CHAPTER XVI
THE NEW YEAR—JANUARY 1902

TRANSVAAL (EAST)

The troops of General Botha, weakened and disintegrated, still con-
tinued a species of opposition which was met by the persistent
activity of the British commanders. The blockhouse system de-ve-
doped, enclosing vast areas which were first carefully swept by the
British troops, and subsequently occupied by a network of Con-
stabulary Posts. With the continued extension of the blockhouse
lines, the strain of night duty, and the arduous labours of constructing fences,
trenches, and ramparts, fell heavily on the lessening garrisons of individual
blockhouses. Yet these overworked, fatigued troops never failed to respond
with spirit and cheerfulness to every fresh call made upon them.

General B. Hamilton, after the capture of General Erasmus, returned to
Ermelo. Knowing that a Boer laager was located in his vicinity, he directed
Colonel Wing to make a night raid upon Witbank, some twenty-two miles to north-
west of him. Simultaneously Colonel Mackenzie arranged a descent on the
same objective from the neighbourhood of Carolina—a co-operative movement
which acted splendidly and resulted in the capture of 42 prisoners, including
Major Wolmarans, Captain Wolmarans, and Lieutenant Malan (all of the
Staats Artillery), together with ammunition and camp equipment. Not com-
pletely satisfied with the haul, and suspecting that the Boers, scattered for the
nonce, would return to their old haunt, General Hamilton, with great wiliness,
planned a second night raid in the same locality. His surmises proved correct.
The stragglers had returned, but, luckily for them, their outlying pickets gave
the alarm in time, and enabled them to escape in hot haste. They secured a
fair start, and though a spirited chase after flying burghers was carried on for
seven miles, some of them managed to get off. Others were ridden down, and
32 prisoners were secured. Mules, cattle, and vehicles swelled the bag. On
the 18th General Hamilton made a third night expedition in deplorable weather
and over atrocious ground, and captured 27 prisoners. And yet another dash
(on the 24th) from Ermelo towards Boschmansfontein put him in possession
of twelve more of the enemy. The greatest triumph was achieved on the 26th,
Colonel Wools-Sampson and his Intelligence Staff being mainly instrumental
in procuring the success of the affair. Picked men and horses were drawn from
the columns under General Spens, Colonels Allenby, Mackenzie, and Stewart.
These, in ignorance till the last moment of the nature of their mission, were
suddenly directed on Tafel Kop (ten miles north-west of Ermelo). It was now
found that the Boer tracks forked in two, and therefore the force divided.
General B. Hamilton's party proceeded one way in the pouring rain, and sure
enough found a huge laager at Nelspan. This they charged grandly, and in a
few moments a swarm of Boers fled through the tempest, followed for miles by
the troops with ardour little damped by the nature of the weather. The other
way was taken by a party under Major Pratt (Durham Light Infantry), who drove

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the Boers towards the Ermelo-Standerton line of blockhouses, where the luckless Dutchmen were forced to surrender. Other bands were also run to earth, and in all 82 prisoners—among them Field-Cornet de Villiers, Corporal de Jager (Staats Artillery), and Mr. de Jager, formerly of the First Volksraad—were the reward of this brilliant enterprise. General Hamilton by these dashing exploits (during the last his troops covered fifty-two miles in twenty-four hours) had considerably unnerved the enemy, who now, both by night and by day, lived on tenter-hooks, and consequently evaded as much as possible all contact with the British troops. In his operations the General was materially assisted by the activities of the columns under General Plumer, Colonels Pulteney and Colville, who effectually barred all exits to the south, and kept the enemy within range of General B. Hamilton's schemes. General Plumer scored on the 25th. Then, 24 prisoners were hemmed in and taken in the kloofs between Spitz Kop and Castrols Nek. Colonel Fry (West Yorkshire Regiment) seized thirty more straggling burghers who had run their heads against the Piet Retief-Wakkerstroom blockhouse line. Colonel Mackenzie was meanwhile guarding the northern avenues of escape leading across the Delagoa Railway in order to frustrate plans for a junction between Botha and Viljoen, but the last ruffian remained north of the railway at a farm between Boschoek and Kruger's Post, where, on the 25th, he was cleverly captured by a detachment of the Royal Irish under Major Orr. Thus the enemy lost one of his most prominent and trusted leaders, one who nursed a supreme hatred for the British. The weather continued deplorable—fogs, mist, and incessant rain baulked the best enterprises of the troops—but on the 21st 300 Boers were encountered by Colonels Park and Urmston, and in spite of the elements some captures were made. On the 24th, near Houtenbek, another guerilla gang, with whom the Boer Government was said to be, was encountered. But this will-o'-the-wisp disappeared at the first shot into the broken country north of Rooseneakal. January closed with the departure from Lydenburg of Colonel Urmston, who escorted General B. Viljoen and other prisoners to the railway at Machadodorp.

Early in February, east of Springs, the columns under General G. Hamilton and Colonel Wing made an important haul. The Boers had broken back to the west of the constabulary posts, and clung tenaciously to their ground—most probably in fear of facing, in their efforts to escape, the fire-swept region of the blockhouse lines. They were exceedingly wary, and the reward of very hard labour on the part of the British columns was meagre until the 3rd February, when, at Grootpan, 31 burghers with their transport were captured, and 3 killed.

TRANSVAAL (NORTH)

Operations here were handicapped by horse sickness. Colonel Colen-brander, having moved to the south, gave General Beyers the leisure to conceive a neat little plan for an attack on Pietersburg, and the simultaneous removal of such peaceably-minded burghers as occupied the refuge camp there. The attack on the town began at 4.20 A.M. on the 24th January, and continued hotly for some twenty minutes, after which Beyers was repulsed with the loss of three of his band, while three others lay dangerously wounded within 300 yards of the defence. The Dutchman succeeded under cover of darkness, however, in getting away a certain number of "neutral" burghers, who doubtless were acting in collusion with him. In the engagement the Volunteer Town Guard, who had turned out to the assistance of the troops, displayed
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grit and steadiness of a remarkable order. His attack having failed, Beyers retired to the south-east, but some eleven of his band were caught on the 6th of February by Major Vallancey and a small force, hunting from Pietersburg.

TRANSVAAL (WEST)

Colonel Colenbrander was now assisting (with Lord Methuen and Colonel Hickie) in the clearance of the western regions. Of Lord Methuen's raids and repeated successes it would be tedious to write, though each was carried out at the risk of life and limb, and with consummate dash and endurance. On the 16th of January a Free State laager, with twenty-four burghers, and mules, horses, carts, cattle, and waggons, was captured on the way from Vryburg to Lichtenburg. Near here, while a detachment of Yeomanry were reconnoitring, the Boers got their revenge. Celliers, with 200 men, pounced on the small British party, who, though they fought bravely, had 40 of their number captured: 8 were killed and 5 wounded. On the 30th, after a brisk engagement, Celliers was sent flying to the west by Lord Methuen, who returned to Klerksdorp on the 1st of February. His troops after a rest proceeded, under Colonel Von Donop, towards Wolmaranstad. On the way they effected the capture of 36 prisoners, 49 horses, 25 waggons, and 15 Cape carts by means of a neatly-contrived surprise for Potgieter, who narrowly escaped falling into their hands. By night they surrounded his laager, which was found at Rhenoster Spruit, and also an adjacent farm, and at dawn on the 8th came into possession of the prizes already enumerated.

Colonel Kekewich spent his time in night raids of the same nature, some profitable, some disappointing. Boers were growing scarce as a natural consequence of the effective operations for netting them. In February a smart expedition was arranged for the capture of Delarey, which failed in its main object, but was yet highly successful in other ways. Starting from Leeuwwfontein on the 4th of February, Major Leader, with mounted men (from Kekewich's and Hickie's columns), proceeded north by night, taking a circuitous route towards Roodepan (fifteen miles north-east of Lichtenburg), where Delarey was reported to be. After the capture of a Boer piquet, he learnt that the Dutch general had moved his camp, but the laager of Commandant Sarel Albert was in the vicinity. A bird in the hand being worth two in the bush, this laager was surrounded just before daybreak. With a rush and a roar the Scottish Horse dashed on the Dutchmen, causing a scene of dire tumult, which was enhanced by the stampeding of the Boer horses, who had become alarmed at the fire of the British pom-pom. Brilliantly the attacking force, inspired by the gallant major and his spirited subalterns, Lawless, Selby, and Wallace, fought for their prize, and in the end they had the satisfaction of securing Sarel himself, with his adjutant, Landdrost Potgieter, Field-Cornets Jan du Plessis and Jan du Toit, two assistant Field-Cornets, and ten corporals. They took in all 132 prisoners (11 wounded), 130 rifles, 2800 rounds of ammunition, with horses, mules, and cattle in great number. Unhappily the gallant Scottish Horse paid for its triumph. Two officers and six men were wounded.

ORANGE RIVER COLONY

General Elliot and his troops spent the early part of the new year in chases around Reitz after De Wet, but that skilful personage smartly evaded them. In spite of all efforts it was impossible to wedge him against either the Drakens-
A Big Trap for De Wet

berg or the Harrismith-Bethlehem blockhouses. Colonel de Lisle, at Kaffir Kop, to the west of Lindley and Bethlehem, kept an eye on Prinsloo, who threatened the safety of the blockhouses in course of construction. Colonel Byng's force was constantly engaged with parties of the enemy between Lindley and Reitz, while Colonel Rimington operated in the country south of Frankfort. (At Groothoop, on the 31st of January, he performed useful work by capturing a convoy and twenty-two prisoners, with their "effects.") Colonel Dawkins, with his own column and two regiments of Imperial Light Horse, joined Colonel Rawlinson (who had moved from Standerton after De Wet), and marched south on the left of Colonel Rimington's line of advance. On the 29th Colonel Rawlinson, with a portion of his force, doubled back from near Kaffirstad to Achalia (near the junction of Cornelis and Wilge Rivers), and at dawn on the 30th pounced on one of Manie Botha's laagers. This night march and raid was a feat of remarkable endurance and dash, for the fighting force in the previous thirty-four hours had marched sixty-seven miles, the 2nd Battalion Mounted Infantry doing eighty-two miles in the same interval of time! The captures amounted to 11 prisoners, 120 horses, 2900 cattle, 20 waggons, and 25 carts.

A BIG TRAP FOR DE WET

Meanwhile wheels within wheels of the military machine were revolving, and preparing a carefully arranged plan for the enclosing of De Wet should he, on approach of the columns, which were pressing him towards the Harrismith blockhouses, endeavour to break back to the west. Troops were quietly being passed to east and south-east of him in readiness for a general sweep to the west. It was hoped by the maintenance of perpetual close contact, with patrols and outposts along the whole front of the British line, to drive the smart Dutchman into the strongly held angle formed by the Wolvehoek-Kroonstad railway and the Wolvehoek-Heilbron-Frankfort blockhouse line. De Wet, as was expected, did break back. He ran within the cordon. He appeared to be doomed. He was first promptly pursued on the night of the 2nd of February by Colonel Byng, who on Liebenberg Vlei (west of Reitz) had lain in waiting for him. Quickly flew the British troops in pursuit, and some fifteen miles to the east they came upon a convoy of De Wet's commando. The New Zealand and Queensland Imperial Bushmen brilliantly dashed into the rearguard, while the South African Light Horse as gallantly charged the centre, and with complete success. Such of the enemy as escaped tore off westwards, but twenty-six prisoners (among them Captain Muller, O.F.S. Artillery, Captain Villiers, and Field-Cornet Wessels, who was mortally wounded) fell into our hands. Many vehicles, cattle, horses, and mules were secured, and also a 15-pounder gun and two pom-poms. Nine Boers were killed and eight wounded in this brilliant engagement, which was a tug-of-war creditable to the stamina of both parties. De Wet himself had yet to be dealt with. Now began the working of the great plan for his capture. By the 5th of February our columns formed a continuous line of men (a movable chain of outposts in fact) extending along the west bank of Liebenbergs Vlei from Frankfort as far south as Fanny's Home and thence to Kaffir Kop (west of Lindley). Rawlinson's men on the right were flanked along the Frankfort-Heilbron blockhouse line by the troops under Wilson (Kitchener's Fighting Scouts) and Keir (Royal Artillery), and thence, in order from right to left, came columns under Rimington, De Lisle, and Major Fanshawe. From the south, Marshall and Holmes (detached from Colonel
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Knox's command) moved up to the Lindley-Kroonstad line, gradually connecting General Elliot's left with the Kroonstad railway line. This, from Kroonstad to Wolvehoek, had been specially strengthened for the occasion. In addition to the normal garrisons, the 2nd Battalion Seaforths were distributed along the line. Four armoured trains were also in readiness. The Wolvehoek-Heilbron branch line had, moreover, been reinforced by the 2nd Battalion Leinster Regiment and three armoured trains. At Wolvehoek itself General Cunningham held the 28th Mounted Infantry in readiness to pursue such marauders as might be driven across the railway!

Here was a gigantic chain—every link firmly united to its fellow! On the 6th it began to move west. By night a British line was held from Holland, on the Heilbron-Frankfort blockhouse line, to Doornkloof, on the Kroonstad-Lindley line. This gigantic line was held by entrenched outposts fifty yards apart. Fires were lit in advance, to give the effect of a double position. Men were pushed along the flanking blockhouse line to watch for attempts to break through. Nothing could be more complete, and at every post were British eyes on the alert and British hearts beating with anxiety lest their part in the programme should be weakly performed.

At daybreak a further general advance was made. The line now reached the Heilbron-Kroonstad road, the left moving up, joined at America Siding on to the Kroonstad-Wolvehoek blockhouse line. The last night's arrangements were repeated, and every officer and man in the force remained on outpost duty. The piquets were constantly attacked, and Boers, struggling to escape and caught in the toils, caused a perpetual ripple of bullets to break the stillness of the night. In one case there was a desperate rush at the Heilbron line of blockhouses, which was bravely repulsed. The Boers lost ten killed and several wounded. At this time De Wet—finding himself cornered as it were—ordered his men in small parties to make each, independently, his dash for safety, leaving him and a few others to trust to their native wit for a means of escape. His well-known sagacity came to his aid. Riding with an immense herd of cattle, he made for Kroonstad-Lindley blockhouse line. Here, in the intense darkness, he gathered himself together for a desperate plunge. Racing full speed in the midst of the herd, he charged the line, breaking the wire entanglements and simply sweeping every obstacle before him by sheer weight of the impact! Thus he got away. Three of his followers were killed, and the mob of horses and cattle that had shielded him was shot—but his end was achieved! He had outwitted the British. He was free.

But though his freedom as an individual was maintained, the loss to his party and the wreck of his hopes were considerable. Two hundred and eighty-five of his band were either killed, wounded, or prisoners, the last having been gleaned from among the rushes and reeds in the bed of the Rhenoster, where they had sought refuge after carefully divesting themselves of compromising articles of khaki uniform. These were found lying on the banks!

To the west of the railway, Colonel Rochfort spent January and February in tussling with commandos under Nieuwoudt and Pretorius. On the 26th of January, Major Driscoll came in touch with the former leader. He pursued him to the Bosshof road, about eight miles north of the Modder, and in a short, sharp engagement secured seventeen prisoners (including Field-Cornets Venter and Grobelaar), some waggons, carts, and riding horses. Nieuwoudt, however, doubled back and joined Pretorius and 150 burghers, and then prepared to attack Colonel Du Moulin's column, which had been searching for him in the Jagersfontein region. On the 27th, Du Moulin's force was bivouacked on the
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south bank of the Riet, at Abraham's Kraal. The Dutchmen crossed the Riet from the north and rushed the piquet that was holding a kopje, behind which the camp was sheltered. Once in possession of this commanding point their success seemed assured. At the first sound of alarm Du Moulin, a brilliant leader who had done incessant and excellent service, dashed to repel the attack, and was instantly shot. Many of his men dropped by his side. Major Gilbert (Sussex Regiment) assuming command, set to work to repulse the enemy, and by 1.45 A.M. had so effectively reoccupied the defences that a second bold attempt on the part of the guerillas to carry a position held by one of the piquets proved a complete failure. But, besides the valiant Colonel, ten of our men were killed and six wounded in the hardly-fought engagement.

Colonel Sitwell spent January in covering the passage of convoys in the Kimberley district. This, always a risky undertaking, on the 13th of January became more exciting than pleasant. De Villiers with 400 rebels held an entrenched position midway between Campbell and Griquatown, completely commanding the line of advance. Despite the energy and dash of the 22nd Battalion Mounted Infantry, who managed to establish themselves within a comparatively short distance of the defences, the foe was not to be routed. Finally on the scene came a small detachment of the Munster Fusiliers, and these, by a well-executed bayonet charge, carried the position. The engagement cost us 1 officer and 5 men killed, and 6 men wounded. The Boer loss was great, but they succeeded in removing their wounded, leaving 50 dead horses and 18 live ones behind them.

CAPE COLONY

The operations of the raiders were gradually becoming confined to the comparatively waterless and inaccessible districts where, though politically less menacing, they were, in matters of transport and supply, decidedly obnoxious. The columns at this time were chiefly employed in covering the Lamberts Bay-Victoria Road blockhouse line, and in escorting convoys to supply depots now being established at Calvinia, Williston, Fraserburg, and Carnarvon.