CHAPTER I

CONTINUATION OF THE DE WET CHASE, 1ST TO 10TH MARCH—ACROSS THE ORANGE RIVER

On the last day of February, as we know, De Wet and Steyn, with a bedraggled, hungry commando of some fifteen hundred Boers, precipitately crossed the Orange River at Lilliefontein, near Colesberg Bridge. They were seen by some few men of Nesbitt's Horse under Sergeant-Major Surworth, and promptly fired upon as men and horses strove to battle with the current. This unlooked for attack caused considerable dismay, so much so, that many Cape carts and some clothing were left on the south bank, while several fugitives were seen to be galloping off in Garden of Eden attire. Many Boers were left in the neighbourhood of the Zeekoe River, and of these some thirty-three were captured by Captain Dallimore and sixteen Victorian Rifles.

The retirement becoming known to General Lyttelton, who was directing the operations, the pursuing columns were ordered to converge on Philippolis. General Plumer, Colonels Haig and Thorneycroft, entering Orange River by Norval's Pont, operated from Springfontein to the river, while General C. Knox and Colonel Bethune at Orange River Bridge mounted guard there, and threatened such marauders as might retire in their direction. On the arrival of General Plumer at Philippolis, on the 3rd, he discovered that De Wet was fleeing to Fauresmith, and Hertzog, with 500 men, was making for Luckhoff. He therefore, with almost inexhaustible energy, instantly pursued the great raider, and after a rearguard action on the 4th at Zuurfontein, reached Fauresmith on the 5th, only to find the bird flown via the Petrusburg Road. On and on then went the troops, past Petrusburg—De Wet ever twenty-four hours ahead—till they reached Abraham Kraal Drift on the Modder River. By this time (the 7th) the Boer flock had dispersed over the enormous track of country with which they are so intimate, and De Wet himself vanished, as usual, into "thin air." The 8th was spent in recuperation, replenishing stores, and gaining information. On the following two days the northerly march was continued in search of De Wet, who was reported to have crossed the line (on the night of the 8th) on the
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way to Senekal. But, as the redoubtable one trekked at the rate of some five miles a day more than the best column, General Plumer gave him up as lost, and marched to Brandfort, and thence proceeded under orders to Winburg. The chase had been far from stimulating; for heavy rain had fallen, causing much inconvenience to man and beast, and hindering transport operations. The veldt, however, soon assumed a rich green garb, which rendered all the English horses independent of the Commissariat Department.

Meanwhile Colonel Haig, in conjunction, had moved to Philippolis on the 4th, only to learn that General Plumer was on the track of De Wet. He therefore turned his attention to Hertzog, caught him on the 5th at Grootfontein, ten miles north-west of Philippolis, engaged him and forced him westward. He then waited orders at Springfontein lest a more speedy movement by rail might be directed.

Colonel Bethune, in his position near Orange River Bridge, spent this time in fighting and dispersing large bodies of raiders, passing at length via Petrusburg, on the 6th, to the line Abraham’s Kraal, Roodewal, on the 8th. Here he halted. An empty convoy returning from him to Bloemfontein was attacked by the Boers, but the escort tackled the enemy, and, with the assistance of the Prince of Wales’ Light Horse, put them to flight.

General C. Knox’s columns (Colonels Pilcher and Crewe, moving by way of Kalabas Bridge and Koffyfontein respectively), advanced at the same time, reaching Bloemfontein on the 10th and 11th, the astute Pilcher having captured a Boer laager by the way. He had three killed, eleven wounded, three missing, and his captures included twenty-four prisoners, 1500 horses, and some cattle.

Colonel Crewe engaged in a smart tussle with Brand’s commando at Olivenberg (south-west of Petrusburg), and reached his destination plus five prisoners, twenty-one waggons and carts with teams complete, and 2000 horses.

During March, Major Goold-Adams, the Deputy-Administrator of the Orange River Colony, in whom theburghers placed much confidence, bent his mind to the organisation of the civil administration of the colony. Mr. Conrad Linder, an ex-official of the late Government, was provisionally appointed registrar. A scheme of education, based on the Canadian principle, was drawn up, and the organisation of the civil police taken in hand. The Imperial authorities were engaged in a scheme for restocking the country after the war by establishing stock depots on the Government farms in both the Transvaal and Orange River.
MAJOR-GENERAL CHARLES KNOX.

Photo Elliott & Fry, London.
Lyttelton's Sweeping Movement

LYTTELTON'S SWEEPING MOVEMENT—10TH TO 20TH MARCH—THABANCHU LINE

The enemy, under the direction of Fourie, in many small gangs of from two to four hundred, still hovered in the region between the Orange River and the Thabanchu-Ladybrand line. With the object of sweeping them up, General Lyttelton organised a combined northward movement which began on the 10th of March. General Bruce-Hamilton's columns, under Lieutenant-Colonels Monro, Maxwell, and White pushed up from Aliwal North, Colonel Hickman and Lieutenant-Colonel Thorneycroft moved out from Bethulie and Springfontein respectively, prolonging the line on the left to the railway, while Colonel Haig's troops advanced from Edenburg. Later on, as the columns swept upwards, Colonel Bethune's Brigade took its place in the scheme, filling the gap between Leeuw Kop and Boesman's Kop, with its right flank resting on the Kaffir River. While these were marching up, the line of posts from Bloemfontein via Thabanchu to the Basutoland border was temporarily reinforced by Colonel Harley, who, with some 200 mounted men, two guns, and a battalion, had been detached from the portion of General Rundle's force which was holding Ficksburg. The road still further north, near Houtnek, was watched by Colonel Pilcher to guard against hostile movement in that region. The combined advance, though there was little fighting, was decidedly successful. Heavy stocks of grain were found, and such as could not be accommodated in the British waggons were destroyed. Though, as usual, the Boers were dispersed in driblets and most of the farms were deserted and the property abandoned, some of their number got caught in the meshes of the military net. Colonel Pilcher's men succeeded in securing some thirty-three Boers and about 3000 horses, and the total haul of the columns on reaching the Thabanchu line on the 20th amounted to 70 prisoners, 4300 horses, and many trek oxen. After this date General Bruce-Hamilton's force and that of Colonel Hickman disposed themselves between Wepener and Dewetsdorp, while Colonel Haig was ordered to keep his eye on rambling raiders from Cape Colony, in the region of the Caledon. Colonel Bethune's Brigade, marching north via Winburg and Ventersburg, soon swelled the mounted force of some 7000 men, being organised at Kroonstad (under the command of General Elliot), and Colonel Thorneycroft, now under orders of General C. Knox, took up a position at Brandfort. This place at that time was somewhat harassed by meandering marauders, who were in the habit of taking up a nightly post on a hill near by. These were
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surprised by the mounted infantry and burgher police, and their number considerably thinned.

From all points the clearance of the Colony was pursued with vigour. On the 24th Colonel White, in the Thabanchu region, surprised parties of Boers, capturing six waggons, thirty-four horses, and some cattle, and on the 25th some smart work was done by a detachment of Lancers, Yeomanry, and Rimington's Guides, who
drove off and dispersed various portions of Fourie's commando without loss to themselves. At this time Fourie, Joubert, Pretorius, and Coetzee had been all hanging about the neighbourhood of Dewetsdorp, and on the 25th and 26th some spirited encounters took place between them and Captain Damant, who, with some of Rimington's Scouts, engaged in many perilous excursions. On the 27th General Bruce-Hamilton, with Hickman's column and Rimington's Scouts,
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moved out with a view to clearing off the snipers that fringed the surrounding hills. The Scouts and the Lancaster Mounted Infantry routed the Boers from one position after another, chasing them for miles as far as Blesbokfontein, where they dispersed. Meanwhile on the left, near Byersberg, our troops had discovered the Boer laager, whereupon Rimington's Scouts rode round the position, driving the enemy, who scampered from their concealment in the ridges, in a south-westerly direction. Owing to the exhaustion of the horses the pursuit could not be continued, but the troops returned to camp with a goodly show of horses, cattle, and Cape carts as a prize for their endurance.

Concurrently with the activities in the south-east of the Orange River Colony, in the region of Winburg and Heilbron, good work had been going forward. Colonel Williams and Major Pine Coffin, working in combination, had cleared the Doornberg, a supply depot, which, owing to De Wet's absence, was but weakly guarded. All stock was removed, and during the operations General P. Botha and seven Boers were killed and many were taken prisoners. Colonel Williams and the combined forces, reinforced by Major Massy's column from Edenburg, now took up a position near the Vet and Zand Rivers, in order to catch De Wet should he break northward. But as this leader was now in hiding, "taking a breather" for fresh nimbleness in future, it was found unnecessary to wait there, and the column moved on towards Heilbron. Here, accompanied by a detachment from the garrison under Major Weston, Colonel Williams continued his work of clearance, fighting betimes, and capturing grain, forage, food-stuffs, and ammunition in great quantities. Colonel Williams then moved to the north of Heilbron, performing the same task of clearance between the Wilge River and the main line of rail. This occupation took him well into April, of which month more anon.

During the middle of March Lord Kitchener engaged himself with the rearrangement of the mobile columns in the Orange River Colony, dividing the place into four military districts. Each district was placed under the control of a General Officer, whose duty it was to deal with any encroachments of the enemy, to prevent the concentration of commandos, and to clear the country of horses and cattle, and any supplies which might stimulate the marauders to new exertion. The southern district, bounded on the south by the Orange River, on the north by the line Petrusburg-Ladybrand, on the west by the Kimberley Railway, on the east by Basutoland, was entrusted to General Lyttelton, his force including the columns of General Bruce-Hamilton and Colonels Hickman and Haig.
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The central district, bounded on the south by General Lyttelton's command, on the north by the Bultfontein-Winburg-Ficksburg line, extending to Boshof, was assigned to General C. Knox, with whom were the columns of Colonels Pilcher and Thorneycroft.

The northern district, including part of Orange River Colony north of General C. Knox's command, bounded on the east by the Frankfort-Reitz-Bethlehem line, was allotted to General Elliot, whose troops consisted of Colonel Bethune's Cavalry Brigade, Colonel de Lisle's Column (withdrawn from Cape Colony), and General Broad-

wood's Brigade, composed of 7th Dragoon Guards, three battalions Imperial Yeomanry, and six guns.

The eastern district, as before, remained in charge of General Rundle, who, with the original 8th Division and some Mounted Infantry and Yeomanry, protected the line Frankfort-Reitz-Bethlehem-Ficksburg.

By the end of March recruiting for General Baden-Powell's Police ceased. The work of training, clothing, mounting, and equipping was carried on with all speed, and the recruits who
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arrived from England promptly displayed their grit and their zeal by withstanding the assaults of the Boers, who invariably attacked such districts as they fancied were in charge of the "raw" element. The new-comers were no fledgelings, however, for the members of the Constabulary were mostly gentlemen or farmers of a high class, selected with a view to making good colonists.