

*Scribner's*  
*January, 1900*

### ***The Relief of Ladysmith***

After the defeat of the Boers at the battle of Pieter's Hill there were two things left for them to do. They could fall back across a great plain which stretched from Pieter's Hill to Bulwana Mountain, and there make their last stand against Buller and the Ladysmith relief column, or they could abandon the siege of Ladysmith and slip away after having held Buller at bay for three months.

Bulwana Mountain is shaped like a brick and blocks the valley in which Ladysmith lies. The railroad track slips around one end of the brick, and the Dundee trail around the other. It was on this mountain that the Boers had placed their famous gun, Long Tom, with which they began the bombardment of Ladysmith, and with which up to the day before Ladysmith was relieved they had thrown three thousand shells into that miserable town.

If the Boers on retreating from Pieter's Hill had fortified this mountain with the purpose of holding off Buller for a still longer time, they would have been under a fire from General White's artillery in the town behind them and from Buller's naval guns in front. Their position would not have been unlike that of Humpty Dumpty on the wall, so they wisely adopted the only alternative and slipped away. This was on Tuesday night, while the British were hurrying up artillery to hold the hills they had taken that afternoon.

By ten o'clock the following morning from the top of Pieter's Hill you could still see the Boers moving off along the Dundee road. It was an easy matter to follow them, for the dust hung above the trail in a yellow cloud, like mist over a swamp. There were two opinions as to whether they were halting at Bulwana or passing it, on their way to Laing's Neck. If they were going only to Bulwana there was the probability of two weeks' more fighting before they could be dislodged. If they had avoided Bulwana, the way to Ladysmith was open.

Lord Dundonald, who is in command of a brigade of irregular cavalry, was scouting to the left of Bulwana, far in advance of our forces. At sunset he arrived, without having encountered the Boers, at the base of Bulwana. He could either return and report the disappearance of the enemy or he could make a dash for it and enter Ladysmith. His orders were "to go, look, see," and avoid an action, and the fact that none of his brigade was in the triumphant procession which took place three days later has led many to think that in entering the besieged town without orders he offended the commanding general.

In any event, it is a family row and of no interest to the outsider. The main fact is that he did make a dash for it, and just at sunset found himself with two hundred men only a mile from the "Doomed City." His force was composed of Natal Carbiniers and Imperial Light Horse. He halted them, and in order that honors might be even, formed them in sections with the half sections made up from each of the two organizations. All the officers were placed in front, and with a cheer they started to race across the plain.

The wig-waggers on Convent Hill had already seen them, and the townspeople and the garrison were rushing through the streets to meet them, cheering and shouting, and some of them weeping. Others, so officers tell me, who were in the different camps, looked down upon the figures galloping across the plain in the twilight, and continued making tea.

Just as they had reached the centre of the town, General Sir George White and his staff rode down from headquarters and met the men whose coming meant for him life and peace and success. They were advancing at a walk, with the cheering people hanging to their stirrups, clutching at their hands and hanging to the bridles of their horses.

General White's first greeting was characteristically unselfish and loyal, and typical of the British officer. He gave no sign of his own incalculable relief, nor did he give to Cæsar the things which were Cæsar's. He did not cheer Dundonald, nor Buller, nor the column which had rescued him and his garrison from present starvation and probable imprisonment at Pretoria. He raised his helmet and cried, "We will give three cheers for the Queen!" And then the general and the healthy, ragged, and sunburned troopers from the outside world, the starved, fever-ridden garrison, and the starved, fever-ridden civilians stood with hats off and sang their national anthem.

The column outside had been fighting steadily for six weeks to get Dundonald or any one of its force into Ladysmith; for fourteen days it had been living in the open, fighting by night as well as by day, without halt or respite; the garrison inside had been for four months holding the enemy at bay with the point of the bayonet; it was famished for food, it was rotten with fever, and yet when the relief came and all turned out well, the first thought of everyone was for the Queen!

It may be credulous in them or old-fashioned; but it is certainly very unselfish, and when you take their point of view it is certainly very fine.

After the Queen every one else had his share of the cheering, and General White could not complain of the heartiness with which they greeted him; he tried to make a speech in reply, but it was a brief one. He spoke of how much they owed to General Buller and his column, and he congratulated his own soldiers on the defense they had made.

"I am very sorry, men," he said, "that I had to cut down your rations. I—I promise you I won't do it again."

Then he stopped very suddenly and whirled his horse's head around and rode away. Judging from the number of times they told me of this, the fact that they had all but seen an English general give way to his feelings seemed to have impressed the civilian mind of Ladysmith more than the entrance of the relief force. The men having come in and demonstrated that the way was open, rode forth again, and the relief of Ladysmith had taken place. But it is not the people cheering in the dark streets, nor General White breaking down in his speech of welcome, which gives the note to the way the men of Ladysmith received their freedom. It is rather the fact that as the two hundred battle-stained and earth-stained troopers galloped forward, racing to be the first, and rising in their stirrups to cheer, the men in the hospital camps said, "Well, they're come at last, have they?" and continued fussing over their fourth of a ration of tea. That gives the real picture of how Ladysmith came into her inheritance, and of how she received her rescuers.

On the morning after Dundonald had ridden in and out of Ladysmith, two other correspondents and myself started to relieve it on our own account. We did not know the way to Ladysmith, and we did not then know whether or not the Boers still occupied Bulwana

Mountain. But we argued that the chances of the Boers having raised the siege were so good that it was worth risking their not having done so, and being taken prisoner.

We carried all the tobacco we could pack in our saddle-bags, and enough food for one day. My chief regret was that my government, with true republican simplicity, had given me a passport, typewritten on a modest sheet of notepaper and woefully lacking in impressive seals and coats of arms. I fancied it would look to Boer eyes like one I might have forged for myself in the writing-room of the hotel at Cape Town.

We had ridden up Pieter's Hill and scrambled down on its other side before we learned that the night before Dundonald had raised the siege. We learned this from long trains of artillery and regiments of infantry which already were moving forward over the great plain which lies between Pieter's and Bulwana. We learned it also from the silence of conscientious, dutiful correspondents, who came galloping back as we galloped forward, and who made wide détours at sight of us, or who, when we hailed them, lashed their ponies over the red rocks and pretended not to hear, each unselfishly turning his back on Ladysmith in the hope that he might be the first to send word that the "Doomed City" was relieved. This would enable one paper to say that it had the news "on the street" five minutes earlier than its hated rivals.

We found that the rivalry of our respective papers bored us. We condemned it as being childish and weak. London, New York, Chicago were names, they were spots thousands of leagues away: Ladysmith was just across that mountain. If our horses held out at the pace, we would be—after Dundonald—the first men in. We imagined that we would see hysterical women and starving men. They would wring our hands, and say, "God bless you," and we would halt our steaming horses in the marketplace, and distribute the news of the outside world, and tobacco. There would be shattered houses, roofless homes, deep pits in the roadways where the shells had burst and buried themselves. We would see the entombed miner at the moment of his deliverance, we would be among the first from the outer world to break the spell of his silence; the first to receive the brunt of the imprisoned people's gratitude and rejoicings.

Indeed, it was clearly our duty to the papers that employed us that we should not send them news, but that we should be the first to enter Ladysmith. We were surely the best judges of what was best to do. How like them to try to dictate to us from London and New York, when we were on the spot! It was absurd. We shouted this to each other as we raced in and out of the long confused column, lashing viciously with our whips. We stumbled around pieces of artillery, slid in between dripping water-carts, dodged the horns of weary oxen, scattered companies of straggling Tommies, and ducked under protruding tent-poles on the baggage-wagons, and at last came out together again in advance of the dusty column.

"Besides, we don't know where the press-censor is, do we?" No, of course we had no idea where the press-censor was, and unless he said that Ladysmith was relieved, the fact that twenty-five thousand other soldiers said so counted for idle gossip. Our papers could not expect us to go riding over mountains the day Ladysmith was relieved, hunting for a press-censor. "That press-censor," gasped Hartland, "never—is—where he—ought to be." The words were bumped out of him as he was shot up and down in the saddle.

That was it. It was the press-censor's fault. Our consciences were clear now. If our papers worried themselves or us because they did not receive the great news until every one else knew of it, it was all because of that press-censor. We smiled again and spurred the horses forward. We abused the press-censor roundly—we were extremely indignant with him. It was so like him to lose himself the day Ladysmith was relieved. "Confound him," we muttered, and grinned guiltily. We felt as we used to feel when we were playing truant from school.

We were nearing Pieter's Station now, and were half-way to Ladysmith. But the van of the army was still about us. Was it possible that it stretched already into the beleaguered city? Were we, after all, to be cheated of the first and freshest impressions? The tall lancers turned at the sound of the horses' hoofs and stared, infantry officers on foot smiled up at us sadly, they were dirty and dusty and sweating, they carried rifles and cross belts like the Tommies; and they knew that we outsiders who were not under orders would see the chosen city before them. Some of them shouted to us, but we only nodded and galloped on. We wanted to get rid of them all, but they were interminable. When we thought we had shaken them off, and that we were at last in advance, we would come upon a group of them resting on the same ground their shells had torn up during the battle the day before.

We passed Boer laagers marked by empty cans and broken saddles and black, cold camp-fires. At Pieter's Station the blood was still fresh on the grass where two hours before some of the South African Light Horse had been wounded.

The Boers were still on Bulwana then? Perhaps, after all, we had better turn back and try to find that press-censor. But we rode on and saw Pieter's Station, as we passed it, as an absurd relic of by-gone days when bridges were intact and trains ran on schedule time. One door seen over the shoulder as we galloped past read, "Station Master's Office—Private," and in contempt of that stern injunction, which would make even the first-class passenger hesitate, one of our shells had knocked away the half of the door and made its privacy a mockery.

We had only to follow the track now and we would arrive in time—unless the Boers were still on Bulwana. We had shaken off the army, and we were two miles in front of it, when six men came galloping toward us in an unfamiliar uniform. They passed us far to the right, regardless of the trail, and galloping through the high grass. We pulled up when we saw them, for they had green facings to their gray uniforms, and no one with Buller's column wore green facings.

We gave a yell in chorus. "Are you from Ladysmith?" we shouted. The men, before they answered, wheeled and cheered, and came toward us laughing jubilant. "We're the first men out," cried the officer and we rode in among them, shaking hands and offering our good wishes. "We're glad to see you," we said. "We're glad to see *you*," they said. It was not an original greeting, but it seemed sufficient to all of us. "Are the Boers on Bulwana?" we asked. "No, they've trekked up Dundee way. You can go right in."

We parted at the word and started to go right in. We found the culverts along the railroad cut away and the bridges down, and that galloping ponies over the roadbed of a railroad is a difficult feat at the best, even when the road is in working order.

Some men, cleanly dressed and rather pale-looking, met us and said: "Good-morning." "Are you from Ladysmith?" we called. "No, we're from the neutral camp," they answered. We were the first men from outside they had seen in four months, and that was the extent of their interest or information. They had put on their best clothes, and were walking along the track to Colenso to catch a train south to Durban or to Maritzburg, to any place out of the neutral camp. They might have been somnambulists for all they saw of us, or of the Boer trenches and the battle-field before them. But we found them of greatest interest, especially their clean clothes. Our column had not seen clean linen in six weeks, and the sight of these civilians in white duck and straw hats, and carrying walking-sticks, coming toward us over the railroad ties, made one think it was Sunday at home and these were excursionists to the suburbs.

We had been riding through a roofless tunnel, with the mountain and the great dam on one side, and the high wall of the railway cutting on the other, but now just ahead of us lay the

open country, and the exit of the tunnel barricaded by twisted rails and heaped-up ties and bags of earth. Bulwana was behind us. For eight miles it had shut out the sight of our goal, but now, directly in front of us, was spread a great city of dirty tents and grass huts and Red Cross flags—the neutral camp—and beyond that, four miles away, shimmering and twinkling sleepily in the sun, the white walls and zinc roofs of Ladysmith.

We gave a gasp of recognition and galloped into and through the neutral camp. Natives of India in great turbans, Indian women in gay shawls and nose-rings, and black Kaffirs in discarded khaki looked up at us dully from the earth floors of their huts, and when we shouted “Which way?” and “Where is the bridge?” only stared, or pointed vaguely, still staring.

After all, we thought, they are poor creatures, incapable of emotion. Perhaps they do not know how glad we are that they have been rescued. They do not understand that we want to shake hands with everybody and offer our congratulations. Wait until we meet our own people, we said, they will understand! It was such a pleasant prospect that we whipped the unhappy ponies into greater bursts of speed, not because they needed it, but because we were too excited and impatient to sit motionless.

In our haste we lost our way among innumerable little trees; we disagreed as to which one of the many cross-trails led home to the bridge. We slipped out of our stirrups to drag the ponies over one steep place, and to haul them up another, and at last the right road lay before us, and a hundred yards ahead a short iron bridge and a Gordon Highlander waited to welcome us, to receive our first greetings and an assorted collection of cigarettes. Hartland was riding a thoroughbred polo pony and passed the gallant defender of Ladysmith without a kind look or word, but Blackwood and I galloped up more decorously, smiling at him with good-will. The soldier, who had not seen a friend from the outside world in four months, leaped in front of us and presented a heavy gun and a burnished bayonet.

“Halt, there,” he cried. “Where’s your pass?” Of course it showed excellent discipline—we admired it immensely. We even overlooked the fact that he should think Boer spies would enter the town by way of the main bridge and at a gallop. We liked his vigilance, we admired his discipline, but in spite of that his reception chilled us. We had brought several things with us that we thought they might possibly want in Ladysmith, but we had entirely forgotten to bring a pass. Indeed I do not believe one of the twenty-five thousand men who had been fighting for six weeks to relieve Ladysmith had supplied himself with one. The night before, when the Ladysmith sentries had tried to halt Dundonald’s troopers in the same way, and demanded a pass from them, there was not one in the squadron.

We crossed the bridge soberly and entered Ladysmith at a walk. Even the ponies looked disconcerted and crestfallen. After the high grass and the mountains of red rock, where there was not even a tent to remind one of a roof-tree, the stone cottages and shop-windows and chapels and well-ordered hedges of the main street of Ladysmith made it seem a wealthy and attractive suburb. When we entered, a Sabbath-like calm hung upon the town; officers in the smartest khaki and glistening Stowassers observed us askance, little girls in white pinafores passed us with eyes cast down, a man on a bicycle looked up, and then, in terror lest we might speak to him, glued his eyes to the wheel and “scorched” rapidly. We trotted forward and halted at each street crossing, looking to the right and left in the hope that some one might nod to us. From the opposite end of the town General Buller and his staff came toward us slowly—the house-tops did not seem to sway—it was not “roses, roses all the way.” The German army marching into Paris received as hearty a welcome. “Why didn’t you people cheer General Buller when he came in?” we asked later. “Oh, was that General Buller?” they inquired. “We didn’t recognize him.” “But

you knew he was a general officer, you knew he was the first of the relieving column?" "Ye-es, but we didn't know who he was."

I decided that the bare fact of the relief of Ladysmith was all I would be able to wire to my neglected paper, and with remorse started to find the Ladysmith censor. Two officers, with whom I ventured to break the hush that hung upon the town by asking my way, said they were going in the direction of the censor. We rode for some distance in guarded silence. Finally, one of them, with an inward struggle, brought himself to ask, "Are you from the outside?"

I was forced to admit that I was. I felt that I had taken an unwarrantable liberty in intruding on a besieged garrison. I wanted to say that I had lost my way and had ridden into the town by mistake, and that I begged to be allowed to withdraw with apologies. The other officer woke up suddenly and handed me a printed list of the prices which had been paid during the siege for food and tobacco. He seemed to offer it as being in some way an official apology for his starved appearance. The price of cigars struck me as especially pathetic, and I commented on it. The first officer gazed mournfully at the blazing sunshine before him. "I have not smoked a cigar in two months," he said. My surging sympathy, and my terror at again offending the haughty garrison, combated so fiercely that it was only with a great effort that I produced a handful. "Will you have these?" The other officer started in his saddle so violently that I thought his horse had stumbled, but he also kept his eyes straight in front. "Thank you, I will take one if I may—just one," said the first officer. "Are you sure I am not robbing you?"

They each took one, but they refused to put the rest of the cigars in their pockets. As the printed list stated that a dozen matches sold for \$1.75, I handed them a box of matches. Then a beautiful thing happened. They lit the cigars and at the first taste of the smoke—and they were not good cigars—an almost human expression of peace and goodwill and utter abandonment to joy spread over their yellow skins and cracked lips and fever-lit eyes. The first man dropped his reins and put his hands on his hips and threw back his head and shoulders and closed his eyelids. I felt that I had intruded at a moment which should have been left sacred.

Another boy officer in stainless khaki and beautifully turned out, polished and burnished and varnished, but with the same yellow skin and sharpened cheekbones and protruding teeth, a skeleton on horseback, rode slowly toward us down the hill. As he reached us he glanced up and then swayed in his saddle, gazing at my companions fearfully. "Good God," he cried. His brother officers seemed to understand, but made no answer, except to jerk their heads toward me. They were too occupied to speak. I handed the skeleton a cigar, and he took it in great embarrassment, laughing and stammering and blushing. Then I began to understand; I began to appreciate the heroic self-sacrifice of the first two, who, when they had been given the chance, had refused to fill their pockets. I knew then that it was an effort worthy of the V. C.

The censor was at his post, and a few minutes later a signal officer on Convent Hill heliographed my cable to Bulwana, where, six hours after the Boers had abandoned it, Buller's own helios had begun to dance, and they speeded the cable on its long journey to the newspaper office on the Thames Embankment.

When one descended to the streets again—there are only two streets which run the full length of the town—and looked for signs of the siege, one found them not in the shattered houses, of which there seemed surprisingly few, but in the starved and fever-shaken look of the people.

The cloak of indifference which every Englishman wears, and his instinctive dislike to make much of his feelings, and, in this case, his pluck, at first concealed from us how terribly

those who had been inside of Ladysmith had suffered, and how near to the breaking point they were. Their faces were the real index to what they had passed through.

Any one who had seen our men at Montauk Point or in the fever camp at Siboney needed no hospital list to tell him of the pitiful condition of the garrison. The skin on their faces was yellow, and drawn sharply over the brow and cheekbones; their teeth protruded, and they shambled along like old men, their voices ranging from a feeble pipe to a deep whisper. In this pitiable condition they had been forced to keep night-watch on the hill-crests, in the rain, to lie in the trenches, and to work on fortifications and bomb-proofs. And they were expected to do all of these things on what strength they could get from horse-meat, biscuits of the toughness and composition of those that are fed to dogs, and on "mealies," which is what we call corn.

That first day in Ladysmith gave us a faint experience as to what the siege meant. The correspondents had disposed of all their tobacco, and within an hour saw starvation staring them in the face, and raced through the town to rob fellow-correspondents who had just arrived. The new-comers in their turn had soon distributed all they owned, and came tearing back to beg one of their own cigarettes. We tried to buy grass for our ponies, and were met with pitying contempt; we tried to buy food for ourselves, and were met with open scorn. I went to the only hotel which was open in the place, and offered large sums for a cup of tea.

"Put up your money," said the Scotchman in charge, sharply. "What's the good of your money? Can your horse eat money? Can you eat money? Very well, then, put it away."

The great dramatic moment after the raising of the siege was the entrance into Ladysmith of the relieving column. It was a magnificent, manly, and moving spectacle. You must imagine the dry, burning heat, the fine, yellow dust, the white glare of the sunshine, and in the heat and glare and dust the great interminable column of men in ragged khaki crowding down the main street, twenty-two thousand strong, cheering and shouting, with the sweat running off their red faces and cutting little rivulets in the dust that caked their cheeks. Some of them were so glad that, though in the heaviest marching order, they leaped up and down and stepped out of line to dance to the music of the bagpipes. For hours they crowded past, laughing, joking, and cheering, or staring ahead of them, with lips wide apart, panting in the heat and choking with the dust, but always ready to turn again and wave their helmets at Sir George White.

It was a pitiful contrast which the two forces presented. The men of the garrison were in clean khaki, pipe-clayed and brushed and polished, but their tunics hung on them as loosely as the flag around its pole, the skin on their cheek-bones was as tight and as yellow as the belly of a drum, their teeth protruded through parched, cracked lips, and hunger, fever, and suffering stared from out their eyes. They were so ill and so feeble that the mere exercise of standing was too severe for their endurance, and many of them collapsed, falling back to the sidewalk, rising to salute only the first troop of each succeeding regiment. This done, they would again sink back and each would sit leaning his head against his musket, or with his forehead resting heavily on his folded arms. In comparison the relieving column looked like giants as they came in with a swinging swagger, their uniforms blackened with mud and sweat and bloodstains, their faces brilliantly crimsoned and blistered and tanned by the dust and sun. They made a picture of strength and health and aggressiveness.

Perhaps the contrast was strongest when the battalion of the Devons that had been on foreign service passed the "reserve" battalion which had come from England. The men of the two battalions had parted five years before in India, and they met again in Ladysmith, with the men of one battalion lining the streets, sick, hungry, and yellow, and the others, who had been fighting six weeks to reach it, marching toward them, robust, red-faced, and cheering mightily.

As they met they gave a shout of recognition, and the men broke ranks and ran forward, calling each other by name, embracing, shaking hands, and punching each other in the back and shoulders. It was a sight that very few men watched unmoved. Indeed, the whole three hours was one of the most brutal assaults upon the feelings that it has been my lot to endure. One felt he had been entirely lifted out of the politics of the war, and the question of the wrongs of the Boers disappeared before a simple proposition of brave men saluting brave men.

Early in the campaign, when his officers had blundered, General White had dared to write: "I alone am to blame." But in this triumphal procession twenty-two thousand gentlemen in khaki wiped that line off the slate, and wrote, "Well done, sir," in its place, as they passed before him through the town he had defended and saved.