CHAPTER LXVI.

THE MARCH ON BLOEMFONTEIN—POPLAR GROVE.

AFTER a week of rest and reorganisation Roberts was on the move. His immediate objective was Bloemfontein, and he purposed to deal with the enemy who barred the way in this fashion :

French, with the cavalry and some mounted infantry (including the mounted men of the C.I.V.'s) should make a wide sweep to the south, turning east after about a six-mile march, and then north, which would bring him in the rear of the enemy. General Kelly-Kenny should follow up the cavalry with his infantry division ; but he was not to join in the turning movement : he was to march against the front of the Seven Sisters. The other road was along the Modder valley. And the British commander intended to sweep along on both banks of the Modder, with Tucker and his division on the south bank, and the Highland Brigade, Smith-Dorrien's brigade (forming the 9th Division under Colvile), and the Naval Brigade on the north bank.

If the plan of campaign succeeded in its entirety, the Boers would be cut off in the rear by the cavalry, attacked in the front by Kelly-Kenny, while the Highlanders and the sailors would effectually stop them from crossing to the north bank and escaping that way.

At 2.30 a.m., on the 7th of March, the cavalry stood to their horses, and at 3 a.m. they moved out slowly to the south. The Boers were entrenched on a number of kopjes near a place called Poplar Grove, east of Lord Roberts's army, having their left protected by a small group of hills called the Seven Sisters. Poplar Grove Farm, from which the position took its name, was behind the centre of their line ; and they had constructed with tremendous labour trenches and earth-works. The right of their position was a big flat-topped mountain, called Leeuw Kop,* on the north bank, whose slopes ran down to the river, and on the south bank was a ridge of kopjes which formed their centre. The whole position was protected in the front by lesser hills, rough on the surface.

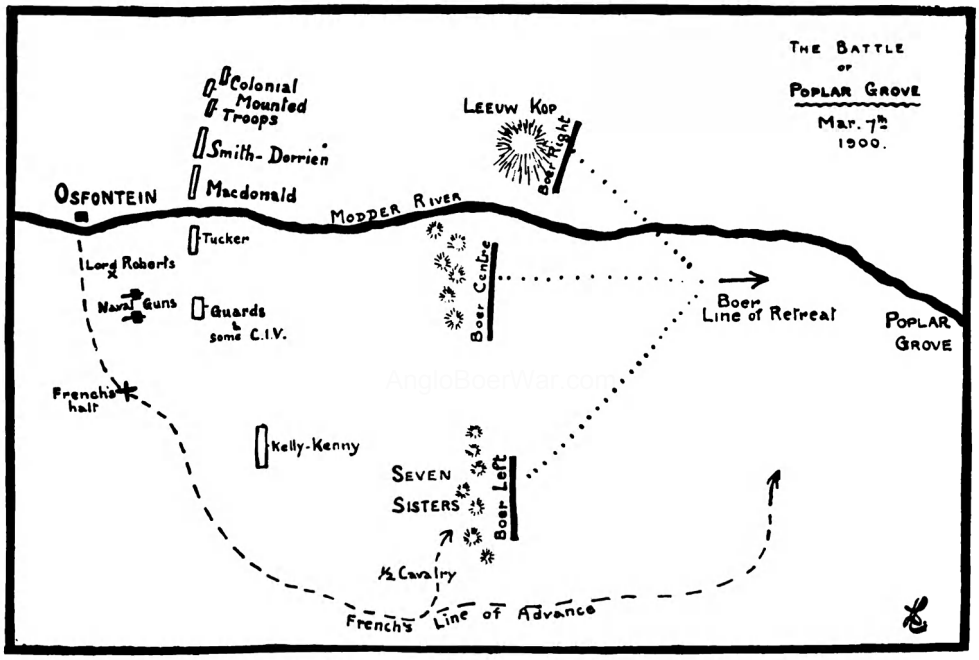
When French's division marched out of camp it was dark ; and, after travelling a little over two miles, the general halted. In so doing he was not following his instructions ; because Lord Roberts had calculated that by the time it was daylight the cavalry would be so far on their way that their enveloping movement would be almost completed—at all events, so far advanced that the Boers would be unable to escape. For two hours or more French stood still, fearing to move further in the darkness in an unknown country ; and this, although he had with him the scout, Burnham, who could find his way about in the darkness better than most men at noontide. The delay had serious consequences.

The 4·7's opened the ball just before six a.m. They had been shifted to some low kopjes south of the Modder and east of Osfontein just after midnight, and Lord Roberts and the Headquarters' Staff took

* *Leeuw* is pronounced "loo."

their stand by the sailormen. As soon as it was well light the war balloon reported a laager behind the Seven Sisters kopjes. The Naval guns loaded with common shell, and in very few minutes found the range and dropped their projectiles into the enemy's camp.

Colvile, at the same time, put his division in motion on the other side of the stream, and the Highlanders were directed straight towards the big flat-topped mountain before described.



PLAN OF THE BATTLE OF POPLAR GROVE.

French had moved at daybreak. As soon as he got his horses in motion he put them to the gallop, and by 7.30 a.m. appeared on the Boer left; but he ought ere this to have been full on the enemy's rear. The Dutchmen saw the swarm of brown-clad cavalry descending upon their flank, and for the first time their guns spoke. Two Krupp guns and a pom-pom opened a vicious fire from Seven Sisters, and with their usual accuracy pitched shells among French's squadrons as they galloped across the veldt. It was matter of admiration how the Boer gunners worked their pieces. A gun would follow a regiment of cavalry moving at full gallop for a mile, never letting go of it, but continually pitching common shell and shrapnel over and amongst the horses.

Hitherto the Naval men had been unable to discover the emplacements of the enemy's guns. But now those positions were unmasked, and the 4·7's began to turn their unremitting attention to the artillery of the enemy. With tremendous rapidity shell after shell hurtled through the air and dropped into and around the Boer gun emplacements. So rapid was

the fire that sometimes two shells out of the same gun would be in the air at the same time. "A little more to the left." "Ay, ay, sir." "Fire! Oh!—good shot." A shell from a 4·7 had dropped within a foot or two of one of the Krupp guns, scattering the gunners, and strewing the ground with maimed and dead men. Also, it disturbed the gun mounting, and that Krupp never spoke again that day.

With a cheer for their own success, the sailormen began to hurl out common shell and lyddite with increased rapidity and venom. After about twenty minutes more of shelling they discovered the exact position of the other Krupp, and soon three well-aimed shells dropped right into its emplacement. Another well-aimed missile slew the crew of the pom-pom. The Boer gunners could stand it no longer, and in haste began to remove their cannon and hurry to the rear.

Meanwhile French's cavalry, still at a hard gallop, developed their attack. Half of them turned off sharp to the left and made straight for the flank of the Seven Sisters; the other half continued east for a mile or so, and then bore up round the rear of the left of the Boer position. On the north bank the Highlanders and the victorious brigade of General Smith-Dorrien pushed along with great ardour, and on their left, forming a protecting band, a large body of Colonial horsemen galloped to get round to the left of the big, flat-topped kopje.

There was no attack except by artillery fire upon the Boer centre. Tucker's brigade, pushing along the south bank of the river, halted as soon as within rifle shot. And the Guards' Brigade, under Pole-Carew, simply sat down to guard the Naval guns. Kelly-Kenny had slewed round, swinging his right up and making a pivot of his left, until his division faced the Seven Sisters, upon which he marched with one brigade as straight as he could go. And at 8 a.m. battle was fully joined.

Colvile's division, on the north bank, had the assistance of some field batteries, which trotted forward every now and then, unlimbering and pitching shrapnel upon the lower slopes of Leeuw Kop. Riflemen were there, lying invisible behind boulders, whence they took long shots at the kilts of Macdonald's men.

It was wonderful to see the confidence with which this brigade swept to the attack. It had, perhaps, the hardest position assigned to it. It had been decimated at Magersfontein, and cut up at Paardeberg; yet here, under the eye of "Bobs" and the leadership of the valiant Hector, it strode forward like a brigade that had never known a check. They took a lot of licking, these Highlanders. With set faces on they pressed, confident that if the Dutchmen would only wait for them, ten minutes with the bayonet would repay all debts. The kilts swished as the thin lines moved forward. No pipes played them to battle, for Macdonald had prohibited music until such time as he should judge the brigade to have re-established itself. And, being a Highlander himself, he set a high standard.

At 8.30 French's division was in the rear of the Seven Sisters, and then the Boers on that side began to trek. They did not retreat absolutely straight to the rear, but fell back to the rear of their centre. Away went the cavalry, not in pursuit, but continuing the circuit, so as to envelop the Boer main body and cut off its retreat. The line of that retreat was now very narrow. To begin with, it was confined to the south bank of the river.

Colvile's mounted Colonials, the 9th Division, and the Naval guns rendered it impossible for them to cross at any neighbouring drift. Then French had cut round to the rear of their left, and was rapidly making for the rear of their centre. This, therefore, only left open the ground between the south bank of the river and the head of French's column.

True, the Dutchmen might have stayed where they were and fought it out; but the fate of Cronje was before their eyes, and they did not dare to allow themselves to be enveloped. Moreover, they would have been exceedingly unwise if they had allowed French to get right behind them. Although it is not to be doubted that if these commandoes had stood at bay they would have made an excellent fight of it, there is also no doubt that once they had allowed French to touch the river with the head of his column, every man must have been killed or captured.

So they did all that was to be done—namely, they withdrew their guns, mounted them on waggons drawn by teams of ponies, packed up such stores as they might in so short a time and hastened eastward through the gap still left between French's division and the river. But that gap was rapidly growing smaller. French had his men on the gallop, as he had had them all day, and they began to get perilously near to the Dutch column. The horse artillery of the Cavalry Division galloped on, unlimbered, fired at the retreating column, limbered up, and repeated the performance time and time again.

The swift movements of French's troopers began to make an impression upon the Dutchmen. They had begun their retreat in an orderly and steadfast manner. They had packed most of their valuable stores. But as Hussars and Dragoons, Lancers and Colonial horsemen, came flying across the veldt, threatening to cut the column in halves, waggons were abandoned, stores were thrown away, everything was done to lighten the horses and augment the speed of the retreat.

Had it not been for French's long halt, there is little doubt that he would have cut the whole column off, and there would have been another big capture. And, even with the late arrival, with his horses in decent condition the cavalry general would still have accomplished his task. As it was, he manœuvred the Boers out of a position from which they could only have been forced by severe fighting at heaviest expense.

The position occupied by the Boer army might well have cost us several hundred lives. As the day turned out, there was no fighting to speak of. The infantry never charged all day, nor did the cavalry get near enough to use their carbines, much less their sabres, with any effect. We lost four killed and forty-two wounded. The operation had now resolved itself into a flight and a pursuit.

The mounted infantry, especially the section of the C.I.V.'s, went ahead on the trail. More than once, by sheer hard riding, by merciless spurring of horses, the mounted riflemen came up with parties of Dutchmen, dismounted, and let fly damaging volleys. The regular cavalry also pursued keenly; but they did not always display the same caution in scouting as the C.I.V.'s and the Colonials. There was a good deal of bull-at-a-gate tactics. Subalterns and captains would insist upon charging, troop and squadron, straight ahead, as though this were the Long Valley or Salisbury Plain, and there were no lead in the cartridges.

To wit, there was a squadron of the 9th Lancers led by a captain, to the number of thirty-five, who rode straight ahead when the Dutchmen were quitting the Seven Sisters position. The leader seemed to take it for granted that as the Boers were on the run they must be absolutely disorganised, and could not have left anybody behind to protect their rear. Slap-dash went the squadron. There is a tiny hill—had you not better send two men out to the right front and two to the left front?

This was the question suggested by caution. But no such thought as cautiousness ever entered the head of any regular cavalry officer until his squadron had been cut up a time or two. Without a single scout, on went the squadron, and had begun to ride over the lower slopes of the hill when volleys spat out from the top and emptied twenty-three saddles out of the thirty-five. This foolishness accounted for exactly half the casualties of the day.

A WOUNDED COMRADE.

On the other side of the river, Colvile's division was having an easy time.

Hitherto this fine body of infantry had received more than its share of knocks. Now it gained a little glory cheaply.

The Highland Brigade marched nearest the river, having on their left the brigade of Smith-Dorrien, with the Shropshires and Canadians in front, and the Gordons and Cornwalls in support. Of this brigade, the Shropshires formed the right of the firing line, in touch with the left of the Highland Brigade, and the Canadians continued the line to the left. There was a kopje opposite to the Shropshires, a kopje with a Krupp gun on it. "The Shropshires will advance and capture the hill in front." This was the command; and the Shropshires looked at the steep hill ahead of them, just glanced to see that the bayonets were loose in their scabbards, and immediately felt all the rights of ownership in the Krupp gun.

Meanwhile the Canadians had swept round to the left. They were to assault one face of the hill, while the Shropshires made a frontal attack up another face. It was a march of some miles for the Canadians, over rough ground and under a broiling sun. But the men of Paardeberg fame took the matter lightly enough. They covered at least ten miles under arms and in full equipment. Yet not a single man fell out by the way. They were proud men, those Canadians—and every man of them would rather have dropped dead from sunstroke than admit that he was too exhausted to march further. And so, in solid, close-packed ranks the battalion stepped out on its flanking march, only hoping that, after all, Canada might be first at the gun.

The Shropshires marched slowly forward, lying down occasionally. They were in no great hurry, because they were to begin their climb about the same moment that the Canadians were timed to reach the left side of the kopje. Colvile marched the battalion within range of the top the hill, and let them lie down and indulge in a little fancy shooting. To the great surprise of the Englishmen, the Boer marksmen refused to be drawn. Not a shot answered the repeated challenges of the Lee-Metfords.

It was slow—much too slow for the commander of the Shropshires. Wherefore he pushed his men forward a little, and again cast them to the earth with rifles pointed at the summit of the hill. Then he threw them forward again—forward and up. For the Boer rifles were still silent, and their gun had ceased to boom.

By successive short rushes the Shropshires attained to within a thousand yards of the hill top, and then it began to dawn on their commander that perhaps the enemy had deserted the position. So he sent a cloud of skirmishers ahead to push on as quickly as might be, and see whether it was so or no. Up went the skirmishers, rushing from cover to cover, showing just enough to draw the fire of the enemy, but no more.

The crest of the hill grew nearer and nearer. Two hundred yards—then one hundred—then only twenty. Then a Shropshire lad stood upright on the crest, at the edge of the great plateau, and raising his helmet on his rifle waved it in triumph.

As on their left, so on their right; the Boers, seeing a considerable force encircling their position, and mindful of the fate of the Fighting General, had simply bolted. And in this case they had bolted with far more haste than their comrades on the other bank of the river. For they had left behind their Krupp gun—one of

the very few instances in which the Dutchmen had fled without taking all their artillery with them.

The Shropshires flew up the hill and pounced upon their trophy. They would have preferred for the Boers to stand and make a fight for it; but the capture of so considerable a prize as a Boer gun made up for many disappointments, the want of a fight amongst others. Somebody chalked the number of the regiment upon the gun, as the manner has been in the British army since cannon began to be. The Canadians, during all this time, were marching to complete their circle. They completed it, only to find that the elusive enemy had slipped through before the net was spread, and to find their brothers in arms, the Shropshires, looking very much more festive than the Shropshires usually permitted themselves to look.

But there was no time to be lost in mere rejoicings. The enemy had run. It was the business of Lord Roberts's army to keep them on the run. The 9th Division marched on, therefore, along the north bank of the Modder, hoping vainly to come up with the flying foe. On the other side of the river the Boers, who had formed the centre and the left of their army, had retreated on another line of kopjes about four miles to the rear. Their little, hardy, sure-footed ponies carried them off at a rate much quicker than the gallop raised by the British horsemen for the pursuit. They settled down on this ridge behind boulders and in great clefts in the ground, hoping that the guileless *rooineks* would charge straight after them.

But the *rooineks* were now under the command of a man who intended to fight in his own way, and not in the enemy's way. Instead of charging the second line of kopjes, the field-marshal merely sent off an order to French to make a curve round the next ridge in the same way as he had done in respect of the last position. The Silent Cavalryman promptly put his horses in motion. The poor beasts were tired enough with their heavy day's work, that had lasted almost twelve hours. They had to be flogged with sabres to make them gallop at all.

But gallop they did in the end; and sweeping wide round to the right, so as to be right out of range of the riflemen on the ridge, they again made to enclose the Boer army between themselves and Kelly-Kenny's infantry division. There was some dropping fire as a pom-pom turned its attentions on the squadrons. French was in peril himself for a few minutes, having ridden forward with the staff to survey the ground and having come under a heavy fire from some concealed rifles about 1,000 yards away. But once more the turning movement accomplished in a few hours what a frontal attack would have occupied a whole day in doing. The turning movement, in fact, frightened the Boers out of a position with no loss to ourselves, where a straightforward infantry attack might have been repulsed time after time, and would certainly have entailed heavy loss.

The Boers would not wait to be rounded up. They saw the hundreds of horsemen on their left galloping hard to cut them off. And as soon as they saw it, neither threat, command, nor persuasion could hold them to their position. Their morale was for a time detroyed. Away they went, horse and man. They did not tarry by the way. President Steyn himself was there, and he did his best to persuade his burghers to stop and fight. But they had had enough for the moment.

LORD ROBERTS AT LUNCH ON THE BATTLEFIELD.

They left behind waggons and stores and wounded. Many a fat sheep and many a draught bullock graced the spits of the Guards and the C.I.V.'s and the Colonial troopers. Especially the Australians came in for their share; for if there was one thing more than any other thing which made an Australian a valuable acquisition to an army, it was that he could forage. A certain Englishman with the army said, that if you put an Australian in the middle of a great plain, as bare as the palm of your hand, he would presently emerge with a ham on each side of his saddle-bow, several ducks, and most likely a sheep. Let it be said, also, that these same men of the great island continent were the best of comrades—never did they hesitate to share with their less fortunate fellows the good things that Providence

and their own keen wit had put in their way.

Amongst other things that happened on the day of the Poplar Grove, was the capture of the military *attachés* of Russia and the Netherlands, of whom the latter bore a name exceedingly British—it was Thomson—and the other a name conspicuously Slavonian. Lieutenant-Colonel Wasili Gourko was his name, style, and title, and he had a few words to say about the conduct of his hosts in leaving him stranded. The two *attachés* had provided themselves with a mule waggon, and when the Boers hurriedly quitted the second position they took the mules out of this waggon to use them for their own transport.

General French was at this time following the retreat with seven horse batteries, which made matters very lively. The batteries galloped after the fugitive column, unlimbered, cast shells amongst the waggons and threw shrapnel at the horses. Then, when the Boers were getting out of their range, the batteries limbered up again and once more galloped after the flying enemy. Indeed, had it not been for the fact that the draught animals had not yet recovered from their forced march to Kimberley—a recovery considerably retarded by the scanty food they had since lived on—they might have destroyed the Boer army and captured every single gun and waggon.

Altogether, the infantry covered twenty miles that day, bivouacking only when the evening began to close in. The cavalry had done considerably more owing to the circuits they had been obliged to make in accomplishing their two turning movements. Altogether, it was a most creditable march, and would have been a fine performance had the army been moving along decent roads in England on a cool day. And when one takes into account the fact that the march had been considerably impeded, and that there had been something in the nature of a rear-guard action, the performance of Lord Roberts's army on the 7th of March becomes little short of marvellous.

Had General French not waited for daylight, it is quite possible, and almost probable, that the whole of the Boer force would have been "rounded up," as the Australians had it.

One thing the army heard with grief—almost with rage. Kruger himself, the arch-Boer, had slipped through their fingers. He had escaped them by the bare margin of two hours. This annoyed the rank and file of the army sorely. They had not forgotten that Kruger was the head and chief of the Transvaal Boers at Majuba time—Kruger, Joubert, and Cronje. As for Cronje, he was safe now. Joubert, most courteous and chivalrous of foes, was, so it was reported, lying on a sick bed at Pretoria—a sick bed from which he might never rise again. And now, the third of the triumvirate had missed his just doom by a little matter of two hours.

Wherefore the British army wrapped itself in its overcoat and softly swore itself to sleep.