CHAPTER XXII.

EVENTS IN THE ORANGE RIVER COLONY*

(Continued from Chapter XVIII.).

DECEMBER, 1901—FEBRUARY, 1902.

With De Wet once more at the head of a force in being, the eastern part of the Orange River Colony became in December, 1901, the cynosure of all the theatre of war. This his presence would have ensured in any event, for now both sides had come to determine largely the chances, or rather the duration of the war, by the measure of the famous leader's forces and fortunes. It is true that not a British soldier doubted the issue of his prolonged exertions, but there were few who expected their cessation until De Wet was either killed or taken, for either event was expected promptly to terminate the fighting. The name of Jackson was not more celebrated in the camps of Pope, or of Rupert in those of Fairfax than that of De Wet in the numberless bivouacs which had dotted the veld of South Africa for two years. But, apart from his high reputation, there were other reasons why at this moment De Wet's return to activity should have absorbed the attention of the British Headquarters. In all other parts the Commander-in-Chief's patient, unrelenting methods seemed to be slowly doing their work.

In the Eastern Transvaal Bruce Hamilton's six columns and the contracting rings of blockhouses were fastening upon the High Veld with a hold which Botha found it impossible to shake off.† Viljoen was practically isolated in Lydenberg. The Western Transvaal was less under control, but, after all, the

* See map No. 64.  † See Chapter XXI.
chief difficulty of Lord Methuen and Kekewich was to discover De la Rey or any other tangible enemy.* In the Northern Transvaal Colenbrander was carrying all before him.† The Orange River Colony was seriously disturbed nowhere but in its eastern half. Cape Colony, the true foundation of the whole campaign, and one to be preserved from crumbling only by the most unremitting efforts, remained a keen anxiety, but even there things were brighter than they had been at any time during the past year. In the eastern part there was scarcely a Boer leader above the level of a bandit, and in the west Maritz’s strategy, and with it the success of all Smuts’ plans, had been confounded just as it had developed into a real danger.‡ De Wet, then, took the field at a moment when some striking performance was most needed by his own side and least desired by the other, and Lord Kitchener, knowing well what to expect, directed all his efforts towards anticipating the offensive on the part of the Free State levy.

The central point of De Wet’s concentration seemed to lie about Elands Kop, between Lindley and Frankfort. Accordingly the following ingenious raid was instituted against the suspected locality. Whilst Elliot was to move out from Kroonstad, marching steadily up the Valsch, not widely extended, and keeping to the south of the real objective, Rimington, Damant and Wilson, coming from Frankfort would approach up the right or eastern bank of the Libenbergs Vlei river. These movements, it was hoped, would have the effect of deluding De Wet into the impression that a general easterly march was in progress which would leave him free behind the receding forces. When the Kroonstad and Frankfort forces should come into touch with the Libenbergs Vlei river, the whole would suddenly face about, and sweep over the country between the Lindley—Reitz and Heilbron—Frankfort roads. On December 8th Elliot, marching light, took out Broadwood, de Lisle and Byng (the latter in place of Lowe), and advanced up the Valsch, de Lisle on the left, Byng in centre and Broadwood on the right.

* See Chapter XIX. † See Chapter XXV. ‡ See Chapter XX.
Rimington and Wilson simultaneously started from Heilbron to join Damant at Frankfort. Elliot was in the midst of his first day's march when, about 11.30 a.m., De Wet was discovered by Broadwood to be sitting upon a strong position Klein Sedan—Quaggafontein, covering Lindley with 1,000 men. De Wet was at this moment meditating an attack on Barker, whose forays from Winburg had earned his special displeasure, and the appearance of the columns from Kroonstad, whilst it surprised him, only caused him to look with more certainty for a movement by Barker in his direction. Reserving himself, as usual, for the weaker opponent, he offered little resistance to Broadwood and Byng who lined up on his left, and after a skirmish of two hours, fell back rapidly on the Libenbergs Vlei. Elliot, who was on the extreme left with de Lisle, knew nothing of this important discovery, and it was not until five hours later that he heard from Broadwood, who had gone into camp at Quaggafontein at 3 p.m., how touch had been gained and lost. At 9 p.m. Broadwood endeavoured to recover contact by a long and difficult night march to Rietpoort; but De Wet, anticipating some such action, was also on the move, and circling southward, passed by the east of Broadwood and past Bethlehem, making for Kaffir Kop, north of Fouriesburg. Finding nothing at the end of a thirty-mile march in the dark Broadwood returned to resume his part in the set scheme. On the night of the 8th Elliot's front was Lindley—Mooifontein.

Nothing could have been more unfortunate than these events. The object of the whole manœuvre had now plainly vanished outside the right flank, and was to be sought rather at the head of the Valsch river than that of the Rhenoster. Only in an instant pursuit by every column towards Bethlehem was there any chance of regaining touch with De Wet, tactics in which the Frankfort troops might equally well have co-operated. But a plan had been formulated, and it was evidence of the inherent inelasticity of schemes laid down and controlled from Army Headquarters, that no attempt was made to depart from it. The march eastward was duly persisted in, Elliot actually feinting at Bethlehem, his proper target, with the object
of diverting attention from the now purposeless advance towards Reitz. On the 10th he was astride of the Libenbergs Vlei river on the line Bulhoek—Fanny's Home—Zwartfontein, whilst De Wet, still with an eye to Winburg, scouted secure from interruption from Kaffir Kop.

Meanwhile the Frankfort troops had joined hands with Elliot along the Libenbergs Vlei from Bordeaux and Zorgvleit. At 4 a.m. on December 11th all six columns turned and faced westward for the "drive" over Elands Kop. Broadwood, on the extreme left was thrown forward from Bulhoek so as to prevent a break-out by the south; escape by the north was barred by the line of blockhouses now standing between Wolvehoek and Frankfort. For the next four days the return march proceeded, the columns searching carefully and maintaining a line which it would have been difficult to penetrate. It was not surprising, however, that their discoveries were small. Every mile removed them further from De Wet's main gathering, which, even at the outset, had been forty miles to the southward. Some 300 Boers in all were sighted, and when on December 14th the operation concluded on the line Heilbron—Kaalfontein, only forty-three prisoners had been taken. Of convoys containing fugitive families there had been no lack, and 187 wagonsful were driven in.

The whole of the eastern Orange River Colony, from Frankfort down to Thabanchu now became the scene of great activity on both sides. De Wet, whose strength increased daily, divided his forces, sending some 800 men under General W. J. Wessels northward to reconnoitre with a view to attacking any columns found outside Frankfort. There was good prospect of success here, because at this time Brigadier-General E. O. F. Hamilton was engaged in laying out a prolongation of the Heilbron—Frankfort blockhouse line to Tafel Kop, and the camp of his working parties was in the open at Dundas. De Wet himself returned from Kaffir Kop to his former ground between Bethlehem and Lindley. No sooner had he done so when, as if led by a malicious spirit, five columns converged on Kaffir Kop in search of him. From Kaalfontein came Elliot with his three
brigades, Barker issued from Winburg, and from the opposite
direction Sir J. Dartnell came out of Harrismith by way of
Elands River Bridge and Bethlehem. On December 17th all
these should have met at Kaffir Kop; but even had the lair not
been deserted, the mission might have miscarried from faulty
communication. Although they duly arrived in the neigh-
bourhood from opposite sides, Elliot and Dartnell failed to meet,
whilst the latter, though he did get sight of Barker, was unable
to establish signalling communication with him. Then, having
seen so little of each other and nothing of the enemy, all five
columns turned for the counter-march to their respective bases.
De Wet, who had observed these manoeuvres from above Beth-
lehem had actually hurried to attack Dartnell on his westward
way, but was only in time to see the column disappear into
Bethlehem, where B. Campbell had been recently installed with
his wing of Sir L. Rundle's command. He therefore lay in
wait some fifteen miles to the north-east of the town, and
kept a watchful eye on the Harrismith road for the first sign of
Dartnell's reappearance.

At 8 a.m. on the 18th Sir J. Dartnell cleared Bethlehem and
set out on his return march to Harrismith. He had received
double warning of De Wet's presence. First, a native captured
the day before had stated that the Free State force had already
placed itself between the column and its destination; next, just
as Dartnell quitted Bethlehem a surrendering burgher rode up
with the news that the Free State force was actually lying in
wait only eight miles out upon the road. So certain did an
attack appear that B. Campbell had agreed to send on his own
mounted men in support of the march for a certain distance.
Taking every precaution except that of attempting at all costs
to discover and inform Elliot, Dartnell moved cautiously upon
his way. As, about 11 a.m., the advance guard approached the
drift which carried the road over the Tiger Kloof Spruit, a sudden
and heavy volley from a hill close to the left front warned
Dartnell that his informants had spoken truly. He instantly
parked his wagons and pushed forward his artillery; but before
the guns could unlimber for action, a fusilade broke upon him.
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from every side. De Wet's commandos had perfectly enveloped the road. Whilst a strong force of riflemen, aided by a Maxim-Nordenfeldt posted on the east of the Spruit, opened fire from the surrounding kopjes, smaller bodies galloped in and took cover at close quarters, and a united rush upon the column seemed imminent. For a few moments Dartnell’s column was in danger of sharing the fate of others which had been waylaid in similar fashion by the arch highwayman of the veld; but De Wet soon found that he had met his match. The Imperial Light Horse, the majority of whom were as experienced in such combats as himself, fought with determination, and utterly denied with their rapid shooting the 400 yards of open ground which separated them from the assaulting bodies. Moreover, the burghers by no means displayed their usual confidence in themselves or their leader. De Wet had ordered a general charge, but only half his men responded to the signal, and these, finding their comrades hanging back, declined to carry matters to a conclusion. De Wet was quick to see that an affair which had cooled at its first onset had miscarried; and there were indications that he had not only failed, but would soon have to look to himself. As soon as the seriousness of the attack had become apparent, Dartnell had signalled to Campbell that the support of his mounted men, who had advanced to Vogelfontein, would be welcome, and Campbell had not only ordered them forward, but was coming on himself with his infantry. At 3 p.m. De Wet called his men from the field, and Dartnell, safe, but in no position to pursue, continued his march to Elands River Bridge and thence into Harrismith on December 23rd without further incident. His losses in the engagement were one man killed, four officers and ten men wounded; those of the enemy, five killed and nine wounded.* De Wet retired into the Lange Berg much chagrined by his discomfiture at the hands of a column which he had looked upon as a certain prey. In a few hours news reached him of a hot engagement in another quarter.

* For gallantry on this occasion Surgeon-Captain T. J. Crean, 1st Imperial Light Horse, was awarded the Victoria Cross.
Within a week of their co-operation with Elliot's raid between the Libenbergs Vlei and Kroonstad, Rimington and Damant were again in combination in the Frankfort district, chiefly with the object of covering the contemplated extension of the blockhouse line from Frankfort to Tafel Kop. On the night of December 19th the two commanders set out on a pre-arranged enterprise, the general scheme of which was a circular sweep around Tafel Kop from the east, concluding with a drive down the valley of the Wilge back towards Frankfort. Soon after dawn on the 20th the columns, having encompassed Tafel Kop, were facing west, in line but not in touch, Rimington on the left at the head of the tributary Kalk Spruit, Damant at the head of the Riet Spruit some five miles to the north. From the start there had been reports of the presence of a considerable Boer force in the hills upon the right bank of the Wilge river, and both Rimington and Damant had captured more than one patrol and outpost. These were in reality the antennæ of Wessels, who, fearing to attack E. O. F. Hamilton's strongly fortified camp at Dundas, had lain between Tafel Kop and the Wilge observing the blockhouse building, and alert for any false step which would afford him a chance to sting. The advent of the two field-columns on the morning of the 20th came as a surprise to the Boer leader. Seeing Damant on one side of him and Rimington on the other, he imagined that he was being purposely surrounded,* whereas neither of the British commanders was in reality aware of his presence. This idea seemed to be confirmed when a third party—whether of his own men, or an advanced detachment of Damant's or Rimington's columns, or a reconnoitring patrol from Frankfort, cannot be ascertained—alarmed him by appearing to the west, and Wessels, certain that he was now shut in, thought that nothing could save him but a charge. Soon Damant's horsemen, galloping down the Riet Spruit in chase of a band which had been unearthed on the southern slope of Tafel Kop, arrived much scattered on the high ground overlooking the right bank. Damant himself, with eighty officers and men

* Report by Assistant-Head-Commandant W. J. Wessels to Chief Commandant C. De Wet.
and the three guns, drew rein about the centre of the line, taking post on a long straggling flat-topped kopje which fell steeply to the broad and shallow bowl of grass curving between the rise and the river. Five hundred yards on Damant’s right a squadron of Damant’s Horse had halted. Other portions of this regiment were on the opposite flank, that is, to the south, but so distant that Rimington, though completely out of touch with Damant himself, had picked them up on his way down the Kalk Spruit. The veld in front of Damant was covered with moving horsemen. Some were making up the river, others were crossing to the left bank. Five groups, each some 100 strong, could be distinguished from the rest, standing motionless under the shadow of the opposite slope. The men composing these were dismounted and holding their horses; they were clothed in khaki uniform, and were drawn up in so compact and orderly a fashion that Damant, who examined them closely, came to the conclusion that they were squadrons of Yeomanry from Heilbron or Dundas. This impression seemed confirmed beyond suspicion when the parties, turning their backs on Damant’s position, took to firing at some invisible target in the opposite direction, certainly, so it seemed to Damant, the scattered Boers who were in retreat from his own advance. Next, portions of the groups broke up, and, collecting some cattle which were straying in the neighbourhood, drove them in the direction of Damant’s position. Finally, all five groups mounted, and rode slowly in cavalry formation straight towards Damant. There was now no room for doubt; Damant’s men allowed them to approach at leisure, and they were soon within hail of the position. Only when one of the knots rode within ten yards was the identity of the whole array suddenly revealed, and the troops became aware that they had admitted a strong Boer commando almost into their lines. Lieutenant W. Scott’s squadron, that on Damant’s right, was the first to discover the danger, and shot point-blank into the nearest band, putting it to flight with the loss of eight of its members. The rest of the intruders, throwing off all disguise, then galloped at full speed for the foot of Damant’s kopje, which was so steep on that side that the ground at its foot was
hidden from view. Realising the situation at last, Damant hurriedly collected a troop, and rushed forward to forestall the enemy on the edge of his crest-line; but he was too late. The Boers scrambled over the lip before he could reach it, and in one moment an overwhelming force poured amongst the guns and covered the whole top of the kopje. Now ensued a combat as noble and as hopeless as that which had strewn Gun Hill at Bakenlaagte with dead seven weeks earlier.* The party with Damant was manifestly lost; the guns were already in the enemy's hands; but every man who had a rifle plied it where he lay, striving only how much he might cost the enemy before a bullet ended his own account. For an hour and a half the unequal contest was maintained, so long does it take men even so bold and skilful as Wessels' veterans to make an end of a resolute band six times smaller than itself.† At the end of that time, out of the eighty on the hill seventy-seven were killed or wounded, amongst the latter Damant himself.‡ When all resistance was quenched the Boers took possession of the kopje, sullying their triumph by permitting a few of their number to perpetrate those outrages on the wounded of which it seems impossible altogether to purify warfare, however humane the combatants. Their hold upon their capture was, however, but momentary. Whilst Wessels cast vainly around for means to remove the guns, every horse of which had long been shot, Scott came charging up from his detached position on the right with the squadron of Damant's Horse and the 30th and 31st companies Imperial Yeomanry, which with one united rush hurled the enemy from the hill almost as soon as he had won it. Soon after Rimington appeared from the south-west and completed the rout. Rimington had heard the first outburst of firing, and also its cessation; but he learned nothing of the

* See Chapter XVII., pages 310-13.

† For gallantry on this occasion Shoeing-Smith A. E. Ind, Royal Horse Artillery (XI. section pompoms) was awarded the Victoria Cross.

‡ Casualties, December 20th, 1901—Killed, two officers and twenty-nine men; wounded, six officers, forty men.
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disaster until it was complete, when first a straggler from Damant and then a messenger from Scott informed him of the facts. He was then some miles distant, but, galloping for the scene, he arrived in time to chase the broken commando across the Wilge as far as the exhausted condition of his horses permitted. Thus ended an engagement remarkable for its startling changes of fortune and, it may be added, for the extraordinary report rendered of it by Wessels, whose undoubted daring with the sword was certainly equalled by that with the pen. De Wet, brooding over his late discomfiture in the Lange Berg, must have derived delusive solace from an account which informed him of charges delivered by only 130 burghers over a bare plain 6,000 yards broad against 2,000 Britons in position; of incessant counter-charges incessantly repulsed; of a hundred dead, and this but a third of the losses of the ill-fated column, being counted by himself in one spot.* Be this as it may, the Free State generalissimo could scarcely have learned the truth before he delivered a more than rival blow.

Since the middle of December the construction of the blockhouse line from Harrismith to Bethlehem had been steadily progressing. At this moment such work, in the absence of a strong and mobile covering force, was risky in the extreme. This was one of the rare occasions during the campaign on which information as to De Wet was absolutely reliable. The attack on Sir J. Dartnell on the 18th had disclosed both his strength and his anxiety to use it, and it was unlikely that such a leader would rest contented under the unaccustomed smart of the defeat of one of his favourite schemes. True, after the affair at Tiger Kloof Spruit, all touch with De Wet had immediately been lost, no special effort having been made to retain or regain it. Dartnell had moved on into Harrismith, taking with him the only mounted force in the district strong enough to beat for game so dangerous. Thereafter information was mainly dependent upon natives, who still reported the presence of the commandos in the Lange Berg. Both B. Campbell and Sir L. Rundle were

* See footnote, page 388.
practically powerless for distant scouting. Their available forces were trifling, and would have been immobile even had they not been chained by protective and working purposes to the partially completed blockhouse line. The brigade of Imperial Light Horse had been broken up, Dartnell having resigned command on his return to Harrismith; and although the two regiments came out again on the 24th, they were not only under independent commanders, but were expressly excluded from Sir L. Rundle's jurisdiction, reporting instead directly to the Commander-in-Chief.* One (Briggs) was to be based on Bethlehem; the other (McKenzie) between that and Harrismith, Lord Kitchener intending, though he did not so inform Sir L. Rundle, that it should work from the blockhouse-head,† which it might effectually have protected. Finally, the Intelligence Department, lacking the only certain means of obtaining information, keen-eyed men on good horses, had to concern itself more with reports of distant British columns than of the nearer Boer commandos. Labouring under all these disabilities Sir L. Rundle remained as blind to De Wet's immediate presence as he was vulnerable to his attack, and it happened that Christmas Eve found him at his weakest. Blockhouse-head was then in the air at Tweefontein, nine miles to the west of Elands River Bridge, and was covered by some 500 men of the Imperial Yeomanry with a gun and a Vickers-Maxim, all under command of Major F. A. Williams (South Staffordshire regiment), who temporarily replaced Lieut.-Colonel R. B. Firman, whilst that officer was on leave of absence. This force lay some two miles to the west of the last completed blockhouse. Sir L. Rundle himself had gone into camp three miles behind Williams with 270 men of the Grenadier Guards (destined for B. Campbell) and sixty-six mounted men of the 1st South Staffordshire mounted infantry. These were all the troops at the front. The regiments of the Imperial Light Horse were not at blockhouse-head, but both together at Elands River Bridge, nine miles in rear of it, and

* Telegram from Commander-in-Chief. K. 9199, December 22nd, 1901.

† Telegram from Commander-in-Chief. K. 9264, December 25th, 1901.
eleven miles from the force covering it. Beyond the undoubted fact of De Wet's presence there seemed, however, no special likelihood of an attack. The Intelligence summary on the evening of the 24th was entirely reassuring. The "situation to the south was quite clear. . . . Movement from north was unlikely." Only seventy-five Boers in all, posted as scouts and cattle guards, could be discovered anywhere.* Christmas Day had not dawned before De Wet, rushing out of this peaceful country, had disappeared into it again, dragging after him the relics of a British force.

F. A. Williams' position at Tweefontein much resembled that of Damant in the recently described encounter on the Wilge. His outposts lined the edge of the almost precipitous southern side of a kopje, the opposite slope of which, falling gently to the north, contained the camp and baggage. This northern side, being peculiarly vulnerable to attack, was strongly defended by entrenched outposts. The hill was the usual camping ground for all columns passing that way,† and was thus almost as well known to the enemy as to the troops. Nevertheless De Wet carefully reconnoitred it in person for two days, and having drawn the fire of the guns by means of his scouts, and ascertained the position of the various defences, he marked it as his victim. Remaining in observation himself, he ordered hisburghers to meet him at a spot four miles distant from Tweefontein during the night of December 24th. This was duly carried out, and about midnight eight commandos, numbering some 1,200 men, advanced upon Tweefontein. It had long been an axiom with the Boers, and might by this time have well been conceded by their opponents, that the steepest side of a position is that most favourable to attack. The numberless proofs of this in history were probably unknown to men who studied warfare not from books but the face of nature; but South Africa, from Majuba onwards, had provided lessons enough to both sides that difficulties of ground are nothing compared to the advantages of

* Intelligence summary, Harrismith District, December 24th, 1901.
† Sir L. Rundle's report, December 26th, 1901.
the cover from fire and view provided by the precipitous faces which at first sight seem impregnable. The force, therefore, which watches only the edge and neglects the foot of such a steep will always be in extreme danger from an active enemy by night. Wagon Hill and Spion Kop had taught the British, Elands-laagte and Driefontein the Boers, how much easier it is to lose than regain such a crest. At heavy cost F. A. Williams' Yeomanry were now to learn it again. De Wet steered straight for the southern face. At two o'clock on Christmas morning his men began to scale the height. Climbing in stockinged feet, they were undetected until the last moment, and then only a single sentry took the alarm. Five minutes later the whole outpost line was destroyed and the camp flooded from corner to corner with an overwhelming inrush of riflemen. Of defence there was none; every body of men on duty was instantly dashed to pieces; the troops in camp were of no more military value than any other collection of suddenly and so terribly awakened sleepers. But of battling with an inevitable fate, the peculiar quality of the British soldier, there was enough both to redeem the field to its losers and to increase the credit of the assault. Broken into groups, and lost in the darkness, the Yeomanry offered a fierce resistance, delivering time after time gallant but ineffectual charges, which were finely led wherever a leader could be found. The gunners stood and fell to a man by their pieces. De Wet himself, no unpractised judge of courage, bore witness to the gallantry of his victims. In less than an hour his work was done; 145 of the column were killed and wounded;* and as dawn broke he left the hill, taking with him the two guns and more than 200 prisoners of war.

The first shots fired in this disastrous affair were heard in Sir L. Rundle's little camp, and a quarter of an hour later the Staffordshire mounted infantry were led out by a Staff officer to ascertain the cause of the ensuing roar of musketry. As the scouts approached Tweefontein the faint light of a cloudy moon

* British casualties—Killed, six officers (including Major Williams) and fifty-one men; wounded, eight officers and eighty men. The Boer losses numbered about fifty, including three officers.
was sufficient to show them the state of affairs, and they themselves were so nearly discovered that the officer in command, who rode ahead to reconnoitre with two men, was summoned to surrender, his companions being actually captured. In an hour's time the patrol was back with Sir L. Rundle, who, on hearing their report, concentrated his small force and sent his aide-de-camp, Captain A. C. McLean, to summon the Imperial Light Horse from Elands River Bridge. His own position was extremely hazardous. Had De Wet turned upon him it is likely that he would have shared Williams' fate; but the Boer leader had allowed his men to scatter in search of the loot and as guards over the wagons, guns and prisoners, and he had only a small force with him when the rising sun revealed the adjacent camp. Even so, Rundle was in some jeopardy from the Boer stragglers. The Staffordshire mounted infantry, whom he sent at the gallop to seize a hill commanding his left and the road by which the reinforcements were expected, were all but forestalled by a hostile body of equal strength who raced for it from the other side; a stronger commando hovered on his right. Meanwhile McLean, riding at speed through the darkness, dashed into Elands River Bridge in less than an hour, and soon both regiments of Imperial Light Horse arrived at full gallop from the east. But the enemy had almost disappeared. A pursuit into the tangled spurs of the Lange Berg led the cavalry into country of such difficulty that it was unsafe to persist, and once more De Wet vanished.

It now fell to Elliot to take up the chase. On his return from the barren operation against Kaffir Kop, Elliot had reorganised his division into two columns under de Lisle and Major R. Fanshawe (Oxfordshire Light Infantry), Broadwood having proceeded on leave of absence. Since then these troops had been engaged in covering the construction of the Kroonstad—

Lindley blockhouse line, based chiefly on Quaggafontein, with Byng behind at Kaalfontein. On the day of the occurrence at Tweefontein, Elliot received intelligence that De Wet was near Reitz. Calling Byng forward to guard the rapidly accumulating depot at Quaggafontein, on the evening of December 26th, that
is, some forty-eight hours after the disaster, Elliot sent out de Lisle without guns or transport, with orders to conduct a wide-ranging reconnaissance, Fanshawe following at dawn on the 27th with the impedimenta. De Wet was reported with suspicious promptitude. On the 28th, when de Lisle was approaching the left bank of the Libenbergs Vlei by Fanny's Home, the heights on the opposite side were seen to be covered by an apparently strong force which made little effort to conceal its numbers or disposition. It appeared certain that De Wet was about to oppose the passage of the Vlei, and Elliot prepared for an encounter with the elusive marauder. But the General was doubly out in his reckoning. De Wet himself was far away, having ridden off to visit Steyn and the commandos of W. J. Wessels on the Wilge river. In the meantime he had entrusted the leadership to General M. Prinsloo, ordering him to lead the commandos west of Reitz, and it was this officer who now faced Elliot across the Libenbergs Vlei. At the first news of the approach of the British column Prinsloo conceived a manœuvre worthy of De Wet himself. Sending the bulk of his men to cross the Vlei, an hour's ride down stream, he drew up a small but showy force opposite Fanny's Home, trusting that it would draw Elliot across the river and allow the undisturbed passage of his main body in the opposite direction. In this he was perfectly successful. By the time that Elliot, forced to deploy against unknown numbers, and further delayed by his transport at the damaged drift, had crossed the stream, nothing was to be seen but a few groups of scouts. Prinsloo's actual commandos were at that moment fording the river ten miles to the north, and were fast gathering upon the very bank which Elliot had just quitted with so much labour. Reitz was found deserted, and it was not until 5.30 p.m. that the news of a numerous body on the march west of Roodekraal, that is, almost behind him, showed Elliot how he had been outwitted.

Facing about, he at once sent five regiments and all his guns to gain contact, and hopes of a decisive engagement were renewed by the discovery of a strong rearguard embattled this time on the high ground on the left bank of the Libenbergs Vlei
river. The enemy was reported to number 2,000 men; it was known that they possessed guns, the trophies of Tweefontein, and ammunition for them. The situation of a commander in the presence of a hostile covering force of considerable but unknown strength has always been held to be one of the most difficult in warfare since the days when Ney shone in command of rearguards and Soult failed in attacking them. Elliot’s problem on the Libenbergs Vlei, however differing in scale from the classic prototypes of the Peninsula and Russia, was even more difficult than they, for he was opposed to an enemy of unprecedented mobility, and in a campaign in which it were hard to say whether caution had proved the more profitless or dash the more dangerous. Where prudence gains the day it is useless to speculate on the possible gains or losses. Elliot, widely extending his troops, formally advanced against the position, duly disclosed the enemy’s guns and firing lines, and accordingly missed his mark. Night fell upon his division still on the right bank of the Libenbergs Vlei river after a remarkable march of seventy miles; a few of his parties which had crossed to the other side were even recalled, and next morning the columns, extending once more on a front eight miles broad, marched over an empty position, and soon after completely lost touch even with the hoof and wheel marks of their quarry. On the last day of December Elliot returned to the blockhouse line to refill, bringing twelve prisoners and fifty-four carts and wagons.

Thus the opening days of the year 1902 found the whole campaign almost come to a head in the eastern Orange River Colony and De Wet. The conflagration which elsewhere seemed to be flickering to its close here burned as fiercely as ever, for De Wet’s renaissance was marked by an energy which recalled the earliest periods of the Boer campaign. From Ventersburg to Vrede and from Frankfort down to Fouriesburg there was not a convoy whose safe arrival could be counted on, not a garrison that did not stand continually to arms, not a column which even whilst it marched against the enemy had not to move with the strictest precautions of the defensive. The history of the next few months is one of continual effort to bring the guerrilla
chief to book. Columns from all parts drove and counter-drove from every base and every angle across his hunting ground; colossal lines of blockhouses daily cut up his sphere of action. Soon Heilbron was joined to Frankfort, Frankfort to Tafel Kop and Vrede, Vrede to Botha’s Pass and Natal by these fortified buildings, of which an unbroken row stretched also from Harri-smith through Bethlehem and Lindley to Kroonstad.* In bringing all this about De Wet had at once achieved his object and ended his occupation. He had roused a giant which might even by accident overpower him. To keep watch on the incessant gyrations of so many columns, the almost insensible tightening of the grip of the blockhouses on every horizon, demanded a hundred eyes. De Wet perceived that the moment had come for another disembodiment. Now, therefore, he again broke up the force which he had gathered for so short and adventurous a course, and in a few days there was scarcely a hill, hollow, hamlet or farm in all the countryside without its little population of armed men, whilst scarcely two hundred remained anywhere together to reward the powerful arrays which Lord Kitchener poured into the district. De Wet himself, with a moderate following, made for the Elands Kop district. With only a few hours’ pause Elliot, knowing nothing of this, took the field again, and swept rapidly to Reitz, thence northward down the Libenbergs Vlei river and eastward to the Wilge river, gaining touch with Tafel Kop (January 4th), whither E. O. F. Hamilton had now successfully pushed his blockhouses. Nothing was to be seen and little heard of the enemy, and but for solitary scouts the country seemed deserted. A sudden dash back to the banks of the Libenbergs Vlei in the evening, often a profitable ruse against the Boers, resulted in the capture of eight prisoners; but the commandos had utterly vanished, and Elliot, whose men were now on reduced rations, gave the word for Lindley. On this day, January 4th, he covered sixty miles: the last five days’ marching had totalled nearly 250 miles, a feat which the

* Fuller details of these and all other lines of blockhouse construction within the theatre of war will be found in Appendix 2.
most brilliant rewards have seldom been able to extract from troops, especially under service conditions of such rigour; for it is never to be forgotten what incessant tension of mind and body added to the labours of columns surrounded by enemies who had time and again suddenly transformed themselves from a sprinkling of vedettes into a formidable offensive force.

No sooner was Elliot in Lindley (January 7th) than a rumour of De Wet’s presence close to the north-east once more drew out his weary men and horses. The Boer leader was reported near Vecht Kop, moving west with the apparent intention of breaking across the railway about Roodewal. This proved true. On January 8th de Lisle and Fanshawe gained touch, and retaining it skilfully by another fifty-mile march, interposed between the railway and De Wet, who was already across the Rhenoster, and pushed him back beyond Vecht Kop, the Boer leader eventually drawing off out of reach towards Reitz again.

Rest was now absolutely necessary for two out of Elliot’s three columns. He remained based on Lindley, Fanshawe clearing the country around the place whilst de Lisle entrenched on Kaffir Kop to the south, so as to cover an extension of the Kroonstad—Lindley blockhouse line to that commanding hill. Whilst they were thus occupied Byng, who had remained in charge of Quaggafontein, took their place in the field, and endeavoured to pick up the slender threads which led to De Wet. He had therefore to make for Reitz, and moved in the first instance on Fanny’s Home, where he expected to find two columns from Frankfort which had been placed under his command for the task. These were the forces of Garratt, and of Lieut.-Colonel J. W. Dunlop, R.A., the first of whom had recently been engaged in covering Bullock’s blockhouse building from Botha’s Pass to Vrede, whilst the latter had been performing similar service for E. O. F. Hamilton from Frankfort to Tafel Kop. Both were delayed one day on their southward march, but on January 20th all three columns united at Verkykers Kop, and for the rest of the month they drove and counter-drove between the Libenbergs Vlei and the Wilge rivers, returning to Fanny’s Home with twenty-three prisoners on February 1st. By
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that date not only was Elliot again on the move, but three more columns had taken the field in the immediate neighbourhood to join in the unending search for De Wet, namely, those of Barker from Winburg, Dawkins (strengthened by the two regiments of Imperial Light Horse) from the Harrismith—Bethlehem blockhouse-head, and Sir H. Rawlinson who reappeared from Standerton. Rimington, too, came from Frankfort, on every side of which, from Villiersdorp to Heilbron and even down to Elands Kop, he had been raiding with his accustomed vigour since January 1st.

From the converging marches of all these units were evolved two grand tactical ideas, which were briefly as follows: First, to press De Wet south-eastward, either into the Drakensberg, or against the Harrismith—Bethlehem blockhouses; secondly, should this miscarry by De Wet breaking through the cordon in a westerly direction, to mass a line of columns behind him and drive him westward, either against a column to be dropped by Elliot during his advance or, failing that, into the strongly fortified angle between the Kroonstad railway and the Wolvehoek—Heilbron blockhouses. The columns did not come together without sundry incidents on the way. In the last week of January when Elliot, keeping to the south of Reitz, was marching on a broad front towards Harrismith, Rimington was sweeping down the angle between the Libenbergs Vlei and the Wilge rivers, with Sir H. Rawlinson on his left, on the opposite (right) bank of the Wilge. Rawlinson, who reached Cornelia on the 23rd, secured thirty prisoners by a skilfully managed round-up of the farms on the Venters Spruit on the next night. Four days later he was joined by Dawkins on the Hol Spruit, and continuing southward, drove before him a Boer convoy down to the junction of the Cornelis and Wilge rivers. This he surprised and rushed on the 30th, taking eleven prisoners and forty-five vehicles. Rimington, who had arrived and remained at Reitz January 26th—28th, was now abreast of Rawlinson, and resumed his march on Harrismith. On the night after Rawlinson's capture on the right bank of the Wilge, Rimington was equally successful within a few miles of the spot on the left bank.
He, too, had been pushing a Boer convoy southward, and on the evening of the 31st was so close to it that its capture on the next day would be almost certain. Rimington's keen observation of Boer tactics now prompted him to adopt a manœuvre after his opponent's own heart. Suspecting that the imperilled convoy would double past him in the dark, he himself made a night march backward, and at dawn on the 31st caught the whole convoy, with twenty-three prisoners and twenty-one wagons at Morgenzon, nine miles in rear of his bivouac of the evening before.

Lord Kitchener's expectation that De Wet would not be found in front of the foregathering columns was soon borne out. The troops made touch with Harrismith with no more serious encounters than those recorded, but Byng, whom Elliot had stopped at Fanny's Home, exactly fulfilled the purpose for which he had been left behind. On the night of February 2nd Byng, acting on intelligence that the enemy was on the move to the north, raided in that direction, and at once struck into the midst of a party under Commandants Mears and Wessels whom De Wet had ordered to extricate the captured guns from the closing cordon of troops. Byng at once attacked, and after a close combat in which his South African Light Horse and Garratt's New Zealanders and Queensland Bushmen much distinguished themselves, recaptured the three guns lost at Tweefontein, taking in addition twenty-seven prisoners, including three officers, and six carts. Besides these the Boers suffered the loss of some dozen killed and wounded, amongst the former being Wessels. Byng's casualties, in spite of, or perhaps because of the determined nature of his attack, numbered but three.

The quarry, though thus broken, was now out of the ring, and on February 4th the columns were turned and hurried into position for the westerly "drive." Could some aeronaut have poised high enough to enable him to survey the array in all its proportions, he would have beheld next day the veld of the Orange River Colony barred from Frankfort down to Kaffir Kop by an unbroken arc of horsemen, whose flanks were at the extremities of a chord more than eighty miles in length, closing.
as they moved forward, the "gorge" of the vast open field-work into which the fortification of the railway and blockhouse lines had converted the whole of the eastern half of the province. The walls of this enclosure had been doubly strengthened for the event. Two additional battalions of infantry lined the defences between Kroonstad, Wolvehoek and Heilbron, which were patrolled incessantly by seven armoured trains. At Wolvehoek a battalion of mounted infantry lay in readiness to gallop to any quarter at a moment's notice. As for the disposition of the advancing semi-circle, on the left, from Lindley to near Fanny's Home, were Elliot's two columns, linking with Rimington, who reached to Stabbertswaag; next came Byng, extended as far as Marsala, north of which was Sir H. Rawlinson, whose right touched Frankfort and gave a hand to three columns under Damant, Wilson and Keir* drawn up in front of the Frankfort—Heilbron blockhouses. Barker remained in second line on Kaffir Kop behind Elliot. As this great horn, a colossal reproduction of the formation of the vanished Zulu impis, advanced, its embrace grew wider by the addition to Elliot's left of two columns under Majors W. R. Marshall and H. G. Holmes, from Sir C. Knox's southern district.

From February 6th—8th the unbroken curve rolled in upon the railway. Not an inch of the country was left unsearched by day. By night, when no officer or man in all the army was relieved from duty, all egress was denied by a continuous line of entrenched outposts, some distance in front of which fires were lighted both to increase the apparent depth of the formation and to disguise the real positions of the works. To attempt to break through such a barrier was a madman's venture; yet it was constantly attempted, especially against Rawlinson, who in three days took 129 prisoners, and at the northern blockhouses, which, dangerous as they were, seemed less fatal than the wakeful rank of troops out on the veld. In one of these encounters ten Boers were killed and many wounded; in all

* Lieut.-Colonel J. L. Keir, R.A., who, with a command of Royal Horse artillery-men serving as cavalry without guns, had been placed in charge of the operations covering the blockhouse building in the north.
of them the fugitives suffered losses by death and capture; but here and there parties and individuals, helped by fortune and their own valour, contrived to get through, in spite of every precaution. Amongst these evasions was one the bitter misfortune of which was well-nigh atoned for by the desperate daring of its carrying out. On February 6th De Wet himself, with a small following, was west of Elands Kop in the very centre of the circle. He was precisely informed of the converging forces by his heliographs which had begun to work from Blaauwkopje (between Bethlehem and Lindley) and Verkykers Kop as soon as the line of troops had passed them by. The dangers of the railway and the blockhouses radiating from it had long been known to him. At the first news of the army encompassing him he had ordered all his detachments to break out where they could, and he himself had now to determine quickly against which of the fences he should make his own rush for safety. For the blockhouses De Wet had invariably, both in conversation and his despatches, expressed such contempt that his decision was a foregone conclusion. Hiding himself near the Lindley—Kroonstad line late in the afternoon of February 6th, he waited for darkness to cover his salvation or ruin. His chances were small, but every moment’s delay would make them less. Elliot was no further forward than Doornkloof; Holmes and Marshall had not yet come up into line from the south. When night was some hours old he gave the word to march, and at one o’clock on the morning of February 7th he found himself close against the wire entanglements which barricaded the narrow space between the blockhouses. In the intense darkness his approach had been quite undiscovered, and when the wires were cut De Wet himself and his foremost men effected the crossing in perfect silence. Close behind him, however, came a herd of driven cattle, the precious meat supply of the commando, and it was not until these began to blunder noisily amongst the wires that the garrisons in the blockhouses awoke to the situation and opened fire. Many of the beasts and a fewburghers who were riding with them were shot; many were turned back, but the majority burst their way through and rejoined
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De Wet when he gained the banks of the Valsch river and freedom at dawn.*

On the next day, February 8th, the great armament, its main object thus dissipated, checked its career at the railway and counted its gains. These were not inconsiderable, though there were few who would not have bartered the total yield for one prize which was not in the net. In killed, wounded and prisoners the manoeuvre had deprived the enemy of some 285 men, perhaps one-sixth of those who had from time to time been reported, or had disclosed themselves during the past few weeks. The rest had disappeared, some with De Wet, the others as if they had been moles or bats, for the surface of the ground had been apparently utterly denied to them. Some, at least, had attempted to escape like fish, for Rimington actually made prisoners of men who had buried themselves all but their mouths under the waters of the Rhenoster, whilst many were raked from the mud and reeds of the adjacent banks! Such desperate devices to avoid a captor from whom no cruelty was to be feared may well arouse wonder, not at the length, but the shortness of the campaign which brought a nation of these stalwarts to its knees. Must not the Romans have encountered a like spirit when, under remarkably similar conditions of comparative discipline, organisation and resources, they found a period of nearly one hundred and fifty years all too short for the subjugation of Britain?

* There was much uncertainty on both sides with regard to this occurrence. It was believed by the British, and Lord Kitchener so reported in his despatch, that De Wet had driven the cattle as a ram against the wires, hiding himself and his men in the midst of the mob, a device of the credit of which the Boer leader would scarcely have deprived himself as he did in his own account of the affair ("Three Years' War," page 352). It is probable that, unknown to him as he rode ahead in the darkness, the majority of his followers did actually become involved in the stampede which carried the herd of 600 beasts through the line of defences.
**EVENTS IN THE ORANGE RIVER COLONY.**

**APPARENTLY STRENGTH STATES OF COLUMNS REFERRED TO IN FOREGOING CHAPTER.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COLUMN</th>
<th>Mounted Troops</th>
<th>Infantry</th>
<th>Guns, including Vickers-Maxims</th>
<th>Machine Guns</th>
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<td>Major H. G. Holmes</td>
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* These two columns worked independently on Sir J. Dartnell relinquishing command.

† Scottish cyclists.