CHAPTER VIII

LORD METHUEN, TRANSVAAL (SOUTH-WEST)

The Boers (who had been concentrating for a month at Hartebeestefontein), before the enveloping columns of Lord Methuen and General Mildmay Willson, now left their strong positions and scattered to the west. On the 8th of May some were brought to a stand at Leeuwfontein by General Babington with his smart New Zealanders, Bushmen, and Imperial Light Horse, while others were driven into General Dixon's net at Putfontein. Thus many captures were effected. Besides the fight of the 8th there was another near Korannafontein on the 10th with a detachment of Colonel Williams' force.

Lord Methuen and Sir Henry Rawlinson, after chasing the enemy in the west, moved to Mafeking and Maribogo respectively. General Babington and Colonel Williams by a southerly route returned to Klerksdorp, and General Dixon on the 25th took up his old position at Nauwpoort (south of the Magaliesberg). Seventy prisoners, twenty-six surrenders, 102 vehicles, and much stock were the results of these combined operations.

Attention next turned to Wolmaranstad, where Delarey was reported to be, and which place was now called by the Boers their capital. Rawlinson from the west, and Williams, accompanied by General Fetherstonhaugh (who had relieved General Babington) marched thither from Klerksdorp, while Lord Methuen guarded the exits towards the north. Colonel Rawlinson entered Wolmaranstad without opposition, joined hands with General Fetherstonhaugh, and proceeded towards Klerksdorp, after having marched (since the 6th of May) 387 miles. By way of interlude he captured a small laager near Cyferkuil, thus making his haul consist of 17 prisoners, 3000 head of cattle, 29,000 sheep, and 400 horses. Forty Boers and many families were also brought in. At the same time Lord Methuen, working from Korannafontein, chased a roving commando which was trekking towards Lichtenburg. The fruit of the united activity represented 56 prisoners, 40 horses, and over 100 vehicles, besides stock in abundance. An animated fight took place on the 23rd, over a convoy moving from Potchefstroom to Ventersdorp. The Potchefstroom convoy got as far as Witpoortje, where it was met by the Ventersdorp section. This section was about to leave Witpoortje on its way to Ventersdorp when it was
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attacked by 300 Boers, who fought the fight of the famished. Instantly the Potchefstroom section returned to the rescue, and reinforced the Ventersdorp force with fifty men of the Welsh Fusiliers and twenty of the Imperial Light Horse. The Boers driven off, the convoy then proceeded, but again at Rietfontein Drift the guerillas, some 400 of them under Liebenberg, made a desperate rush upon the coveted supplies, three waggons of which had broken down in the scrimmage.

The escort were hard pressed—losing four men killed and two officers and thirty-one men wounded—but their endurance and gallantry stood every test. The garrison of Ventersdorp sent out fifty men to clear the front of the convoy, and finally brought it back in safety. At one time it seemed as though the convoy was lost, but it was recaptured by dint of hard fighting. Captain Purchas (2nd Battalion South Wales Borderers) especially distinguished himself, Captain Hay (Royal Welsh Fusiliers) was wounded, and Lieutenant Wells (Loyal North Lancashire Regiment), Lieutenant Bankes (Imperial Yeomanry), and Second-Lieutenant Smith (78th Battery R.F.A.), who were in the thick of the fray, had narrow escapes, owing to the prodigious energy with which they tackled the marauders.

The work of clearing the right bank of the Vaal towards Klerksdorp was next undertaken by General Fetherstonhaugh and Colonel Williams. A successful action on the 24th against Van Rensburg's banditti enabled the force to march into Klerksdorp with twenty-four prisoners, 6200 rounds of ammunition, and thirty ox waggons. Thirty-five Burghers surrendered in course of the march.

General Dixon, veering west from Naauwpoort, made a search for guns and ammunition, which had been buried in the neighbourhood. From his camp at Vlakfontein he moved on the 29th of May to Waterval, where, on a farm, he found the spot where the guns had been buried. The weapons themselves had been removed. Near here ammunition was found, but it was too late in the day to attempt to unearth it. The enemy was hovering all round the region, and it was deemed advisable to return to camp before making a lunge at them. The camp in the absence of General Dixon was well guarded, and in a good defensible position, and there was no reason to believe that the hovering Boers could quickly mass in any large number.

As the centre (with which was General Dixon) was crossing the valley towards camp, the firing which had all day been going forward in the direction of the rearguard became louder and louder. Then

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1 For composition of force see beginning of volume.
2 Two guns 28th Battery, one pom-pom. 29th Imperial Yeomanry, one Company Derby Regiment, too strong, under Major Chance, R.A.

Drawing by R. Caton Woodville
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suddenly the hilly ground on which was the rearguard became apparently enveloped in fire, the veldt blazing and smoking, and seeming to impose a flaming curtain between one portion of the force and the other. The rolls of artillery now increased, and presently a messenger from Major Chance reported that he was hard pressed. The Boers, under cover of the smoke, had come up in great numbers, rushed upon and surrounded the guns, killing the gun teams and—after a desperate struggle—most of the section in charge. According to the much-contested statement of Reuter’s Correspondent: “A lieutenant and a sergeant-major were made prisoners, and on their refusing to give information as to the working of the guns they were shot. Their gallant conduct undoubtedly saved many lives, for the enemy actually turned the guns on our troops, but the shells failed to explode, as the pins had not been withdrawn.” This statement could not be corroborated, as those concerned were dead, but support for it is found in the assertion of a private, who stated: “They asked the officer in charge to surrender, but he replied, ‘A British soldier does not know the meaning of surrender, and if you want guns you will need to shoot me and my gunners!’ Thereupon the enemy shot the officer and gunners, and captured the two guns, and then turned them on us.” At this juncture General Dixon, who had sent off Colonel Duff and his troops to the succour of Major Chance, and himself had been galloping across the valley to the scene of action, came to the rescue. On arrival at the west picket of the camp, he found the situation was critical in the extreme. The two guns and howitzer which had been with him were in action west of the picket, and these, together with the company of the Derbys which had been on picket and the details left in camp, were hotly engaged. Some of the enemy were within 500 yards of the picket, while others at 1600 yards range were shelling the British camp and guns. It now became evident that the guns of the rearguard were captured! Colonel Duff, advancing with two guns (8th Battery), 200 Scottish Horse, and two companies of the King’s Own Borderers with a Maxim, now hastened across the valley, and a general advance was made. The Derbyshires were ordered to retake the guns, and this was brilliantly accomplished. By successive rushes they swept on and on, till the Boers, hearing the roar and seeing the red flash of bayonets in the fire-light, took to their steeds, mounted and galloped off as hard as legs would carry them. The guns were recaptured, but the ground was littered with wounded and dead, some of whom had met their fate at the hands of the Boers after they were stricken helpless on the veldt. A trooper of the Imperial Yeomanry, writing of this, said: “It was an awful affair; I thought every one of us was going to get
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killed. There were dozens of poor fellows murdered after they were wounded. I expect the newspapers have told all about it. I hope, please God, I shall never see anything like this again. It was an awful sight. We had been on the trek all last month with General Dixon's column. . . . The night after the fight we had to saddle up in quick time and do a night flit, as the Boers were surrounding our camp. We got away quite safe without the Boers knowing it. We left all the tents standing, so as to make them believe we were still there, but we had to leave our wounded.

General Dixon marched from Vlakfontein on the night of May 30 to Naauwpoort, leaving the hospital, which contained many serious cases, to be moved by daylight on May 31 along a good road leading to Krugersdorp.

Several notable acts of gallantry were performed, among them that of Captain Field (Scottish Horse), who went back at the risk of his life to extricate two men who were unable to retire from the flames. It was a day of many heroes—McDougal, a noble fellow who gave his life; West, another splendid officer of Field Artillery; Captain Browne of the Border Regiment; young Manby, who charged with the dashing "Derbys"; and Willyams of the Imperial Yeomanry, who was among the missing—these are only some of the number who made themselves distinguished in this bloody hour. The officers killed besides Lieutenant McDougal (28th Battery R.F.A.) were Captain Armstrong, 7th Battalion Imperial Yeomanry, and Lieutenants Laing, Nok, Campbell, Campion (Imperial Yeomanry). Among the wounded were Captain Sadler, Lieutenants Gibson, Armstrong, Rimington (Derbyshire Regiment), Surgeon-Captain Welford, and Lieutenant Hern (Imperial Yeomanry). Of the men, forty-four were killed and seventeen succumbed to their injuries. The total wounded was 115.

A trooper wrote the following description of the day's fighting: "About midday the Boers fired the veldt, and we were stationed just in front and could not see. Suddenly the enemy rushed through, after giving us a volley. Dozens of our men and horses went down, and I had the worst two hours of my life. Just as we had the order to retire a chap close to me was thrown from his horse. I caught the animal with the intention of taking it back to the owner, but a bullet passed through my coat and grazed my horse, making the animal turn sharply, with the result that the other horse pulled me clean out of the saddle and knocked the wind out of me. I lay there with our men being shot down by dozens. The sights I saw were beyond description. Boers shot our fellows down in cold blood. Dozens of them were simply murdered. They threw down their arms, and the Boers walked up to them and shot them in cold blood. I lay for some time as if dead, but eventually I
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joined some foot soldiers and we captured our guns again. An awful thing was that many wounded were burned to death in the veldt fire. The devils used explosive bullets, and some of the wounds were dreadful."

One of the Scottish Horse said: "We rushed up the ridge and shot down any one who came in front of us, and managed to re-capture the guns. It was a most bloodthirsty and murderous battle. The enemy were not content with wounding our men, but they started shooting and clubbing our wounded." On this subject Lieutenant Duff (Imperial Yeomanry) collected the evidence of various officers and privates of the Yeomanry and the Derbyshire Regiment, who were eye-witnesses to the acts of atrocity committed by the Boers. He provided Lord Kitchener with the following information. The day after the fight at Vlakfontein, on May 29, he was conversing with Lieutenant Hern, also of the Imperial Yeomanry, who had been badly wounded in that engagement and has since been invalided home to England. Lieutenant Hern told him that while he was lying wounded on the ground he noticed about twenty yards from him Lieutenant Spring and Sergeant Findlay, both of the Imperial Yeomanry. They were both slightly wounded, and were binding up each other's wounds, when a young Boer, wearing a pink puggaree round his hat, came close up to them and shot them both dead. This Lieutenant Hern saw himself. He lay quite still, and the Boers, thinking him dead, contented themselves with taking his spurs and leggings.

Lieutenant Hern also said that the same day others of our wounded were deliberately shot by the Boers.

The enemy, numbering 1500, were under the command of General Kemp.

On receipt of the news of this engagement General Fetherstonhaugh, with the columns under Colonels Sir H. Rawlinson, Williams, and Hickie, hurriedly pushed north from Klerksdorp so as to deal with Commandant Kemp's barbarians, while General Gilbert Hamilton's force moved by rail from Greylingstad to Krugersdorp, and General Methuen marched from the neighbourhood of Zeerust towards Doornkop. But on the approach of the troops the Boers began flying westward. Subsequently it was reported that Kemp and Beyers intended to join hands in the Waterberg district, consequently General Dixon proceeded through Olifants Nek to block the passes north of Rustenburg, while General Fetherstonhaugh continued to scour the rugged region west of the Magaliesberg. Near Roodeval on the 9th of June he caught them, seized seventeen prisoners, thirty-three waggons and a quantity of ammunition, and sent the rest scudding northwards. Still scouring the country he dis-
persed Boers right and left, and finally returned to Klerksdorp with Colonels Rawlinson and Hickie, while Colonel Williams was directed to Krugersdorp to refit. Curiously enough, in the course of these operations over country which had for some months been unexplored by the British, Boers in certain regions were discovered peacefully ploughing and sowing on their farms. They effected to believe the war had ended in their favour, but made no demur on being invited to surrender. Reuter's Correspondent gave the following sample of a conversation which ensued when the Magistrate announced his intention of administering the oath of allegiance to Burghers of the conquered territories desirous of taking it.

Does taking the oath render military service against our own people compulsory?—No; but British subjects are expected to defend their town in case of attack.

What difference is there between the oath of neutrality and the oath of allegiance?—The first effaces a man's nationality; the second renders him a British subject.

Will the oath prejudice any claim against Great Britain?—No.
Will the oath confer the full rights of a British subject?—Yes.

(Here the Boer could study the policy of the British versus that of the late South African Government. Political equality on the one side, and long years of apprenticeship as subject of the Republic on the other!) The next question was:—

Will those taking the oath now have any advantages over those taking it later?—No.

If a Burgher takes the oath now, and his property outside is destroyed by the enemy, will he receive any compensation?—Great Britain repudiates legal liability, but invites claims, which will be brought before a commission.

To resume. Colonel Allenby and General G. Hamilton had meanwhile been clearing the Hekpoort Valley and Breedts Nek in the Magaliesberg. That work successfully accomplished, they moved via Tafel Kop and Ventersdorp to Klerksdorp. The rest of June was spent in operations against Kemp's guerillas in this region, and the month ended with the breaking up of a commando which had gathered in the Hartebeestfontein Hills. Lord Methuen, after the dispersal of the enemy, employed his troops in escorting convoys to Zeerust.¹ Early in July he attacked, on the north-east of Zeerust, a gang of

¹ The siege ended about the 22nd of May, when Lord Methuen arrived with a large convoy and dispersed the Boers from the neighbourhood. As an instance of the change which was taking place may be quoted the resolutions passed by some ex-Burghers in regard to the attitude of the leaders of the Bond and of the Dutch Reformed Church towards the peace delegates. "Considering the magnitude of the suffering which has already occurred from the war, the fearful loss of life and treasure, the thousands of prisoners in exile in other lands or in bondage in South Africa, and the multitude of refugees, both British and Boer, whose homes have been broken up and who are surely being reduced to penury, and considering further the loss and ruin in ever-increasing measure falling on the country, this
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Boers, with stock and waggons, captured forty-three prisoners, thirty-seven rifles, and forty-six waggons. His casualties were two wounded. The Boers lost three killed, while three surrendered.

At this time, 7th July, Colonel Allenby was moved to the north of Krugersdorp for the purpose of sweeping, in co-operation with General Barton and Major C. Williams, the line of Crocodile River, which was harassed by Boers, who were doing their best to oppose the establishment of posts which were to be occupied by the South African Constabulary.

meeting thanks the Peace Committee for its benevolent efforts, and trusts that it will endeavour to continue them, expressing at the same time its deep regret and indignation at the attitude of Messrs. Andrew Murray, Theron, Sauer, and Merriman towards the peace envoys and the future of the war. Their conduct must tend powerfully in the direction of further bloodshed and increasing misery, and this meeting urges the military necessity of absolutely suppressing all sedition by all the force which martial law affords, and of using the utmost firmness to end this long protracted war, believing that peace alone can bring true prosperity.