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*The Boer in the Field*

*His Methods of Warfare Compared with Those of Tommy Atkins*

THE Sand River was the last natural obstacle between the British Army and Kroonstad, the new capital in which the government of the Orange Free State had set up housekeeping after its eviction from Bloemfontein.

Somebody's victorious army, I do not even now know whose, although I ran before it for three days, had swallowed up Brandfort, Winburg and Smalduel, making a meal of each in a brief forty-eight hours. Its next meal, unless it were halted at the Sand, would be Ventersberg. At Kroonstad, thirty miles back from Ventersburg, the government, with its Executive Chamber in the dancing hall of the hotel, was busy rounding up stray burghers and hurrying them to the front, and back of the Post the telegraph clerks and Kaffirs were forestalling the British occupation by feeding official telegrams and papers to a great bonfire.

But Ventersberg was calm. It was not burning incriminating documents nor driving burghers from its solitary street. It was making them welcome at Jones' Hotel. The sun had sunk an angry crimson, the sure sign, so they said, of a bloody battle on the morrow, and a full moon had turned the dusty street and the veldt into which it disappeared into a field of snow.

American scouts had halted at Jones' and the American proprietor was giving them drinks free. Their cowboy spurs jingled on the floor of the barroom, on the boards of the verandas, on the stone floor of the kitchen and around the billiard table where they were playing pool as joyously as though the English were not ten miles away. Brave, awkward burghers rode up, each a cloud of dust, and leaving his pony to wander in the street and his rifle in a corner, shook hands with every one solemnly and asked for coffee. Italians, of Garibaldi's red-shirted army, Swedes and Danes in semi-uniform, Frenchmen in high boots and great sombreros, Germans with the sabre cuts on their cheeks that had been given them at the university, and Russian officers smoking tiny cigarettes, crowded the little dining room, and by the light of a smoky lamp talked in many tongues of Spion Kop, Hannahspost, Fourteen Streams and the battle on the morrow.

They were suntanned, dusty, stained, and many of them with wounds in bandages. They came from every capital of Europe, and as each took his turn around the crowded table they drank to the health of every nation, save one. When they had eaten they picked up the pony's bridle from the dust and melted into the moonlight with a wave of the hand and a "good luck to you." There were no bugles to sound "boots and saddles" for them, no sergeants to keep them in hand, no officers to pay for their rations and issue orders.

Each was his own officer, his conscience was his bugle call, he gave himself orders. They were all equal, all friends; the cowboy and the Russian prince, the French socialist from La Villette or Montmartre, with a red sash around his velveteen breeches, and the little French

nobleman from the Club Royal who had never before felt the sun, except when he had played lawn tennis on the Isle de Puteaux. Each had his bandolier and rifle; each was minding his own business, which was the business of all—to try and save the independence of a free people

The presence of these foreigners, with rifle in hand, showed the sentiment and sympathies of the countries from which they came, for while monarchs and cabinets may keep a nation from war, they cannot control the nation's sympathies. These men were Europe's real ambassadors to the Republic of the Transvaal. The hundreds of thousands of their countrymen who had remained at home held toward the Boer the same feelings they did, but they were not so strongly moved toward him; not strongly enough to feel that they must go abroad to fight for him.

These foreigners were not the exception in opinion, they were only exceptionally adventurous and liberty loving. They were not soldiers of fortune, for the soldier of fortune fights for gain. These men receive no pay, no emolument nor reward. They were the few who dared do what the majority of their countrymen in Europe thought.

At Jones' Hotel that night, at Ventersberg, it was as though a jury composed of men from all of Europe and the United States had gathered in judgment on the British nation, and had found it guilty of "murder with intent to rob."

Outside in the moonlight in the dusty road two bearded burghers had halted me to ask the way to the house of the commandant. Between them on a Boer pony sat a man, erect, slim waisted, with well set shoulders and chin in air, one hand holding the reins high, the other with knuckles down resting on his hip. The Boer pony he rode, nor the moonlight, nor the veldt behind him, could disguise his seat and pose. It was as though I had been suddenly thrown back into London and was passing the cuirassed, gauntleted guardsman, motionless on his black charger in the sentry gate in Whitehall. Only now, instead of a steel breastplate, he shivered through his thin khaki, and instead of the high boots his legs were wrapped in twisted putties.

"When did they take you?" I asked.

"Early this morning. I was out scouting," he said. He spoke in a well trained and modulated voice that I tried to see his shoulder straps.

"Oh, you are an officer?" I said.

"No, sir, a trooper. First Life Guards."

But in the moonlight I could see him smile, whether at my mistake or because it was not a mistake I could not guess. There are many gentlemen rankers in this war.

HE made a lonely figure in the night, his helmet marking him as conspicuously as a man wearing a high hat in a church. From the billiard room, where the American scouts were playing pool, came the click of the ivory and loud, light hearted laughter; from the veranda the sputtering of many strange tongues and the deep, lazy voices of the Boers. There were Boers to the left of him, Boers to the right of him, pulling at their long, drooping pipes and sending up big rings of white smoke in the white moonlight.

He dismounted, and stood watching the crowd about him under half lowered eyelids, but as unmoved as though he saw no one. He threw his arm over the pony's neck and pulled its head down against his chest and began talking to it.

It was as though he wished to emphasize his loneliness.

"You are not tired, are you? No, you're not," he said. His voice was as kindly as though he were speaking to a child.

“Oh, but you can't be tired. What?” he whispered. “A little hungry, perhaps. Yes?” He seemed to draw much comfort from his friend the pony, and the pony rubbed his head against the Englishman's shoulder

“The Commandant says he will question you some in the morning. You will come with us to the jail now,” his captor directed. “You will find three of your people there to talk to. I will go bring a blanket for you, it is getting cold.” And they rode off together into the night.

Had he arrived two days later he would have heard through the windows of Jones' Hotel the billiard balls still clicking joyously, but the men who held the cues then would have been officers in helmets like his own.

THERE was only one question asked on the morrow. Would the English try to cross at the drift or at the railroad bridge? It was a question which divided the burghers into two forces, sending the greater one to the bridge and gathering the lesser around the drift. The force that waited at the drift as it lay spread out on both sides of the river looked like a gathering of Wisconsin lumbermen, of Adirondack guides and hunters halted at Paul Smith's, like a Methodist camp meeting limited entirely to men.

The eye sought in vain for rows of tents, for the horses at the picket line, for the flags that mark headquarters, the commissariat, the field telegraph, the field post office, the A. S. C, the R. M. A. C, the C. O. and all the other combinations of letters of the military alphabet.

I remembered that great army of General Buller's as I saw it stretching out over the basin of the Tugela, like the children of Israel in number, like Tammany Hall in organization and discipline, with not a tent pin missing; with hospitals as complete as those established for a hundred years in the heart of London; with searchlights, heliographs, war balloons, Roentgen rays, pontoon bridges, telegraph wagons and trenching tools, farriers with anvils, major generals, map makers, “gallopers,” intelligence departments; even barbers and press censors; every kind of thing and every kind of man that goes to make up a British army corps. I knew that seven miles from us just such another completely equipped and disciplined column was advancing to the opposite bank of the Sand River.

And opposed to it was this merry company of Boer farmers lying on the grass, toasting pieces of a freshly killed ox on the end of a stick, their hobbled ponies foraging for themselves a half mile away, guarded by three half grown Kaffir boys; a thousand men without a tent among them, without a field glass; I even saw a captain of artillery hold up President Steyn himself, and take his glasses away from him, pleading the greater need.

IT was a picnic, a pastoral scene, not a scene of war. On the hills overlooking the drift were the guns, but down along the banks the burghers were sitting in circles singing the evening hymn; at the drift the other burghers were watering the oxen, bathing and washing in the cold river; around the camp fires they were smoking luxuriously, with their saddles for pillows, laughing and playing tricks on one another, like children at a husking bee. The evening breeze brought the sweet smell of burning wood, a haze of smoke from many fires, the lazy hum of hundreds of voices rising in the open air, the neighing of many horses, and the swift soothing rush of the river.

These were the men, and this gypsy encampment was the force, which, for six months, had been holding back the “Lion and her cubs.” It was holding them back no longer, for the soldiers of the Queen outnumbered the farmers ten to one, and under “England's Only General,” had been taught the value of flank movements.

It is not difficult to flank an enemy when you have six men to send around his ends while you attack him in the centre with the remaining four. But the unfairness of the odds was not what impressed one. It was the character of the opposing forces and the causes for which each fought.

On the one bank of the Sand was the professional soldier, who does whatever he is ordered to do. His order this time were to kill a sufficiently large number of human beings to cause those few who might survive to throw up their hands and surrender their homes, their country and their birthright. On the other bank were a thousand self-governing, self-respecting farmers fighting for the land they have redeemed from the lion and the savage, for the towns and cities they have reared in a beautiful wilderness.

“An Englishman’s house is his castle,” and he can defend it accordingly, is the oldest of English adages. The Boer has merely been defending his castle. You can make nothing more of this war than that. The Englishman will tell you there is much more to it than that, he will talk glibly of a franchise which he never wanted, or unjust mining laws and restrictions which are much more generous than those he has instituted in British Columbia, and which he could have avoided had he not found he was growing rich in spite of them by simply remaining in his own country; he will try to blind you by pleading that the war was forced upon him by the Boers’ ultimatum, an ultimatum which came only after he had threatened the borders of the Transvaal with twenty thousand soldiers.

He will present every excuse, every sophistry, every reason save one, which is that he covets the Boer’s watch and chain, and is going to kill him to get it. It is too late now to go into the injustice of this war. The Boer has lost heart and is falling back, leisurely, as is his wont, but still falling back. Before this letter reaches America the end may have come and the English will be pumping the water out of the gold mines they have fought so long and so hard to win.

It is possible that the gold may repay some few of them for their losses, but it will not bring seven thousand men back to life again; it will not restore the lost prestige of the British army, nor pay for the ill feeling of Europe, nor for the loss of what was once Great Britain’s hope, an alliance with the United States.

“Never envy a man his riches until you know what he did to gain them,” is a saying as old as Epictetus, and who will envy England her slaughtered, bleeding republics, now that we see the price they have cost her!

Except for the excellence of her transport service, it has cost her her former place as a military power, her position as a religious nation. Even her Archbishop of Cape Town is today with thumbs down howling in the name of “peace” for the complete and utter extermination of the two prostrate states. It has cost her the right to speak again in the name of Christianity, for the chief loot of her soldiers is the Bibles they find upon the dead bodies of the men they have killed. It has given her a Dreyfus scandal of her own, and by the light of the homes she is burning in the Free State she can read her acts as she read the “Bulgarian atrocities.”

THIS may seem hysterical and unjust, but it is time, now that it is too late, that we should see clearly what has been taking place while the world sat idly by. We have been misinformed and blinded by propaganda against the Boer, a manipulation of press and Parliament, which has never been equalled in dexterity of misrepresentation nor audacity of untruth, not even by the boulevard journalists who live on blackmail and the Monte Carlo Sustenance Fund .

The murder and robbery of a Boer on the veldt is no less a murder and robbery than though it had taken place in Whitechapel or Fifth Avenue.

The Boer has been murdered and robbed, and the fact that before his life was attempted his character was attacked and vilified is not the least of the sins to which the “empire builders” of Kimberley, Johannesburg and the Colonial Office must someday stand in judgment.

The battle of Sand River lasted for four hours. It might, possibly, have been a second Colenso, but it was a retreat. At no time was the advance of the British column seriously threatened, and by a flanking movement on General Botha’s right it carried the bridge, or the place where the bridge had stood, and had a clear road to Kroonstad.

The Free Staters were beaten before the battle began. They had been driven out of Brandfort, Winburg and Virginia, and they had lost heart.

When you looked down upon the lines of the English army advancing for three miles across the plain one could hardly blame them. The burghers did not even raise their Mausers. One bullet, the size of a broken slate pencil, falling into a block three miles across and a mile deep seems so inadequate. It was like trying to turn back the waves of the sea with a blowpipe.

It is true they had held back as many at Colenso, but the defensive positions there were magnificent, and since then six months had passed, during which time the same thirty thousand men who had been fighting then were fighting still, while the enemy was always new, with fresh recruits and reinforcements arriving daily.

AS the English officers at Durban, who had so lately arrived from home that they wore swords, used to say with the proud consciousness of two hundred thousand men back of them, “It won’t last much longer now. The Boers have had their belly full of fighting. They’re fed up on it; that’s what it is; they’re fed up.”

They forgot that the Boers, who for three months had held Buller back at the Tugela, were the same Boers who were rushed across the Free State to rescue Cronje from Roberts, and who were then sent to meet the relief column at Fourteen Streams, and were then ordered back again to harass Roberta at Sannahspost, and who, at last, worn out, stale, heartsick and hopeless at the unequal odds and endless fighting, fell back at Sand River.

I have seen a retreat in Greece when the men before they left the trenches stood up in them and raged and cursed at the advancing Turk, cursed at their government, at their King, at each other, and retreated with shame in their faces because they did so.

But the retreat of the burghers of the Free State was not like that. They rose one by one and saddled their ponies with the look in their faces of men who had been attending the funeral of a friend, and who were leaving just before the coffin was swallowed in the grave. Some of them for a long time after the greater number of the commando had ridden away sat upon the rocks staring down into the sunny valley below them talking together gravely, rising to take a last look at the territory which was their own. The shells of the victorious British sang triumphantly over the heads of their own artillery, bursting impotently in white smoke or tearing up the veldt in fountains of dust.

But they did not heed them. They did not even send a revengeful bullet into the approaching masses. The sweetness of revenge could not pay for what they had lost. They looked down upon the farmhouses of man they knew; upon their own farmhouses rising in smoke, they saw the Englishmen like a pest of locusts settling down around gardens and farmhouses still nearer, and swallowing them up.

Their companions, already far on the way to safety, waved to them from the veldt to follow; an excited doctor carrying a wounded man warned them that the English were just below them, storming the hill. “Our artillery is aiming at five hundred yards,” he shouted, but still they

stood immovable, leaning on their rifles, silent, homeless, looking down without rage or show of feeling at the great waves of khaki sweeping steadily toward them, and possessing their land.

*(Source: FultonHistory.com)*