CHAPTER VI

GENERAL ELLIOT'S OPERATIONS FROM KROONSTAD

It will be remembered that during the middle of March Lord Kitchener engaged himself with a new scheme of redistribution, and that General Elliot's force was arranged to operate from Kroonstad in the northern district of the Orange River Colony. By the 10th of April this force was ready to take the field. In consequence of a seeming recrudescence of activity of the enemy in the north-west of the Colony, and certain signs of a possible junction between them and their confederates of the south-west of the Transvaal, General Elliot directed his energies to the sweeping of the district about Reitzburg and Parys. Here supplies in some quantities served as an attraction to the hungry commandos. These were satisfactorily disposed of by the 20th of April, when the force returned to Kroonstad.

But it remained not long idle. General Elliot proceeded to scour the districts beyond the Wilge River, where the Dutchmen were again beginning to hoard their goods for further activity. Lord Kitchener's plan was as follows:—A movement was to be made by parallel columns on a wide front eastward beyond Heilbron; the left or northern column, when past that point, was to halt, while the other columns wheeling to the left should clear the country, the right passing east of Frankfort. The whole division, moving north in line, was then to press the Boers and their stock back on the Vaal River.

In order to drive as many dispersed Boers as possible into General Elliot's net, General C. Knox, concurrently with General Elliot's first move, was to send a column towards Reitz. A force was also stationed on the north under Colonel Western, who had succeeded to the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Williams’ column on the lower drifts of the Wilge River. At the same time the columns of Colonels E. Knox and Rimington were to move from Heidelberg and Standerton respectively towards the junction of the Vaal and Waterval Rivers.

In accordance with this scheme, General C. Knox occupied Senekal on the 25th of April, sending, as directed, Colonel Pilcher (who had been doing magnificent work at Clocolan, Mequatting's Nek, and the Korannaberg) to Reitz on the 28th. The town was found to have been evacuated on the previous evening, and
Orange River Colony (North)

report spoke to General Elliot's presence on the north of it: consequently, Colonel Pilcher's part in the scheme being accomplished, he rejoined General Knox at Senekal, and with him moved to the railway.

General Elliot's force at this time was moving east, and by the 7th of May the troops were disposed along the line Villiersdorp-Frankfort-Tafel Kop. On the 9th the General, who was at Cornelia, despatched a force to Vrede, and sent off forty prisoners, 5000 horses, and a large number of waggons and cattle to Standerton. The Boers (since Colonel Western was guarding the Wilge River Drift) were now threatened on all sides. Flying in despair to the hilly cover south of Greylingstad, they jumped into the open arms of Colonels E. Knox and Rimington, who were lying in wait for them. Those who were smart enough to escape scurried across the river, but 34 prisoners, 4000 cattle, 284 waggons and carts, and 5400 rounds of ammunition were secured, and the haul served as a successful finale to the first phase of these well-directed operations.

Colonel Western's share in the movement being completed, he went from the Wilge River Drifts to Heilbron. Here he became aware that Steenkamp's laagers were situated some seventeen miles to north of him. Quick as lightning he was off again, marching stealthily by night in the direction of the quarry, and rushing the camp at dawn on the 9th of May. It was a splendidly conceived and splendidly executed affair, and thirty-two prisoners, with horses, waggons, and carts, were the prize of the undertaking.

June opened with more dexterous swoops, and after clearing the ground from Vereeniging to Parys, and thoroughly sweeping Venterskroom and Vredefort, the force returned eastward to the rail, bringing with them nine prisoners, 16,000 rounds of ammunition, and many waggons. After refitting at Rhenoster, Colonel Western scoured the country between the junction of the Vaal and Rhenoster Rivers and Coal Mine Drift, but the enemy vanished, having now every reason to reserve their ammunition, or to spend it only on forces inferior to their own in number. They were not in all cases successful in their disappearance, for a convoy was caught on the 23rd of June, and the guerillas had to fight for dear life; six prisoners and all the waggons and stock were captured. Colonel Western then marched to Klerksdorp to replenish his supplies, after which he co-operated with General Gilbert Hamilton and Colonel Allenby—attacked the enemy in the mountain fastnesses of Hartebeestefontein, and captured more prisoners, horses, and rifles. He finished up the month by moving towards Hoopstad to meet Colonel Henry's column. on its way from Christiana, hustling Boers wherever
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he found them, and then returning to Klerksdorp, plus six prisoners, thirteen rifles, seventy-one horses, fifteen waggons and carts. Two Boers were killed.

GENERAL ELLIOT'S OPERATIONS—SECOND PHASE

General Elliot, his left column following the course of the Klip River, his right extended to the south (beyond Vrede), meanwhile marched towards the Natal border. At the same time Colonel Colville's force moved up the right bank of the Klip River on General Elliot's left, searching the country around Verzammelberg. Troops from General Hildyard's force were posted to close Almond's (or Alleman's) Nek and guard Botha's and Muller's Passes. Beyond an engagement with some 300 of the foe, who were found on his right flank some twenty miles below Vrede, General Elliot met with slight opposition. He reached Botha's Pass on the 19th of May, and forwarded to Natal some 2000 horses and stock, the fruits of his labours since leaving the Vaal.

The Boers by this time had found for themselves a new and naturally strong position some twenty-five miles to the south, and from this rugged and honeycombed region it was imperative to rout them. On the 21st they were attacked and without much difficulty driven off, as their resistance was mainly intended to cause a diversion while their convoy got away in safety to the cover of the broken country along the banks of the Wilge River. General Elliot, accompanied by Colonel De Lisle's column, now marched to Harrismith, collecting nearly 2000 horses on the way, and returning afterwards to Vrede. There, at the end of the month, he was met by Colonels Bethune and Lowe, who had remained behind to operate north and west of Witkoppies—the position south of Botha's Pass whence the Boers had been dislodged.

On the 3rd of June General Elliot, having replenished his supplies from Standerton, moved from Vrede towards Kroonstad and Reitz and Lindley. It was on the way to Reitz that one of the most exciting conflicts of the march took place. A night sloop on Graspan had been planned for the purpose of intercepting a Boer convoy (said to be De Wet's), which had been located in the neighbourhood. Accordingly, in the small hours of the 6th, Major Sladen, with 400 Mounted Infantry of Colonel De Lisle's force, made his way to the larger. The movement was executed with the utmost secrecy, and before they knew of the coming of the troops the Boers in their slumber found themselves surrounded. All that could get away bolted precipitately, but forty-five prisoners were secured. Then Major Sladen, after sending some forty of his party to communicate with Colonel De Lisle, took up a defensive position and awaited
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reinforcements. During the interval the fleeing Boers had a chance to draw breath; they calculated the smallness of the British party by which they had been attacked, and knew that, weighted with prisoners and waggons, it would be impossible for them to move on. They presently came on Fouche, who was marching in this direction with 500 men, and with him returned to the rescue of their comrades of the laager, and made a vigorous struggle to regain the convoy. The small and fatigued British party remained gallant as ever.

Colonel de Lisle
(Photo by J. Edwards, London)

Captain Finlay (Bedford Regiment) and Captain Langley (South African Bushmen) and their men met the attack with immense energy, but in the course of the action the Boers succeeded in getting away some of the waggons which were parked outside the position.

They nevertheless (though egged on by De Wet and Delarey, who chanced to be on their way to the Transvaal) failed to make any impression on Major Sladen's superb defence, which was doggedly sustained till 3 p.m. By this time the first reinforcement from De Lisle's force was seen to be advancing, and the enemy in hot haste tore off, taking with them such waggons as they had secured. But they were swiftly pursued. Fighting recom-
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menced with ferocity—hand-to-hand combats on all sides—and the waggons, all but two, were recaptured. Among the deeds of valour which were numerous on this memorable occasion, was the dashing exploit of young Ashburner, who, at the head of a few men, plunged into the thick of the fray, and at point of bayonet effected the recapture of the leading waggon.

Poor Lieutenant Cameron of the Gordon Highlanders, who had many times before been notable for conspicuous gallantry, was killed. A gallant young officer, White of the Gordon Highlanders, escaped by a marvel. He was taken prisoner during the first fight, and stripped by the Boers; but when the second attack commenced he succeeded in escaping, and, further, managed to run six miles and bring up reinforcements.

But such hard fighting was not carried on without heavy cost—that of 3 officers and 17 men killed, and 1 officer and 24 men wounded. The enemy lost 14 dead, 6 wounded, and 45 taken prisoners, in addition to a number of injured which were carried away in carts. The captures included 10,000 rounds of ammunition, 114 wagons and carts, 4000 cattle, and a quantity of foodstuffs.

More captures were made later, near Lindley, and the force, heavily weighted, arrived at Kroonstad on the 14th and 15th of June. From thence, on the 22nd, they swept eastward, between Lindley and Senekal, towards the line of the Wilge River. On the 2nd of July, at Springfield Drift, some twenty miles north of Harrismith, they received supplies sent out by General Rundle. This officer was now preparing to co-operate with General Elliot, and to march north, on his right, through the country east of the Wilge River, while General Bullock should traverse the country from Standerton to Frankfort and Villiersdorp, and thus serve as a stop for any Boers who might be swept that way.