their foes and one of the guns lost at Bakenlaagte, before they were recalled to Ermelo, where they halted after a march of more than fifty miles. Nor had Bruce Hamilton’s columns been idle in the intervals. On December 4th E. C. I. Williams, raiding along the Oliphant river, had accounted for seventeen Boers, and Allenby and Barter five; Sir H. Rawlinson had taken eight on the 7th, and Mackenzie six on the 13th, each securing much loot in cattle, wagons and crops.

After sundry minor operations Bruce Hamilton moved eastward from Ermelo with 2,150 mounted men from the columns of Sir H. Rawlinson, Williams and Wing, intending to push the remnants of Botha’s forces against the Swazi border. Bad weather, drifts and guides delayed the first portion of the march until the Boers had warning and scattered. But Hamilton drove on, and assisted by Mackenzie from the north, ran down, killed or captured more than seventy burghers in the neighbourhood of Maryvale, taking nine more on his return march towards Ermelo on the 25th.
Altogether, up to the end of December, 508 Boers, 101 wagons and 10,000 cattle had fallen to Bruce Hamilton's troops. The effect of these misfortunes was great on an enemy who, until recently, had camped contemptuously close to British outposts; who boasted that he had made the night and the veld tracks his own, and that he was not to be beaten at the game of surprise by the very impis of the Zulu. Realising on how formidable a successor the mantle of Benson had fallen, Botha's commandos became utterly demoralised, and nowhere was the end of the war more plainly in sight than in the Eastern Transvaal at the close of 1901.

During Bruce Hamilton's advance Spens, with his Headquarters on the Standerton—Bethel road, had forayed continuously with flying columns. He would have come out with profit but for a mischance to one of his strong patrols which, chasing a commando on the banks of the Vaal on December 19th, was led into an ambush from which it only emerged after desperate fighting, with the loss of about 140 killed, wounded and prisoners. Spens was then directed southward, and placed with Pulteney under command of Plumer for raiding west of Amersfoort, which was carried out with good results.

Barter and Allenby were likewise detached from Bruce Hamilton's forces in order to join a brigade of cavalry which had been sent down from Pretoria on the 15th under G. Hamilton, to deal with the broken bodies which had crept through Bruce Hamilton's lines, and were now wandering in some strength about the Constabulary blockhouse line east of Springs. Vigorous chasing resulted in the capture of thirty-four of these by Allenby's men, many more surrendering at the blockhouses; a determined remnant under General Alberts, however, eluded capture, and remained to do much mischief in the future.*

North of the Delagoa Bay line, Park from Lydenburg, and Urmston, with a roving base, but usually from Belfast, had patrolled the Dullstroom district, searching mainly for the Boer Government, and incidentally for the many small groups which, with constant loss, were attempting flight across the railway.

* See Chapter XXIX.
from before Bruce Hamilton's advancing line of columns. The
only formed body in the district was that of Viljoen, whose
lieutenant, the daring Muller, fell hotly upon Park near Dull-
stream on the night of the 19th, being repulsed with loss, but
inflicting thirty-one casualties upon Park's command. Three
days later Park responded with an onslaught on Muller's camp,
the greater part of which fell into his hands, Muller abandoning
also a Vickers-Maxim gun. Both columns returned to the line
on the 26th, Park to Dalmanutha, Urmston to Belfast.

In Natal Bullock, covered by Garratt, continued to build
blockhouses, now from Botha's Pass to Vrede, and this he con-
tinued to do with assiduity for a month to come. By the end
of December the blockhouses along the Ermelo road were com-
pleted; over those from Piet Retief to the Swazi border Colville
remained on guard, whilst Chapman took out for a fortnight a
raiding party 700 strong, which scoured the Zulu border from
Nkandhla round to Nondweni. These were the doings in
December, a month of great effort and results.

The New Year (1902) found Bruce Hamilton busy amongst
the demoralised knots of Boers who crept along the river beds
seeking a way of escape from the narrowing space between the
British columns and the Swazi border. On January 1st twenty-
two of these were run down on the banks of the Umtali river,
north of Amsterdam. Sixty-nine more, including Commandant
Erasmus, fell victims on the 3rd, forty-nine of which were taken
on the Compies river by Colonels A. B. Scott (temporarily com-
manding Sir H. Rawlinson's column), Stewart and Simpson,
directed by Hamilton in person, the others falling on the Umtali
to Wing, who next day added six more prisoners to his train on
the Umpilusi north of Bell's Kop. On the 9th Bruce Hamilton,
his task in the east reduced to the chasing of individuals, re-
turned to Ermelo, around which he at once found fresh occupa-
tion amongst the bands who had broken through his lines at his
first advance. These were now mere wanderers, ringed in by
blockhouses, exhausted by incessant harrying, and so unnerved
that they dared not approach the familiar farmhouses to seek
for the provisions and fodder which they sorely lacked. Whether
THE WAR IN SOUTH AFRICA.

or no, for men in such a case, capture were a relief from their unhappy lot, it duly befell many of them. On the night of January 10th Bruce Hamilton, leading out Wing and E. C. I. Williams, marched rapidly to Witbank, and surrounded a laager which yielded forty-two prisoners to the throw of the net at dawn, Major Wolmarans, the renowned State artillerist, being taken with two of his officers. A second raid by Hamilton with Scott, Stewart and Simpson in the same neighbourhood two days later, nearly miscarried, owing to the vigilance of a Boer piquet, and the troopers, who had ridden hard for thirty miles in the dark, had to gallop furiously for seven miles more before they were content to draw rein with thirty-sixburghers to their credit. Sir H. Rawlinson's column now (January 14th) left the command for Standerton, and that of Simpson was broken up; but Spens had brought his force back to Ermelo on the 9th, and Allenby had returned to Bethel where also was Barter, so that there was no weakening of the chase. On the night of the 18th Bruce Hamilton once more cast his pack eastward, intending to draw the confluence of the Zand Spruit and Compies river, about Alkmaar. Twenty-seven prisoners had been brought to bag when the Vaal, coming down in flood, warned Hamilton to return, or be caught himself, and at midnight on the 19th Spens, Wing, E. C. I. Williams and Stewart, who had conjointly carried out the hunt, were back in Ermelo. On the 22nd a fresh series of blockhouses was begun from Ermelo to Carolina under cover of Fortescue's force, and the columns, prowling separately on both sides of the new line, secured a few more prisoners on the 24th and 29th. Next day Bruce Hamilton, receiving intelligence of a laager at Tafelkop, ten miles north-west of Ermelo, took Spens, Mackenzie and Stewart, with 850 men, and set out for another trophy, directing Allenby, who was midway between Bethel and Ermelo, towards the same spot. The columns, surrounding the lair at midnight, found it empty; but they followed hotly on the spoor which led southward from it. Near Springbokfontein they fairly ran down a marching commando which they instantly charged and shattered, hurling it against the Standerton—Ermelo blockhouses, ninety-four burghers,
including several officers, being accounted for. By the time the troops regained Ermelo they had covered sixty-five miles in twenty-four hours, in heavy rain, and without food or rest. So well had they learned from the enemy not how to endure, for that was as native in them as in the Boers, but that endurance was the hard road to success. The results achieved—338 prisoners during January, 850 during the two months' raid—showed that it was now for the enemy to learn something fresh, for his hereditary crafts had been mastered.

Meanwhile G. Hamilton's cavalry, strengthened up to January 14th by Barter's troops, and until the 21st by Allenby's, had continued to intercept to the east of Springs many of the fugitives from the zone which Bruce Hamilton had made uninhabitable. To the south Plumer, Pulteney (with Spens up to the 9th) and Colville had performed similarly, the first forming a roving stop between the Vaal and the fixed barrier of the Piet Retief—Wakkerstroom blockhouse line, whilst Colville patrolled the space between the terminus of that line at Piet Retief and the Swazi border. Operating first from Rotterdam, on the Mabusa Spruit, and subsequently from Wakkerstroom, Plumer had sundry encounters with bands whose strength and quality seemed to indicate that Bruce Hamilton had brushed southward the best of his opponents, perhaps Botha himself, in whose presence audacity and determination were ever to be expected. On the morning of January 3rd Plumer's New Zealanders pursuing too confidently a band seen retreating up the left bank of the Vaal, near Rotterdam, found themselves suddenly charged by 250 horsemen, who killed, wounded and captured thirty-one men, then drew off, and pursued their way. Next day Plumer pushed after across the Ermelo—Amsterdam road, north of which his advance-guard, under Major J. M. Vallentin (Somersetshire Light Infantry), having sighted no enemy all day, halted on the plateau of Onverwacht. Vallentin then descried a party moving north-east, and started in pursuit. No sooner was he well on the trail when a commando of 400 men, which had gathered during his halt, fell upon him in front and
both flanks. A desperate mêlée followed, in which both combatants lost heavily. On the British side Vallentin himself and eighteen non-commissioned officers and men were killed, thirty-six officers and men wounded, and some fifty captured in the hand-to-hand fighting. The Boers lost Opperman, one of their bravest Generals, and many killed and wounded, but they were like to have annihilated Vallentin's party but for the opportune arrival of Pulteney's supporting troops, who drove the enemy from the field and far to the north. Soon after this event Plumer repaired to the neighbourhood of Wakkerstroom where the wooded gorges, peopled by lurking refugees, gave him full occupation for the next three weeks, and finally an opportunity of avenging his mischances earlier in the month. On the night of the 25th Plumer surrounded, with five bodies of troops, the kloofs between Spitz Kop and Castrol Nek, and at dawn next day sent his men through them. A number of Boers emerged, only to be driven against the blockhouse line where thirty-four prisoners were taken. Plumer then returned to Rotterdam, and, after some minor raids, went down with Pulteney to Volksrust to replenish supplies (February 4th).

North of the Delagoa Bay line Park and Urmston manœuvred in the Roos Senekal area, but were much hampered by rain and fog. This was the more unfortunate because the Transvaal Acting-President and Government were at this time wandering near Dullstroom, in great straits, and virtually cut off from their main hope in this district, General B. Viljoen, who was now reduced to impotence at Pilgrim's Rest. Schalk Burger was anxious for more practical guardianship, and about the middle of the month summoned Viljoen to meet him at Windhoek in the Stenkamps Berg. In a few days Viljoen, accompanied by four adjutants, was beside his chief, and it was arranged that the official body should follow him back to Pilgrim's Rest, whither Viljoen himself set out on the 25th. It befell strangely that the Government had called their protector to his own destruction, for this ride proved to be the last of the Boer leader's many adventures. The British Intelligence Department was keenly watching the vagrant
Events in the Eastern Transvaal

Legislature; every outpost was alert, and ambuscades lay in many a likely spruit bed and rail and river crossing. Into one of these traps—laid by a party of the 1st Royal Irish regiment, sent out under Major A. S. Orr by Lieut.-Colonel H. Guinness—fell Viljoen as, having stolen past the outposts of Lydenburg, he made to ford the Spekboom river. Two of his adjutants were killed at once, three bullets brought down the General’s horse, and soon one of the staunchest of the federal leaders was escorted into captivity.

Approximate Strength States of Columns referred to in foregoing chapter.

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<th>COLUMN</th>
<th>Mounted Troops</th>
<th>Infantry</th>
<th>Guns, including Vickers-Maxims</th>
<th>Machine Guns</th>
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