

HENTY GEORGE ALFRED

WITH BULLER IN NATAL,
OR, A BORN LEADER

George Henty

**With Buller in Natal,
Or, a Born Leader**

«Public Domain»

Henty G.

With Buller in Natal, Or, a Born Leader / G. Henty — «Public
Domain»,

Содержание

PREFACE	5
CHAPTER I	6
CHAPTER II	14
CHAPTER III	22
CHAPTER IV	30
CHAPTER V	38
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	44

G. A. Henty

With Buller in Natal, Or, a Born Leader

PREFACE

It will be a long time before the story of the late war can be written fully and impartially. Even among the narratives of those who witnessed the engagements there are many differences and discrepancies, as is necessarily the case when the men who write are in different parts of the field. Until, then, the very meagre military despatches are supplemented by much fuller details, anything like an accurate history of the war would be impossible. I have, however, endeavoured to reconcile the various narratives of the fighting in Natal, and to make the account of the military occurrences as clear as possible. Fortunately this is not a history, but a story, to which the war forms the background, and, as is necessary in such a case, it is the heroes of my tale, the little band of lads from Johannesburg, rather than the leaders of the British troops, who are the most conspicuous characters in the narrative. As these, although possessed of many admirable qualities, had not the faculty of being at two places at once, I was obliged to confine the action of the story to Natal. With the doings of the main army I hope to deal next year.

G. A. HENTY

CHAPTER I

THE BURSTING OF THE STORM

A group of excited men were gathered in front of the Stock Exchange at Johannesburg. It was evident that something altogether unusual had happened. All wore anxious and angry expressions, but a few shook hands with each other, as if the news that so much agitated them, although painful, was yet welcome; and indeed this was so.

For months a war-cloud had hung over the town, but it had been thought that it might pass over without bursting. None imagined that the blow would come so suddenly, and when it fell it had all the force of a complete surprise, although it had been so threatening for many weeks that a considerable portion of the population had already fled. It was true that great numbers of men, well armed, and with large numbers of cannon, had been moving south, but negotiations were still going on and might continue for some time yet; and now by the folly and arrogance of one man the cloud had burst, and in thirty hours war would begin.

Similar though smaller groups were gathered here and there in the streets. Parties of Boers from the country round rode up and down with an air of insolent triumph, some of them shouting "We shall soon be rid of you; in another month there will not be a rooinek left in South Africa."

Those addressed paid no heed to the words. They had heard the same thing over and over again for the past two months. There was a tightening of the lips and a closing of the fingers as if on a sword or rifle, but no one replied to the insolent taunts. For years it had been the hope of the Uitlanders that this would come, and that there would be an end to a position that was well-nigh intolerable. Never before had a large body of intelligent men been kept in a state of abject subjection by an inferior race, a race almost without even the elements of civilization, ignorant and brutal beyond any existing white community, and superior only in the fact that they were organized and armed, whereas those they trampled upon were deficient in both these respects. Having no votes, these were powerless to better their condition by the means common to civilized communities throughout the world. They were ground down by an enormous taxation, towards which the Boers themselves contributed practically nothing, and the revenue drawn from them was spent in the purchase of munitions of war, artillery, and fortifications, so enormously beyond the needs of the country, that it was no secret that they were intended not only for the defence of the republic against invasion, but for a general rising of the Boer population and the establishment of Dutch supremacy throughout the whole of South Africa.

The Boer government was corrupt from the highest to the lowest. The president and the members of his family piled up wealth to an enormous amount, and nothing could be done without wholesale bribery. The price of everything connected with the mining industry was doubled by the supply being in the hands of monopolists, who shared their gains with high state officials. Money was lavished like water on what was called secret service, in subsidizing newspapers to influence public opinion throughout Europe, and, as it was strongly suspected, in carrying on a propaganda among the Dutch in Cape Colony, and in securing the return of members and a ministry secretly pledged to further in every way the aims of the Presidents of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The British and other aliens were not only deprived of all rights of citizenship, but even freedom of speech and the right of public meeting was denied them; they were not allowed to carry arms except by a special license, their children were taught in Dutch in the schools, they had no right of trial by jury; judges who had the courage to refuse to carry out the illegal behests of the president were deprived of their offices, and the few editors of newspapers representing the Uitlanders—as all men not born in the state were called—were imprisoned and their journals suppressed.

Intolerable as was such a state of things to a civilized community, it might have been borne with some patience had it not been that the insolence of their masters was unbounded. Every Boer

seemed to take a pleasure in neglecting no opportunity of showing his contempt for the men whose enterprise and labour had enormously enriched the country, and whose superior intelligence he was too grossly ignorant to appreciate. A Boer farmer would refuse a cup of water to a passing traveller, and would enforce his refusal by producing his rifle immediately if the stranger ventured to urge his request. Of late the insolence of the Boers had greatly increased; the manner in which England had, instead of demanding justice with the sternness and determination that the circumstances called for, permitted her remonstrances to be simply ignored, was put down as a consciousness of weakness. And having now collected arms sufficient not only for themselves but for the whole Dutch population of South Africa, the Boers were convinced that their hour of triumph had come, and that in a very short time their flag would float over every public building throughout the country and the Union Jack disappear for ever.

The long discussions that had been going on with regard to a five or seven years' franchise were regarded with absolute indifference by the Uitlanders—even the shorter time would have afforded them no advantage whatever. The members from the mining districts would be in a hopeless minority in the assembly; and indeed, very few of those entitled to a vote would have cared to claim it, inasmuch as they would thereby render themselves citizens of the republic, and be liable to be commandeered and called upon to serve in arms, not only against the natives, upon whom the Boers were always making aggressions, but against England, when the war, which all foresaw could not long be delayed, broke out.

For months the negotiations went on between President Kruger and Mr. Chamberlain, the British colonial minister, and the certainty that the Boers were bent upon fighting became more and more evident. Vast quantities of rifles, ammunition, and cannon poured into the Transvaal, their passage being more than winked at by the Dutch ministry of Cape Colony.

It was that day known that President Kruger had thrown off the mask of a pretended desire for peace, and that an ultimatum had been telegraphed to England couched in terms of such studied insolence that it was certain war must ensue. The greatest civilized power on earth would have shown less arrogance towards the most feeble. Not only was England called upon to send no more troops to South Africa, but to withdraw most of her forces already in the country, and this by a state that owed its very existence to her, and whose total population was not more than that of a small English county.

The terms of that ultimatum had just become known in Johannesburg, and it was not surprising that it had created an intense excitement. All had long felt that war must come, and that at an early date, but the step that had now been taken came as a surprise. From all appearances it had seemed that the negotiations might be continued for months yet before the crisis arrived, and that it should thus have been forced on by the wording of the ultimatum showed that the Boers were satisfied that their preparations were complete, and that they were in a position to overrun Natal and Cape Colony before any British force capable of withstanding them could arrive. England, indeed, had been placed in a most difficult position. The ministry were not unaware of the enormous preparations that the Boers were making, and had for some time past been quietly sending out a large number of officers and a few non-commissioned officers and men to the Cape. But so long as there was a hope that the Boers would finally grant some redress to the Uitlanders, they could not despatch any considerable number of troops, for had they done so they would have been accused not only on the Continent, but by a section of Englishmen, of forcing on a war with a weak state, whereas in point of fact the war was being forced on by a country that most erroneously believed itself to be stronger than England. The Boers of the Transvaal knew already that the Orange Free State would join them at once, and believed firmly that every Dutchman in Natal and Cape Colony would at the signal take up arms.

Presently a gentleman detached himself from the crowd in front of the Exchange, and joined a lad of some sixteen years old who was standing on the other side of the street.

"Well, father, is it all true what they say?" the latter asked—"that Kruger has sent such an ultimatum to England that war is certain?"

"It is quite true, Chris; war is absolutely certain. Kruger has given the British Government only two days to reply to the most insolent demand ever addressed to a great power, and worded in the most offensive manner. I imagine that no reply will be given; and as the ultimatum was sent off yesterday, we shall to-morrow morning be in a state of war."

"Well, father, there is no doubt what the result will be."

"No doubt whatever as to the final result, but I am afraid things will go very badly for a time. I am glad, very glad, that Kruger should have sent such an ultimatum. It cannot but be accepted as a defiance by all England; and I should say that even the opposition, which has of late continually attacked Mr. Chamberlain, will now be silenced, and that Government will be supported by all parties."

After a quarter of an hour's walk they arrived at home. It was a handsome house, for Mr. King was one of the leading men in Johannesburg. He had come out with a wife and son ten years before, being sent by some London capitalists to report to them fully upon the prospects of the gold-fields. Under his advice they had purchased several properties, which had been brought out as companies, and proved extremely valuable. He was himself a large holder in each of these, and acted as manager and director of the group. "What is the news, Robert?" his wife asked, as he and her son came in. "I have had three or four visitors in here, and they all say that there is quite an excitement in the town."

"It has come at last," he said gravely; "war is inevitable, and will begin in twenty-four hours. Kruger has sent one of the most extraordinary demands ever drawn up. He calls upon England to cease sending out troops, and to speedily recall most of those now in South Africa, and has given two days for a reply, of which one has already expired. As it is absolutely certain that England will not grant this modest request, we may say that the war has begun. I wish now that I had sent you and Chris down to Durban a fortnight ago, for there will be a fearful rush, and judging by the attitude of the Boers, I fear they will make the journey a very unpleasant one. As we have agreed, it is absolutely necessary that I should remain here. There is no saying what steps the Boers will take with reference to the mines; but it is certain that we must, if possible, keep them going—not for the sake of the profit, which you may be sure Kruger will not allow to go out of the country, but because if they were to be stopped it would cost an immense deal of money to put them in working condition again, especially if, as is likely enough, the Boers damage the machinery. I shall do as little work as I can; and the Boers will not, I fancy, interfere with us as long as they can benefit by the working. For myself, I would risk any loss or damage rather than aid in supplying them with gold, but for the sake of our shareholders in Europe I must do my best to save the mines from destruction. Indeed, if I don't work them, probably they will do so until the end is at hand, and will then do as much damage as possible. You know we have agreed on this point."

"Yes, I suppose it is best, Robert; but it seems terrible leaving you alone here, and I shall be in a perpetual state of anxiety about you."

"I don't think there is any occasion for that; as long as I am working the mines and they are taking the gold, which no doubt they will have to repay when our army are masters here, they will not interfere with me. They treat us badly enough, as we know; but they love the gold even more than they hate us, so I have no fear whatever as to my personal safety. I am afraid, dear, that for a time things will go very badly with us. Already we know that commandos have gone forward in great strength to the frontier, and I should not be surprised if the whole of South Africa rises; at any rate, the Boers are confident that it will be so. Gladstone's miserable surrender after our disasters at Laing's Nek and Majuba have puffed them up with such an idea of their own fighting powers and our weakness, that I believe they think they are going to have almost a walk over. Still, though it was certain that we should have a hard time whenever war came, we have been hoping for years that England would at last interfere to obtain redress for us, and we must not grumble now that what we have been so long expecting has at last come to pass. I believe there will be some stern fighting. The Boers are no

cowards; courage is, indeed, as far as I know, the only virtue they possess. In the long run they must certainly be beaten, but it will only be after very hard fighting."

"What do you think they will do, father?"

"I can't say what they will do, but I am sure that what they ought to do is to merely hold the passes from Natal with enough men for the purpose, and to march their whole force, broken up into half a dozen columns, into Cape Colony. There is no force there that could resist them, they would be undoubtedly joined by every Dutchman there, and I am convinced that the Africander ministry would at once declare for them, in which case England would have to undertake the tremendous work of conquering the whole of South Africa afresh, for certainly she could not allow it to slip from her hands, even if it should prove as stern a business as the conquering of half India after the Sepoy Mutiny. Now to business. Fortunately we sent down your clothes and everything we had of value to our friends the Wilsons, at Durban, six weeks ago. What you have remaining you must leave behind to take its chance. You will be able to take no luggage whatever with you. We know how terribly the trains have been packed for the past fortnight, and a week ago almost all the carriages were commandeered for the use of the troops going south.

"You must take with you a basket of provisions, sufficient, if necessary, for two or three days for you both. There is no saying how long you may be on your way to the frontier; once beyond that you will, of course, be able to obtain anything you want. But you need expect no civility or courtesy from the Boers, who, indeed, would feel a malicious pleasure in shunting you off into a siding, and letting you wait there for any number of hours. You must mind, Chris, above all things, to keep your temper, whatever may happen. You know how our people have been insulted, and actually maltreated in scores of cases, and in their present state of excitement the Boers would be only too glad to find an excuse for acts of violence. I was speaking to you about it three days ago, and I cannot impress it too strongly upon you. I have already given you permission to join one or other of the corps that are being raised in Natal, and if anything unpleasant occurs on the road, you must bottle up your feelings and wait till you get a rifle in your hand and stand on equal terms with them."

"I promise that, father. I think, after what we have had to put up with here, during the past two or three months especially, I can bear anything for these last few days."

"Yes, Chris; but it will be more trying now that you have your mother under your charge. It is for her sake as well as your own that I impress this so strongly upon you. Now, will you go down at once to the railway-station and enquire about the trains? I shall go myself to the manager and see whether I can get him to make any special arrangement in your mother's favour, though I have no great hopes of that; for though I know him well, he is, like all these Dutchmen in office, an uncivilized brute puffed up with his own importance."

Chris started at once, and returned an hour later with a very discouraging report. The station was crowded with people. No regular trains were running, but while he was there a large number of cattle-trucks had been run up to the platform, and in these as many of the fugitives as could be packed in were stowed away. As soon as this was done the train had started, but not half the number collected on the platform had found room in it. His father had left a few minutes after him, and presently returned.

"From what I can hear," he said, "there is no chance whatever of your being able to get any accommodation, but must take your chance with the others. Viljoen told me that except the waggon there was not a carriage of any sort or class left here, and that there was no saying at all when any would return; but that even if they did, they would be taken for the use of the troops going south. All he could say was that if, when I came down to the station with you, he is there, he will see that you go by the first waggon that leave."

"That is something at least," Mrs. King said quietly. "I certainly do not wish to ask for any favour from these people, and do not want to be better off than others. I have no doubt that it will

be an unpleasant time, but after all it will be nothing to what great numbers of people will have to suffer during the war."

"That is so, Amy. And now I think that the sooner the start is made the better. The rush to get away will increase every hour, and we shall have the miners coming in in hundreds. Many of the mines will be shut down at once, though some of them will, like ours, continue operations as long as they are allowed to."

"Make your basket, or bag, or whatever you take your provisions in, as small as possible, mother. I saw lots of baggage left behind on the platform. You see, there are no seats to stow things under. I should say that a flat box which you can sit on would be the best thing. And you will want your warmest cloak and a thick rug for night."

"I have a box that will do very well, Chris. Fortunately we have plenty of cold meat and bread in the house. I shall not be more than half an hour, Robert."

In less than that time the party were ready. Chris's preparations had been of the simplest. He carried over his arm a long, thick greatcoat, in the pocket of which he had thrust a fur cap and two woollen comforters. He had also a light but warm rug, for he thought it probable that he might not be able to be next to his mother. He had on his usual light tweed suit, but had in addition put on a cardigan waistcoat, which he intended to take off when once in the train. In his pockets he had a couple of packets of tobacco, for although he seldom smoked, he thought that some of it might be very acceptable to his fellow-passengers before the journey was over. He wore a light gray, broad-brimmed wide-awake, with a white silk puggaree twisted round it, for the heat of the sun in the middle of the day was already very great, and would be greater still when they got down to Natal. The box, which a Kaffir servant put on his shoulder, was about eight inches deep and a foot wide, and eighteen inches long.

"What have you in it, mother?"

"Two tin bottles of cold tea, each holding a gallon."

"I should hardly have thought that we wanted as much as that."

"No; but there may be many women who have made no provision at all, thinking that we shall at least be able to get water at any of the stations we stop at. I have a small tin mug, and that joint of meat; the rest of the box is filled up with bread-and-butter. I have cut it up and spread it, so that it packs a good deal closer than it would do if we put the loaves in whole."

Mr. King had his wife's thick-wadded winter cloak and a rug over his arm, and a small hand-bag with a few necessities for the journey. Mrs. King was in her usual attire, and carried only a white umbrella.

"We look as if we were starting for a picnic rather than a journey that will last three or four days," she said with an attempt at gaiety. "There is one comfort, we shall have nothing to look after when we get to the end."

Chris walked on ahead to let his father and mother talk together, for although all arrangements had been discussed and settled during the past two or three days, there was much they had to say to each other now that the parting had come. The lad was a fine specimen of the young Uitlander. A life passed largely in the open air, hard work and exercise, had broadened his shoulders and made him look at least a year older than he really was. He was a splendid rider and an excellent shot with his rifle, for his father had obtained a permit from the authorities for him to carry one, and he could bring down an antelope when running at full speed as neatly as any of the young Boers. Four days a week he had spent in the mines, for his father intended him to follow in his footsteps, and he had worked by turns with the miners below and the engineers on the surface, so that he might in the course of a few years be thoroughly acquainted with all the details of his profession.

The last two days in each week he had to himself, and with three or four lads of his own age went for long rides in search of sport. A couple of hours every evening were spent in study under his father's direction. He was quiet in manner, and talked but little. He deeply resented the position in

which the British population in the Transvaal were placed, the insolence of the Boers towards them, and their brutal cruelty towards the natives. The restraint which he so often found it necessary to exercise had had no slight influence on his character, and had given a certain grim expression to the naturally bright face. Many had been the discussions between him and his friends as to the prospect of England's taking up their cause. Their disappointment had been intense at the miserable failure of the Jameson raid, which, however, they felt, and rightly, must some day have a good result, inasmuch as it had brought out the wretched position of the Uitlanders, who, though forming the majority of the population, and the source of all the wealth of the country, and paying all the taxes, were yet treated as an outcast race, and deprived of every right possessed by people of all civilized nations.

They had wondered and fretted at the apathy with which the enormous warlike preparations of the Boers were regarded at home, and the fact that they were permitted to become a formidable power, capable of offering a desperate resistance even by the armies of England; whereas, before they had been enriched by the industry and enterprise of the immigrants, they had been in danger of being altogether wiped out by the Zulus and Swazis, and had only been saved by the interference on their behalf of the British power. Thus, then, while the war-cloud had been slowly but surely gathering, the lads had watched the approaching crisis with delight, unmingled with the anxiety and foreboding of the capitalists, who, without doubting what the end must be, were sure that enormous losses and sacrifices must result before their deliverance from Boer oppression could be obtained.

The scene at the station was an extraordinary one. Men, women, and children of all ranks were crowded on the platform; the greater capitalists, the men whose fortunes could be counted by hundreds of thousands, had for the most part left, but many who in England would be considered as rich men had remained in the town till the last moment, to make their final arrangements and wind up their affairs. With these were well-to-do storekeepers, with their wives and families, together with mining officials, miners, and mechanics of all kinds. Piles of baggage rendered movement difficult, for many had supposed that the regular trains were still running, and that they would be able to carry away with them the greater portion of their belongings. The scenes at the departure of the previous trains roughly awakened them to the fact that all this must be abandoned, and women were crying and men cursing below their breath at this last evidence of Boer indifference to the sufferings of those by whose work they had so greatly benefited. Mr. King soon found that the manager was still there, but on speaking to him he shrugged his shoulders, and said:

"I do not see what I can do. Look at the crowd there. When the waggons come up there will be a rush, and I have no men here to keep such a number in order."

"I see that, Mr. Viljoen, but if you would send a man with us to where the waggons are standing in readiness to come up, my wife could take her place then."

"Yes, I will do that at once. You had better go with her outside the station, and the porter shall take you on from there. If you were to get off the platform here and walk up the lines, others would notice it, and there would be an immediate rush."

He called to one of the porters on the platform, and gave him instructions, and in a few minutes Mrs. King was seated on her box in the corner of a truck, which, with a few others, had a covered roof, although it was entirely open at the sides. In the next half-hour eight or ten others, who had been similarly favoured by the manager, joined them. All these were known to the Kings, and it was a great relief to them to find that they would travel together, instead of being mixed up with the general crowd. They had packed themselves together as closely as possible, so that when the train became crowded there should be no room for anyone to push in among them. Among the party was John Cairns, a great chum of Chris's. He and his father and mother had been waiting for two hours at the station, and he told him that there were seven or eight of their companions there.

"We will take our seats on that side," Chris said, "and as we move in shout to them to join us. It will be a great thing to get as many people we know in here as possible."

Presently the train began to move. Fortunately, at the spot where it drew up, a group of their acquaintances were clustered together, and these all managed to get into the truck, which was speedily filled up until there was scarce standing-room. Three minutes later the train moved on. A great number were left behind, although everyone made as much room as possible, women especially being helped in after the trucks seemed absolutely choke-full. As soon as the train was fairly in motion many of the men climbed up on to the roofs of the covered waggons, thereby relieving the pressure below, and enabling all the women to sit down. Others ranged themselves along the sides, sitting on the rail, and so minimizing the space they occupied. But even with all this, the women were packed inconveniently together. All, however, were so much pleased at their good fortune in having got away that there was no complaining or grumbling. That the journey would be a long one, all knew; but at least they had started, and would soon be a free people in a free country. Chris and his friends had been among the first to climb up on to the roof, and they sat down in a group at one end of it.

"It is going to be pretty cold here to-night, and desperately hot to-morrow," Chris said; "but we can put up with that. I would stand it for a month rather than stop any longer among these brutes." There was a general murmur of agreement.

"Thank heavens," one of them said, "the next time we meet them will be with arms in our hands. We have a long score to pay off, and we shall, I expect, have plenty of chances. The Boers are boasting that they will soon drive the last Englishman out of South Africa, and seem to regard it as a sort of general picnic. They will find out their mistake before they have done."

"Still, we must not think that it is going to be a picnic our way," Chris said. "They have quite made up their minds that every Boer in Cape Colony and Natal will join them at once. If they do, it will be a very long business to put them down, though I have no doubt it will all come right in the end. Do you know anything about the others?"

"I know that Peters and Carmichael and Brown went off with their people last night, but I don't know about the others."

"Capper and Willesden and Horrocks went yesterday," another lad said. "Sankey and Holdsworth were on the platform, and no doubt got into another truck."

"There are seven of us here," Chris said, "and as six have gone on, that makes thirteen certain, and there are eight more to come. Most of us will stop at Pietermaritzburg, but I suppose some, whose friends are going straight home, will go down with them to Durban."

"There will not be many who have to do so," another said. "Sankey's people and Carmichael's are going to Cape Town, but, so far as I know, all the others will stay and see it out either at Maritzburg or Durban. Do you think that we should take any others with us, Chris?"

"I don't think so. You see we all know each other, and it would be a nuisance having fellows with us of whom we know nothing. They might not pull with us, while we have been so much together that there is no fear of our having any disagreement. I think we have all pretty well settled that it will be much better to act by ourselves, instead of joining any of the corps that are sure to be formed down there. Still, if we knew one of the men getting up a corps—and some of our people are pretty sure to do so—I do think it would be a good plan to join, if they would accept us as a sort of independent troop, ready to act with them when there is any big fighting, and to go about on our own account at other times. You see, none of us will want any pay. We shall all furnish our own horses and arms, and shall therefore be on a different footing from men who have to draw pay and be equipped at the public expense; and I don't see why any officer commanding a troop in one of these corps should object to our joining him on those terms. But anyhow, I feel sure that we should be able to do a great deal more good by being free to move where we liked, and to undertake expeditions on our own account, than if we were to act in a more regular manner."

There was a general chorus of agreement.

"Now, how long do you think it will be before we cross Laing's Nek? Of course we ought to be there by to-morrow morning. It is only a hundred and fifty miles, and at fifteen miles an hour,

which is about their usual rate of travelling, we should cross the frontier at two o'clock, for it was about four when we started. But there is no saying. My father thought we ought to take four days' provisions with us; I think we could hold out for that time."

"You don't mean to say, Chris, he thought it possible we might be as long as that?"

"He did think so, Peters. He considered that we might be shunted off very often to let trains with men and stores for the troops go on ahead of us."

"Well," the other replied, "I don't care so much for myself, though I don't say that it would be lively to be stuck up here for four days and nights, but it would be awful for the women; and I should say that very few of them have got more than enough provisions for a day. Still, of course, if we are shunted at a station we shall be able to buy things."

"I am not so sure of that," Chris said. "You know what the Boers are at their best; and now that they believe the time has arrived when they are going to be the absolute lords of all South Africa, they are so puffed up that there is no saying what they may do to show their hatred and contempt for us. And whatever happens, you fellows, you must keep your temper. My father spoke to me very strongly about it. You must remember that they will not mind what they do, and would shoot any of us down on the smallest excuse, knowing well enough that we are helpless, and that it is unlikely any enquiry would ever be made, or anyone punished even if they shot a dozen of us. We must remember that we intend to pay off old scores later on, and that we mean to do it with interest."

CHAPTER II

A TERRIBLE JOURNEY

Twenty-four hours had gone, and not half the distance had yet been covered. The night had passed painfully to all those in the waggons, for though most of the women had provided themselves with wraps of one sort or another, the cold was severe. This, however, was less felt than the cramped position in which all had to sit on the floor, unable to move or to stretch their legs, the only change obtainable being by standing up. The pressure was most felt in the open waggons, where the men as well as the women were packed together so closely that even sitting down was impossible. Some slight relief had been afforded by the men on the covered waggons taking as many from the uncovered trucks as could lie down there with them; but as the latter were by far the more numerous, a comparatively small number of men could be so entertained.

For a time the rising of the sun afforded some relief, but as it gained in power the position of the fugitives became almost unbearable. The stoppages were frequent, and at all the stations the Boers from the neighbourhood had assembled, some from curiosity, but the majority to wait for the trains that were to take them to the front. Although sometimes detained for three or four hours, the passengers were not allowed to alight. The men, indeed, at times, by common impulse, sprang out, but were soon forced to take their places again, some of the Boers using their heavy whips over their heads and shoulders, while others with pointed guns prevented any attempt at retaliation. Men, and even women, crowded the platform, jeering and cursing those in the waggons, menacing them with their whips and snatching at such trinkets, and even cloaks as took their fancy. The men were all several times searched for weapons, and made to turn their pockets inside out, the contents being unceremoniously transferred to those of the Boers. Chris and his companions would have taken their places below with their friends, but these implored them not to do so, being afraid that they would be enraged beyond endurance, and might in their anger say or do something that would give an excuse to the Boers to use their rifles, which they so often pointed threateningly at women as well as men. It was only when the train was in motion that food and drink were passed up from below, as these too would assuredly, had they been seen, have been confiscated by the brutal tormentors.

When they steamed into Standerton in the afternoon, the distress of the women and children for water was so great that men determined at all costs to endeavour to get some for them. As if by one impulse, when the train came to a standstill outside the station, they jumped out and made for the little village. But here all refused to give or sell them water or food, and in a few minutes a large party of Boers rode in, and falling upon them with their whips, drove them back to the train. Had they been armed the men would assuredly have resisted till the last, although certain to be killed, so mad were they with passion. As it was, it would have been throwing away their lives, without a chance of even avenging themselves on their assailants. As they reached the waggons and climbed into their places again, several had broad blue weals across their faces, while many more were smarting from the cuts they had received on the body. Chris and his companions had got out when the others did so, but had not followed them. Their supply of water and cold tea was not yet exhausted, as most of the ladies had made preparations for a journey of two or three days, and Mrs. King and the mothers of the other lads begged them not to go.

"The Boers are only waiting for an excuse to use their firearms," Mrs. King said, "and whatever happens you had better stay here. You can do no good by going." So, reluctantly, they had again taken their places on the roofs of the carriages, and sat there with their pulses beating and their fists clenched as they heard the shouts and the cracking of the heavy whips in the village, and presently saw the men running back, pursued by their cowardly assailants. Two or three of the lads were so enraged at the sight that they would have jumped down had not Chris laid a restraining hand on them.

"Wait your time," he said in a hard voice. "We can't repay them now, but we will remember this when our turn comes."

The Boers, as they rode up, leapt from their horses, and with shouts of exultation walked along the waggons, striking at the men, hurling every epithet of contempt and hatred at them, and even spitting at them. Many of the women were also struck as well as being grossly insulted.

"And these scoundrels call themselves Christian men, and their friends speak of them as simple pious farmers! I call them, both from their appearance and their actions, as unmitigated a set of ruffians as are to be found on the face of the globe," Cairns exclaimed passionately.

They were indeed as unsavoury in appearance as they were brutal in manner. Water is scarce in the Transvaal, and is used most sparingly for all purposes of cleanliness. The Boer sleeps in his clothes, gives himself a shake when he gets up, and his toilet is completed, unless on very exceptional occasions when he goes outside the door to the water-cask, fills his hands with water, and rubs them over his face.

Four times in the year, however, the Boers indulge in a general wash before starting with their wives and families for four or five days' stay at the nearest town to attend the services of the church and to do their quarter's marketing. In dress the Boer is almost universally slovenly, his clothes hang about him stained and discoloured by long usage. In the majority of cases he is altogether without education, and very many Boers are scarcely able to sign their names. Most of them wear beards and long unkempt hair. But in point of physique they are fine men, tall and powerfully, though loosely, built, but capable of standing great fatigue if necessary, although averse to all exercise save on horseback. All are taught to shoot from boyhood, and even the women in the country districts are trained in the use of firearms, for it is not so long since they lived in dread of incursions by the Zulus and Swazis.

There was no attempt whatever at uniformity of dress. Most of the men wore high riding boots. Some of the young men from the towns were in tweed suits, the vast majority wore either shooting jackets or long loose coats; some were in straw hats, but the elder men all wore large felt hats with wide brims. They were all, however, similarly armed with rifles of the best and most modern construction. Their general appearance was that of a large band of farmers of the roughest type and wholly without regard for their personal appearance.

It was fully an hour before the train moved again. Then it was shunted on to a siding while the Boers entrained with their horses on a long line of waggons which had just come up, and which started on its way south as soon as they were on board. Then the emigrant tram crawled on again. There was another night of wretchedness, and in the morning they arrived at Volksrust, the frontier town. Here they were again closely searched for arms, and what provisions remained among them were commandeered, or as the emigrants called it, stolen. However, they knew that their troubles were now nearly over, and did not grumble when they were informed that the train would go no farther, and that they must make their way on foot to Newcastle.

They were told tauntingly that they might find some of their friends there if they had not already run away, and that if they stopped at Pietermaritzburg for a week they would have another journey down to Durban as prisoners. All were too glad to get out of the clutches of the Boers to utter complaints which they knew would be useless, and they went off at once. The prospect was not, however, a pleasant one. Newcastle was nearly thirty miles away, but they hoped that at least they might obtain shelter and rest and food for the women at some of the scattered farms. At first their progress was slow, for after being for more than two days and a half packed up like cattle, they had almost lost the use of their limbs; but gradually the pace was accelerated. Men took the little children on their shoulders, others helped the women along. Charlestown, on the British side of the frontier, was already occupied by the Boers, who hooted and abused them as they passed through. At Laing's Nek there was a Dutch commando with some guns.

Two miles on the women could go no further, and they halted at a large farmhouse which had been deserted by its owners. All the men, however, who were alone, determined to push on at once to

Newcastle, and promised they would send vehicles of some sort to take them on if they could possibly be obtained. Mrs. King and the other ladies authorized them to pay any sums demanded.

Thankful indeed were the tired women when they reached the farmhouse. They found the doors unfastened, as the farmer knew that were he to lock them the Boers would certainly batter them in when they arrived, and would probably do greater damage to the furniture left behind than if they had obtained an entry without trouble. The men soon found the wood-shed, and in a short time great fires blazed in every room. The bedding had been carried away, but utterly worn out as they were, the women were only too glad to lie down on rugs and cover themselves with their cloaks. The men gathered in the lower room and talked for some time before thinking of going to sleep. There was scarce one who was not determined to join one of the volunteer corps being raised at Durban and Maritzburg, and to avenge the insults and ill-treatment to which they had been subjected. The long-smouldering animosity towards the Boers had been fanned during the past three days into a fierce fire, and even those who had not before thought of taking part in the struggle were now as eager as the others to do so.

In the morning all were astir early. Had they been supplied with food they would have waited until waggons came out from Newcastle, but these could hardly arrive until evening, and at any moment the Boer advance might commence. They therefore determined to move on early, for if they met the waggons half-way these could return with them at once to the town. It was desirable to start as soon as possible so as to get well on the way before the heat of the day was at its fullest. Accordingly by six all were in movement. The long night's rest had done them good, still more so the thought that by the end of the day they would be among friends, and they were disposed to laugh and joke over their present situation. All the men had cut themselves heavy cudgels from the stock of firewood, and the fact that they were not as before wholly defenceless was no slight gratification to them. Even the ladies spoke confidently of being able to walk the twenty miles to Newcastle should they not meet vehicles coming to fetch them. They could go ten miles now and then halt till the sun was setting, and after such a long rest could certainly go on to Newcastle.

"I am afraid, mother," Chris said as they started, "that what seems so easy now will be too much for many of the women. We started without breakfast, and unless we can get something by the way I doubt if many will reach the town to-night. Of course for the men it is nothing. Very often when I have been out on the veldt and have started early, I have had nothing till I got back late in the evening. What are you wearing that veil for, mother? I saw that you pulled it down over your face yesterday afternoon. I suppose you did it to keep the dust out of your eyes, but there is none now."

"I had a reason for doing it, but I can put it up now."

She lifted the white veil to its usual place round her hat; as she did so, Chris uttered a sharp exclamation as his eye fell on a bluish-red mark across her face.

"You don't mean to say, mother," he said in a tone of horror, "that one of those scoundrels struck you?"

"They struck a good many of us, Chris, and there was no reason why I should escape more than another."

The lad's face grew white.

"Why did you not call out? I would have—"

"I know you would," she interrupted gently, "and so of course I did not cry out. You had all had enough to try you to the utmost, and I was not going to risk your life by letting you know what had happened. It flashed across me at once that if you had seen it happen you would have been down from the roof in an instant and struck the man. Had you done so, your fate would have been sealed, you would have had half a dozen bullets in your body; therefore, I simply dropped my veil, and I can assure you that the smart of the Boer's sjambok gave me less pain when I felt that you knew nothing of it."

Chris walked along silently for a minute or two; then he said quietly: "Thank you, mother. I am sure it would have been as you said. I could not have helped it. No one could see his mother struck without interfering."

"I can understand that, dear; but it would have been a poor consolation for me had you been killed in endeavouring to right a wrong that I could very well put up with, and shall forget in a week."

"I suppose so, mother. I should not so much mind if I only knew the fellow's name, or even knew him by sight, so that I might possibly have the chance some day of settling accounts with him."

They walked on until eight o'clock, and then rested under the shade of some rocks. Fortunately there had been some rain two days before, and they had been able to quench their thirst at a little stream that came down from the hills. There were in all some thirty women and eighteen men.

"Look here, Harris," Chris said, "there is a farmhouse over there, and as I see cattle and horses, it evidently is not deserted. Let us go and see if we can get some bread and some milk for the women."

"All right!"

The other lads were quite ready to go also, and they walked across to the house, which stood some half a mile away. As they approached it a Boer came out. On seeing them he re-entered it, and appeared again with a rifle.

"I am afraid we shall get nothing here," Harris said. "The Dutchmen in Natal are only waiting for the Boers to advance to join them."

"Well, we will try anyhow," Chris said doggedly. "I dare say that you are right; but Boer or no Boer, if there is any food in that house I mean to get it."

They went quietly on. When they were within fifty yards the Boer shouted to them to go back.

"We have some women and children with us," Chris replied, continuing to advance. "They are exhausted from want of food and fatigue, and we have come to ask for some bread, and if you have it in the house, some milk."

"If the house was full of both you should not have a crumb of bread or a drop of milk. Halt! I say, or I will put a bullet into you."

Chris did not heed the command.

"We have plenty of money to pay you, and are willing to give ten times its fair price."

He was now within ten yards of the farmer. The latter burst into a torrent of abuse, and was in the act of raising his rifle when Chris sprang at him. The Boer, who had no idea that this lad would venture to attack him, discharged his rifle almost at random, and the ball passed through the brim of Chris's hat. An instant later his heavy stick fell on the Boer's head, and levelled him to the ground.

"Now, Harris," he shouted, "do you and the others go into the house, and first of all bring me out one of these fellows' whips. Cairns, pick up his rifle, and reload it. Sankey, do you and the others keep guard at the door, and don't let those viragoes out"—for three women had just appeared, and were cursing with a fluency that Billingsgate would have envied.

Harris had already come out with a heavy whip by the time Cairns had reloaded. Chris took it and said to the Boer, who, in view of the formidable sticks the lads carried, had thought it best to lie quiet.

"Now you can get up, you hulking ruffian. I am going to give you a lesson in civility. Oh, you won't get up? Well, it will make no difference to me," and he proceeded to give the howling Boer a tremendous thrashing. "There," he said, when his arm was tired, "you may get up and go, and I hope that the lesson will do you good. Now, Cairns, we will search the house. It is likely enough he has a lot of rifles hidden somewhere, and perhaps when we have gone he may go and fetch some more of his class. We may as well possess ourselves of them."

The seven lads went into the house, paying no further attention to the Boer. In spite of the fury of the women, they searched the house thoroughly, and in a large case in a disused room they found twelve Mauser rifles, with a thousand cartridges. They then took a basket and filled it with bread, and emptied the milk from two large pans into a pail.

"We are not thieves and robbers, like your people," Chris said to the women, as he threw five shillings on the table. "Your man has been good enough to tell us that he will be in Maritzburg with the Boers in a week's time. Therefore, as war has been declared, the muskets are lawful spoil taken from a rebel. Now, boys, let's be off."

The cartridges were divided among them; then, with the thirteen guns, the basket, and pail, they started to rejoin their friends. "Well, that is a fair capture to begin with," Chris said. "As far as we are concerned, the war has begun. The Boer has made off, I see. I should not be surprised if we hear of him and some of his friends again. However, now we are well armed they can come as soon as they like."

Great was the joy among the women and children when they returned with the much-needed refreshment.

"I was getting very anxious about you, Chris," his mother said. "We heard the man fire. But where have you got all these rifles from?"

"The owner of the farm is a Boer, mother, and as he told us, a rebel. As he began the affair by putting a bullet through my hat, and abusing us and our nation heartily, we took the liberty of searching his house, with good success. I need not say that he did not give us this bread and the pail of milk of his own free-will, but I left the money for them."

His mother had turned pale when he said that a bullet had gone through his hat, but she said nothing.

"What became of the man?" she asked. "You did not kill him, I hope?"

"No, mother; I contented myself with thrashing him with one of his own whips until my arm ached."

There was enough bread for all to have a slice. The women and children had as much milk as they could drink, the rest was divided among the men. The extra rifles were given to those who could best use them. In half an hour the women said that they were ready to go on again, and that they would rather do that than wait, for they greatly feared that the Boer might gather some of his friends and attack them. Feeling greatly strengthened and refreshed, they started at a good pace. They had gone about a mile when Sankey said to Chris:

"Look, there is a party of mounted men across the valley."

"Then we had better plant ourselves among the rocks, and let the unarmed men go on with the women and children, and take shelter a bit farther on. I don't suppose they will venture to attack us when they find, to their disgust, that we are armed with as good rifles as their own. They have a great respect for their lives."

Accordingly the seven lads and the six men with rifles at once took up a position among the rocks. The rest of the party went forward two hundred yards and then took shelter also. The Boers, feeling certain that the party was unarmed, did not trouble themselves to open fire at a distance, but rode forward in a clump at full gallop.

"They are about a thousand yards away now," one of the men said. "We may as well give them a volley."

The thirteen rifles flashed out almost simultaneously. There were, as they had counted, sixteen Boers. Five horses fell, three others galloped off riderless, and the party broke up and rode off at full speed in various directions.

"I don't think we need trouble any more about them," said Sankey's father, who, was one of the party, as he rose to his feet. "You may be sure that several of those who got away carried bullets somewhere about them."

As they turned to rejoin their friends there was a general exclamation of satisfaction, for two large waggons were seen coming along the road. In ten minutes the women and children, with all the older men, were comfortably seated and on their way to Newcastle. Chris and his party accompanied them on foot so as to form a rear-guard. "We have won our first battle," Chris laughed.

"But for you there would not have been any battle at all," Field said. "I don't think any of us would have gone forward after that fellow warned us back had you not done so."

"I was determined to get some milk for the children," Chris said, "and would have gone forward even if I had been alone. I don't think I ever felt such a satisfaction as I did in thrashing that Boer. One of them struck my mother across the face, you know, in the train, and though it was not the same man, I feel better now that I have taken it out of someone."

At Newcastle they found a small British force, and learned that there were four or five thousand troops at Dundee. Trains were still running, and after only an hour's delay at Newcastle to obtain a meal, the whole party went on. Late that evening they arrived at Colenso. Mrs. King and the ladies and gentlemen of the party had decided to sleep there, but hearing on the road that the little town was crowded with fugitives from the Transvaal and the farms near the frontier, they determined to continue the journey to the capital, which they reached the next morning. The lads had quite decided upon their course before starting, and had arranged with their parents to remain at Maritzburg. The general opinion was that the British force at the front could not possibly maintain itself, but that as soon as the invasion began in force they must fall back, as the Transvaal Boers would be able to attack them in front and on the right flank, while the Free Staters would pour down through Van Reenen and De Beers Passes and make straight for Ladysmith, and so threaten their line of retreat.

There were a few indeed who still believed that the Boers would stand entirely upon the defensive so far as Natal went. They would occupy the formidable passes through the Drakensberg and await attack there, while they would invade Cape Colony at many points and raise the Boer population. However, the general opinion was that they would advance into Natal in great force, and in that case it was doubtful, indeed, whether Sir George White could oppose them successfully north of Maritzburg. He might even, it was thought, be obliged to fall back to Durban until reinforcements arrived from England. Already there was a rush to the offices that had been opened for the volunteer corps. Many of the fugitives from the Transvaal had joined, as had most of the young farmers who had been obliged by the hostility of their Dutch neighbours to abandon their homes in the north of Natal, while numbers of all ranks in Maritzburg, Durban, and other towns were giving in their names. All the lads who had come down with Chris had some time before obtained their parents' consent to join a volunteer corps, or form one among themselves, and as it was evident that the crisis was at hand no objections were raised to their doing so at once. Mrs. King would go down to Durban with her friends, so that there was no need for her son to accompany her.

It had been agreed by the other lads that they would all meet at ten o'clock at the hotel where Chris put up, and the party mustered in greater strength than had been expected, for they found that the boys who had preceded them had all waited in the town, and were stopping at the various hotels. They too had been as badly treated by the Boers as the last arrivals, and were all eager to begin work.

"There is no getting a private room here," Chris said, "so we had better go outside the town and talk things over." As they went they chatted over their adventures on the road, and great satisfaction was felt among those who had not been present on hearing how Chris had thrashed the Boer, and had gone tip to him in spite of his threat to shoot. At their last meeting at Johannesburg they had elected him their captain, but he had at the time refused to accept the post, saying that it would be wiser to decide that afterwards, as one of the others might show himself better fitted for the position. However, their first step when they sat down by the bank of the little river outside the town was to again elect him by acclamation.

"Very well," he said, "as you all wish it I will accept the post. I suppose we are well provided with funds. Our fathers all said they would find our outfit, and money enough for all expenses." There was a general assent. "Well, we start better than we had expected, for we have thirteen rifles: twelve of them are Mausers, the other we will sell; so we shall have to buy nine others. That had better be done this morning, for we may be sure that there will be a rush to the gunsmiths' shops. In the next place we must each buy a saddle and saddlery. We have agreed that we will not have any approach to

uniform; because, as we all speak Dutch, we shall be able to pass unobserved, if necessary, among them. But I have been thinking it over, and it seems to me that if we have nothing of the sort we shall run the risk of being shot by our own men."

"What are we to do, then, Chris?"

"I think that we had better get flat caps, like the fatigue caps our soldiers wear. They can be carried in our pockets inside our shirts when we are in the neighbourhood of the Boers, and when we are riding anywhere near our own troops we can put them on instead of our felt hats. It would alter our appearance altogether when riding in groups, and even at a distance we could hardly be taken for Boers."

All agreed that it would be an excellent plan.

"We shall, of course, have bandoliers for our cartridges, and haversacks for our provisions and spare packets of ammunition. Not an hour must be lost in getting these things. I hear that Captain Brookfield, who came up to Johannesburg last year and stayed a fortnight with us, has raised a corps, which he has named the Maritzburg Scouts. I will call upon him this afternoon and tell him that there are one-and-twenty of us, all somewhere about my age, and that we mean fighting; and that as we all speak Dutch we think we can do more good by scouting about on our own account than by joining any regular corps; but that at the same time we should like, if there was anything like regular fighting, to place ourselves under the orders of an officer like himself. It is rather difficult to explain, you know, but I think he will understand what we mean. We should be, in fact, a section of his troop, acting generally on independent service, either scouting, or going in among the Boers and getting intelligence, trying to blow up bridges, and engaging looting parties—for we may be sure that the Boers will be scattering all over the country plundering.

"Of course I shall say, if he won't accept us on those terms, we shall do as we best can on our own account; but that as we don't require pay, and will provide ourselves with all necessities, we do not see that we should be any burden when we join him. I propose that we meet here again this afternoon, and I hope that by that time we shall all have got our mounts and saddlery. I hear that many of the loyal farmers north have driven their animals down here, and are only too glad to sell the horses at the usual prices. Mind, the clothes we have now won't do; we must get them of farmer fashion. Don't go together to any shop, but let each choose for himself; we don't want anything like uniformity of pattern. The stuff must be strong. We shall each want a couple of blankets; one of these, with a slit cut in the middle to slip over the head, will serve as a greatcoat. Now, let us be off! To save trouble, I should say that we had each better put a certain sum, say twenty pounds, to go into a fund for general expenditure—food and ammunition, and that sort of thing—into one of the banks, and we can draw upon that as we require it."

"I should say, Chris," Sankey said, "that we had better put all our money into the fund. Our people are all going to pay for our outfit, and you know they have agreed to give us a hundred pounds each to last us through the war. It is of no use carrying money about with us. I think we should agree to pay it all into the common fund, and that at the end of the business what remains is to be divided among those of us who go through it."

"I think that is a good plan, Sankey. Certainly we cannot all expect to come out alive, and that arrangement will save all trouble about money."

On going back into the town they learned that a large farmer had encamped two miles away, with a big drove of cattle and a couple of hundred horses, many of which were fine animals, and it was agreed at once that Sankey, Carmichael, and Peters should hire a buggy and drive over there and choose twenty-one good horses. Harris and Field undertook the purchase of the rifles, and Chris went to the office which Captain Brookfield, who had been an officer in the English army had taken. He had sent in his name, and was at once shown in.

"Well, Chris," he said cordially as he entered, "I am glad to see you. You have grown and widened out a good deal since last year. I suppose your father and mother have both come down with you?"

"My mother has come down, sir, but my father thought that he ought to remain behind to look after the mines."

"Have you come here to enlist?"

"Not exactly, sir, and yet I have to a certain extent;" and he told the officer of the little corps that had been formed among his companions at Johannesburg.

"A very good idea. Speaking Dutch, as you say they all do, they ought to do good service as scouts. But why have you come to me?"

This Chris explained.

The captain laughed. "I suppose the fact is, Chris, you think that you will be able to see and do more if you are altogether independent of other people's orders."

"Perhaps that is it, sir; but if there is any cavalry fighting we should much rather be under orders. Such a small corps would look ridiculous marching out by itself."

"Well, I don't see any reason why you should not carry out your plan. It would certainly be better that you should have some—what I may call—official sanction. All the men in our corps are paid five shillings a day, and as your troop would serve under different conditions, you can to a certain extent dictate your own terms. I will, if you like, accept you as an independent corps, attached to my command when with me, but at other times free to scout and to act as you choose; but mind, I cannot be responsible for any scrape that you get into. You might call yourselves the Johannesburg section of the Maritzburg Scouts, maintaining yourselves at your own expense, and drawing neither pay nor rations."

"Thank you very much, sir; that is just what we want."

"Then, if you will bring your companions here this evening, I will swear you in. I shall administer a different oath to you from that which the others take, and merely pledge you, when under my orders, to obey them, with permission to withdraw from the corps when you choose. And indeed, receiving no pay or assistance from government, you would naturally be free to do so."

Leaving Captain Brookfield, Chris went and bought his clothes, bandolier and belt, and saddlery, and then returned to the hotel and told his mother how he had got on, and that a horse and rifle would, he hoped, be obtained that afternoon.

"It seems to me a terribly dangerous business, Chris; but as your father agreed to it, of course I need say no more. I have a cheque for five hundred pounds for my expenses and yours."

"Father gave me a hundred before I started, mother; that will more than pay for my outfit. I don't know what we shall do for the horses, but there will certainly not be much over."

"Yes, I know, Chris; and he told me to hand you over another hundred when I went to the bank, which I shall do this afternoon."

CHAPTER III

AT THE FRONT

At five o'clock the lads from Johannesburg again met and reported the result of the afternoon's work. The nine Mauser rifles had been bought, and six thousand rounds of ammunition had been purchased. This appeared an excessive amount, but as there might be a difficulty in obtaining this ammunition, they bought up all that could be found in the town. Peters and his party had chosen the horses for the troop. The farmer was a well-known breeder of good stock, and was glad to dispose of some of them at a fair price in order to lessen their number. He had already had several enquiries from corps that were being raised, but the prices were higher than could be paid for ordinary troopers, though several had been bought by officers. The lot the lads had picked out had been put aside, and they had given the farmer fifty pounds earnest-money, to hold them till the next morning.

"They are as good a looking lot of horses as I ever saw," Peters said, "in fact, by a long way the best. I always heard that he was one of the largest breeders of good horses in South Africa. He had eight or ten extraordinarily good ones, but, of course, he wanted extra prices for these; but from the rest—and he has some three hundred of them—he let us choose any we liked at one price, and I think I can say that we shall be as well mounted a corps as any out here. Of course we avoided the showy-looking horses, and chose those specially suited to the country and likely to be fast. Mr. Duncan had several thoroughbreds from home, and there is no doubt that his stock has benefited by it; they are all of the country type, sturdy and compact, and yet somewhat finer in the limb than any I ever saw in the Transvaal. We were delighted with them."

All the lads were accustomed from childhood to horses, but those Chris had selected as the committee of inspection were admitted by their friends to be the best judges of horseflesh in the party, their fathers being wealthy men who always bought the finest horses money could obtain.

"We will go over in a body to-morrow," Chris said, "and pay for them and bring them back. We are lucky indeed to have got hold of such a good lot. Are they pretty even animals, Peters?"

"Yes, I really don't think there is anything to choose between them."

"Well then, the fair way will be, to make one-and-twenty tickets with as many numbers and fasten one to the mane of each horse, then we will put another twenty-one numbers into a hat and draw them; in that way everyone will be satisfied. Those of you who have not got their money from their people had better ask them for it this evening, so that we can settle up to-morrow for the horses and rifles and ammunition. The hundred pounds we have each been promised will well cover all our expenses up to the moment we start, and I should think leave us with something like twenty pounds apiece in pocket, but all we have and the other hundred for future expenses we had better put into the bank here to-morrow. We must arrange for four of us to sign cheques, each cheque to be signed by two, but we had better give them all our signatures so that in case what we can call the finance committee of four are all killed or taken prisoners there will be no bother about having fresh signatures to arrange about."

"Well," Sankey said, "we might as well settle that at once. I propose that Field, Carmichael, Capper, and, of course, you form the committee." As no amendment was offered, this was at once agreed to.

"What time did you say that we would come over to fetch the horses?"

"About ten o'clock."

"Well, will you all be at my hotel to-morrow at half-past eight with your money? Then we will all sign our names on paper the committee first; afterwards they shall go with me to the bank and pay all the money in, give them the list of signatures, and tell them that until further notice two of the four first names will sign the cheques, but that should circumstances prevent any two of them being able

to do so, others will sign instead. The account had better stand as the Johannesburg Scouts. When we have arranged that we will hire a couple of light waggons and start. Have you all got your saddlery?"

"Yes."

"Well, we will take it with us, and then we can ride the horses back. I will get the tickets made out."

As soon as the bank opened in the morning, Chris and his three companions presented themselves, and had an interview with the manager, who was somewhat surprised when twenty-one cheques and cash to the amount of three thousand five hundred pounds were handed in, each member having deducted the amount paid for saddlery and clothes. "We wish the account to stand in the name of the Johannesburg Scouts, and cheques will be signed by two of the four names standing first on this list; but as casualties may occur, you will please accept any of these signatures. Our little corps will form part of the Maritzburg Scouts, but in money matters we keep to ourselves, being all volunteers serving without pay."

The manager ran his eye over the cheques. All the names were well known to him as those of prominent men at Johannesburg, and the great majority had already accounts at his bank, as all had some time previously made arrangements for drawing money in case of necessity.

"I suppose, Mr. King," he said, "that as you and your friends represent the corps, you are all young men?"

"We are all boys," Chris answered with a smile, "but we are old enough to do men's work, and in the Transvaal the Boers are commandeering all boys two or three years younger than we are."

"Well, I congratulate you all both on your patriotism and your pluck,

Mr. King, and I have no doubt that you will do good service."

Receiving a cheque-book, they drew two hundred pounds for current expenses, and then going back to the hotel found the two Cape-carts and their companions ready, and the saddlery already stowed away. On arriving at the farm all were highly pleased with the horses their comrades had selected. They had on the way agreed that it would be a good plan to buy four others to act as pack-horses, and to furnish them with remounts in case any of their own were shot. These were to be sent into the town by two Kaffirs, whom they arranged to take into their service, for the farmer said at once, when they asked him that he could very well spare them, as he would be parting with a considerable number of his horses and cattle, and would not require so many hands as he had at present. The two men he chose for them were both active young natives; they made no objection to the exchange of masters, and, indeed, seemed pleased at the thought of going with them to fight the Boers, who were universally hated by the natives.

A cheque was given to the farmer for their purchase, then the horses were chosen by lot as agreed, and were at once saddled and mounted. They had all been partially broken in, and as the boys were good riders, they were after a little preliminary struggle soon at their ease, and, taking a couple of hours' sharp ride through the country, returned on good terms with their mounts. Two or three hours were spent in teaching the horses to stand steady as soon as the reins were thrown over their heads, this being a training to which all horses in the Cape are subjected. Then they rode back to the town and arranged with a farmer near it to picket their horses in one of his meadows, and for their feed while they remained there. The rest of the day was spent in laying in their supplies. The rifles and ammunition were paid for, pack saddles bought for the four spare horses, a brace of revolvers purchased for each member, haversacks ordered for the whole party, and bags to carry a supply of grain for each horse. In the evening they went out to the farm, and after discharging their rifles a few times fed their horses.

This they repeated in the morning, so as to familiarize them with the sound of firearms; then they saddled and mounted them, and after riding for half an hour drew up in line, as Captain Brookfield, who had sworn them in on the previous afternoon, was to inspect them at eight o'clock.

They had all put on their working clothes, bandoliers and belts, and high boots, and the captain on his arrival, after closely inspecting them, expressed his strongest approval of their appearance.

"I really congratulate you, Mr. King," he said, "on having command of twenty such serviceable-looking young fellows. As they all can ride, and, as you tell me, can all shoot, they ought to do really good service, and I should be well pleased if all my troop were composed of such good material. From the fact that you can all speak Dutch, and most of you Kaffir, you will have great opportunities of obtaining information, and can, in case of need, pass as young Boers. In fact, I may say that there is some danger of your being mistaken for them by our men. I should take you for them myself, except that you all look brighter and more wide-awake than Boers generally do; but an artilleryman could hardly be blamed if he plumped a shell among you at a distance of two or three thousand yards."

"We thought of that, sir;" Chris turned to his band, "Change caps!" All pulled field-service caps from their pockets, took off the soft felts, rolled them up and forced them into their valises, and put on the caps.

"That is excellent!" Captain Brookfield exclaimed. "That certainly alters your appearance altogether, and as far as your figures could be made out through a glass, it could be seen that you are an irregular body of some sort. And this can be still more plainly seen if, as I should advise you, you always ride in fours when you are approaching our lines; there will then be little chance of a mistake being made. Where did you pick up all those horses?"

"We bought them yesterday from a farmer named Duncan, who has brought them down from his place near Dundee."

"Ah! that accounts for it; he is one of the best-known horse-breeders in the colony. I had not heard that he had come down."

"He only arrived two days ago, sir. We were fortunate to hear of it, and some of us rode over early yesterday and were lucky enough to secure them."

"You were lucky. There are several mounted corps being formed here and at Durban, and horses will go up in price rapidly. Where is he staying?"

"About a mile and a half farther out, sir. If you want horses I should think that you had better go on at once, for he told me that he had sold sixty yesterday, but that very few of them were anything like as good horses as these."

"No. People are subscribing handsomely, but we cannot afford to mount our troopers on such horses as these. A good many gentlemen have found their own horses, and of course will be well mounted; but a good, sound, country horse is all we can afford for the others; they are excellent for ordinary work, though, of course, not so fast as yours, nor quite so big. Your horses have all a strain of English thoroughbred blood, and if you should at any time have to ride for it there would be little chance of the Boers overtaking you, though some of them are very well mounted, for the two things a Boer will spend money on, are his horse and his rifle. And when do you start?"

"We are going to-morrow morning. I went to the station-master yesterday evening and arranged for trucks for the horses to be attached to an early train to Dundee. We want to get up in time to see the first of it, and we should lose three days if we were to travel by road."

"That is the right spirit, and I wish I could go with you; but my troop will wear a sort of uniform, Norfolk jackets and riding-breeches, and the outfitters are so overwhelmed with orders that it will be another couple of days at least before they are ready. Then the men must have two or three days' drill before they start; I am still short of horses, so I will ride on and see Duncan. I want thirty-five more, and as yet, although subscriptions are coming in well, we are still a good deal short of our requirements. However, I dare say I shall be able to make some arrangement with Duncan, as I shall probably have enough to pay him in full by the end of the week. Altogether, I don't suppose I shall be ready to start for another ten days, and unless the Boers delay their advance I am afraid that I shall not get to Dundee."

"Do you not believe that we shall be able to hold the town?"

"I hardly think that there is a chance of it, and I am sure we made a mistake in sending a portion of the force there. I know the premier was most anxious that our troops should be posted as far north as possible, in order to save the loyal farmers from plunder. If the position were stronger and impossible to be turned, the case would be different; but it is not strong, and can be turned on each flank. If the Boers march to attack General Symons, who is in command there, he may possibly beat them off; but as they can advance towards Ladysmith either from the Free State on one side or the Transvaal on the other, he and his troops would be cut off, and the loyal farmers would be plundered just as much as if Symons had remained at Ladysmith. I fancy all the military men think that a grave mistake has been made, and that General White should not have exposed half his force to disaster. Besides, the position of Ladysmith is no more defensible than that of Dundee. The Tugela would be the natural line of defence, but even that could be turned by troops from the Transvaal going through Zululand, and the line of the river would be very difficult to defend by a force of less than twenty thousand men. However, we shall see how the thing works out—how enterprising the Boers are, and how warmly the Free Staters throw themselves into the work."

"You think that we shall have a hard time, Captain Brookfield?"

"Yes, I think that is certain, even if Cape Colony keeps quiet, which I am very much afraid it will not do. If it rises, it will take all the strength of England to put it down. Well, I wish you all luck. I can assure you I feel proud of my Johannesburg section, and I shall be glad when you join me."

He shook hands with the whole of the lads and then rode off.

"The train starts at eight o'clock," Chris said. "We had better get our good-byes over to-night, get some breakfast if we are able to do so at half-past five, and meet here at six. We ought to be at the station at least an hour before the train starts. We shall not only have to get the horses into the trucks, which is certain to be a troublesome business, as they are altogether new to it, but we shall have to see to our other stores and belongings. I have arranged that we shall travel with the horses, so that we can each stand at the heads of our own animals, and if they are very wild, we can blindfold them until they become accustomed to the situation. I have bought a couple of trusses of hay from Thomas, and he will send down two of his native boys to the station. I should advise you all to put some food into your haversacks, there is no saying how long we may be on the road."

"What sort of trucks are they, Chris?"

"They have high sides, but no roofs. Of course I would rather have had roofs, but the station-master could not provide any waggons with them. But he showed me these, and as the sides are quite high enough to prevent the horses getting out, they will do very well."

The saddles were taken off and piled together. There was no chance of rain, so they were left uncovered. The lads then walked back into the town. There was, of course, a sad parting that evening between Chris and his mother, but she bore up well. She knew that hundreds of other women were parting with husbands or sons, and she felt that, as the main cause of the war was to rescue the Uitlanders in the Transvaal from the oppression of the Boers, it behooved all the fugitives from that country to do their utmost.

In the morning the lads all arrived punctually at the rendezvous. The horses were fed to the accompaniment, as usual, of pistol shots. Then they were saddled up, the valises the lads had brought down with them were strapped on, and with their rifles slung behind them they rode to the station.

It was, as they had expected, a long and troublesome business to get the horses into the trucks, but at last this was managed. Nose-bags were put on, with a few double-handfuls of grain, then one trooper was left to each two horses, while the rest saw to their bundles of blankets, their stores of tea, sugar, and flour, preserved milk, cocoa, bacon, and tinned food. A couple of frying-pans, and a canteen of tin cups and plates, a knife, fork, and spoon each, and two kettles, completed their outfit. They had put their soft felt hats in their valises, and were all in their flat fatigue caps.

The train was a long one, but the carriages with it were empty, for while the trains from the north were closely packed, there were few persons indeed proceeding up country. The trucks, however,

were well filled, as great quantities of stores were being taken up, some to Ladysmith, and others for the force at Dundee. The horses soon became accustomed to the motion, and their masters took the opportunity of familiarizing themselves with them, by talking to them, patting them, and giving them pieces of bread and an occasional lump of sugar. The two Kaffirs had brought on the pack-horses four water-skins and a couple of buckets, and in the heat of the day the horses were allowed a good drink, while their masters, whose haversacks had been filled by their friends, enjoyed a hearty meal, washed down by tin mugs full of champagne.

They were in the highest spirits, although the meal was taken under difficult circumstances, for all were seated on the upper rails of the trucks, there being no room for them to sit down among the horses. The plates were all packed up, and fingers and teeth served for knives and forks, which was the less important since chickens were the staple of the meal; and these had been cut up before starting. Many were the jokes that passed along the line. All felt that it was the last experience they were likely to have of civilized food, and that it would be a long while before champagne or any other wine would fall to their lot. The Kaffirs, who had each charge of two spare horses, enjoyed themselves no less, for they had a fair share of the provisions of their masters, and were in a high state of contentment with their prospects.

There was a halt of an hour at Ladysmith. Many of the officers and soldiers gathered at the station, their work for the day finished, and the arrival of the train being always an event of some importance in the little town. They were amused and interested at the party of young fellows who alighted to stretch their legs and get a change of position.

"Which is your leader?" a major asked Field.

"The one talking to an officer. His name is Chris King."

"Is he chosen because he is the oldest of you?"

"No, that has nothing to do with it. We are all within a year of the same age. We have all been chums and friends, and have hunted and shot together, and he is the one we elected as our leader, just as you would choose the captain of a cricket club. We all come from Johannesburg, find our own horses, arms, and outfits, and ask nothing whatever from the government; and as we speak Dutch, and all know more or less Kaffir, we fancy we can make a good deal better scouts than your cavalry, who can't ask a question of a Boer or get information from a native."

The major laughed. He saw that the lad a little resented the joking tone in which he had asked the question.

"I have no doubt that you are right," he said, "and I am quite sure I should like half a dozen of you as subalterns. When did you come from Johannesburg?"

"We left there about a week ago, and as we were only at Maritzburg three days, we have not lost any time."

"Indeed, I think that is a record performance. Of course you are all looking forward to your first skirmish; I can assure you we are."

"We had our first on the way down here, when we were between Newcastle and the frontier. Four or five of us went to a farmhouse to try and get some food and milk for the women and children. It was a Boer's place, and the fellow came out with a rifle and warned us off. We went forward, and he took a shot at King when he was quite close to him, but fortunately the bullet only went through his hat. Chris knocked him down and gave him a tremendous thrashing with his own whip. Then we took some provisions and paid for them, and searching the house, found twelve Mauser rifles and a lot of ammunition. We took these off without paying for them. The Boer had made off while we were searching the house, and he and some twenty others pursued us, not dreaming that we were now armed. However, we gave them a volley, and emptied three saddles and killed three or four horses, and they moved off without trying to make our further acquaintance."

"Well done, lads!" the officer said warmly, "that was an excellent beginning, and I have no doubt that you will follow it up well."

Similar conversations were going on all along the platform, and when at last the lads again took their places in the trucks, a hearty cheer was given them. The sun was setting when they arrived at Dundee. It was a larger place than Ladysmith, as there were some coal-mines in the neighbourhood, and a considerable number of men were employed in them. Like Ladysmith it is situated on a plain dominated by hills. The camp was some little distance out of the town. An officer was at the station with a party of men to receive the stores brought up by the train. Chris at once went up to him and saluted.

"We have just arrived, sir; we are a section of the Maritzburg Scouts, acting independently. As we are all from Johannesburg, and find our own horses, equipment, and food, provide our own rations, and, of course, serve without pay, we propose to scout on our own account, and as we all speak Dutch well, I think that we may be useful in obtaining information. We shall, of course, search the country in whatever direction may be considered most useful."

"I have no doubt that you will be of good service, sir," the officer said.

"I suppose we can camp anywhere we like."

"I should think so. As you do not draw rations, it can matter little where you post yourselves; but I don't think that you will be able to get tents to-night."

"We shall not want them, sir; we have each a large waterproof sheet, and intend to use them as tentes d'abri. I suppose I had better report myself at the headquarters of the general?"

"Yes, that would be the proper thing. The camp is a mile and a half away; if you follow the Glencoe railway, you cannot miss it."

As soon as the horses were detrained and the baggage packed, the little party mounted and left the station, and choosing a piece of unoccupied ground a few hundred yards away, proceeded to unsaddle and picket the horses, while Chris rode away to the camp accompanied by one of the natives to hold his horse there. He had no difficulty in finding it, and dismounting, walked to the group of head-quarter tents. His appearance excited a good deal of amusement and some chaff from the soldiers he passed. He looked, indeed, like a young Dutch farmer in his rough clothes, and his rifle, and a bandolier of cartridges. Seeing a young officer close to a tent, he asked him which was that of the adjutant-general.

"He is there talking to the general at the door of his tent. Do you wish to speak to him?"

"I should be glad to do so," Chris replied. The officer walked across and informed the colonel that Chris wanted to speak to him.

"Bring him across, Mr. Williams," the general himself said. "He is evidently a young farmer, and possibly brings in some news of the enemy's movements."

The lieutenant returned to Chris and led him up to the general.

"You have some news that you wish to give us, sir?" Sir Penn Symons said.

"No, general; but I hope to be able to do so to-morrow."

He then stated his position and the nature of his command.

"We are all very well mounted, sir," he went on, "and as we all speak Dutch, hope to be useful. At any rate, we shall be no trouble to you, as we draw neither rations nor pay. We think we can pass anywhere as Boers; that is why we have not adopted any uniform."

"I have no doubt you will be of service," the general said, "though I hardly think that you will pass as Boers with those caps."

"We have all wide-brimmed hats to use while we are scouting, general; but we carry these too, so that on our return towards your lines we can be recognized even at a distance as not being Boers, and so avoid being fired at."

"Yes, that is a very necessary precaution. I will have officers commanding cavalry and artillery detachments warned, that a section of Maritzburg volunteers are dressed as farmers, but may be known in the distance by having caps similar to the ordinary infantry field-service caps."

"Well, sir, I shall be glad if you will to-morrow ride to the south, following the river, and endeavour to find out whether the Boers have any considerable force in that direction, either on this side of the river or the other, I may tell you that five of the Natal police were captured on the evening of the 13th at De Jagers Drift. The Boers have been in possession of Newcastle for the past three days, and they are certainly crossing the passes from the Free State. You must be very careful, for they have scouting parties across the river almost as far as the Tugela. However, we hardly expect any serious struggle for another week or ten days; for all the accounts are to the effect that the Boers are still very deficient in transport, and that for the past week those at Laing's Nek, and the other passes, have been very much straitened for provisions. It would be as well for you, while you are at Dundee, to come over once a day to report your doings, and to receive orders as to the point where we most need information. Have you gone into lodgings in the town?"

"No, sir. We have waterproof sheets that form tentes d'abri, and we prefer being with our horses, which were only bought a few days ago; so, as we shall not have much opportunity of sleeping otherwise than in the open for some time, we thought it as well to begin at once, especially as the weather looks threatening, and the horses, being unaccustomed to be picketed, might pull up the pegs and get loose were there a heavy rain."

"You seem to be well fitted for the work, and to set about it in the right spirit."

"We have all been accustomed to hunting expeditions, sir, when we have often been out for some days, so that we understand how to shift for ourselves, though we are new to campaigning."

"What rifles have you? that does not look like a Lee-Metford."

"No, general, it is a Mauser. We captured twelve of them, at a Boer's farmhouse three or four miles this side of Newcastle six days ago. He fired at us, and though his bullet only went through my hat, we thought ourselves justified in searching his house."

"Certainly you were. We heard that there had been a skirmish on the road, and learned the particulars from one of those who took part in it, and who stayed here for two or three days before going down the country. He said that four or five young gentlemen, who were coming down with a party of women and children from Volksrust, had gone to a farmhouse to try and get food, milk, and bread for the females. The Boer farmer insulted them, and shot at one of them when but two or three yards away; he had been tremendously thrashed by the young fellow, and they returned laden with a good supply of milk and bread, and twelve rifles and a lot of ammunition that they had found at the farm. And with these they and some of the men had beaten off an attack of a score of Boers without any loss to themselves."

"Yes, general, that was our party; we had sent forward for some waggons, and got into Dundee two hours after the skirmish; and as there was a train just going we went on at once, and reached Maritzburg the next morning, where we were joined by some of our party who had come down the day before. As we had made all our plans before leaving Johannesburg, we were able to start this morning, which was the third after our arrival there."

"You were prompt indeed," the general said with a smile, "and must have needed money as well as brains."

"We had all obtained leave of our families, general, and were well provided with funds to carry us through the campaign if it lasts for a year. We wanted to be in time for the first fight."

"I think yours was the first fight, except that a few shots were exchanged between our scouts and the Boers on the morning after the ultimatum expired. Now, sir, if you should at any time be in want of necessaries I shall be glad to supply you; but I cannot furnish you with ammunition, as the Mausers carry a smaller bullet than our rifles."

"Thank you, general, but we have enough to last us for a considerable time, having brought up six thousand rounds."

"A good provision indeed," the general laughed; "enough to last you through half a dozen pitched battles. I shall be in the town at six o'clock to-morrow morning, and shall be pleased to inspect your little corps before you start."

"I thank you, general; we shall all be very proud to be inspected by you."

Then saluting he returned to his horse and rode back to Dundee. He was pleased to see that the eleven little tents had been erected strictly in line, that the horses were all standing quietly at the picket-rope, and that two of the troop were placed as sentries. A large fire was blazing in front of the tents, the two natives were squatting by it, the kettles were swung over it, and a joint of meat was roasting there. Two or three of the lads were standing talking together; the rest had gone into the town. Cairns came up to him as he dismounted.

"Have you heard the news, Chris?"

"No, I have not heard any particular news."

"I was at the station a quarter of an hour ago, and a telegram had just been received that the Boers were, when it was sent off, entering Elandslaagte station, and were in the act of capturing the passenger train that was standing there. The message stopped abruptly, as no doubt the Boers entered the room where the clerk was at work at the needles."

"By Jove we are in luck!" Chris said. "Of course that was the train that had to leave three hours after us. If we had stopped for that, the horses, rifles, and kit would all have gone, and we should now be prisoners. It is serious news, though, for it is evident that not only are they marching against us in front, and on both flanks, but have cut our communications with Ladysmith. There can be no doubt that, as everyone said there, it was a mistake to send General Symons forward here, as it was almost certain that with four regiments, three batteries of artillery, a regiment of cavalry, and a few hundred of the Natal police and volunteers, he could never maintain himself here. Why, we heard at Ladysmith that a column had gone out the day before towards Besters station, as the news had come in that they were even then in the neighbourhood. It was a false alarm, but it was enough to show that the Boers were likely to be coming down and cutting the railway in our rear. General Symons told me that he did not expect any general advance of the enemy just yet, because he heard that their transport was incomplete, and that they were very short of provisions. But I don't think the want of transport would prevent their advancing. We know well enough that the Boers think nothing of going out for three or four days without any prospect of getting any more provisions than they carry about them, unless they have the luck to bring down an antelope. And as Utrecht and Vryheid and Newcastle are all within a few miles of us, and the Free Staters have already come down through some of the passes of the Drakensberg, they must be within an easy ride of us; and if they are in force enough to drive us out of this place, they must know they would find themselves in clover, for we heard at Ladysmith that there were provisions and stores for two months collected here."

CHAPTER IV

DUNDEE

After picketing his horse, Chris went into the town. He found the streets full of excited people, for the news that the railway had been cut was serious indeed, and the scene reminded Chris of that which he had witnessed in the streets of Johannesburg but eight days before. Only eight days! and yet it seemed to him as if weeks had passed since then. So much had been done, so great had been the changes. As at Johannesburg, a considerable portion of the population had left, seeing that, although the troops might for a time defend the town, the Boers were certain to cut the line of railway. Work at the coal-mines had been pushed on feverishly of late, for strangely enough there was no store of coals either in Dundee itself or at any of the stations down to Durban, and the authorities had only woken up a few days before to the fact that coal would be required in large quantities for the transports on the arrival of the troops. But now all this was to come to a stop. The hands would be thrown out of employment, and the town would become stagnant until it was captured by the Boers, or until an army arrived of sufficient strength to clear Natal of its invaders. That evening many who possessed vehicles started by road for Ladysmith, feeling that in another twenty-four hours it might be too late.

At seven o'clock, as had been arranged when they arrived, all the members of the band met at the bivouac for supper. There was a general feeling of excitement among them. They had known that hostilities must soon begin, but to find that the line had already been cut, and that the enemy were closing in in all directions, came almost as a surprise. This, however, in no way prevented them from enjoying their meal. After it was over they held, at Chris's suggestion, a sort of council. He had already told them what the general had said to him, and that they were to be inspected in the morning. As their saddlery was all new, there was nothing to be done in the way of burnishing buckles and rubbing up leather. As Chris remarked, all that would be necessary was an hour's work in the morning grooming their horses.

"Now," he said, "that the work is going to begin, we must draw up a few rules, for, volunteers though we are, we must have some regulations. In the first place, I find that the troops all parade in order of battle before daybreak, so as to be able to repel a sudden attack or move in any direction that may be required. If it is necessary for them, it is still more necessary for us, and I think that it should be a standing rule that we are all ready to mount at daybreak. Sentries must be posted at night, however safe we may feel. I think there should be two, relieved every two hours. There will be no hardship in that, as each would only go on duty every other night. In the next place, I think there should be what they call an officer of the day, who would generally be in charge of the arrangements, see that the Kaffirs attended to their horses properly, and so on. You see, we shall not be always acting together, but might sometimes be broken into four troops, in which case one in each five should command. I think the same lot should always keep together. What do you think? Would it be better that in each group of five one should be in charge each day, or that each group should choose one to act as non-commissioned officer?"

There was no reply.

"What do you think yourself, Chris?" Sankey asked after a pause.

"You are as well able to judge as I am," he replied. "I think that it would perhaps be the best way to write down the twenty names and put them in a hat, and draw them one by one. The first five should be number one squad. I don't know whether that is the right word, but anyhow it will do for them. The next five number two, and so on. Then each five can vote whether they would prefer alternate commands, or to choose one of their number as permanent non-commissioned officer. If they prefer this, they must then ballot as to which among them shall be leader. If you can think of any way that you would like better, by all means say so."

All agreed that the plan that he proposed should be adopted. Four groups were first chosen. Before they proceeded to the next step, Peters said:

"Of course I am quite game to carry it out as you suggest, Chris, but don't you think it would be a good plan to let the final decision stand for a week or two, each taking the leadership of his group in rotation? At the end of that time we should be better able to make a choice than we can be now."

"I think that is a very good idea, Peters. What do you all say? Will you each take your turn alphabetically for the present, and at the end of fifteen days, when each of you have led three times, you can decide whether each squad shall choose a permanent leader or go on as you have begun."

All at once agreed to the proposal. They felt, good friends as they were, that it would be very difficult to decide now.

"Very well, then, it shall be so," Chris said. "To-morrow we shall certainly do some scouting, but in a day or two you may be shut up here; and until we get away there will be no scouting to be done. We must have some signals. Suppose we are scattered over two or three miles, we may want to assemble, and must be able to signal. I thought of it before we started from home, and put down in my pocket-book the sort of thing that I fancied would be wanted. I will read it out to you."

He stirred the fire into a blaze and then read:

"One shot followed by another and a third, with ten seconds between them, will mean 'Enemy seen on the right'; with twenty seconds between, 'Enemy seen on the left'; then, after a pause, two shots in quick succession will mean 'Enemy in strength'; three shots will be 'Small party only'; one shot, followed at an interval of ten seconds by two in succession, will mean 'Retire to the point agreed on before we separated'; followed by three shots in quick succession, will be 'Close in to the centre'. We can think of others afterwards, but I think that will do to begin with. I know that you have all pocketbooks, so take down these signals at once."

"We ought to know where you will be," Field said, "so that we could rally round you ready for the next order."

"That might be so; therefore we had better fix on three shots in quick succession, followed in ten seconds by a fourth. The sound will be sufficient to let you know pretty well where I am, and you will on hearing it, join me at once. Are there any other suggestions?"

There was silence and then the books were closed.

"I cannot too strongly impress upon you all," Chris said, after they had chatted for some time, "the necessity for being extremely cautious. We know how slim the Boers are, and how accustomed they are to stalk game; and we shall have to be as watchful as deer, more so, in fact, since we have not their power of smell. When we break up into four parties, each party must scatter, keeping three or four hundred yards apart. On arriving at any swell or the crest of a hill, a halt must be made, and every foot of the country searched by your field glasses, no matter how long it takes. You must assure yourself that there are no moving objects in sight. When you get near such a point you must dismount, and, leaving your horse, crawl forward until you reach a point from where you have a good view, and on no account stand up. While you are making your observations any Boers who might be lying in sight would be certain to notice a figure against the skyline, and we know that many of them are provided with glasses as good as our own. We must be as careful as if we were out after game instead of men. You all know these things as well as I do, but I want to impress them upon you. You see, they have captured five of the Natal police, who are a very sharp set of fellows. However, a few days' scouting will show us far better what is required than any amount of thinking beforehand. There is one thing that I want to say to you. You elected me for your leader, but it is quite probable that when we have worked together for a bit some of you may prove much better qualified for the post than I am. What I want to say now is, if this is the case, I shall feel in no way aggrieved, and shall serve just as cheerfully under his orders as I hope you will under mine so long as I command you."

There was a general chorus of "No fear of that, Chris. We all know you well enough to be sure that we have made a good choice. We knew it before we left Johannesburg, but your pluck in walking up to that Boer with his loaded rifle clenched the matter."

"Well, we shall see," Chris said. "I shall do my best, but, as I said, the moment you want a change I shall be ready to resign; and now I think that we may as well turn in. It is nine o'clock, and we must be up at daybreak. Squads number one and two will each furnish a man for the first watch, taking the first on the list alphabetically. At eleven they will be relieved by two from squads three and four; then one and two furnish the next pair, and so on. Four watches will take us on till daybreak. The two of each squad who will be on duty to-night turn in to the same tent together, then the others will not be disturbed."

The blankets were spread in the little shelter tents, and all except the two men on duty were soon asleep. Chris had a tent to himself, there being an odd number, and an extra waterproof sheet had been carried for this purpose. Before leaving Maritzburg twenty-two poles, a little longer than cricket stumps, had been made under Chris's direction. They were shod with iron, so that they could be driven into hard ground. At the top was a sort of crutch, with a notch cut in it deep enough to hold another of the same size. Twenty-two other sticks of the same length were to form the ridgepoles. Half these were provided with a long brass socket, into which its fellow fitted. The whole, when they were accompanied by the spare horses, would be packed with their stores and spare blankets. At other times each rider would carry two of the poles strapped to his valise behind him.

Chris was the first to stir in the morning. There was but the slightest gleam of daylight in the sky, but he at once blew a whistle that he had bought that evening in the town, and heads appeared almost immediately at the entrances of the other tents, and in half a minute all were out, some alert and ready for business, others yawning and stretching themselves, according to their dispositions.

"First of all, let's put on the nose-bags, and let the horses have a meal," Chris said; "then set to work to groom them. Remember, there must not be a speck of yesterday's dust left anywhere."

All were soon hard at work. The Kaffirs stirred up the embers of the fire, which they had replenished two or three times during the night, hung the kettles again over it, and cut up slices of ham ready to fry. By half-past five Chris, after inspecting all the horses closely, declared that nothing more could be done to them. Then they were saddled, the valises, with a day's provisions and a spare blanket, being strapped on. Then all had a wash, and made themselves, as far as possible, tidy. By this time breakfast was ready, and they had just finished their meal when a party of horsemen were seen in the distance. Rifles were slung over their shoulders, and bandoliers and belts full of cartridges strapped on, and they donned their forage-caps after coiling up the picket-ropes and halters and fastening them with their valises to the saddles. Then they mounted and formed up in line just as the general, with two of his staff, rode up. After saying a few words to Chris, the general examined the horses and their riders closely.

"Very good and serviceable," he said, "and a really splendid set of horses. Of course, gentlemen, you would look better if you were in uniform, but for your purpose the clothes you have on are far more useful. Let me see you in your hats; I can then better judge how you would pass as Boers."

The lads all slipped their forage-caps in their pockets, and put on their felt hats, which were of different shapes and colours. As they had agreed beforehand they at once dropped the upright position in which they had been sitting, and assumed the careless, slouching attitude of the Boers.

"Very good indeed," the general said with a laugh. "As far as appearances go, you would pass anywhere. The only criticism I can make is that your boots look too new, but that is a fault that will soon be mended. A few days' knocking about, especially as I fancy we are going to have bad weather, will take the shine out of them, and, once off, take good care not to put it on again. A Boer with clean boots would be an anomaly indeed. Now, I will detain you no longer."

The only manoeuvre the boys had to learn was the simple one of forming fours. This they had practised on foot, and performed the manoeuvre with fair accuracy. Then Chris gave the word, and, after saluting the general, led the way off at a trot.

"They are a fine set of young fellows," the general said to the two officers with him. "They are all sons of rich men, and have equipped themselves entirely at their own expense. They are admirably mounted, and provided they are not caught in an ambush, are not likely to see the inside of a Boer prison. It says a good deal for their zeal that they are ready to disguise themselves as Boer farmers instead of going in for smart uniforms. However, they are right; for, speaking Dutch, as I hear they all do, they should be able singly to mingle with the Boers and gather valuable information."

As soon as they were fairly south of the town, Chris said:

"Now our work begins. Number one squad will make its way towards the river, and follow its course, keeping always at a distance from it, so that while they themselves would escape notice, they can ascertain whether any bodies of the enemy are this side of it, or within sight beyond the other bank. Number four will take the right flank, and keep a sharp look-out in that direction. Squads two and three will, under my command, scout between the flanking parties, and examine the farmhouses and the country generally. The whole will, as I said last night, maintain a distance of about three hundred yards apart, and each man will as far as possible keep those next to him on either hand in sight."

The two flanking companies starting off, those under Chris separating as they rode off until they were as far apart as he had ordered, and then moved forward. When on level ground they went fast, but broke into a walk whenever they came to the foot of rising ground, and when near the top halted, dismounted, and crawled forward. Each man carried a Union Jack about the size of a handkerchief, elastic rings being sewn to two of the corners. When necessary these flags could be slipped over the rifles, and a signal could be passed from one to another along the whole line—to halt by waving the flag, to advance by holding the rifles steadily erect. Other signals were to be invented in the future. Chris took his place in the centre of the line, in readiness to ride to either flank from which a signal might be given.

For five or six miles no signs of the enemy could be perceived. Most of the fields were entirely deserted, but round a few of the scattered farmhouses animals could be seen grazing, and these Chris set down as belonging to Dutch farmers who had no fear of interference by the Boers, and were prepared to join them as soon as they advanced. Many of these, indeed, during the past fortnight had trekked north, and were already in the ranks of the enemy. Presently Chris, who was constantly using his glasses, saw the flutter of a flag on a hill away to the left, and a minute later the signal to halt passed along the line. It had been agreed that signalling by shot should not be attempted unless the enemy seen were so far distant that they would not be likely to hear.

"What do you see, Brown?" Chris said as he reached the lad who had first signalled.

"There are a good many men and animals round a farmhouse about two miles away. The house lies under the shoulder of a hill to the left, I suppose that that is why the others did not see it."

Dismounting, Chris crawled forward with the other until he could obtain a view across the country. As Brown had said, the farmhouse stood at the foot of the line of hills they were crossing, and was fully a mile nearer to those on the right flank than to the point from which he was looking at it, but hidden from their view. Bringing his glass to bear upon it, he could distinctly make out that some forty or fifty men were moving about, and that a large quantity of cattle were collected near the house.

"It is certainly a raiding party," he said to his companion. "They are too strong for us to attack openly, at least if they are all Boers. It would not do to lose half our number in our first fight. Still, we may be able to frighten them off, and save the farmer, who is certainly a loyalist, and cattle. You gallop along the line as far as it extends and order all to come over to the right. I shall go on at once and get a view of the ground close by. By the time they have all assembled we can see what had best be done."

Going back to their horses they started in opposite directions. In a few minutes Chris reached a point which he believed to be nearly behind the farmhouse, picking up some of the scouts by the way.

"I expect I shall be back in about a quarter of a hour," he said as he dismounted. "You, Peters and Field, may as well come with me, I may want to send back orders."

They walked forward fast until so far down the hill that they could obtain a view of the farmhouse. The moment they did so they lay down, and made their way across some broken ground until they were within a quarter of a mile of it; then seated among some rocks they had a look through their glasses, and could see everything that was passing as clearly as if they had been standing in the farmyard. It was evident the Boers had only arrived there a short time before Brown noticed them. Parties of two or three were still driving in cattle, others were going in and out of the house, some returning with such articles as they fancied and putting them down by their horses in readiness to carry them off. Two men and some women and children were standing together in a group; these were beyond doubt the owners of the farmhouse.

"How many Boers do you make out? I have counted thirty-eight." Peters had made out forty, and Field forty-three, the difference being accounted for by those going in and out of the house and sheds.

"Well, we will say forty-five, and then we shan't be far wrong. We certainly can't attack that number openly, but we may drive them off empty-handed if we take them by surprise." He examined the ground for another minute or two, and then said: "I think we might make our way down among these rocks to within three hundred yards of the house. I will send six more down to you. With the others I will go down farther to the left, and work along in that little donga running into the flat a hundred yards to the east of the house. You keep a sharp look-out in that direction, and you will be able to see us, while we shall be hidden from the Boers. We shall halt about three hundred yards beyond the house. As soon as we are ready I will wave a flag, then you and your party will open fire. Be sure you hide yourselves well, so that they may not know how many of you there are; they are certain, at the first alarm, to run to their horses and ride off. Directly they do so we will open fire on them, and finding themselves taken in the flank they are likely to bolt without hesitation. Don't throw away a shot if you can help it, but empty your magazines as fast as you can be sure of your aim. Between us we ought to account for a good many of them."

"I understand, Chris; we will wait here till the others join us, and then, as you say, we will work down as far as we can find cover."

Chris at once returned to the main party, who had by this time all assembled. "We can bring our horses down a good bit farther without being seen," he said. "There is a dip farther on with some rough brushwood. We had better fasten them there; they have learned to stand pretty fairly, but they might not do so if they heard heavy firing."

Leading their own horses and those of Field and Peters they walked down to the spot Chris had chosen, and there threw the reins over the horses' heads as usual, unfastened the head ropes, and tied them to the bushes. Chris had already explained the situation to the troop, and had told off six of them to go down to join Peters. He now advanced cautiously with these till he could point out to them exactly the spot where the two scouts were lying. Then he returned to the others, and they walked along fast until they came upon the break in the hill, which lower down developed into a depression, and was during the rains a water-course. Down this they made their way. On reaching the bottom they found it was some twelve feet below the level of the surrounding ground.

A couple of hundred yards further they could tell by the sound of shouting, the bellowing of cattle, and other noises, that they were abreast of the farmhouse, and going another three hundred yards they halted. Chris went up the bank until he could obtain a view, and saw that he was just at the spot he had fixed on. Making signs to the others, they took their places as he had directed, some ten yards apart. Then he raised his rifle after slipping the little flag upon it. A moment later came the crack of a rifle, followed by other shots in quick succession. Chris, with his eyes just above the level

of the ground, could see all that was passing round the farmhouse. With shouts of alarm the Boers at once rushed towards their horses, several dropping before they reached them. As they rode out from the yard the magazine rifles kept up a constant rattle, sounding as if a strong company of troops were at work. Chris waited until they were nearly abreast of his party, and then fired.

His companions followed his example, and in a moment a fire as rapid and effective as that still kept up from the hill was maintained. This completed the stampede of the enemy. They were soon half a mile away, but even at that distance the Mauser bullets continued to whistle over and among them, and they continued their flight until lost in the distance. Chris's whistle gave the signal for ceasing fire, and the two parties sprang to their feet, gave three hearty cheers, and then ran towards the farmhouse. In the yard lay five Boers and seven or eight horses; the riders had jumped up behind companions, for as they passed, Chris had seen that several of the animals were carrying double. The little group, so lately prisoners, advanced as they came up, almost bewildered at the sudden transformation that had taken place, their surprise being increased on seeing that they had apparently been rescued by another party of Boers, and still more when on their reaching them they found that these were all mere lads.

"We are a party of Maritzburg Scouts," Chris said, with a smile at their astonished faces; "though, as you see, we are got up as Boers so as to be able to get close to them without exciting suspicion. We were fortunate in just arriving in time."

"We thank you indeed, sir," the settler said, "for you have saved us the loss of all our property, and, for aught I know, from being carried off as prisoners. We were intending to trek down to Ladysmith today, and had just driven in our herds when the Boers arrived. If they had been content with stealing them, they would have been away before you arrived; but they stopped to plunder everything they could carry off, and, as I should say, from noises that we heard in the house, to smash up all the furniture they could not carry off. We are indeed grateful to you."

"We are very glad to have had the chance of giving the plunderers a lesson," Chris said. "It will make them a little cautious in future. But I think that you are wise to go at once, for there are certainly parties between this and Elandslaagte, where they have cut the line; so I should advise you to travel west for a bit before you strike down to Ladysmith. We have not heard of any of them being beyond the line of railway yet. Now we have work to do. Number one and two squads will at once go up and fetch down the horses, number three and four will examine the Boers who have fallen here and out on the plain and will bring in any who may be only wounded."

He went out with this party; they found that eight more had fallen. Three of these lay at a short distance from the farmhouse, and had evidently fallen under the fire of the party on the hill; the others had been hit by those in the ambushade. Altogether ten horses had been killed. Five of the Boers were still alive.

"Have you a spare cart?" Chris asked the farmer.

"Yes, I can spare one. Fortunately I have a small one besides two large waggons. May I ask what you want it for?"

"I want it to carry these wounded men to within reach of their friends.

Which is the nearest drift?"

"Vant's Drift, and it is there, no doubt, that the party crossed. It is a little more than two miles away."

"Then we will place the wounded in the cart, and you might send one of your Kaffirs with it to the drift and stick up a pole with a sheet on it; they are sure to have halted on the other side, and will guess that there are wounded in it. As soon as the Kaffir comes within two or three hundred yards of the river he can take the horses out and return. I dare say he will be back again before you are off."

The cart was driven along the line that the Boers had taken, the wounded being carefully lifted and placed in it as it reached them. Two more were found dead and three wounded some distance beyond the spot where the searchers had turned, having fallen nearly a mile from the farm; the lads

who accompanied the cart then returned. Long before they reached the house the horses had been brought down. The settler and his Kaffirs were hard at work loading the stores into two ox-waggons. The lads all lent their assistance, and in less than an hour the settlers started for Ladysmith, the women and children in the wagon, and the men on horseback driving their herds with the aid of the Kaffirs. After a hearty adieu, Chris and his party rode on together for some little distance before again scattering widely to recommence their work of scouting. Hitherto they had been too busy for conversation, but now they were able to give words to the satisfaction they all felt at their success.

"It has been splendid!" Sankey said enthusiastically. "We have defeated a force twice as strong as ourselves, have killed or badly wounded eighteen of them, and you may be sure that of those that got away several must have been hit. Not one of us has a scratch."

"Splendid!" another exclaimed. "It could not have been better managed. I think we ought to give three cheers for Chris." Three rousing cheers were given. "After this, Chris," Carmichael said, "I don't think you need talk any more about resigning the command. General Symons himself could not have done better."

"I think, at any rate, we have begun to wipe off old scores," Chris said. "We have paid for a few of the insults the ladies had to submit to as we came along, and I am heartily glad that we were in time to do it. We have baulked them of the haul they expected to make, and saved something like a thousand head of cattle for the colony, to say nothing of preventing these people from being absolutely ruined. It is only a pity that we had not our horses with us. If we had, not many of the Boers would have recrossed the river. But we could not have taken them with us without being detected before we got into position, and in that case we might have had a hard fight, and matters would probably have turned out altogether differently."

There was a general expression of assent, for all felt that in an equal fight the Boers, being twice their own numbers, would have been more than a match for them. It was evening when they returned to Dundee, having come across no more Boers during the day's work. Directly they arrived at the little camp where they had left the tents standing in charge of their two Kaffirs, Chris wrote a short report of their doings, stating briefly that they had come upon a party of forty-five Boers in the act of driving off the cattle and sacking the house of Mr. Fraser, a loyal settler. Having dismounted and divided into two parties, they had attacked the Boers and driven them off, with the loss of ten killed and eight seriously wounded left on the field. Many of their horses had been killed. The wounded Boers had been sent in a cart to Vant's Drift, and the farmer and his herds had been escorted as far as the line of railway, which they had crossed and were making for Ladysmith. There had been no casualties among his party.

Field rode over with this report and delivered it at headquarters, remaining to ask whether there were any orders for the next day. When he returned he brought a line from the general. It contained only the words, "I congratulate you most heartily. The affair must have been managed excellently, and does you all the greatest credit. Continue scouting on the same line to-morrow."

The lads were all highly delighted when Chris read this aloud, and then sat down to a well-earned meal, which was the more enjoyed as it had been voted that Field, as one of the finance committee, should go into the town and buy half a dozen of champagne in honour of their first victory. In the course of the evening one of the general's staff rode into camp on his way to town, having been requested by him to obtain full particulars of the fight at Eraser's farm. He took his seat by the fire with them, and Chris gave him a full account of their proceedings.

"Upon my word, Mr. King," he said, "you managed the matter admirably; no cavalry leader could have done it better."

"There is no particular credit about the management," Chris said; "we acted just as we should have done had we been stalking a herd of deer instead of a party of Boers. One always manages, if possible, to put a party on the line by which they are likely to take flight, before crawling up within shot. If we could have taken our horses down with us before we opened fire we should have done so,

and being so well mounted, I think few of them would have got away; but we could not manage it without risking being seen, and in that case the Boers, on making out what our strength was, would certainly have shown fight; and even if we had beaten them, which I don't suppose we should have done, we should have suffered heavily."

"You were quite right not to risk it," the officer said; "we know by old experience that the Boers are formidable antagonists when behind shelter, and, accustomed as they are to shooting on horseback, I dare say they will do well when not opposed by regular cavalry, who, I am convinced, would ride through and through them. I am quite sure that in the open they will not be able to make any stand whatever against infantry, which is the more important, as in so hilly a country as Natal our cavalry would seldom be able to act with advantage."

In the course of conversation he told them that there was no news of any large body of the Boers being near. Joubert's force had not moved out of Newcastle, and nothing had been heard of the Free Staters or of the Utrecht force under Lucas Meyer. "We have sentries on all the lower hills round here and Glencoe, and there is no fear of our being surprised. The sooner they come the better, for we are all longing to get at them; and I can tell you we felt quite jealous when we heard of your spirited affair to-day. I can assure you that we shall have a greater respect for the volunteers than we had before, and if all do as well as you have done to-day they will be a most valuable addition to our force."

After their visitor had left, they sat chatting round a fire till ten o'clock, and then turned in.

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST BATTLE

All in the little camp, save the two sentries, slept soundly until, at two in the morning, they awoke with a sudden start. A deep boom and a strange rushing sound was in their ears. With exclamations of surprise they all scrambled out of their tents.

"What is that?" Chris asked the sentry.

"It is a big gun on the top of that high hill they call Talana. We saw the flash of light, and directly after heard the report, and a rushing sound. I suppose it was a shot overhead; if it had been a shell we should have heard it burst and seen the flash. It must have been fired at the camp."

The horses, startled by the report, were plunging and kicking, and the lads at once ran to their heads and patted and soothed them. Not until they were quiet did they gather again.

"What time is it?" Chris asked.

"The clock on the church struck two a few minutes ago," Brown, who was on sentry, said. As he spoke another gun boomed from Talana, or as it was generally called in the town, Smith's Hill, from a farm owned by a settler of that name at its foot. It was about a mile and a half east of the town, and therefore some three miles from the camp.

"It must be a very heavy gun by its sound—as big as the largest of those we have heard fired from that fort above Johannesburg. Joubert must have started from Newcastle early to have managed to get it up there by this time, or it may be the force from Utrecht; anyhow, they must be strong to venture to attack us in this way. We may as well saddle up, though it is hardly likely the cavalry will be engaged. I shall not send to camp for orders; the general will have enough to think about, and it will make no matter where twenty men place themselves. However, I shall ride over to camp and see what is going on there; it is likely enough that there will be an attack by the Free Staters on the other side. Carmichael and Horrocks, do you run into the town and see what is going on there. I will not start till you get back; if any of the staff see me they may ask some questions about it."

In a quarter of an hour the two lads returned. The people there were completely scared at the unexpected attack, and the streets were full of half-dressed men; however, they seemed to be getting over their first terror, now that they found it was the camp and not the town that was being fired at, and the volunteer corps was already gathering in readiness for orders.

"We may be pretty sure that nothing will be done till daylight," Chris said. "Our men know the ground now, and none of the Transvaal Boers can do so, and I don't think they will venture to move till they can see their way about. I am glad, indeed, that most of the women and children were sent off two days ago, and that the scare on the evening that we arrived, when the news came of the railway being cut at Elandslaagte, sent the greater part of the men who had remained behind, and who did not mean fighting, off by road. If they bombard the town they may do damage to property, but there will be no great loss of life. You had better give the horses a feed—that is, if they are disposed to eat at this hour—while I am away."

On reaching the camp, Chris found all the troops under arms. They had been roused before the Boer fire began, as a picket to the east of Dundee had been attacked and driven in. It was not, however, supposed that the Boers were in force until their guns opened fire. All lights were out in the camp, and the enemy's shot had gone wide. It was by no means clear why the Boers should have betrayed their presence on the top of the hill until it was light enough for them to use their guns with effect. Chris had, before starting, put on his flat cap.

As he approached the camp he was challenged by a sentry: "Who comes there?" and on his replying, "An officer of the Maritzburg Scouts," the sentry called out: "Advance, officer of the Maritz Scouts, and give the countersign."

Fortunately, as it happened, the officer had given it to Chris on his visit to their camp, and he therefore answered at once, "Ladysmith," and was relieved when the sentry called out, "Ladysmith pass, and all is well."

When he entered the camp he found the men were standing in lines, but at ease, with their rifles piled in front of them, and there was a hum of conversation in the ranks. At the head-quarter tents everybody was astir. Presently an officer came up.

"Who are you?" he asked as he advanced.

"I am in command of the party of Maritzburg Scouts."

"Mr. King, is it not?" the officer asked.

"Yes, sir. I have ridden in to ask if there are any orders."

"No, and there will be none issued until it is daylight, and we can make out how matters stand and what is the force of the Boers. It is not likely that you will have any special orders, but can act with the cavalry and mounted infantry."

"Thank you, sir. Then I will ride back at once." On returning to camp, he said: "There is nothing to be done till morning. So far they have no idea of the force of the Boers. This is just the work we were formed for. Peters, you and Field and Horrocks certainly speak Dutch better than any of the others. It is half-past two now, and we have at least two and a half hours of darkness, therefore I propose we try to find out what force the Boers have got up there. It is no use for more than four of us to go, so the others can turn in, except the two sentries; but all will, of course, be ready to mount in case any party of Boers should come down upon the town before it is light. The next time I want three men on special duty I will give others a chance."

"Shall we ride, Chris?"

"I think so. Of course it will be more difficult getting up there in the dark; but I shall make a detour of three or four miles, and come up on the other side, and we should be much more likely to be questioned if we were on foot than on horseback. Should we come upon any party of armed Boers, remember we have just arrived from Standerton, and finding when we got to Newcastle that the force had moved on, and were to take up their station at Talana Hill, we rode on to overtake them. When we get fairly there among them, we will dismount; Field and Peters will stand by the four horses, Horrocks and I will go on. If you hear a row, you will mount and wait a minute or two, and then if we do not come, you will ride off with our horses as well as your own. We shall try and make our way to the edge of the hill, and ought to be able to slip away in the darkness if we can get there before we are shot down or overtaken. However, I don't think there is much chance of our being recognized. Indeed, I expect most of them will be lying down for a sleep before the time comes for action. If there is one thing a Boer hates it is being kept awake at night. I will take one of the Kaffir boys with us. They can see in the dark a great deal better than we can; and as the Boers are sure to have some natives with them, he is quite as likely to pick up news as we are—more so, perhaps, for the natives will sit and talk all night while their masters are snoring. I think the one we call Jack is the sharpest."

Jack was called up, and on being told what was required, at once agreed to accompany them.

No time was lost. Chris and his three companions mounted, and with the Kaffir running alongside they set off at a trot. Keeping to the north of east, they rode on for some two miles, Jack leading the way with as much ease as if it had been daylight. When they had, as they calculated, come upon the ground the Boers must have passed over, they turned south, and kept on until they saw the dark mass of Talana on their right, and made towards it. On this side the hill sloped gradually, while on that facing Dundee it was extremely steep and strewn with boulders. They were now going at a walk, and they soon came upon an immense gathering of waggons, carts, oxen and ponies, crowded without any order, just as they had arrived two hours before. "There is no fear of our being detected," Chris said in a whisper, "and we can't do better than stop here. There is no getting the horses through this crowd, and if we did manage to do so there would be no getting them back, certainly not in a hurry. You had better lie down beside them, it is not likely that any Boers will be coming up or

down. If the whole camp is like this there is not the slightest fear of our getting caught." Jack had already been instructed that when he got into the camp he was to leave them and join any party of Kaffirs he found awake, and talk to them as if he were one of the bullock drivers. As Chris and his companions returned, the former would blow his whistle softly, and he was then to make his way down to the horses at once.

Passing on unquestioned they neared the top of the hill, having left the mass of the vehicles behind them. There were, however, large numbers of ponies assembled here in readiness should their masters require them. Hitherto they had heard no voices since entering the camp, but as they went farther they heard talking. Here the fighting men were assembled. For the most part they were lying down; some were asleep; others, however, were moving about, and joining or leaving groups gathered together discussing the events of the next day. Horrocks and Chris now separated and joined different parties, some twenty yards from each other. They attracted no attention whatever. Their appearance in their broad hats and rough clothing, their bandoliers and rifles, was precisely similar to that of the men standing about.

No doubt whatever that the morning would bring them a brilliant victory, appeared to be entertained by the enemy. The artillery would first crush that of the British, then they would charge down and finish the affair. "They say that they have less than four thousand altogether," one said. "We are as many, and, as everyone knows, one Boer is a match for any three rooineks. It will not be a fight, it will be slaughter. We shall stop a day to gather the plunder and send it off in the waggons, then we shall go south and destroy the force at Ladysmith. Three days later we shall be in Maritzburg, and within three or four days afterwards shall drive the British on board their ships at Durban. We shall get grand plunder there and at Maritzburg. But I think it is time now to take a hand at building up that wall along the front. Ebers' commando have been at it for three hours, and it is our turn now."

There was a general movement, which was accelerated by a sharp order, and a minute later Horrocks and Chris again came together and moved on with the others. Three hundred yards farther they came upon six guns, beyond which a number of men were at work carrying and placing great stones to form a rough wall. These left off their work as soon as the party arrived. Having now seen all that was necessary, the two lads joined them and returned with them down the hill. The others threw themselves down near their horses, but Chris and his companion went on. Through the huge gathering of waggons they made their way with great difficulty, Chris giving a low whistle occasionally. At last they were through the camp. Jack was standing by the horses, and Peters and Field at once rose to their feet. Without a word they mounted, and rode without speaking till they were some little distance from the waggons.

"You are back earlier than I expected," Field said. "You have been gone scarcely an hour."

"No; the only difficulty we had was making our way through the mass of waggons and animals all mixed up higgledy-piggledy, and there has been no more excitement than if we had been walking through Dundee. We have got all we wanted to know. Their strength is about four thousand. They have six guns. They are building a stone wall along the brow of the hill, and they are cock-sure that they are going to thrash us without difficulty." Field and Peters laughed.

"They are fools to count their chickens before they are hatched," the latter said. "If they think it is going to be another Laing's Nek business they will find themselves mightily mistaken, though it will be a very difficult business to scale that hill from the other side under such a rifle fire as they will keep up."

Jack had now taken his place ahead of them again, and kept there with ease, although, they broke into a canter as soon as they reached the level ground. In half an hour they reached their camp.

"Now, Jack," Chris said when he had dismounted, "we have not heard what news you have picked up."

"Not much news, baas. Talk with some Kaffirs; all hope that we beat them to-day, but think we cannot do so. Too many Boers and big guns. They say Boers very angry because the other commandos

not here, and Free State Boers not arrived. They sure going to beat the rooineks, but are afraid that some may get away. If Joubert and Free Staters here, catch them in a trap and kill them all."

Such was the substance of Jack's answer in his own language. By this time the rest of the party had turned out to hear the news. They had had but little sleep, for all were intensely anxious as to the fate of their four comrades, and although delighted that they had returned safely, were a little disappointed on finding that the affair had been so tame and unexciting. While they were talking the two Kaffirs had stirred up the fire, put some wood and some coal on, and hung up the kettle.

"That is right, Jack," Chris said; "day will begin to break in half an hour, and we may have to be moving." All was quiet until half-past five, and the lads had just finished their meal when the Boer guns opened fire, and two or three minutes later those of the British replied.

"It is an uncomfortable feeling sitting here with that terrific roaring noise overhead," Chris said. "One knows that there is not the slightest risk of being hit, but, to say the least of it, it is very unpleasant. There, a shell has just burst over the camp. So it is shell that they are firing."

Indeed, the Boers had been using these missiles only, but owing to some fault in the loading, or the badness of the fuses, they fell for the most part without bursting. It was soon evident to the lads that the range of the British guns was shorter than that of the heavier pieces from Talana. The distance was five thousand yards, and the elevated position of the Boer guns added to the advantage given by their superior weight.

"I will ride in now," Chris said as he got up from breakfast, "and tell the staff what we have gathered as to the Boers' strength." He had on his way down the hill exchanged his hat for his forage-cap, and taking Horrocks with him he galloped to the camp. Sir Penn Symons was standing on a small elevation watching the fire. Chris rode up and saluted.

"I have no orders for you, Mr. King, except that when the fighting is over you will join the cavalry in pursuit."

"Thank you, sir; I have not come for orders, but to report to you that with Mr. Horrocks and two others, and one of our Kaffir servants, I entered the Boer camp last night in order to ascertain their strength."

"You did!" the general exclaimed in surprise. "You hear that, gentlemen?" he said, turning round to three or four of his staff standing but a short distance behind him. "Mr. King and three of his party absolutely entered the Boer camp last night to discover their force. Well, sir, what was the result?"

"There are about four thousand of them, sir, over rather than under, and they have six guns, all of heavy calibre. When I was there they were at work building a thick wall some five feet high of rough stones along the edge of the hill. It will scarcely shelter the guns, but it will provide cover for the riflemen at the edge of the hill. There is an immense gathering of waggons and carts—there are certainly not less than a thousand of them—in a confused mass behind the hill. Arriving in the dark, each seems to have gone on until it could get no farther. The fighting men are all on the top of the hill, and between them and the waggons are their ponies. They certainly could not ride away till the waggons have been passed through, but possibly a passage may have been left on each side of these for them to get through, in order, as is their intention, to charge your army when their guns have silenced your artillery. I gathered that expected commandos had not come up. They were disappointed at hearing nothing of the Free Staters, who they expected would have attacked Glencoe from the other side. They are absolutely confident of success, and expect to overwhelm General White at Ladysmith in three days from now, and to be in Pietermaritzburg in a week, and are talking of driving the last rooinek on board the ships at Durban shortly after."

The general smiled. "I am much obliged to you for your information, Mr. King, and am much pleased at the courage with which you and your companions entered the Boer camp to obtain it. It is satisfactory to learn that their force is not much greater than our own. It is also useful to know that their ponies are gathered so close to them, for shells that go over the hill may burst among them; and

I believe that one of the Boers' most vulnerable points is their horses, for without them they would feel absolutely lost. I am sure, Mr. King, that you would wish to be in the thick of the fighting, but I would rather that you curbed your impetuosity, for after the manner in which you obtained this news for me, I can see that your party will do far greater service in scouting and in gaining intelligence than they could afford in action. I should advise you to shift your camp, as the troops are about to advance into the town, and the enemy's shot will soon be falling there."

A few minutes later two field batteries moved forward and took up their position south of Dundee, escorted by the mounted infantry and the rifles. The third battalion of the Lancashire regiment remained to protect the camp should it be attacked by the Free Staters, while the Dublin Fusiliers and the Royal Irish Fusiliers were to march through the town to a donga or river-bed half a mile to the east. Beyond this the long ascent to Talana begins. The King's Royal Rifles were to take up a position under cover to the east of the town.

Chris had ridden back fast to Dundee. The work of taking down the tents and packing their materials and all the stores on to the spare horses took but a few minutes, and two of the lads went with the two natives and saw the horses safely placed in a sharp depression half a mile away, in which they would be safe from Boer shells. Chris had told his companions what the general had said. They all looked disappointed.

"We shall have plenty of opportunities afterwards, and it is a compliment that he considers we had better reserve ourselves for scouting, which, after all, is the work we always intended to carry out. Still, though, after what he has said, we cannot absolutely join the cavalry, we will manage somehow to see some of the fighting without getting into the thick of it. Besides, I should say that in any case the whole brunt of the affair must fall upon the infantry and artillery. If they silence the Boer guns and capture the hill, the battle is won, and the cavalry will have to wait for their chance till they can get the Boers to fight on ground where they can act."

Drizzling rain had now set in, but this and the fact that they had started without breakfast in no way abated the spirits of the troops who soon came along, marching with light step and eager faces which showed that they were delighted at the prospect of action. The batteries to the right had already come into play, and a vigorous cannonade was being directed at the crest of the hill, from which the Boer guns kept up a slower though steady fire in return.

"While nothing else is doing we may just as well ride over and see how things are getting on there," Chris said. And as soon as the two Irish regiments had passed, the little troop trotted across to the rising ground and dismounted a few hundred yards from the guns. They soon saw with satisfaction that the fire of the Boers was far from effective, their aim was not good, and a very small proportion of the shells burst; while on the other hand the shrapnel from the British batteries burst with splendid accuracy over the crest of the hill. For two hours the artillery duel continued, then the Boer guns gradually ceased their fire. The mist that had partly shrouded the summit of Talana, eight hundred feet above the plain, and the smoke that still hung thickly there, rendered it impossible to say whether they had all been put out of action or simply withdrawn, but when it cleared off they could no longer be seen. It was now the turn of the infantry. Beyond the donga in which they were lying the rise of the ground was gradual, up to a plantation which surrounded Smith's farm. Beyond this the ground was rocky. The men advanced at the double in open order, and the moment they were seen by the Boers a continuous fire of musketry was opened. The distance was about a mile, but the Mauser rifles had a much greater range than this and the bullets pattered thickly on the ground. Only four men, however, fell. The two regiments halted in the plantation and farm buildings, and the advanced line at the edge of the trees opened fire in answer to that to which they were exposed. The general at first had taken up his position with the guns, but as soon as the men advanced from the donga he joined them and accompanied them as far as the plantation. Then he returned to the battery, which continued its fire with greater activity to prepare the way for the further advance of the infantry.

The Rifles had joined the two Irish regiments, and at half-past nine General Symons galloped up to the farm and gave the order for the advance. This was received with a cheer by the men, who had been impatiently awaiting it. Scarcely had the cheer died away when the general was mortally wounded by a bullet that struck him in the stomach. Unconscious that the wound was so severe he retained his seat a minute or two, and was then carried by the Indian bearer company into the town. The troops, ignorant of the misfortune that had befallen them, were now working their way up the hill, taking advantage of every stone and boulder, and although exposed to a terrific fire, gradually pushing on until they reached a stone wall which ran round the face of the hill. Beyond this the ground was much rougher and very much steeper—so steep, indeed, that it was almost impossible to climb it. The fire of the enemy was now terrific. The troops were some three hundred yards from the crest, and it was certain death to show a head above the wall. An officer placed his helmet on the end of his sword, and the moment he raised it, it was riddled by five balls.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.