

ALFRED THAYER MAHAN

STORY OF THE WAR IN
SOUTH AFRICA,
1899-1900

Alfred Thayer Mahan

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A. T. Mahan

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CHAPTER I

THE THEATRE OF THE WAR

The war in South Africa has been no exception to the general rule that the origin of current events is to be sought in the history of the past, and their present course to be understood by an appreciation of existing conditions, which decisively control it. This is especially true of the matter here before us; because the southern extreme of Africa, like to that of the American continent, has heretofore lain far outside of the common interest, and therefore of the accurate knowledge, of mankind at large. The Cape of Good Hope and Cape Horn, in themselves remote, tempestuous, and comparatively unproductive regions, for centuries derived importance merely from the fact that by those ways alone the European world found access to the shores of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The application of steam to ocean navigation, and the opening of the Suez Canal, have greatly modified conditions, by diverting travel from the two Capes to the Canal and to the Straits of Magellan. It is only within a very few years that South Africa, thus diminished in consequence as a station upon a leading commercial highway, has received compensation by the discovery of great mineral wealth.

Thus separated from the rest of the world, by lack of intrinsic value as a region producing materials necessary to the common good, the isolation of South Africa was further increased by physical conditions, which not only retarded colonisation and development, but powerfully affected the character and the mutual relations of the European settlers. Portuguese mariners, after more than half a century of painful groping downward along the West African coast in search of a sea route to India that vague tradition asserted could there be found, in 1486 rounded the Cape of Good Hope, which then received the despondent name of the Cape of Storms from its first discoverer, Bartholomew Diaz.

Vasco da Gama, following him in 1497, gave to it its present auspicious title, which was to him of sound augury; for he then passed on to explore the East coast and to find the long-desired Indies. It was, however, the latter which constituted the Portuguese goal. Africa was to them primarily the half-way house, where to refresh their ships on the long voyage to Hindustan, which then took near a year to complete. For this purpose they established themselves on the island of Mozambique, and gradually took possession of the country to this day known as Portuguese East Africa.

From that far back settlement, Delagoa Bay, near the southern border, is now a thorn in the side of the British invasion; a port with which they are not at war, and therefore cannot seize or blockade, but which, through the supplies that thence reach the otherwise isolated Transvaal, contributes powerfully to support the defence.

Upon the heels of the Portuguese followed the Dutch, aiming like them at the Far East, more especially at what were then comprehensively called the Spice Islands—the Moluccas. They also felt the need of a half-way station. For this the Cape of Good Hope, with the adjacent bays—Table Bay and False Bay—presented advantages; for though not perfectly safe anchorages at all seasons, the voyage to the islands is more expeditiously and healthfully made by starting from, and keeping in, a far southern latitude, than by proceeding along the East African coast.

In 1652 the Dutch settled at the Cape, and gradually extended their holding to the eastward as far as the Great Fish River. A generation later, in 1686, the population received an accession of French Protestant refugees, leaving their country upon the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. From these descended the late General Joubert, Commander-in-Chief of the Transvaal forces at the opening of

hostilities. The administration of the colony by the Dutch East India Company being both arbitrary and meddlesome, some of the more independent spirits withdrew from the coast and moved inland, behind the difficult mountain ranges that separate the narrow strip of sea-coast from the high table-lands of the interior.

In 1795 local dissatisfaction and the spread of French revolutionary principles led to a revolt of the colonists, and Holland passing at that time into alliance with France, the Cape was seized by a British naval and military expedition. At the Peace of Amiens in 1802 it was restored to Holland; but in the next war it was again taken by the British, in 1806, and at the Peace of 1814 was confirmed in their possession.

The population remained Dutch in blood and in tradition; but subsequent accessions of English immigrants have established in Cape Colony itself an approach to equilibrium between the two races, to which has also contributed a series of emigrations to the interior by the Dutch farmers, dissatisfied with various incidents of British rule. Into the merits of these differences we have neither space nor occasion to go.

In 1836, immediately prior to the largest of these movements, known as the Great Trek, the British Government, by Act, extended its claim of control over all South Africa, south of 25°, the latitude of Delagoa Bay; and the Boer emigrants were warned that in entering that region they remained under British authority, unless they passed on into the Portuguese dominion. From this Trek resulted directly, in the course of years, the two Boer states, the Orange Free State and the South African Republic (commonly called the Transvaal); and also, indirectly, the easternmost British colony in South Africa, Natal, in which the English element is decisively preponderant.

The mention of this migration leads naturally and immediately to a summary of the physical conditions of the country, by which, as well as by derivation of blood, the apartness of the two races has been emphasized. Between the narrow margin of land belonging, as it were, to the sea, and the high interior plateau, there runs from the extreme west of the British dominions a chain of lofty mountains, parallel, roughly, to the coastline, and terminating only when abreast of Delagoa Bay. These reach an elevation of from six to eight thousand feet, and in places on the border between Natal and Basutoland heights of eleven thousand are attained. On the side toward the sea the ascent is comparatively rapid and difficult, though often broken into precipitous terraces. Inland the descent is less, and more regular, issuing in a plateau from three to five thousand feet above the sea, and presenting almost throughout a comparatively level or undulating surface that offers no serious difficulty to transit.

The territory of the Orange Free State and of the Transvaal lies wholly within this table-land. In this region, and throughout Africa south of 25°, there are river beds, but no navigable rivers. The country is generally treeless, and there is a great deficiency of steady natural water supply. During the rainy season, from October to March, the naked ground fails to retard the running off of the waters, which therefore escape rapidly by the rivers, swelling them to momentary torrents that quickly and fruitlessly subside. During the long dry season the exposed herbage dries to the roots.

From these conditions it results that not only is agriculture generally impracticable, economically, but that cattle and sheep, the chief wealth of the Boer farmers, require an unusual proportion of ground per head for pasture; and the mobility of bodies of horsemen, expecting to subsist their beasts upon local pasturage, is greatly affected by the seasons—an important military consideration. The large holdings introduce large spaces between the holders, who dwell therefore alone, each man with his family. So it has come to pass that the descendants of one of the most mercantile and gregarious of races, whose artists have won some of their chiefest triumphs in depicting the joyous episodes of crowded social life, have, through calling and environment, become lovers of solitude, austere, self-dependent, disposed rather to repel than to seek their kind.

The same conditions, unfavourable to the aggregation of people into towns or villages, have interfered with the development of lines of travel, roads and cross-roads, which not only facilitate

but define movement; and as the face of the country, readily traversable in all directions, does not compel roads to take a particular direction to avoid obstacles, it has come to pass that the seat of war within the territory of the two Boer states has, like the ocean, and for the same reasons, few strategic points either natural or artificial.

The determining natural military features in South Africa are the seaports, upon possession of which depends Great Britain's landing her forces, and the mountain ranges, the passes of which, as in all such regions, are of the utmost strategic value. It has been said that the Boers' original plan of campaign was to force the British out of Natal, thus closing access by Durban from the sea, and at the same time to seize the pass back of Cape Town known as Hex River. If successful, the eastern flank of the Boer frontier would have been secured against British landing by the occupation of Durban, while advance from Cape Town, against the other extremity, would have involved a front attack upon a strong position in a difficult mountain defile.

These movements, accurate in conception, were probably in any case too developed for the Boer numbers, and were definitively foiled by the British grip upon Ladysmith and Kimberley. Advance was too hazardous, leaving in the rear such forces, unchecked, upon the flank of the lines of communication.

To these two extremes, or flanks, of the Boer frontier, correspond on the British side the ports of Cape Town and Durban, which may be said to mark the western and eastern limits of the field of military operations in the war. They are the chief seaports on the South African coast, which by nature is singularly deficient in good and safe anchorages. The advantages of these two, artificially improved, and combined with the relatively open and productive region immediately behind them, have made them the starting-points of the principal railroad lines by which, through the sea, the interior is linked to the outer world.

The general direction of these roads is determined, as always, by the principal objects of traffic or other interests. Thus the line from Cape Town, ascending by a winding course through the mountains in the rear, pushes its way north to Kimberley, where are the great diamond fields, and thence on, by way of Mafeking, to the territory of the British South African Company—now known as Rhodesia. This lies north of the Transvaal, and, like it, is separated from the sea by the Portuguese dominion, having, however, by treaty a right of military way through the latter by the port of Beira; of which right use is now being made.

In the northern part of its course, which at present ends at Buluwayo, this road is as yet rather political than economical in its importance, joining the British entrance at the sea to the as yet little developed regions of the distant interior. At a point called De Aar Junction, five hundred miles from Cape Town, a principal branch is thrown off to the eastward to Bloemfontein, the capital of the Orange Free State, whence it continues on to Johannesburg, the great industrial centre of the Gold Fields, and to Pretoria, the capital of the Transvaal. A glance along this stretch of road will show that between De Aar and Bloemfontein it receives three tributary routes from three different points of the sea-coast—Port Elizabeth, Port Alfred, and East London—the whole system concentrating some sixty miles before Bloemfontein, at Springfontein, which thus becomes a central depot fed by four convergent, but, in their origin, independent streams of supply; an administrative condition always conducive to security and to convenience. This instance also illustrates the capital importance—especially in a military point of view—of a place where meet several roads from the permanent base of operations, which in the case of the British interior campaign is the sea. The fall of Springfontein would close every avenue of supply by rail; but a blow at any one of the four lines which concentrate there does not necessarily affect the others. Holding across-roads in fact exemplifies the homely phrase of killing two birds with one stone.

Beyond Springfontein the straightness of the line sufficiently testifies to the easy practicability of the country it traverses. Upon this railroad system depend the supplies of the British army, which presents in both men and animals a concentrated mass of life heretofore unknown to the territory in

which it is moving, and where, from previous conditions of population and development, necessary resources of every kind are deficient. This system constitutes the main chain of communications, as the term is understood in war; by it chiefly, for much of the distance wholly, must come all the ammunition, most of the food, and not improbably at times a good deal of the water drunk during the dry season, which fortunately, from this point of view, is also that of cooler weather.

The difficulty of reinforcing railway carriage by any other system of road transportation is greatly increased by the local horse-sickness, from which three-fourths of the horses exposed to it die. Reliance for that purpose, therefore, must be upon the ox-wagon, which for this reason, and owing to the open level character of the country, has in the past played a leading part in the South African migrations.

The main and subsidiary railroads thus summarized should, from the point of view of our subject, be considered as one, contributory to the advance of the British army over a substantially even country, which opposes few natural obstacles to such a movement, though here and there "accidents of the ground"—a range of hills, or a dry river-bed, as at Paardeberg—may facilitate opposition by a military force. The system receives no further support until Johannesburg is reached. There the railroad from Durban comes in, and, if its carrying capacity were adequate, which is doubtful, would enable the chief base of operations and main line of communications to be shifted to the nearer locality, retaining the Cape road only as secondary.

The advantage to the British of the line of invasion from Cape Town is that it crosses the mountains, which separate the coast district from the inland plateau, at such a distance from the enemy's frontier that it is impossible for the latter to offer serious resistance before the comparatively easy rolling country has been reached. It was for this reason that the decision of the Orange Free State to join in the war, while it added to the numerical resistance to be encountered by the British, had for them the compensating advantage that it removed the necessity of forcing their way over the difficult mountain ranges which separate Natal from the Transvaal.

With the power of Great Britain to bring into the field a great superiority of numbers, it is at least open to argument that the Free State, by ceasing to be neutral, relieved the enemy of a difficulty greater than that which its hostility introduced. It was for these reasons that the original British plan, as generally understood, was to make the main invasion along this line. The danger of Ladysmith, it is commonly and with probability believed, caused the momentary abandonment of this purpose. Whether the change was at the moment correct in principle or not, it is evident that Lord Roberts has reverted to the first intention; a course which enforces its accuracy with all the weight of his well-earned great renown.

The other railroad system of direct importance to the military operations of the present war is the single Natal line, from Durban to Johannesburg and Pretoria, which at Ladysmith throws off a branch to the westward, crossing the mountains to Bethlehem in the Free State, and there ends, over sixty miles from the road between Bloemfontein and Pretoria. The Natal road, having been opened as lately as 1895, may be considered the child of the Gold Fields; prior to the discovery of which, indeed, there were in the Transvaal neither products nor consumers enough to give commercial value to a railroad.

The Cape Town line reached Pretoria only in 1892, and it is still characteristic of all the lines that there is but little local traffic, either freight or passenger; the roads exist as means whereby the function of communication, so far discharged by the sea, is prolonged from the coast to the interior of the continent.

It is not the least noteworthy in the incidents of commercial and mechanical energy, by which foreign hands have developed the Transvaal from a poor to a wealthy state, that "all the heavy machinery, the timber, the corrugated iron with which the works and men's houses are constructed, and nearly every requirement of work and life, had to be brought for over three hundred miles upon

ox-wagons, the country itself supplying scarcely anything, and even to this day (1897) wheat being brought from Australia."¹

Regarded as a source of supply, especially of military supply, the demands of which are more urgent than those of common life, as its needs and dangers are more imminent, the Natal railroad, though much shorter in distance to the probable scenes of operations, labours under two disadvantages. The port of Durban is not under all circumstances safe for large vessels to enter, and there is therefore in the facilities for landing goods an inferiority to Cape Town. The country, too, is more difficult, the obstacles to movement, which also favour defence, increasing as the frontier is approached, and culminating on the borders of the Free State and the Transvaal. Being thus nearer, the latter are here better able to concentrate and sustain opposition than they are on the western flank.

"The mountains which on the edge of Basutoland rise to a height of ten thousand feet," writes Mr. Bryce, "break down toward Natal in tremendous precipices. Near Ladysmith the frontier of the Orange Free State coincides with a high watershed, crossed by only a few passes."² Where this boundary between Natal and the Free State ends, that of the Transvaal begins, and soon after turns sharply to the southward, the new direction forming with the old a very acute angle, with apex to the north. Here, just within the territory of Natal, is Majuba Hill, whose name has been in the mouths of all men, and Laing's Nek, less familiarly known. The narrow neck of rugged country embraced between the legs of this angle is about sixty miles long, from Majuba to Glencoe. Recent events have familiarised to us many of the names along this line of rail—Glencoe, Dundee (the terminus of a short branch), Colenso, Estcourt, and Ladysmith itself; while the winding character of the track, as mapped, compared with the Free State road, sufficiently indicates the character of the country, in which obstacles have to be circumvented as well as overcome. The grade is in places as high as one in thirty, though that is being reduced; but one in forty is common. Pietermaritzburg, the capital, fifty miles from Durban in a straight line, is 2,200 feet above the sea. Three hundred miles from its starting-point the road reaches an elevation of over five thousand feet, at Laing's Nek, through which it passes by a tunnel.

A topographical map of the country shows upon examination that the mountain range, which forms the western boundary of Natal toward Basutoland and the Orange Free State, and has a general north and south direction parallel to the railroad, throws off to the eastward spurs which, to repeat Mr. Bryce's expression, "break down in tremendous precipices," forming a succession of terraces. The gorges between these determine the direction of the river-beds whereby the rainfall pours down to the sea; and the general easterly course thus imparted is maintained and continued by the lie of the valleys, separating the successive hills through which the territory of Natal gradually rises to the northward. These various streams find their way sooner or later to the Tugela, itself one of the many, but which carries its own name until it reaches the Indian Ocean, some fifty miles north-east of Durban.

Of these watercourses, the Tugela, which the road crosses at Colenso, and the Mooi, some fifty miles south, have been most often mentioned. Another tributary called the Klip flows through the camp at Ladysmith. The channels which these streams have cut for themselves in time of torrent are both steep-banked and deep. They are therefore among those accidents of the ground which, duly improved, can seriously affect military operations. The destruction of a bridge impedes the transport of troops and supplies; a sudden freshet, occurring in the midst of an extensive movement, may imperil an army by sundering its forces; while of the utility of such natural trenches to the purposes of shelter and of defence, of awaiting attack, or resisting an advance, both the Tugela and Paardeberg have given recent striking illustration.

As a general rule such conditions favour the defence relatively to the offence; the former, remaining comparatively motionless, is shielded by obstacles, to surmount which the assailant must

¹ Younghusband's "South Africa of To-day." Second Edition, 1899.

² "Impressions of South Africa." Third Edition, p. 291.

expose himself in the open. Thus they compensate for inferior numbers, which is usually the condition of the defence; and they conduce to delay, ever a leading object in defensive warfare. Consequently, in the present hostilities they have helped the Boers. It may be added that their influence is most felt when the armies are face to face, or at least in touch. Hence their existence near the scene of probable conflict, as in Natal, is a matter of more concern to the invader than when, as upon the Cape extreme of the scene of war, they are found beyond the range to which the defendant can safely extend his operations.

These successive watercourses indicate natural lines of defence, stronger or weaker according to their individual distinctive features. As the railroad, in its progress north, draws near the mountains in the neck of Natal, the streams show smaller volume and less developed channels. This comes from their having there a shorter course and descending from heights which, though still considerable, are decidedly lower. But, while the streams become less conspicuous as obstacles, the ground toward the northward frontier is more broken and irregular, presenting numerous scattered hills, sometimes isolated, sometimes in small ranges or groups, which to a trained military skill afford positions too threatening to be disregarded, and yet which cannot be carried without heavy loss. This characteristic is observable in the neighbourhood of Glencoe, Dundee, and Ladysmith, and, as will be seen, exercised a determinative influence upon the fighting.

In the extreme north a similar condition is emphasized conspicuously at Majuba Hill and the surrounding country, which, however, and perhaps for that very reason, seem unlikely to play much of a part in the war now current.

Before proceeding to the narrative of the hostilities which, so far as events of decisive interest are concerned, began in Natal, it is desirable to note one broad topographical feature distinguishing the region to which, in its eastern development, the war has been confined. From the capital, Pietermaritzburg, the railroad ascends rapidly, so that in twenty-five miles it has risen from 2,200 to 4,800 feet, after which it begins again to go down, till fifty miles further, at Estcourt—the most southern of the stations prominently named in the narratives of the war—the elevation is 3,800 feet. Thence, till near Glencoe and Dundee, there is an extensive area of comparative depression, rarely itself higher than 3,500 feet, but on the western side skirted by the precipitous spurs of the border mountains, close to which the railroad passes.

This district may be called the valley of the Tugela; for all the streams tend to the latter, which finds its own bed in a broad belt of ground, trending to the eastward, where the surface sinks to less than 3,000 feet. Ladysmith itself, important not only as a railroad crossing and military depot, but now also historically, on account of the operations centring around it, is at a height of 3,300. Beyond it the country, though often rough in detail, is gently rolling in general contour till near Glencoe, where the road climbs eight hundred feet in ten miles. From Glencoe a branch runs five miles east to Dundee, the site of extensive collieries, upon which Natal largely depends for fuel.

The railroad from Ladysmith to Glencoe passes therefore through a district the nature of which is favourable to rapid advance or retreat of mounted men, as the Boer forces chiefly are, and which at the same time is marked by frequent and steep detached elevations, adapted for defensive positions hastily assumed. These conditions, with the nearness of the declivities of the western mountains, and the proximity of the enemy's frontier, behind which movements of troops would be "curtained"—to use a graphic military metaphor—gave the Boers particular facilities for striking unexpectedly the railroad between Ladysmith and Glencoe, upon which, in defect of other transportation, the two British posts must depend for communication between themselves, and with their base on the sea.

Further to the south, movements of the same kind would be decisively more difficult. Not only would the Boers there be further from their base, and the British nearer theirs, but the country is less favourable to rapid horse movements, the line of the rail is contracted by lofty and continuous ranges of hills, the space between which gives but a narrow front to be covered by a defence, and the river beds, as already said, are broader and deeper; notably, of course, the Tugela. Moreover, not only are

the mountains on the western frontier higher and more difficult as one goes south, they are also more remote; and, south of Colenso, form the boundary of Basutoland, upon which the Boers could not intrude without arousing armed resistance by the blacks. All these conditions are more favourable to a pure defensive attitude, which was that imposed at the outset upon the British, because they were then numerically the weaker party.

And here at once must be made a distinction, which for intelligent comprehension it is essential to keep in mind. Putting entirely to one side all question of the merits of the quarrel—of its right or its wrong—it must be steadily remembered that, although the comparative aggregate strength of the two parties placed the Boers from the first on the defensive in the general sense, they were at the beginning of hostilities decisively superior in local force, and would so remain until sufficient reinforcements from Great Britain should arrive to turn the scale. Under such circumstances, correct military principle—and the Boers have had good advisers—imperatively dictates that the belligerent so situated must at once assume an active offensive. By rapid and energetic movement, while the opponent's forces are still separated, every advantage must be seized to destroy hostile detachments within reach, and to establish one's own front as far in advance of the great national interests, as it can be reasonably hoped to maintain it with communications unbroken. The line thus occupied must rest upon positions so chosen that by their strength, natural and developed, it shall be possible, when offence has to be exchanged for defensive warfare, to impose to the utmost upon the invader both delay and loss; for delay and loss mean lessening power, and only by causing such diminution, greater relatively than his own, can the weaker hope eventually to reverse the odds and win the game.

To this end, therefore, the Boers with sound military judgment at once devoted themselves; and it is very likely that the surmise before quoted was correct—in naming the Hex River Pass and Durban as their ultimate objectives, to be reached by a swift advance. The latter was certainly not an unreasonable hope, and it is possible that with more precise accuracy of combination, and an offensive more resolutely sustained, they might have attained their purpose, through the mistaken primary dispositions of the British, who, though recognizing themselves to be for the time on the defensive, nevertheless, for political reasons, advanced their front of operations to a point with which, as it proved, they could not secure their communications. From the worst consequences of this error they were saved by the gallantry and skill with which advantage was taken of the defective co-operation that marked the opening of the campaign by the Boers; and there can be also little question that the wholesome respect for their fighting qualities, thus established at the beginning of hostilities, had a most beneficial effect for them, in discouraging attack by an enemy, who, though brave and active, constitutionally prefers a waiting game to an assault. Thus the ultimate fate of Ladysmith was settled in the fortnight of operations that preceded the investment.

CHAPTER II

THE OPENING CAMPAIGN IN NATAL TO THE INVESTMENT OF LADYSMITH (OCTOBER 11-NOVEMBER 2)

The evident exposure of Natal to the first and heaviest attack of the enemy, and the necessity so to provide for its defence as to gain the time necessary for reinforcements to arrive, engaged very early the anxious attention of the Imperial and local authorities. The latter especially felt the greater solicitude, which is natural to those whose interests are immediately threatened. As early as May 25, before the Bloemfontein Conference between Sir Alfred Milner and President Kruger, the Natal Ministry notified Mr. Chamberlain that, owing to Boer preparations across the border, the scattered British in the neck of Natal were getting uneasy, and the Ministry itself nervous, at the prospect of war. These representations were repeated more urgently in the middle of June, and a month later a request was made to be confidentially informed of the proposed plan for defence. When this was communicated, it appeared that General Sir Penn Symons, commanding the Imperial troops in Natal (who afterward was the first general officer killed in the war), considered that with the force then at his disposal—something over 5,000 men of all arms—he could do no more than hold the railroad as far as Hattingh Spruit, some five miles north of Dundee, thereby protecting the collieries. To advance as far as Newcastle he estimated would require 2,000 more, while to hold Laing's Nek an addition of 5,600 would be needed.

These calculations, as is now known, fell far short of the necessities of the case, but they sufficiently alarmed the Colonial Government, and upon its remonstrance the British Cabinet, on August 3, decided to send a reinforcement of 2,000 men.

On the 6th of September the Governor of Natal telegraphed at length to London many menacing symptoms observable among the Boers, from which war was believed to be inevitable, and urged the immediate despatch of troops sufficient to protect the colony. In response to this, orders were issued on September 8 for 5,700 men to start from India, and a small additional force from England itself, making a total of from seven to eight thousand. These were expected to arrive, and actually did for the most part arrive, between October 12 and 19, but even so were barely in time for the critical moment. They were also only sufficient imperfectly to defend the colony, and were by no means adequate to the offensive purpose which the Boer Government, in its ultimatum, professed to discern.

Meanwhile, on the 25th of September, Glencoe had been occupied by a detachment from Ladysmith, while reinforcements were sent to the latter. It had by this time been recognized that the attempt to hold the more advanced positions, such as Newcastle and Laing's Nek, would expose the forces so placed to the fate of isolation which afterward befell Ladysmith. The course of both the Imperial and colonial governments at this period was much affected by a wish not to precipitate hostile action on the part of the Boers; for, in general, war was not desired by the British, and, in particular, they were as yet unready. On the 28th, however, such definite and threatening movements were reported that the Natal Ministry decided at all hazards to call out the volunteers, although it had apprehended that this step would be considered practically equivalent to a declaration of war.

The increase of force in Natal to 15,000 men determined the sending out of an officer superior in rank to General Symons. Sir George White, designated for this duty, reached Cape Town October 3, and in view of the serious news he there received, proceeded at once to Durban. On the 9th, the day the Boer ultimatum was issued, he had at Pietermaritzburg an interview with the Governor, in which he expressed his disapproval of the position at Glencoe—an opinion in which other officers of rank present coincided. The Governor replied that General Symons had thought it safe, even before

the Indian contingent arrived; that the step had been taken to assure the coal supply; and that to recede from it now would involve grave political consequences, disheartening the loyal, and tending to encourage a rising among the blacks and the disaffected Dutch. Without changing his opinion as to the military error involved, Sir George White resolved to allow the detachment to remain. The decision thus taken finally constituted the British military situation in Natal when the campaign opened; namely, an advanced detachment of three or four thousand at Glencoe and Dundee, a main body of eight to ten thousand at Ladysmith, with smaller posts guarding the communications in rear of the latter.

The greater exposure of Natal, owing to its nearness to the Boer States, had determined the concentration upon it of the bulk of the British forces in South Africa, including the reinforcements so far ordered; by the arrival of which it was expected that there would by the end of October be 22,000 troops in South Africa. It was not till October 7 that was issued the first order to mobilise, summoning 25,000 of the Army Reserve to join the colours.

The necessities of Natal left but scant numbers to Cape Colony, which was comparatively of less consequence, because the points of vital importance to Great Britain lay near the sea-coast, protected by their mere remoteness from any speedy attack. On the far inland borders of the colony the situation soon reduced itself to that with which we were so long familiar. The four or five thousand men available at the outbreak of the war for the defence of the long frontier, extending over five hundred miles, from the Basutoland boundary to Mafeking, were obliged by the necessities of the case to concentrate; which they did at Mafeking and Kimberley. There they were speedily invested; and, being thus held in check, the border country, including the important railroad junctions of De Aar, Naauwport and Stormberg, lay freely open to the enemy. The seriousness of this military condition was much increased by the well-known political fact that the Dutch population of the region sympathized more or less actively with the Boers. In fact many of them, upon the opening of hostilities, crossed the border to join the forces of the Orange Free State.

On the 9th of October, 1899, the Transvaal Government presented an ultimatum. After recounting the political grievances of which it complained, it demanded that all points of mutual difference should be settled by arbitration, or other peaceful means, that the British troops near the Transvaal border should be withdrawn, that the recent reinforcements be removed altogether from South Africa, and that those still on the sea should not be landed. If a satisfactory answer were not received by 5 P.M., October 11, the action of the British Government would be regarded as a formal declaration of war. War therefore may be considered as having been formally initiated by the Transvaal, at the day and hour thus fixed.

For some time prior to the opening of hostilities, the armed men of both the South African Republic and the Free State had been assembling in force on their respective frontiers toward Natal; the latter less rapidly than the former, its military preparation not having received as full development as that of its ally, who for some years had been contemplating the possibility of war and accumulating material. The Transvaalers came in rapidly, and already by the end of September had gathered in numbers enough to warrant a speedy advance, before the expected reinforcements from India should reach the enemy.

There is good reason to believe that it was intended to issue the ultimatum on October 2, a week before its actual date; but there occurred the unpleasant surprise of finding that neither in food nor in ammunition were the supplies at hand sufficient to justify an immediate forward movement. The defect of imperfect transport organisation, inherent to hastily levied irregular troops, made itself at once felt. The delay doubtless strengthened both parties, but, as usual, inured most to the benefit of the one then on the defensive.

The first transports from India began to arrive on Tuesday, October 3, on which day also the bulk of the Natal volunteers were expected to be in their places; and in the six intervening days, preceding the ultimatum, eleven more steamers entered Durban with troops which were at once

despatched to the front. General Symons took command at Dundee, Sir George White of the main body at Ladysmith.

The number of the Boers near at hand, and capable of being brought against either of the British posts, was variously estimated at the moment at from 8,000 to 13,000. There can be little doubt, however, that the latter figure was much more nearly correct; that, in fact, on October 11, the available force for the invasion rather exceeded than fell short of the higher figure. Although precise information is still lacking, there can be no doubt, from the character of the Boer operations, that rapid subsequent accessions raised their numbers in Natal to near 30,000 before the middle of November.

It is well here, on the verge of opening hostilities, to recall what has before been indicated, that the projection of the narrow neck of Natal, forming an acute salient angle between two hostile borders, gave especial facilities to the Boers to combine their movements outside the observation of the enemy, and to strike suddenly either at one of the British detachments, or at the railroad uniting them. Small bodies began to make their appearance from both quarters almost immediately after the expiry of the time set by the ultimatum, and for three or four days the ordinary reports of outpost observations and shots exchanged were continually received.

The uncertainty consequent upon these divergent demonstrations, some of which from the Free State seemed to aim at the rear of Ladysmith itself, was balanced and checked by the knowledge that the principal Transvaal force had assembled round Zandspruit, in its own territory, near the railroad, and some fifteen miles beyond Majuba Hill. There was reason also to believe that the Transvaalers would be found more enterprising and numerous than the Free State men. It was, therefore, natural to expect that the main attack would come from the north along the railroad, and from the east, where the approach from the Transvaal boundary, which is there marked by the Buffalo River, is over a country much more practicable than the western mountain range. These considerations in fact appear to have dictated the first combination of the Boers.

Within a week from the opening of hostilities, the latter had occupied Newcastle, thirty-seven miles by rail from Glencoe. On the 18th further demonstrations caused General Symons to withdraw the outpost stationed at Glencoe to the camp, which was a mile and a half west of Dundee. The following day, Thursday, he received information, which proved to be in the main accurate, that a combined movement was in progress by which his position was to be simultaneously attacked from the north and from the east. The force in the latter direction was given at 7,000—probably an excessive estimate; although, as several commandos had been reported on Wednesday to be moving from the northern toward the eastern column, it is probable that the latter was expected to make the chief attack. A British reconnaissance on the same evening had showed the enemy apparently in force some ten miles to the northward on the railway; but, if an attack from that quarter were intended, the Boer combination failed, for none was made. General Joubert, in reporting the results, said, "Commandant Lucas Meyer (commanding the eastern force) has had an engagement with the British at Dundee. Meyer made a plan of campaign by messenger with Commandant Erasmus, who, however, did not put in an appearance." Convergent attacks, intended to be simultaneous, but starting from different quarters, are particularly liable to such mishaps.

While these two columns on the 18th were moving on Dundee, a third force of about 1,000 mounted men, under General Koch, coming from the north, passed round Glencoe to the westward, crossing the Biggarsberg, a lofty spur of nearly 6,000 feet, that extends from the western mountains almost across Natal, with occasional depressions, through one of which the railroad passes. On Thursday these took possession of Elandsplaagte, a station sixteen miles north of Ladysmith, capturing one train and nearly intercepting another. Railroad communication in the rear of Symons was thus intercepted, at the moment that Meyer was advancing from the east, expecting to fall upon him in conjunction with the northern column. During the night of the 19th Meyer's force crossed the Buffalo River at Landman's Drift, ten miles east of Dundee, at 2.30 A.M. drove in the British pickets in that direction, and at daybreak was seen dotting the hill-ridges, about three miles east of the camp.

The scene of the approaching action of October 20 is the valley of a small stream, the general course of which, as nearly as can be judged from the maps, is north and south. The river-bed, or donga—to use the conveniently short South African term—is half a mile east of Dundee, the ground sloping easily toward it; while on the other side the watershed rises, slowly at first, afterward more rapidly, for a mile or more, to the ridge occupied by the Boers, which the road to Landman's crosses at a depression called Smith's Nek. The enemy were on both sides of the latter when first seen by the British. To the north of the Nek—to the Boer right—is Talana Hill, where the decisive fighting occurred, and which had to be carried by direct assault, lasting, with the intervals of cover, for nearly six hours. The characteristics of the Hill itself, therefore, need to be understood. As described by an eye-witness, it is about eight hundred feet high from the level of the donga. The summit presents the flat table-like sky line, frequently noted in South African travel, of which Table Mountain, in Cape Town, is the conspicuous example. After a few hundred yards of gentle acclivity through open ground a wood is reached, near which is a homestead called Smith's Farm. Half way between the wood and the top is a stone wall supporting a terrace. Between the wood and this wall the ground is steep, broken and rocky. Immediately above the wall the terrace, though easy, is wide and open, and consequently exposed. The terrace crossed, the remainder of the ascent is almost perpendicular; a matter therefore of strenuous climbing under fire.

It appears from this description that the wood and the terrace afforded a certain amount of cover, as did the donga; that the first rush from the latter could be made rapidly, with, however, comparatively little shelter from a long-range fire, while to climb the wall and cross the terrace, though a short process, involved the utmost exposure. Concerning the last scene of the drama, the scaling the nearly precipitous fronts which skirted the Boers' position, the difficulty of the achievement caused the losses of the assailants there to be heaviest. It may be added that, owing to the unexpected and rapid developments of the day, most of the British fought without breakfast or other food.

As soon as the enemy were discovered a company of infantry occupied the donga, where successive reinforcements were received, and under cover of which the line prepared for the assault. At 5.30 the Boers surprised the British by opening with artillery—six guns—at an estimated distance of 5,400 yards from the British camp. To this three batteries replied, two of which were soon moved down to the town side of the donga. The artillery duel, at a range of 2,000 to 3,000 yards, continued until toward eight o'clock, when the Boers ceased firing, and General Symons gave the order to prepare for the assault. Difficult as was the task, and inferior though the assailants were in number, the conditions were such that the weak garrison of Dundee had no prospect of ultimate escape, unless they could rout the enemy with which they were engaged before the co-operating body from the north arrived.

While the action was in its early stages, at 10 A.M., scouts reported a large force approaching along the railroad. The small detachment left to guard the British camp moved out to meet and, if possible, to delay this new enemy. Besides the purely local conditions, it was essential, in the general plan of campaign, during the waiting period of inferiority, while their reinforcements were still on the sea, that the British should risk much to demoralise and daunt an enemy who, whatever their advantages otherwise, had not that military training and cohesion which facilitates rapid recovery from a reverse. Whatever the first mistake of advancing their position so far, it is impossible to withhold admiration from the rapidity and energy of the measures taken in the first fortnight of the campaign.

It was a dull, drizzling morning when the line of hungry British soldiers leaped from the donga and rushed for the wood; their batteries to the right and left sending a rapid continuous iron fire over their heads upon the hill-top, whence the Boers rained down lead upon their advance. Few dropped here; but in the wood, where for quite a while they halted, concealed rather than covered, many were struck down, and here it was that death found General Symons, who had galloped up to tell the men the hill *must* be taken. He had asked much of his men, but he spared not himself. He fell honoured and beloved; man cannot die better.

It was about 10 that Symons received his wound. Obedient to his last commands, the troops broke cover and worked their way from the wood to the wall, step by step; a few feet onward, rushed and down; again a rush and again down. Below the terrace they stopped, protected by the wall but unable to advance; for did man show head or hand, down swept the deadly fire from above. Men, however, are not of iron; eyes and hands weary; the brain and the nerves feel strain; and it is of the essence of defence that it exhausts quicker than does offence. It lacks intrinsically the moral tension that sustains; when the forward impulse is removed, the evil spirit of backwardness finds room to enter. As hours pass, this difference in moral conditions affects those which are external—saps physical endurance.

Whatever the reason, toward noon the Boer fire slackened; possibly the necessity of husbanding ammunition was felt. The British scaled the wall, crossed rapidly the terrace, and gained the foot of the last steep climb which lay between them and the enemy's position. Their artillery also moved forward, to sustain the final perilous attempt by keeping down the enemy's fire; but, despite all it could do, the loss here was great and fell especially heavily upon the officers, who exposed themselves freely. Out of seventeen of the latter that went into action with one battalion, five were killed and seven wounded; and the other regiments suffered in like manner, if not to the same degree. As the assailants got near the top, the batteries had to cease firing, unable longer to assure their aim between friend and foe. The last rush was then made with the bayonet, but, as is usual, the defendants did not await the shock of immediate contact. They broke and fled as the British advance crowned the summit, leaving there some thirty dead and wounded, besides seventy wounded in a field hospital on the reverse side of the hill. The artillery of the attack continued to move forward to Smith's Nek, whence the enemy's force was visible in full retreat. It was at 1.30 P.M. that the position, which General Yule, Symons's successor, styled "almost inaccessible," was finally carried.

The precise numbers engaged can as yet be only a matter of estimate, but there is little doubt that the assailants were inferior in number to the defenders. The former were about 2,000; the latter were by General Yule thought to be about 4,000, many of whom, doubtless, were not on the hill itself. The satisfaction of the victors, in what was certainly a splendid feat of arms, was somewhat marred by the disappearance of a body of cavalry, which at the opening of the day had been sent to work round the enemy's right—northern—flank. They had been taken prisoners, apparently by the co-operating Boer force which had failed to come up in time for the fighting.

The following afternoon—Saturday, the 21st—a demonstration was made by this force; but it was not pushed home, being confined to a bombardment by two heavy guns—40-pounders—at a range of 6,000 yards. In prevision of such an attempt, Yule had already shifted some of his equipage, and now, finding that the hostile guns outranged his own, he removed the camp two miles to the southward, on high ground. On the 22nd, news being received of the enemy's defeat at Elands-laagte the day before, he endeavoured to cut off the fugitives at Glencoe, but the nearness of the northern Boers compelled him to desist, and finally to resume his last position. Realising from all the conditions that Dundee could not be held, unless reinforced, and that reinforcement was improbable, he decided now to retreat upon Ladysmith.

At 9 P.M. that night the British marched out, taking their transport trains, but necessarily leaving the wounded behind them. The road followed diverges from the railroad to the eastward, crossing the Biggarsberg, and coming out at a place called Beith. There it forks, the right-hand branch trending toward Ladysmith, parallel to the railroad and distant from it eight to ten miles. The march was severe, for the pace was necessarily rapid and sustained, and the roads heavy from recent rains; nor was it without serious risk from the nearness of the enemy, although the battle of Talana Hill had done much to free the eastern flank, and that of Elands-laagte the western. No molestation was experienced.

It is necessary now to narrate the operations of the Ladysmith garrison, which cannot in effect be dissociated from those of its dependant at Dundee.

The demonstrations of the Boers, in various directions, kept Sir George White in doubt as to their immediate intentions until Thursday, the 19th, when Elandslaagte was occupied by the force under General Koch. The same day word was received of the enemy's approach to Dundee. Both movements threatened to isolate the latter. On the 20th a reconnaissance toward Elandslaagte was made by General French, who had arrived the day before from England. Thick weather prevented precise determination of the hostile numbers or position, but the general fact was established. That evening the successful results of the day's action at Dundee became known, and the next morning—Saturday, October 21—the reconnaissance was resumed under better atmospheric conditions. From a cliff between two and three miles from Elandslaagte a clear view of the enemy was obtained, and their fire drawn, which proved that both numerically and in artillery they were superior to the detachment before them. They had expected reinforcements, and those engaged in the ensuing affair were probably nearer 2,000 than to the 1,000 of two days before.

French telegraphed to Ladysmith and received a promise of more troops, the last of which arrived—the infantry by train—about 3 P.M. Meantime the enemy had quitted Elandslaagte for a ridge of rocky hills about a mile and a half south-east of the station—a position characterised as exceptionally strong by Sir George White, who witnessed the affair, but left its management in French's hands. More in detail, the ridge is described as being about 800 feet high, 800 to 1,000 yards long, and in a general sense perpendicular to the railroad; lying, therefore, south-east and north-west. At the latter extremity, nearer the road, are two marked elevations, with a neck between them, in which was the Boers' laager. Of these the westernmost is the higher, but both commanded the rest of the ridge throughout its full extent to the south-east. In front of the ridge the country, of general rolling contour, presents a shallow valley some two or three miles wide. The near side of this to the British, when the latter first advanced, was occupied by a few Boers, but these fell back quickly to their main body. In making their dispositions the Boers occupied in chief force the western elevations, intrenching their artillery on the inner and lower of the two. A thinner firing line was developed thence to the eastward, along the summit of the ridge covering the approach from the front. A flank being usually the weakest part of a line, the natural course for the assailant would be to attack in flank at the lower—eastern—extremity of the ridge, and to advance thence toward the main positions, supported in so doing by a secondary front attack by riflemen and artillery. To impede such an attempt the Boers had set up at intervals barbed wire fences. Through these, and over a broken rocky surface, the attacking column must fight its way, step by step, till the final hills were reached and could be rushed as Talana had been by their countrymen the day before.

The plan above outlined was the one adopted by General French; seven companies of infantry being allotted to the front attack, a regiment and five companies to that upon the flank. A few squadrons of cavalry accompanied the latter movement, as well to protect it when in performance as to profit by any mishap befalling the enemy. The troops formed just below and under cover of the rising ground on the hither side of the valley fronting the hostile line. The fire of the latter was drawn, and the situation of their artillery thus discovered—despite the use of smokeless powder—by the flashes of their guns, which showed the more clearly against the blackness of a big thunder cloud rising behind the Dutch positions, which enabled the British also to see distinctly the bursting of their own shrapnel over the enemy.

The usual artillery duel succeeded at a distance of 4,500 yards—two miles and a half—but from the lateness of the hour, and the amount of work ahead, no time could be lost, so the infantry operation began as quickly as possible. The front attack moved down into the valley, a firing line of three hundred men covering the space of 500 yards from end to end, its remaining companies following at intervals to support it, and to replace those who fell—to "feed" the line, keeping it at full strength.

The first part of this advance was, on account of the distance, resisted chiefly by artillery fire, which, though accurate, was seen to cause there few casualties. At 1,200 yards from the enemy's

positions, being there well within rifle range, the line halted, lay down, and opened fire. The smooth surface of the ground gave little natural shelter; what there was was found chiefly behind ant hills, of which there were very many. The musketry fire here undergone was severe, for the only diversion to it continued so far to be the British artillery, the flanking movement not having yet fully developed. Under the undivided attention of the enemy's riflemen, the line worked its way steadily forward, men dropping frequently, to within 800 yards of the summit, where they finally lay down and waited under a constant fall of shot till the bugle should summon them to the storm.

Meantime, during these last 400 yards, the flank attack was beginning. In general, the first ascent was of the rocky, broken character before noted, both here and at Talana; but, the strength of the Boer force being on the other flank, the assailants, while mounting, were covered by the slope and did not come fairly under fire until the top was reached. Then they began to fall rapidly, but a few paces further the ground dipped, and again gave momentary shelter. It was, however, but to take breath for the final rush; if rush it can be called, which meant steady, dogged bearing up against a pitiless rain of projectiles, and forcing one's way forward rock by rock, while companions drop, one by one, on either side. Six hundred yards of such work lay, before the flanking column, interrupted ever and anon by the barbed-wire obstacles, which, however, were themselves often cut down by the intensity of the fire.

Under such conditions the community of action which rests upon formal organisation and method ceases to be effectual. The momentum that endures to the end, and so effects the results of co-operation, finds its energy partly in individual character, partly in the moral fellowship of impulse and of purpose which, once imparted, remains subconscious, perhaps, but ineradicable. The man knows, or rather feels, that if he gets to the end he will find his comrades there; and that if he goes back he will not find them, but his own self-contempt. Such is unanimity, the oneness of will that comes of a common training and of common ideals, bred-in, if not inborn. So this mass of men, independent each, and yet members, each, one of the other, struggled forward, through failing light and drenching rain—for the storm had burst as the ascent began—till half the way was won. Then the bugle sounded "Charge," and the reply came cheerily up from below. The men, in the valley and on the hill, moved forward with the bayonet, still not neglecting cover, but looking now more to speed. Again, as usual, save a few of the more stubborn who were killed at their guns, the defenders did not await the shock but fled down the hills, where the cavalry that had accompanied the flank attack got among them and completed their discomfiture.

The battle at Elandslaagte was distinctly creditable to both sides, but upon the whole gave sounder cause for self-congratulation to the British than to their opponents. The former were numerically superior to the defenders, but not to an extent which countervailed even the natural advantages of the ground, further improved by measures for which time allowed.

Regarded apart from its connection with the campaign as a whole, simply as a combat unrelated to other incidents, the conception and the execution of the attack were admirable; while in the matter of military dynamic energy, to whatever source that shown on the one side or the other may be attributed, the potentiality of the attacking force was demonstrated to be greater than that of the opponent.

Still more was the action at Elandslaagte commendable, when viewed in relation to the general respective conditions of the Boers and the British in Natal at that time.

Duly to appreciate the merits and the results of these two successive days of fighting, at Talana and at Elandslaagte, it must be remembered that the British in a general sense, and at Dundee locally as well, were upon the defensive, and that the Boer movements were each a part of one general plan directed, and most properly, to overwhelm and destroy the detachments—Dundee and Ladysmith—in detail; they together being rightly considered one fraction of the enemy's whole force, present or hurrying over sea. So regarded, the vigour with which the British took the initiative, assumed the offensive, themselves in turn attacking in detail, and severely punishing, the separate factors of the

enemy's combination, is worthy of great praise. Sir Penn Symons is perhaps entitled to the greater meed because to him fell, with the greater burden, the greater opportunity, to which he proved not unequal.

Such men were worthy of the steady forward gallantry shown by officers and men. Both leaders and led easily carry off the palm from the more phlegmatic opponents, who failed to sweep them away. The result was to save Ladysmith, or rather—what was most really important—to save the organized force that was there shut in. The brilliant antecedent campaign, the offensive right and left strokes, the prompt and timely resolve of Yule to retreat just as he did, and the consequent concentration, utterly frustrated the Boers' combinations, and shattered antecedently their expectations of subduing the British by the cheaper method of exhaustion. The failure was not only signal, but in the end discreditable; for while success is no sure proof of merit, nor its opposite of indeliberate, the wide miscalculation of the ultimate result, which kept the Boers so long inactive before Ladysmith, and saved Natal, while reinforcements were well known all the while to be hasting across the sea, is entitled to scant respect from any indications in its favour. The faulty execution of the original plan, which enabled the enemy to concentrate and to accumulate adequate means of resistance, and the subsequent underestimate of the endurance of the garrison, bear the same mark. In issuing their ultimatum, in opening the campaign, in combining against Dundee, and finally in investing Ladysmith, the Boers exceeded decisively that five minutes of delay upon which, to use Nelson's words, turns victory or defeat; and the loss of time, as yet only serious, through the procrastinations of the siege became irremediable.

It is noticeable that the returns of casualties at Elands-laagte do not perfectly bear out extreme conclusions as to the fatal preponderance of the defence over the offence in modern warfare. As reported soon after the action, the British lost in killed, 55; in wounded, 199. Of the Boers, 65 dead were found on the ground; others, estimated—guessed is perhaps more correct—at 50, were killed in pursuit by the cavalry. Their wounded is not stated, but there were many among the three hundred prisoners taken. It is true, certainly, that in this affair not only was the British attack well combined, but their superiority in numbers was considerable. Still, after all deductions, the greater loss of the defendants casts doubt, either upon their marksmanship or upon the prevalent theory that the effects of modern weapons are revolutionary. As a historical fact, a front attack upon intrenched men, even irregulars, has been a desperate business as far back, at least, as Bunker Hill and Fort Moultrie.

Twenty-four hours after Elands-laagte, at 9 P.M., Sunday, October 22, Yule's men started on their march of sixty miles, of mountain climb and over rain-drenched roads, to Ladysmith. Their own work at Talana Hill had secured the left flank of their retreat, by the demoralization of Meyer's force; to protect their right, the increasing numbers and threatening movements of the enemy west of the railroad impelled Sir George White to further action. On the 24th he moved out a strong force, which discovered the enemy at Rietfontein, seven miles from Ladysmith, on a ridge west of, and parallel to, the Glencoe road; their artillery intrenched in the centre, and supported by infantry upon commanding elevations at either end. The British drew up on a parallel ridge, to the eastward, and an action ensued, confined mainly to artillery at 3,000 yards. In the end the Boers, chiefly a body of Free State men, evacuated their positions about 2 P.M. and retired to the westward. Pursuit was not attempted. The security and junction of Yule's detachment was the prime immediate necessity, and it was by this fully apparent that the time was come when offensive returns, on the part of the greatly outnumbered British, must be limited to those needed to insure necessary delay before final inevitable interception and investment. It was no occasion for displays of military fancy sparring.

Shortly after noon of Thursday, October 26, Yule's column marched into Ladysmith—"done up," telegraphed White, "but in good spirits and only need rest." The lamented Steevens, with his graphic pen, has described for us the pride, pomp and circumstance of the return of the men who had stormed Talana Hill, and had still before them the grim protracted realities of Ladysmith.

"Before next morning was gray in came the 1st Rifles. They plashed uphill to their blue-roofed huts on the south-west side of the town. By the time the sun was up they were fed by their sister battalion, the 2nd, and had begun to unwind their putties. But what a sight! Their putties were not soaked and not caked; say, rather, that there may have been a core of puttie inside, but that the men's legs were imbedded in a serpentine cast of clay. As for their boots, you could only infer them from the huge balls of stratified mud they bore round their feet. Red mud, yellow mud, black mud, brown mud—they lifted their feet toilsomely; they were land plummets that had sucked up specimens of all the heavy, sticky soils for fifteen miles. Officers and men alike bristled stiff with a week's beard. Rents in their khaki showed white skin; from their grimed hands and heads you might have judged them half red men, half soot-black. Eyelids hung fat and heavy over hollow cheeks and pointed cheekbones. Only the eye remained—the sky-blue, steel-keen, hard, clear, unconquerable English eye—to tell that thirty-two miles without rest, four days without a square meal, six nights—for many—without a stretch of sleep, still found them soldiers at the end.

"That was the beginning of them; but they were not all in till the middle of the afternoon—which made thirty-six hours on their legs. The Irish Fusiliers tramped in at lunch-time—going a bit short some of them, nearly all a trifle stiff on the feet—but solid, square and sturdy from the knees upward. They straightened up to the cheers that met them, and stepped out on scorching feet as if they were ready to go into action again on the instant. After them came the guns—not the sleek creatures of Laffan's Plain, rough with earth and spinning mud from their wheels, but war-worn and fresh from slaughter; you might imagine their damp muzzles were dripping blood. You could count the horses' ribs; they looked as if you could break them in half before the quarters. But they, too, knew they were being cheered; they threw their ears up and flung all the weight left them into the traces.

"Through fire, water and earth, the Dundee column had come home again."³

The undeniable error of placing an advanced detachment in Dundee had thus been redeemed; at much material cost, it may be granted, but the moral gain probably exceeded, and the gallant author of the mistake paid for his error with his life. General Symons died in Dundee on the day his column came in touch with the Ladysmith force.

In the ensuing week the Boers in largely superior numbers closed rapidly down upon the now concentrated British, who on their part strained every nerve to accumulate strength and resources, and to secure time, by imposing caution and delay upon the enemy.

It was in an attempt of this kind that the disaster at Nicholson's Nek was incurred. The enemy had appeared in great numerical strength upon the hills, from three to five miles north of the town, and thence round to the eastward, over a line of seven or eight miles. A reconnaissance in force was planned for Monday, October 30, and in support of it, to secure the British left flank, a detachment of a dozen companies of infantry with a mountain battery started at 11 P.M., Sunday, to march nearly due north, up the bed of a stream called Bell's Spruit, to occupy the elevation known as Nicholson's Nek. Advance along the broken, rock-strewn, and unfamiliar watercourse was necessarily slow, but was unmolested until about two hours before daybreak, when some boulders were rolled down from a neighbouring height and fell among the mules of the battery, which was in the middle of the column, preceded and followed by infantry. The terrified creatures broke from their keepers, turned, and dashed in the darkness through the rear of the division, where several shots were fired into them by the startled soldiers, unable to see the character of the rush they felt. Confusion necessarily ensued, and the panic spread to the other ammunition animals, which stampeded. Order was with difficulty restored, and the detachment, thus arrested, at daybreak found itself still two miles short of its destination. It was not thought expedient to press on; and refuge, rather than position, was sought upon a hill near by, which looked defensible, but upon climbing was found to be commanded from several quarters. These were soon occupied by the Boers, and after a resistance protracted to about 3

³ "From Cape Town to Ladysmith," p. 79.

P.M., the detachment was compelled to surrender. Something over a thousand men were thus lost to the besieged, who could ill afford it. The missing—mostly prisoners—amounted to 843. On the field 52 were found dead, and 150 wounded were brought back to Ladysmith. Less than 100 escaped.

The rest of the British movement was successfully carried out, the enemy retiring before them; but although all the troops were out, except those absolutely needed for garrisoning the works, the enemy's field bases—"laagers"—could not be reached. Their numbers and dispositions so far made were observed; but the approaching powerlessness of the British for decisive offensive action was also shown. Upon returning to camp at 2 P.M., it was happily found that a naval brigade from the cruiser "Powerful," lying at Durban, had reached Ladysmith with long range and heavy guns. These were quickly got into position and soon silenced a Boer 40-pounder, which at daybreak had opened fire on the town from a hill between two and three miles to the northward. A few hours later news came in of the reverse at Nicholson's Nek.

The naval guns arrived in the nick of time, the very day that the enemy got their first heavy piece at work, and but three days before all communication with outside was intercepted. The closeness of the shave emphasizes the military value of unrelenting activity in doing, and unrelenting energy in retarding an opponent. At one end of the line Talana Hill, Elandsplaagte, Rietfontein; at the other, 200 miles away, a naval division rushing guns ashore and to the railroad. The result, a siege artillery opportunely mounted to keep the adversary at distance.

"The enemy's guns," telegraphed Sir George White, October 30, "range further than our field guns. I have now some naval guns, which have temporarily silenced, and I hope will permanently dominate, the enemy's best guns, with which he has been bombarding the town at a distance of over 6,000 yards." "Our forces were seriously outnumbered and our guns outranged" (yesterday), wrote a correspondent in Ladysmith, "until the arrival of the naval brigade, who rendered excellent service." "The prompt assistance rendered by the Navy 190 miles inland has added immensely to the defensive strength of the position, which now depends upon keeping down the enemy's artillery fire. If the siege guns of the Boers can be controlled, the rifle fire of a stout-hearted force ought to render a successful assault impossible."

The naval guns were six—two 4.7 inch, and four long 12-pounders. They were mounted on carriages hastily extemporised for the emergency by Captain Percy Scott, of the Royal Navy, and, as they outranged the army field guns by full 2,000 yards, they extended by at least double that distance the diameter of the circle of investment imposed upon the enemy.

On the 2nd of November telegraphic communication between Ladysmith and the outer world was broken, and the same day railroad communication was intercepted; the last train out carrying General French to take a cavalry command at Cape Town. The brief, exciting, and brilliant prelude to the war was concluded, and a great and controlling centre of national and military interest had been established by the isolation of some 13,000 British in the midst of foes whose numbers are not even yet accurately known, but of whose great superiority in that respect there can be no doubt. For a hundred and eighteen weary days the blockade lasted, until, on February 28, 1900, the advance of the relieving force entered the place.

Almost simultaneously with the beginning of the investment, on the 31st of October, General Sir Redvers Buller arrived from England at Cape Town to take chief command of the British forces in South Africa. The second period of the war now opened, before recounting which it will be necessary to summarize the general situation at date, as constituted by many preliminary occurrences in different, and even remote, quarters of the world. Up to the present, success had seemed to lie with the Boers, but the appearance was only superficial. Their plan had been well designed, but in execution it had failed; and while the failure is to be laid in part to a certain tardiness and lack of synchronism in their own movements, it was due yet more to the well-judged, energetic, and brilliantly executed movements of Sir George White and Sir Penn Symons, which utilised and completed the

dislocation in the enemy's action, and so insured the time necessary for organising defence upon an adequately competent scale.

"Sir George White's force," wrote Spencer Wilkinson, on the 18th October, "is the centre of gravity of the situation. If the Boers cannot defeat it their case is hopeless; if they can crush it they may have hopes of ultimate success."⁴ The summary was true then, and is now. In the preliminary trial of skill and strength the Boers had been worsted.

Note.—The effective British force shut up in Ladysmith on November 2 was 13,496, besides which there were 249 sick and wounded; total, 13,745. The Boer force in Natal is not accurately known, but is roughly reckoned at double the British; say 30,000. This estimate is probable, both from the extent of their operations, and because they ought to have had at least so many. It would be more to their discredit to have had fewer than to fail with more. The non-military element in Ladysmith raised the number of the besieged to about 21,000.

⁴ "Lessons of the War," p. 13.

CHAPTER III

THE COLONIES AND THE TRANSPORTS

In matters accessory to the War in South Africa, two stand conspicuous, as worthy of note by such as interest themselves in clearly comprehending those contemporary facts of which the import is not merely local, but universal. As in all theatres of war, and in all campaigns, there exist in South Africa particular conditions, permanent or transient, to utilise or to overcome which introduces into the character of the forces employed, and into their operations, specific variations, distinguishing them from methods elsewhere preferable. Such differences, however, being accidental in character, involve questions strictly of detail—of application—and do not affect the principles which are common to warfare everywhere. To the casual reader, therefore, they are less important to master and to retain in mind, however necessary to be observed, in order to apprehend the relative advantages and disadvantages of the parties to the conflict, and so to appreciate the skill or the defects shown by either in the various circumstances that arise.

In South Africa such specific differences are to be found, not only in the features of the country, which are more than usually exceptional, or in the contrast of characteristics between the two races engaged, which from the military point of view is very marked, but notably in the uncertainties and impediments attending the lines of communication by which the British army must be sustained nearly a thousand miles from the sea. These embarrassments are manifest in the great length and small capacity of the single-track railroad—750 miles to Bloemfontein and over 1,000 to Pretoria; in the difficulty and slowness of transport by all other means; in the problems of water, and of pasturage, as affected by the wet and dry seasons; in the effect of all these upon mobility, and in the influence on questions of transport, and of all mobile services, exercised by the regional sickness that rapidly destroys the greater part of non-acclimated horses.

Communications dominate war; to protect long lines of communication from serious interference by raids demands an ample mobile force.

These are general principles of warfare, universally applicable. The questions of water, pasturage, and horse sickness are special to South Africa, as is also in some degree the inadequate railway system; and these constitute conditions which modify the local application of general principles. Two factors, however, have appeared in this war which, while they characterise it especially, are gravely significant to those who would fain seek in current events instruction for the future, whether of warning or of encouragement. These are the almost complete failure of the British Government and people to recognise at the beginning the bigness of the task before them; and, in the second place, the enthusiasm and practical unanimity with which not South Africa only but the other and distant British colonies offered their services to the mother country. The philosophical reflector can scarcely fail to be impressed with this latter political fact; for it has illustrated vividly the general truth that, when once men's minds are prepared, a simple unforeseen incident converts what has seemed an academic theory, or an idle dream, into a concrete and most pregnant fact.

The naval battle of Manila Bay will to the future appear one of the decisive events of history, for there the visions of the few, which had quickened unconsciously the conceptions of the many, materialised as suddenly as unexpectedly into an actuality that could be neither obviated nor undone. What Dewey's victory was to the over-sea expansion of the United States, what the bombardment of Fort Sumter in 1861 was to the sentiment of Union in the Northern States, that Paul Kruger's ultimatum, summarizing in itself the antecedent disintegrating course of the Afrikaner Bond, was to Imperial Federation. A fruitful idea, which the unbeliever had thought to bury under scoffs, had taken root in the convictions of men, and passed as by a bound into vigorous life—perfect, if not yet mature. In these months of war, a common devotion, a common service, a common achievement, will

have constituted a bond of common memories and recognised community of ideals and interests. To a political entity these are as a living spirit, which, when it exists, can well await the slow growth of formal organisation, and of compact, that are but the body, the material framework, of political life.

It is evident enough that the Transvaal War was the occasion, not the cause, of the manifested unity of purpose which resulted in immediate common action between communities so far apart, geographically, as the British Islands, Canada and Australasia. As early as July 11 the Governor of Queensland had telegraphed that in case of hostilities the colony would offer two hundred and fifty mounted infantry, and on September 29 the Governor of New Zealand sent a message of like tenor. Before the Boer ultimatum was issued, Western Australia and Tasmania had volunteered contingents. The other colonies rapidly followed these examples. There were, indeed, here and there manifestations of dissent, but they turned mainly upon questions of constitutional interpretation and propriety, and even as such received comparatively little attention in the overwhelming majority of popular sentiment.

The attitude of the Imperial Government throughout was strictly and even scrupulously correct. The action of the colonies was left to be purely voluntary, the aid accepted from them being freely proffered, and the expenses of equipment and transportation by themselves voted. Not till the landing of the colonial troops in Africa were they taken into pay as an integral part of the Imperial forces, to which they were assimilated also as regards support in the field, and in matters of pension for wounds and other compassionate allowances.

The rapidity which characterised the movements on the part of the various colonies affords the most convincing proof, not only of the cordial readiness of their co-operation, but of the antecedent attitude of thoughtful sentiment toward the home country and the interests of the Empire, which is a far more important matter than the relatively scanty numbers of men sent. Imperial Federation is a most momentous fact in the world's history, but in material results it concerns the future rather than the present.

On the 9th of October the Boer ultimatum was issued. On the 23rd the contingent from British Columbia left Vancouver, to cross the continent to Quebec, where the Canadian force was to assemble; and from that port, on the 30th of the same month, the "Sardinian," of the Canadian line, sailed with 1,049 officers and men. The New Zealanders and part of those from New South Wales had already started, and by the 5th of November there was left in Australia but one small steamer's load, of less than one hundred men with their horses, which was not already at sea speeding for Cape Town. To what was known officially as the First Colonial Contingent the Australasian colonies contributed 1,491 officers and men.

It is impossible to an American reading these facts not to recall that there was a day when troops, from what were then North American colonies, fought for Great Britain in the trenches at Havana, and before Louisburg in Cape Breton, as well as in the more celebrated campaigns on the lines of Lake Champlain and the St. Lawrence. But—and herein is the contrast between past and present that makes the latter so vitally interesting—neither mother country nor colonies had then aroused to consciousness of world-wide conditions, for which indeed the time was not yet ripe, but by which alone immediate and purely local considerations can be seen in their true proportions, and allowed proper relative weight. From those old wars the mother country expected but an addition to her colonial system, to be utilised for her own advantage; the colonists, outside the love of adventure inherent in their blood, were moved almost wholly by the jealousies and dangers of the immediate situation, as the South African colonists have in part been in the present instance. American concern naturally, inevitably as things then were, did not travel outside the range of American interests, American opportunities, American dangers, while the British Government regarded its colonies as all mother countries in those days did. Consequently, when the wills of the one and the other clashed, there was no common unifying motive, no lofty sentiment—such as that of national Union was in

1861 to those who experienced it—to assert supremacy, to induce conciliation, by subordinating immediate interest and conviction of rights to its own superior claim.

After making due allowance for mere racial sympathy, which in the present contest has had even in the neutral United States so large a share in determining individual sympathies, the claim of an English newspaper is approximately correct, that the universal action of the colonies, where volunteering far exceeded the numbers first sent, "indicates what is the opinion of bodies of free men, widely separated by social and geographical conditions, concerning the justice and necessity of the quarrel in which we are now engaged." But this takes too little account of the much more important political fact that cold opinion was quickened to hot action by the sentiment of the unity of the Empire, an ideal which under different conditions may well take to Imperial Federation the place that the Union occupied in American hearts and minds in 1861. Alike in breadth of view and in force of sentiment, nothing exceeds the power of such an ideal to lift men above narrow self-interest to the strenuous self-devotion demanded by great emergencies. Should this be so in the present case, and increase, Imperial Federation and the expansion of the United States are facts, which, whether taken singly or in correlation, are secondary in importance to nothing contemporaneous.

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