CHAPTER VII

GENERAL BRUCE-HAMILTON'S OPERATIONS, ORANGE RIVER COLONY (SOUTH)

GENERAL BRUCE-HAMILTON, as we know, succeeded General Lyttelton in his command on the 13th of April, and proceeded to spend the rest of the month in clearing the Orange River Colony, the Smithfield, Zastron, and Rouxville districts, on the east of the railway. Engaged in this work were Colonels Hickman, Monro, Maxwell, and White. Hearing that the enemy was massing in the hills round Philippolis, he directed Colonel W. Williams to move with three columns from the railway to the western border. From the 10th to the 19th of May was spent in marching through the Philippolis district, mopping up Boers, horses, and stock. Thirty-three prisoners were taken, including Commandant Bothma. About this date a brilliant little piece of work was performed by Major Gogarty and four squadrons of the South African Light Horse. A gang of raiders was known to be hovering in the region of Luckhoff, therefore this officer, with his dashing party, was ordered to surprise and, if possible, seize them. The affair was managed with consummate skill, the troops marching by night and surrounding the marauders. Of these, armed, they captured thirty-one, together with their horses.

Colonel Byng now remained behind to hold Philippolis, while Colonel Williams returned to the railway at Prior Siding. At this time a new system of blockhouses was inaugurated for the defence of the railway, which had the effect of releasing for active operations some six thousand of the troops previously required to guard it. The whole of these blockhouses were constructed of wood and iron. The walls consisted of two skins of corrugated iron (six inches apart) filled with sharp sand. On the complete filling of these skins the proof of the blockhouse against rifle fire entirely depended. The filling was done from the inside at the eaves and through holes in the sills of the loopholes, and was kept complete from time to time by order of the officer in charge by working new sand through the holes in the sill by means of a shovel and piece of wood. To prevent blockhouses from being seen through from one loophole to another, screens of blankets or sacking were suspended at right angles to each other crossing the centre of the blockhouse. A
The Transvaal War

barbed wire spiderwebbing and fence surrounded the blockhouse, the entrance to which was firmly closed at night. A 200-gallon bullet-proof cased tank for water (rain water or that brought by water-carts) was kept outside the house, but on emergency water could be obtained by digging a few feet deep within the wired area round most of the houses. These preparations and precautions were none too many, as the Boers were constantly at mischief, and on the 18th they managed to derail a train at America Siding—an incident which cost the life of Major Heath (3rd Battalion South Lancashire Regiment).

About the 19th of May, owing to the villainous activities of the guerillas in the north of Cape Colony, Colonel Monro moved to join the troops operating near Steynsburg, and subsequently Colonel Murray crossed into the Cape Colony. Colonel Maxwell (R.E.), to the deep regret of his colleagues and of all who knew of his distinguished services as leader of the Colonial Division under General Brabant, succumbed to the serious injuries received by being thrown from his horse. Early in June Colonel White proceeded to Aliwal North to act in combination with Colonel Haig, who was still chasing Kruitzinger. At this time, in accordance with General Bruce-
Orange River Colony (Centre)

Hamilton's plan of scouring the country towards Petrusburg, his force was split into seven small columns. More columns, co-operating, advanced from the line of Kaffir River, Jagersfontein Road, Luckhoff, and Koffyfontein, so as to converge on Petrusburg; while Colonel Henry's force co-operated through Wolvекop (near Luckhoff), and the Kimberley column moved near Koffyfontein. Another force, moving from Bloemfontein, operated westward from Kaffir River Station. To block retreat to the north, the South African Constabulary occupied posts along the line of country between Bloemfontein and Petrusburg; and higher up, the Modder River drifts, between Abraham's Kraal and Paardeberg, were guarded by General Knox's troops. The movement took from the 5th to the 8th of June, during which time many laagers were surprised (one by the Burgher Police under Lieutenant Bayley), and 268 prisoners with various stores and effects secured. These activities were followed by others of a similar nature against roving gangs—under the Commandants Brand, Kolbe, and Joubert—which infested the country east of the railway, between the Caledon River on the south, and the line Edenburg-Reddersburg-Dewetsdorp on the north. Fights and skirmishes and snipings continued almost daily, and the columns of Colonels Rochfort, White, and Du Moulin had no reason to complain of lack of excitement. On the west of the railway, Colonels Williams and Byng continued to sweep the districts of Fauresmith, Jacobsdal, and Philippolis.

MAJOR-GENERAL C. KNOX, ORANGE RIVER COLONY (CENTRE)

General Charles Knox, in accordance with the scheme of General Elliot's operations, remained in the Senekal district till the 10th of May, when he arrived on the railway. On the 13th his force was again on the move in the direction of Bothaville, in order to frustrate some parties of Boers who were seeking to evade the troops then operating near Klerksdorp, and to return to the Orange Colony. It was not long before the advance column under Colonel Pilcher came in touch with them. At a place called Allettasdraai, on the Valsch River, they were discovered, dealt with smartly and decisively, and driven south-west towards Zandspruit before Colonel Thorneycroft and his nimble band. After this period General Knox concentrated his force, and marched back to the railway with a view to acting in co-operation with General Bruce-Hamilton's enveloping movement before described. During this movement Colonel Pilcher was continually engaged with either Commandants Jacob or Erasmus, emerging from the various frays with waggons, stock, and prisoners.
The Transvaal War

Colonel Henry, who moved his force from Jacobsdal to Christiana at the conclusion of General Bruce-Hamilton's operations, was now placed under General Knox's orders. Together with the Kimberley column he operated in the region between Bloemhof and Hoopstad, with the result that between the 2nd and 7th of July 52 prisoners, 50 horses, 64 vehicles, and over 7000 cattle were captured, 2 Boers were killed, and 55 surrendered.

Colonel Pilcher from Boshof moved to Bultfontein on the 18th of June, Colonel Thorneycroft taking simultaneously the same direction. During the advance Colonel Pilcher came in for hot work. On the 19th, while watering his cattle, he was attacked by 400 Boers, who, under cover of the smoke of a veldt fire, attacked the rearguard. These retired in good order, firing by sections. They were then relieved by the Mounted Infantry, who sent the guerillas flying, leaving seven of their number behind. The next day from a small kopje the fugitives became aggressive, and were charged by a detachment of Yeomen, who routed them, but on the morrow they were again found in some strength near Badenhorst Farm. The East Yorkshire Mounted Infantry, therefore, charged their position and dispersed them.

While Colonel Thorneycroft escorted prisoners and stock to Brandfort, Colonel Pilcher moved on in the direction of Hoopstad. Colonel Thorneycroft then searched the bed of the Vet River (west of Smaldeel), unearthing waggons and cattle which were hidden there. Towards the end of June the columns of both Pilcher and Thorneycroft were concentrated at Brandfort in order to recuperate before fresh undertakings in the easterly direction, which began on the 1st of July.