SPENSER WILKINSON

LESSONS OF THE WAR

Spenser Wilkinson

Lessons of the War

Wilkinson S.

Lessons of the War / S. Wilkinson — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Spenser Wilkinson
Lessons of the War / Being Comments from Week to Week to the Relief of Ladysmith

PREFACE

The history of a war cannot be properly written until long after its close, for such a work must be based upon a close study of the military correspondence of the generals and upon the best records, to be had of the doings of both sides. Nor can the tactical lessons of a war be fully set forth until detailed and authoritative accounts of the battles are accessible.

But for the nation the lessons of this war are not obscure, at any rate not to those whose occupations have led them to indulge in any close study of war.

Since the middle of December I have written a daily introduction to the telegrams for one of the morning papers. Before I contemplated that work I had undertaken for my friend Mr. Locker, the Editor of *The London Letter*, to write a weekly review of the war.

Many requests have been made to me by publishers for a volume on the history of the war, with which, for the reasons given above, it is impossible at present to comply; but to the proposal of my old friends, Messrs. Archibald Constable and Co., to reprint my weekly reviews from *The London Letter*, the same objections do not hold.

In revising the articles, I have found but few alterations necessary. My views have not changed, and to make the details of the battles accurate would hardly be practicable without more information than is likely to be at hand until after the return of the troops.

S.W.

March 9th, 1900

THE EVE OF WAR

The next six weeks will be an anxious time for the British Empire. The war which begins as I write between three and four on Wednesday afternoon, October 11th, 1899, is a conflict for supremacy in South Africa between the Boer States, their aiders and abettors, and the British Empire. In point of resources the British Empire is so incomparably stronger than the Boer States that there ought to be no possibility of doubt about the issue. But the Boer States with all their resources are actually in the theatre of war, which is, separated by the wide oceans from all the sources of British power, from Great Britain, from India, from the Australian and Canadian colonies. The reinforcements ordered on September 8th have not yet all arrived, though the last transports are due to arrive during the next four or five days. After that no further reinforcements can be expected for a month, so that during the next few weeks the whole strength of the Boers, so far as it is available at all, can be employed against a mere fragment of the British power. To the gravity of this situation it would be folly to shut our eyes. It contains the possibility of disaster, though what the consequences of disaster now would involve must for the present be left unsaid. Yet it may be well to say one word on the origin of the unpleasant situation which exists, in order to prevent needless misgivings in case the first news should not be as favourable as we all hope. There is no sign of any mistake or neglect in the military department of the Army. The quantity and character of the force required to bring the war to a successful issue has been most carefully estimated in advance; every preparation which forethought can suggest has been thought out, so that the moment the word was given by the supreme authority, the Cabinet, the mobilisation and despatch of the forces could begin and proceed without a hitch. The Army was never in better condition either as regards the zeal and skill of its officers from the highest to the lowest, the training and discipline of the men, or the organisation of all branches of the service. Nor is the present condition of the Army good merely by comparison with what it was twenty years ago. A very high standard has been attained, and those who have watched the Army continuously for many years feel confident that all ranks and all arms will do their duty. The present situation, in which the Boers start favourably handicapped for five weeks certain, is the foreseen consequence of the decision of the Cabinet to postpone the measures necessary for the defence of the British colonies and for attack upon the Boer States. This decision is not attributable to imperfect information. It was regarded as certain so long ago as December last, by those in a position to give the best forecast, that the Boers of both States meant war with the object of establishing Boer supremacy. The Cabinet, therefore, has knowingly and deliberately taken upon itself the responsibility for whatever risks are now run. In this deliberate decision of the Cabinet lies the best ground for hoping that the risks are not so great as they seem.

The two Boer Republics are well supplied with money, arms, and ammunition, and I believe have collected large stores of supplies. Their armies consist of their burghers, with a small nucleus of professional artillery, officers, and men. The total number of burghers of both States is about fifty thousand, and that number is swollen by the addition of non-British Uitlanders who have been induced to take arms by the offer of burghership. The two States are bound by treaty to stand or fall together, and the treaty gives the Commander-in-Chief of both armies to the Transvaal Commander-in-Chief, who is however, bound to consult his subordinate colleague of the Orange Free State. The whole of the fifty thousand burghers cannot take the field. Some must remain to watch the native population, which far outnumbers the burghers and is not well affected. Some must be kept to watch the Basutos, who are anxious to raid the Free State, and there will be deductions for sick and absentees as well as for the necessary duties of civil administration. The forts of Pretoria, Johannesburg, and Bloemfontein require permanent garrisons. In the absence of the accurate data obtainable in the case of an army regularly organised into tactical and administrative units, the most various estimates are current of the force that the two States can put into the field as a mobile army available for attack as

well as for defence. I think thirty-five thousand men a safer estimate than twenty-five thousand. The Boers are fighting for their political existence, which to their minds is identical with their monopoly of political rights, and therefore their States will and must exert themselves to the uttermost. This view is confirmed by the action of the British military authorities, who estimate the British force necessary to disarm the Boer States at over seventy thousand men, a number which would seem disproportionate to a Boer field force of only twenty-five thousand. The British forces now in South Africa are in two separate groups. In Natal Sir George White has some ten thousand regular troops and two thousand volunteers, the regulars being eight or nine infantry battalions, four regiments of cavalry, six field batteries, and a mounted battery. He appears to have no horse artillery. In the Cape Colony there are seven British battalions and, either landed or on passage, three field batteries. A part of this force is scattered in small garrisons of half a battalion each at points on the railways leading to the Free State—Burghersdrop, Naauwpoort, and Kimberley. At Mafeking Colonel Baden-Powell has raised a local force and has fortified the place as well as its resources permit. A force of Rhodesian volunteers is moving from Buluwayo towards Tuli, on the northern border of the Transvaal. There are volunteer corps in the Cape Colony with a total of some seven thousand men, but it is not clear whether the Schreiner Ministry, whose sympathies with the Boers are undisguised, has not prevented the effective arming of these corps.

The reports of the distribution of the Boer forces on the frontiers must be taken with caution. Apparently there are preparations for the attack of Mafeking and of Kimberley, and it is open for the Boers to bring against either or both of these places forces largely outnumbering their defenders. Both places are prepared for defence against ordinary field forces. The actions at these places cannot very greatly affect the general result. Their nearness to the frontier makes it likely that the first engagements will take place on this border. On the other side of the theatre of war the Boers may be expected to invade Natal and to attack Sir George White, whose forces a few days ago were divided between positions near Ladysmith and Glencoe, places nearly thirty-five miles apart. The bulk of the Boer forces are deployed on two sides of the angle formed by the Natal border, where it meets the frontiers of the Transvaal and of the Free State. From the Free State border Ladysmith is about twenty-five miles distant in a straight line, and from the Transvaal border near Vryheid to Ladysmith is about twice that distance. If the Boers move on Thursday morning they would be able easily to collect their whole force at Ladysmith on Sunday morning, supposing the country contained no British troops. By Sunday, therefore, the Boer commander, if he knows his business, ought to be able to attack Sir George White with a force outnumbering the British by something like two to one.

If I were a Cabinet Minister I should not sleep for the next few days, but as an irresponsible citizen I trust that the Boers will be shocked to find how much better the British soldier shoots in 1899 than he did in 1881.

THE MILITARY ISSUES

October 18th, 1899

When the Boers sent their ultimatum they knew that fifty thousand British troops were under orders for South Africa, and that for six weeks the British forces in the theatre of war could not be substantially increased. As they were of opinion that no settlement of the dispute satisfactory to England could possibly be satisfactory to themselves they had resolved upon fighting. If we assume, as we are bound to do, that they had really faced the situation and thought it out, they must have had in their minds some course of action by which if they should begin the war on October 11th they would be likely to gain their end: the recognition of the sovereignty of the Transvaal. They could hardly expect to disarm the British Empire and dictate peace, but they might hope to make the occupation of their country so difficult that Great Britain would be tired of the effort before the moment of success. The Boer defence taken altogether could hope to do no more than to gain time, during which some outside embarrassment might cripple Great Britain; there might be a rising at the Cape, or some other Power might interfere.

If before the arrival of Sir Redvers Buller and his men the Boers could destroy a considerable fraction of the British forces now in South Africa, their chance of prolonging the struggle would be greatly improved. These forces were in two groups. There was the small army of Sir George White in Natal, something more than fifteen thousand men, and there were the detached parties holding points on the colonial railway system, Naauwport, De Aar, Orange River, Kimberley and Mafeking. These detachments, however, are largely made up of local levies, and the total number of British troops among them can hardly amount to three thousand. The whole set might be captured or otherwise swept from the board without any material improvement in the Boer position. Sir Redvers Buller is not tied to the line of railway which most of the detachments guard, and the disappearance both of the railway and of its protectors would be merely a temporary inconvenience to the British. But if during the six weeks' respite it were possible to destroy Sir George White's force the position would be very substantially changed. The confidence of the Boers would be so increased as to add greatly to their fighting power, the difficulties of Sir Redvers Buller would be multiplied, the probability of outside intervention might be brought nearer, and the Army of invasion to be eventually resisted would be weaker by something like a quarter. For these reasons I think Sir George White's force 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. That was the bird's-eye view of the whole situation a week ago, and it still holds good. The week's news does not enable us to judge whether the Boers have grasped it. You can never be too strong at the decisive point, and a first-rate general never lets a single man go away from his main force except for a necessary object important enough to be worth the risk of a great failure. The capture of Mafeking, of Kimberley, and even of Mr. Cecil Rhodes, would not compensate the Boers for failure in Natal. Neither Colonel Baden-Powell nor Colonel Kekewich would be likely to make a serious inroad into Boer territory. I should therefore have expected the Boers merely to watch these places with parties hardly larger than patrols and to have thrown all their energy into a determined attack on Sir George White. But they seem to have sent considerable bodies, in each case several thousand men, against both Mafeking and Kimberley. This proves either that they have a superabundance of force at their disposal or that they have failed to grip the situation and to concentrate their minds, their will, and their troops upon the key of the whole position. I believe the latter to be the true interpretation.

If the cardinal principle is to put all your strength into the decisive blow, its corollary is that you should deliver the blow as soon as you can, for in war time is as precious as lives. Here again it is not easy to judge whether the Boer Commander-in-Chief is fulfilling his mission. When the ultimatum expired his forces were spread along the border line of the Free State and the Transvaal,

so that a forward movement would concentrate them in the northern triangle of Natal. The advance has not been resisted, and at the end of a week the Transvaal wing of the combined army has reached a point a few miles north of Glencoe, while the bulk of the Free State wing is still behind the passes. The movement has not been rapid, but as the ground is difficult—marches through a mountainous country and in bad weather always take incomparably longer than is expected—the delay may be due not to lack of energy but to the inevitable friction of movement. The mere lapse of time throws no light on the Boer plan, for though sound strategy counsels rapidity in the decisive blow, rapidity is a relative term, the pace varying with the Army, the country, and the weather.

Sir George White's object is not merely to make the time pass until Sir Redvers Buller's forces come upon the scene. He has also to prevent the Boers from gaining any great advantage, moral or material. Time could be gained by a gradual retreat, but that would raise the courage of the Boer party, and depress the spirits of the British. Accordingly Sir George White may be expected to take the first opportunity of showing the Boers that his men are fighters, but he will avoid an engagement such as might commit a fraction of his force against the Boer main body. The detachment which was a few days ago near Glencoe may be expected, as the Boer advance continues, to act as a rear guard, of which the business is to delay the enemy without running too great a risk of being itself cut off, or as an advance guard, which is to be reinforced so soon as the general drift of the Boer movements has been made out. The next few days can hardly pass without an engagement in this quarter of Natal, and the first serious engagement will throw a flood of light upon the aims of both generals and upon the quality of the troops of both sides. Meantime the incidents of last week, the wreck of the armoured train, and the attacks which have probably been made upon Mafeking and Kimberley, are of minor importance.

A very serious piece of news, if it should be confirmed, is that the Basutos have begun to attack the Free State. The British authorities have exerted themselves to the utmost to prevent this and to keep the Kaffir population quiet. The mere fact of the existence all over South Africa of a Kaffir population outnumbering Boers and British together made it an imperative duty of both white races to come to a peaceful settlement. This was as well known to the Boers as to the British, and forms an essential factor in any judgment on the action which has caused and precipitated the conflict.

A WEEK'S CAMPAIGN

October 25th, 1899

The Boer Commander-in-Chief has beyond doubt grasped the situation. His total force seems to be larger than was usually expected and to exceed my own rough estimate of thirty-five thousand men, the balance to his advantage being due probably to the British efforts to keep the Basutos from attacking the Free State. Thus the Boers have been able to overrun their western and southern borders in force sufficient to make a pretence of occupying a large extent of territory in which only the important posts specially prepared by the British for defence continue to hold out. Of these posts, however, Mafeking and Kimberley are as yet the only ones that have been attacked or threatened.

For operations in the northern corner of Natal the Boer commander was able to collect some thirty thousand men, who on the eve of hostilities were posted in separate columns upon the various routes leading from the Free State and from the Transvaal into the triangle of northern Natal. This triangle is like a letter *A*, the cross-stroke being the range of hills known as the Biggarsberg, which is intersected near the centre on a north and south line by the head-stream of the Waschbank River forming a pass through which run the railway and the Dundee-Ladysmith road. North of the Biggarsberg the gates of the frontier are Muller's Pass, Botha's Pass, the Charlestown road, Wool's Drift, and De Jager's Drift, of which Landman's Drift is a wicket-gate. At each of these points, except perhaps Muller's Drift, of which I have seen no specific mention, the Boers had a column waiting. South of the Biggarsberg are on the east Rorke's Drift, and on the west the passes of Ollivier's Hoek, Bezuidenhout, Tintwa, Van Reenen, De Beers, Bramkock, and Collins. At all these points there were Boer gatherings, though on the west the Free Staters, having their headquarters at Albertina, were likely to put their main column on the road leading through Van Reenen's Pass to Ladysmith.

By Thursday morning the Boer advance had developed. The columns from Botha's Pass, Charlestown, and Wool's Drift had advanced through Newcastle, where they had converged, and moved south along the main road. The Landman's Drift column had moved towards Dundee, the Rorke's Drift column had pushed some distance towards the west, and the forces from Albertina had showed the heads of their columns on the Natal side of the passes.

The British force was divided between Dundee and Ladysmith. The Biggarsberg range, the cross-line of the A, is about fifty miles long. It is traversed from north to south by three passes. In the centre runs the railway through a defile. Twelve miles to the west of the railway runs the direct Newcastle-Ladysmith road; eight miles to the east runs the road Newcastle-Dannhauser-Dundee-Helpmakaar. A third road runs from De Jager's Drift through Dundee to Glencoe and thence follows the railway to Ladysmith. Dundee is about five miles from Glencoe on a spur of the Biggarsberg range. Between the two places by the Craigie Burn was the camp of Sir Penn Symons, who had under him the eighth brigade (four battalions), three batteries, the 18th Hussars, and a portion of the Natal Mounted Volunteers, in all about four thousand men. Thirty-five miles away at Ladysmith, the junction of the Natal and Free State railways, as well as of the Natal and Free State road systems, Sir George White had a larger force, the seventh brigade, three field batteries, a mountain battery, the Natal battery, two or three cavalry regiments, the newly-raised Imperial Light Horse, and some Natal Mounted Volunteers. It is not clear whether there were more infantry battalions and it seems probable that one battalion and perhaps a battery were at Pietermaritzburg. The Ladysmith force was at least six thousand five hundred strong, and its total may have been as high as eight thousand.

The Boer plan was dictated by the configuration of the frontier and of the obstacles and communications in Northern Natal. The various columns to the north of the Biggarsberg had only to move forward in order to effect their junction on the Newcastle-Dundee road, and their advance southwards on that road would enable them at Dundee to meet the column from Landman's Drift. The movement, if well timed, must lead to an enveloping attack upon Sir Penn Symons, whose brigade

would thus have to resist an assault delivered in the most dangerous form by a force of twenty thousand men. From the point of view of the Boer Commander-in-Chief, the danger was that the Glencoe and Dundee force should escape his blow by retiring to Ladysmith, or should be reinforced by the bulk of the Ladysmith force before his own combined blow could be delivered. It was essential for him to keep Sir George White at Ladysmith and also to cut the communications between Glencoe and Ladysmith. Accordingly, on Wednesday, the 18th, the Free State forces from Albertina, the heads of whose columns had been shown on Tuesday, moved forward towards Acton Homes and Bester's Station, and led Sir George White to hope for the opportunity to strike a blow at them on Thursday, the 18th. At the same time a detachment from the main column was pushed on southwards, and was able on Thursday, while Sir George White was watching the Free State columns, to reach the Glencoe-Ladysmith line near Elandslaagte, to break it up, and to take position to check any northward movement from Ladysmith. Everything was thus ready for the blow to be struck at Dundee, but by some want of concert the combination was imperfect. On Friday morning the Landman's Drift column, which had been reinforced during the previous days by a part of the Newcastle column, was in position on the two hills to the east of Dundee, and began shelling the British camp at long range. At the same time the column from the north was within an easy march from the British position. Sir Penn Symons decided promptly to attack the Landman's Drift column and to check the northern column's advance. Three battalions and a couple of batteries were devoted to the attack of the Boer position, while a battalion and a battery were sent along the north road to delay the approaching column. Both measures were successful. The attack on the Boer position of Talana or Smith's Hill was a sample of good tactical work, in which the three arms, or if mounted infantry may be considered a special arm, the four arms, were alike judiciously and boldly handled. The co-operation of rifle and gun, of foot and horse, was well illustrated, and the Boer force was after a hard fight driven from its position and pursued to the eastward. Unhappily, Sir Penn Symons, who himself took charge of the fight, was mortally wounded at the moment of victory, leaving the command of the force in the hands of the brigadier, Lieut.-Colonel Yule. The northern Boer column seems to have disappeared early in the day. Possibly only its advance guard was within striking distance and had no orders to make an independent attack on the British delaying force.

On Saturday morning Sir George White sent a small force of cavalry and artillery to reconnoitre along the line of the interrupted railway. Some two thousand Boers were found in position near Elandslaagte, and accordingly during the day the British were reinforced by road and rail from Ladysmith, until in the afternoon the Boer position could be attacked by two battalions, three batteries, two cavalry regiments, and a regiment and a half of mounted infantry—about three thousand five hundred men. The Boers were completely crushed and a large number of prisoners taken, including the commander and the commanding officer of the German contingent. The British loss, however, as at Glencoe, was heavy, especially in officers. The force returned on Sunday to Ladysmith.

The British force at Dundee-Glencoe was thus still isolated, and until now no detailed account of its movements has reached England. On Saturday it was again attacked and, there is reason to believe, it again repulsed a large Boer force, probably the main northern column. On Sunday also the attack seems to have been renewed, this time apparently by two columns, one of which may have been composed of Free State troops from Muller's Pass. Either on Sunday or Monday General Yule determined to withdraw from a position in which he could hardly hope without destruction to resist the overwhelming numbers brought to bear against him, especially as the Boer forces, either from the direction of Muller's Pass or from Bester's Station, were threatening his line of retreat by the Glencoe-Ladysmith road. Accordingly, leaving in hospital at Dundee those of his wounded who could not be moved, he retired along the Helpmakaar road, which he followed as far as Beith, about fourteen miles from Dundee, and near there he bivouacked on Monday night. On Tuesday he continued his march from Beith towards Ladysmith, expecting to reach Sunday's River, about sixteen miles, by dark. Sir George White, informed of this movement and of the presence of a strong Boer force to

the west of the Ladysmith-Glencoe road, set out on Tuesday morning to interpose between this force and General Yule, and by delivering a smart attack at Reitfontein was able for that day to cover the retreat of General Yule's brigade.

The Boer Commander-in-Chief has thus, apparently, failed in his attempt to crush one wing of the British force, and has accomplished no more than bringing about its return to the main body, which must have been a part of the original British plan, unless it was thought that a British brigade was capable of defeating four times its own number of Boers.

The net result hitherto seems to be that the Boers have had the strategical and the British the tactical advantage. The British troops have proved their superiority; the Boers have shown that even against troops of better training, spirit, and discipline, numbers must tell, especially if directed according to a sound though not always perfectly-executed plan.

PLAYING WITH FIRE

November 1st, 1899

The first week's campaign, dimly seen through scanty information, gives a peculiar impression of the two armies. The British force seems like an athlete in fine training but without an idea except that of self-preservation, while the Boer army resembles a burly labourer, clumsy in his movements, but knowing very well what he wants. The British force at first is divided upon a front of forty miles, each of its halves looking away from the other, so that there is little attention to the weak point of such a front, the communication between its parts. The first event is the cutting of this communication (on the 19th), and not until the 21st is there an attempt to clear it, and that attempt, though it leads to a severe blow against the interposing Boer force (Elandslaagte), is not successful, for the communication has eventually to be sought on another route behind the direct one. The Boer idea is, after severing the connection between the British halves, to crush the weaker Dundee portion; but the execution is imperfect, so that Sir Penn Symons has the opportunity, which he seizes instantly, to defeat and drive off one of the columns before the other can assist it. His successor, General Yule, the heir to his design, is no sooner convinced by this move to Glencoe that his line of junction with Ladysmith is threatened with attack by a great superiority than he sets out by the nearest way still open to him to rejoin the main body. The Ladysmith force covers this march by a shielding movement (Reitfontein) and the junction of the two British halves is effected. From Dundee to Ladysmith is forty miles, and General Joubert unopposed would have covered the distance in three days. He was before Dundee on Saturday, the 21st, and there was no sign of him before Ladysmith until Saturday, the 28th, or Sunday, the 29th. The original division of the British force and the Battle of Glencoe thus produced a delay of several days in the Boer advance: more could not have been expected from it. This first impression ought to be supplemented by a consideration of Sir George White's peculiarly difficult position, on which I will venture a word or two.

The Government, by its action in the first half of September, decided that Sir George White must defend Natal for about five weeks[1] with sixteen thousand men against the bulk of the Boer army, which was likely to be double his own force. It was evidently expected that he should hold his ground near Ladysmith and thereby cover Natal to the south of the Tugela. This double task was quite disproportionate to his force. If Ladysmith had been a fortress, secure for a month or two against assault, and able to take care of itself, the field force using it as a base could no doubt have covered Natal. But in the absence of a strong place there were only two ways by which a small force could delay the Boer invasion. The force might let itself be invested and thereby hold a proportion of the Boer army, leaving the balance to raid where it could, or the campaign must be conducted as a retreat from position to position. For a general with ten thousand men and only two hundred miles of ground behind him to carry on a retreat in the face of a force double his own so as to make it last five, weeks and to incur no disaster would be a creditable achievement. Sir John Moore is thought to have shown judgment and character by his decision to retreat before a greatly superior force, commanded it is true by Napoleon himself. Moore when he decided to retreat was about as far from Corunna as Dundee is from Durban, and Moore's retreat took nineteen days. He had the sympathy if not the effective help of the population, and was thought to have been clever to get out of the trap laid for him. Sir George White seems to have been expected as a matter of course to resist the Boer army, to prevent the overrunning of Natal by the Boers, and to preserve his own force from the beginning of October to the middle of November.[2] The Government expected the Boers to attack as soon as they should hear of the calling out of the Reserves, that being the reason why the Reserves were not called out

[1] Thirteen weeks, as we now (March) know from the official correspondence.

[2] I should have said December.

earlier. Therefore Sir George White's campaign was timed to last from October 9th to November 15th (December 15th). I conclude that the force to be given to Sir George White was fixed by Lord Lansdowne at haphazard, and that the calculations of the military department were put on one side, this unbusinesslike way of playing with National affairs and with soldier's lives being veiled from the Secretary of State's mind by the phrase, "political reasons." But the "political reason" for exposing a Nation's troops to unreasonable risks and to needless loss must be bad reason and bad policy. Mr. Wyndham has had the courage to assert that there was no haphazard, that his chief knew quite well what he was doing, and that "the policy which the Government adopted was deliberately adopted with the fullest knowledge of possible consequences." If these words in Mr. Wyndham's speech of October 20th mean anything, they mean that Lord Lansdowne and Mr. Wyndham intended Sir George White to be left for a month to fight against double his number of Boers; that they looked calmly forward to the terrible losses and all the risks inseparable from such conditions. That being the case, it seems to me that it is Mr. Wyndham's duty, and if he fails, Lord Lansdowne's duty, to tell the country plainly whether in that deliberate resolve Lord Wolseley was a partner or an overruled protester. Ministers have a higher duty than that to their party. The Nation has as much confidence in Lord Rosebery as in Lord Salisbury and the difference in principle between the two men is a vanishing quantity. A change of ministry would be an inconvenience, but no more. But if the public comes to believe, what I am sure is untrue, that the military department at the War Office has blundered, the consequences will be so grave that I hardly care to use the word which would describe them.

I accept the maxim that it is no use crying over spilt milk or even over spilt blood, but the maxim does not hold when the men whose decision seems inexplicable are in a position to repeat it on a grander scale. The temper of the Boers as early as June left no doubt in any South African mind that if equality of rights and British supremacy were to be secured it would have to be by the sword. The Government alone among those who cared for the Empire failed to realise this in time. That has been admitted. The excess of hope for peace has been condoned and is being atoned for on the battlefields of Natal. But to-day the temper of Europe leaves no room for doubt that, in case of a serious reverse in Natal, Europe if it can will interfere. Have Mr. Goschen and Lord Lansdowne worked out that problem, or is there to be a repetition in the case of the continental Powers—an adversary very different from the Boers—of patience, postponement, and haphazard? It is not the situation in South Africa that gives its gravity to the present aspect of things, but the situation in Europe. Upon the next fortnight's fighting in Natal may turn the fate not merely of Natal and of South Africa, but of the British Empire. That this must be the case was plain enough at Christmas, and has been said over and over again. Yet this was the crisis which was met by sending to the decisive point a reinforcement of ten thousand men to do the best they could along with the six thousand already there during a five weeks' campaign.

After reconnaissance on Friday and Saturday (October 27th-8th) Sir George White, finding a large Boer force in front of him at Ladysmith, determined to hit out on Monday. Suppose Ladysmith to be the centre of a compass card, the Boers were spread across the radii from N. to E. Sir George meaning to clear the Boers from a position near N.E. prepared to move forward towards N.E. and towards E., sending in each direction about a brigade of infantry and a brigade division of field artillery. He sent two battalions and a mounted battery towards N. The party sent to N. started after dark on Sunday; the other parties, making ready in the night, set forward at dawn. There was no enemy in position at N.E. The force sent towards E. pushed back a Boer force, which retreated only to enable a second Boer force to take the British E. column in flank—apparently its left flank. The N.E. column had to be brought up to cover the retirement of the E. column. When these two columns returned to Ladysmith the N. column was still out. Long after dark Sir George White learned that the N. column, which had lost its battery and its reserve rifle ammunition by a stampede of the mules, had been surrounded by a far stronger Boer force, had held its ground until the last cartridge was gone, and that then the survivors had accepted quarter and surrendered.

Sir George White manfully takes upon himself the blame for this misfortune. His portentous blunders were in sending out the party to a distance and in taking no steps to keep in communication with it or to support it. The detachment of a small party to a distant point is a habit of Indian warfare. It is out of place against an enemy of European race, for the detachment is sure to be destroyed if the enemy has a capable commander. Every man in the Ladysmith force will have felt on Tuesday that the commander had make mistakes which he ought not to have made. The question is what effect this consciousness will have upon the spirits of the force.

Sir George White was reinforced before and during the action, a battalion of rifles having arrived in the morning and a party of bluejackets with heavy quick-firers coming up during the day. Further reinforcements were sent towards him from the squadron after the action, so that his force is still about sixteen thousand. If he does not elect to retreat, a course which might demoralise the troops, he may well be able to defend Ladysmith until relieved; but the first business of the troops now on their way out will be to relieve him, and until that has been arranged for, it is to be feared that Mafeking and Kimberley must wait.

HOW WEAK POLICY LEADS TO BAD STRATEGY

November 8th, 1899

The war is doing us good. It is giving us the beginnings of political education in a department that has been utterly neglected. It may be worth while to review the whole situation of to-day, and to ask how the man in the street can lend a helping hand.

The British Government, primarily representing the people of Great Britain, has for many years been an affair of party; the dominant idea of the party leaders has been when out of office to get in, and when in to stay. The way to manage this was to cajole the man in the street, and as he was a busy man getting his living and not much concerned about watching the whole globe, the party leaders made bids for his support; votes to be distributed on the principle that one man was as good as another; taxation to be made light for him, and, consequently, as the money had to be found, heavy for some one else. Each party offered what it sincerely believed to be for the general good; but the kind of general good thought of was the personal improvement or comfort of each individual or of a mass of individuals. While this was going on in British towns and counties, something was happening on the neglected globe. There was a large part of the British Nation living on other continents without votes in any British town or county, yet looking to the British Government to champion something they loved, which has come to be called the Empire. There were also great nations emulating the British in the notion that the world was their inheritance, and that they would take possession of a fair share of it. Their quarrels had driven them to perfect their armies and to build navies. Each of them was annoyed to find that in the scramble for the heritage some one had been before them. On the best plots the British flag was flying, yet Great Britain had not much Army and was very careless about her Navy. The strong powers began to elbow her a little. The British Government was not disturbed by these hints from the globe. A Government made by a Parliament in which every member represented a town or a county or a scrap of a town or county, and in which no one represented the Nation, no one the Empire, and no one the Globe, felt bound to keep its eye upon towns and counties, the Opposition benches, and the next election. Why should it stand up for the British outside, and why concern itself about other Powers looking round the globe for claims to peg out? The colonists who looked to the British Government for championship were snubbed; the foreign Powers working for elbow-room were politely made way for, or if they brushed against the British coat-sleeve and caused an exclamation received a meek apology. This was the normal frame of mind of British party leaders and ministers, from which they have never quite emerged. They were asleep, dreaming of a parochial millennium.

But outside of cabinets there were a few men who used their eyes. Sir Charles Dilke took a turn round the globe, and when he came back said "Greater Britain." That was an idea, and ideas are like the plague—they are catching. Sir John Seeley took a tour through the history of the last three centuries, and said "Expansion of England"; that meant continuity in the Nation's life not merely in space but in time. Whatever the cause, a few years ago there set in an epidemic of fresh ideas, tending to reveal the Nation as more than a crowd of individuals and the Empire as the Nation's work and the Nation's cause. The Government did all it could to resist the infection. Instead of standing up for the Empire it was bent on passing measures in the sense of its own party. It ran away from Russia, from France, and from Germany. But the new ideas grew; every globetrotter became a Nationalist and an Imperialist, and shed his party skin. Then came Fashoda, and Lord Rosebery's action in that matter killed what was left of party.

The case of the British in South Africa cried aloud for British action. But the Government was still hidebound in bad traditions, thinking that democracy means the tail wagging the dog, not seeing that if the statesman leads straight along the path of duty the Nation is sure to follow him. Happily, a statesman was sent to Cape Town, probably because the Cabinet hardly realised how big a man he was.

Sir Alfred Milner mastered his case, thought out his cause, and at the opportune moment put it before the Government. The first result was the Bloemfontein conference. There, with the prescience and the strength of a Cavour or a Bismarck, Milner put the issue: either the minimum concession which will secure the political equality of the two races or war. Kruger's obstinate refusal of the concessions required showed plainly that it would be war. There was only one possible way of averting war; if fifty thousand men had been at once sent to South Africa, Kruger and his people would have known where they were, and might have accepted possible terms, those offered at Bloemfontein. The moment of the breaking off of the conference was the crisis, and to appreciate men you must watch them in a crisis. Mr. Balfour expressed his unbounded confidence in Kruger's sweet reasonableness and in the justice of the British cause; he could not believe there would be war. Mr. Chamberlain entered into ambiguous negotiations, beginning in a way that made everyone, especially Kruger, imagine that the Government would accept less than the Bloemfontein minimum. Of preparing to coerce the Boers there was no sign. The Boers began to get their forces in order. In England big speeches were made; "hands" were "put to the plough"; but at the end of July no military force was made ready. At length, when Natal appealed for protection against the Boer army, ten thousand men were ordered so as to bring up the garrison of the colony to some seventeen thousand. After the ten thousand not another man was sent until October 20th.

The present situation is the necessary outcome of the Government's action between the beginning of June and October 7th, when the orders for calling out the Reserves and for mobilisation were issued. The Cabinet's decisions involved that Sir George White with his small force should have to bear the brunt of the Boer attack from the outbreak of hostilities until the time when the Army Corps should be landed and ready to move. That was at least five weeks[3] of which three have elapsed, and in the three weeks Sir George White, after one or two initial mishaps of no great consequence by themselves, is invested at Ladysmith, while Mafeking and Kimberley are waiting for relief, and the Free State Boers are invading the northern provinces of Cape Colony and trying to enlist the doubtful Dutch farmers. This is not a pleasant situation for the Nation that declares itself the paramount Power in South Africa. Three questions may be discussed with regard to it: What are the risks still run, what are the probabilities, and how can we help to prevent such a situation from recurring?

To see what has been risked on the chance that the force under Sir George White may hold its own we must look from the Boer side. The Boer commander hopes, or ought to hope, to destroy Sir George White's force before it can be relieved. He has a chance of succeeding in this, for an investing force has with modern arms a great advantage over the force it surrounds. The outside circle is so much larger than the inside one that it can bring many more rifles into play; it exposes no flanks, and the interior force cannot attack it without exposing one or both flanks. With anything like equal skill and determination the surrounding force is sure to win in time. But if the time is limited the surrounding force must hurry the result by assaults, in which it loses the advantage of the defensive. If Joubert and his men have the courage and determination to make repeated assaults it may go hard with the defenders of Ladysmith. But the defenders hitherto have had the counterbalancing advantage of a superior artillery. I think it reasonable to expect that with the better discipline of his force, its greater cohesion and mobility and the high spirit which animates it, Sir George White will be able to defy the Boers for many weeks. But suppose the unexpected to happen, as it sometimes does in war, and Sir George White's resistance to be overcome? Such a victory would have a tremendous effect upon the hopes and spirits of the Boers. It would almost double the fighting value of their army, and would probably bring to their side many of their colonial kinsmen. Joubert would become more daring, and, if Sir Redvers Buller had divided his force, would attack its nearest portion with a prospect of success. The failure of Sir Redvers Buller would then not be outside the bounds of possibility. What that would involve there is no need to expound—the Empire would be in peril of

[3] We now know that the time was thirteen weeks.

its existence. We may feel pretty sure that things will not come to such a pass; that another week will show Sir George White well holding his own and a part of the Army Corps preparing to move. Yet it would be prudent to guard against accidents by sending further troops to the Cape. Ten thousand men ordered now would be at Cape Town by the middle of December; but every delay in ordering them will mean, in case they should in December be wanted, a period of suspense like that through which we are now passing.

The moral of the present situation seems to me to be that we should scrutinise our political personages, noting which of them have betrayed their inability to see what was happening and to look ahead, bringing down their figures in our minds to their natural size, and exalting those who have shown themselves equal to their tasks. The man in the street might do well to consider whether the great departments of Government, such as the War Office and the Army, should for ever be entrusted to men who have not even a nodding acquaintance with the business which their departments have to transact, the business called War. Success in that as in other business depends on putting knowledge in power.

TWO VIEWS OR TRUE VIEWS?

November 15th, 1899

October 11th saw the opening of hostilities, and of the first chapter of the war, the conflict between Sir George White with sixteen thousand men and General Joubert with something like double that number. The first chapter had three sections: First, the unfortunate division of Sir George White's force and the isolation of and unsuccessful attack upon his right wing; secondly, the reunion of his wings at Ladysmith; thirdly, the concentration of the Boers against the force at Ladysmith and the surrounding or investment of Sir George White. This third section is not yet ended, but the gathering of the forces at Cape Town and at Port Natal points to its conclusion and to the opening of the second chapter. The arrival of the first portion of the transport flotilla is the only important change since last week.

I thought from the beginning that the division of Sir George White's force was strategically unsound, and the position of Ladysmith a bad one because it lent itself to investment. It is now known that the division of forces and the decision to hold Ladysmith, even until it should be turned and surrounded, was due not to strategical but to what are called political considerations. The Government of Natal thought that if the troops were withdrawn from Glencoe—Dundee, or the whole force collected, say at Colenso instead of Ladysmith, the appearance of retreat would have a bad effect on the natives, the Kaffirs, and perhaps the Dutch farmers. Accordingly, out of deference to the view of the local Government, the General consented to do his work in what he knew to be the wrong way. This is a perfect specimen of the way in which wars are "muddled"—I borrow the expression from Lord Rosebery—and it deserves thinking over.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.