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With Buller's Column

"Were you the station-master here before this?" I asked the man in the straw hat, at Colenso. "I mean before this war?"

"No fear!" snorted the station-master, scornfully. "Why, we didn't know Colenso was on the line until Buller fought a battle here. That's how it is with all these way-stations now. Everybody's talking about them. We never took no notice to them."

And yet the arriving stranger might have been forgiven his point of view and his start of surprise when he found Chieveley a place of only a half dozen corrugated zinc huts, and Colenso a scattered gathering of a dozen shattered houses of battered brick.

Chieveley seemed so insignificant in contrast with its fame to those who had followed the war on maps and in the newspapers, that one was not sure he was on the right road until he saw from the car-window the armored train still lying on the embankment, the graves beside it, and the donga into which Winston Churchill pulled and carried the wounded.

And as the train bumped and halted before the blue and white enamel sign that marks Colenso station, the places which have made that spot familiar and momentous fell into line like the buoys which mark the entrance to a harbor.

We knew that the high bare ridge to the right must be Fort Wylie, that the plain on the left was where Colonel Long had lost his artillery, and three officers gained the Victoria Cross, and that the swift, muddy stream, in which the iron railroad bridge lay humped and sprawling, was the Tugela River.

Six hours before, at Frere Station, the station-master had awakened us to say that Ladysmith would be relieved at any moment. This had but just come over the wire. It was "official." Indeed, he added, with local pride, that the village band was still awake and in readiness to celebrate the imminent event. He found, I fear, an unsympathetic audience. The train was carrying philanthropic gentlemen in charge of stores of champagne and marmalade for the besieged city. They did not want it to be relieved until they were there to substitute *pâté de foie gras* for horseflesh. And there were officers, too, who wanted a "look in," and who had been kept waiting at Cape Town for commissions, gladdening the guests of the Mount Nelson Hotel the while with their new khaki and gaiters, and there were Tommies who wanted "Relief of Ladysmith" on the clasps of their medals, as they had seen "Relief of Lucknow" on the medals of the Chelsea pensioners. And there was a correspondent who had journeyed 15,000 miles to see Ladysmith relieved, and who was apparently going to miss that sight, after five weeks of travel, by a margin of five hours.

We all growled "That's good," as we had done for the last two weeks every time we had heard it was relieved, but our tone was not enthusiastic. And when the captain of the Natal Carbineers said, "I am afraid the good news is too premature," we all said, hopefully, we were afraid it was.

We had seen nothing yet that was like real war. That night at Pietermaritzburg the officers at the hotel were in mess-jackets, the officers' wives in dinner-gowns. It was like Shepherd's Hotel, at the top of the season. But only six hours after that dinner, as we looked out of the car-windows, we saw galloping across the high grass, like men who had lost their way, and silhouetted black against the red sunrise, countless horsemen scouting ahead of our train, and guarding it against the fate of the armored one lying wrecked at Chieveley. The darkness was still heavy on the land and the only lights were the red eyes of the armored train creeping in advance of ours, and the red sun, which showed our silent escort appearing suddenly against the sky-line on a ridge, or galloping toward us through the dew to order us, with a wave of the hand, to greater speed. One hour after sunrise the train drew up at Colenso, and from only a mile away we heard the heavy thud of the naval guns, the hammering of the Boer "pom-poms," and the Maxims and Colt automatics spanking the air. We smiled at each other guiltily. We were on time. It was most evident that Ladysmith had not been relieved.

This was the twelfth day of a battle that Buller's column was waging against the Boers and their mountain ranges, or "disarranges," as someone described them, without having gained more than three miles of hostile territory. He had tried to force his way through them six times, and had been repulsed six times. And now he was to try it again.

No map, nor photograph, nor written description can give an idea of the country which lay between Buller and his goal. It was an eruption of high hills, linked together at every point without order or sequence. In most countries mountains and hills follow some natural law. The Cordilleras can be traced from the Amazon River to Guatemala City; they make the water-shed of two continents; the Great Divide forms the backbone of the States, but these Natal hills have no lineal descent. They are illegitimate children of no line, abandoned broadcast over the country, with no family likeness and no home. They stand alone, or shoulder to shoulder, or at right angles, or at a tangent, or join hands across a valley. They never appear the same; some run to a sharp point, some stretch out, forming a table-land, others are gigantic ant-hills, others perfect and accurately modeled ramparts. In a ride of half a mile, every hill completely loses its original aspect and character.

They hide each other, or disguise each other. Each can be enfiladed by the other, and not one gives up the secret of its strategic value until its crest has been carried by the bayonet. To add to this confusion, the river Tugela has selected the hills around Ladysmith as occupying the country through which it will endeavor to throw off its pursuers. It darts through them as though striving to escape, it doubles on its tracks, it sinks out of sight between them, and in the open plain rises to the dignity of water-falls. It runs uphill, and remains motionless on an incline, and on the level ground twists and turns so frequently that when one says he has crossed the Tugela, he means he has crossed it once at a drift, once at the wrecked railroad bridge, and once over a pontoon. And then he is not sure that he is not still on the same side from which he started.

Some of these hills are green, but the greater part are a yellow or dark red, against which at two hundred yards a man in khaki is indistinguishable from the rocks around him. Indeed, the khaki is the English soldier's sole protection. It saves him in spite of himself, for he apparently cannot learn to advance under cover, and a sky-line is the one place where he selects to stand erect and stretch his weary limbs. I have come to within a hundred yards of a hill before I saw that scattered among its red and yellow boulders was the better part of a regiment as closely packed together as the crowd on the bleaching boards at a baseball match.

Into this maze and confusion of nature's fortifications Buller's column has been twisting and turning, marching and countermarching, capturing one position after another, to find it was

enfiladed from many hills, and abandoning it, only to retake it a week later. The greater part of the column has abandoned its tents and is bivouacking in the open. It is a wonderful and impressive sight. At the first view, an army in being, when it is spread out as it is in the Tugela basin back of the hills, seems a hopelessly and irrevocably entangled mob.

An army in the field is not regiments of armed men, marching with a gun on shoulder, or crouching behind trenches. That is the least, even if it seems the most, important part of it. Before one reaches the firing-line he must pass villages of men, camps of men, bivouacs of men, who are feeding, mending, repairing, and burying the men at the "front." It is these latter that make the mob of gypsies, which is apparently without head or order or organization. They stretched across the great basin of the Tugela, like the children of Israel, their campfires rising to the sky at night like the reflection of great search-lights; by day they swarmed across the plain, like hundreds of moving circus-vans in every direction, with as little obvious intention as herds of buffalo. But each had his appointed work, and each was utterly indifferent to the battle going forward a mile away. Hundreds of teams, of sixteen oxen each, crawled like great black water-snakes across the drifts, the Kaffir drivers, naked and black, lashing them with whips as long as lariats, shrieking, beseeching, and howling, and falling upon the oxen's horns to drag them into place.

Mules from Spain and Texas, loaded with ammunition, kicked and plunged, more oxen drew more soberly the great naval guns, which lurched as though in a heavy sea, throwing the blue-jackets who hung upon the drag-ropes from one high side of the trail to the other. Across the plain, and making toward the trail, wagons loaded with fodder, with rations, with camp equipment, with tents and cooking stoves, crowded each other as closely as cable-cars on Broadway. Scattered among them were fixed lines of tethered horses, rows of dog-tents, camps of Kaffirs, hospital stations with the Red Cross waving from the nearest and highest tree. Dripping water-carts with as many spigots as the regiment had companies, howitzer guns guided by as many ropes as a May-pole, crowded past these to the trail, or gave way to the ambulances filled with men half dressed and bound in the zinc-blue bandages that made the color detestable forever after. Troops of the irregular horse gallop through this multitude, with a jangling of spurs and sling-belts; and Tommies, in close order, fight their way among the oxen, or help pull them to one side as the stretchers pass, each with its burden, each with its blue bandage stained a dark brownish crimson.

It is only when the figure on the stretcher lies under a blanket that the tumult and push and sweltering mass comes to a quick pause, while the dead man's comrade stands at attention, and the officer raises his fingers to his helmet. Then the mass surges on again, with cracking of whips and shouts and imprecations, while the yellow dust rises in thick clouds and buries the picture in a glaring fog. This moving, struggling mass that fights for the right of way along the road is within easy distance of the shells. Those from their own guns pass over them with a shrill crescendo, those from the enemy burst among them at rare intervals, or sink impotently in the soft soil. And a dozen Tommies rush to dig them out as keepsakes. Up at the front, brown and yellow regiments are lying crouched behind brown and yellow rocks and stones. As far as you can see, the hills are sown with them. With a glass you distinguish them against the sky-line of every hill, for over three miles away. Sometimes the men rise and fire, and there is a feverish flutter of musketry; sometimes they lie motionless for hours while the guns make the ways straight.

Anyone who has seen Epsom Downs on a Derby day, with its thousands of vans and tents and lines of horses and moving mobs, can form some idea of what it is like. But while at the

Derby all is interest and excitement, and everyone is pushing and struggling, and the air palpitates with the intoxication of a great event, the winning of a horse-race—here, where men are killed every hour and no one of them knows when his turn may come, the fact that most impresses you is their indifference to it all. What strikes you most is the bored air of the Tommies, the undivided interest of the engineers in the construction of a pontoon bridge, the solicitude of the medical staff over the long lines of wounded, the rage of the naked Kaffirs at their lumbering steers; the fact that every one is intent on something—anything—but the battle.

They are wearied with battles. The Tommies stretch themselves in the sun to dry the wet khaki in which they have lain out in the cold night for weeks, and yawn at battles. Or, if you climb to the hill where the officers are seated, you will find men steeped even deeper in boredom. They are burned a dark red; their brown mustaches look white by contrast, theirs are the same faces you have met with in Piccadilly, which you see across the tables of the Savoy restaurant, which gaze depressedly from the windows of White's and the Bachelors' Club. If they were bored then, they are unbearably bored now. Below them the men of their regiment lie crouched amid the boulders, hardly distinguishable from the brown and yellow rock. They are sleeping, or dozing, or yawning. A shell passes over them like the shaking of many telegraph wires, and neither officer nor Tommy raises his head to watch it strike. They are tired in body and in mind, with cramped limbs and aching eyes. They have had twelve nights and twelve days of battle, and it has lost its power to amuse.

When the sergeants call the companies together, they are eager enough. Anything is better than lying still looking up at the sunny, inscrutable hills, or down into the plain crawling with black oxen.

Among the group of staff officers someone has lost a cigar-holder. It has slipped from between his fingers, and, with the vindictiveness of inanimate things, has slid and jumped under a pile of rocks. The interest of all around is instantly centered on the lost cigar-holder. The Tommies begin to roll the rocks away, endangering the limbs of the men below them, and half the kopje is obliterated. They are as keen as terriers after a rat. The officers sit above and give advice and disagree as to where that cigar-holder hid itself. Over their heads, not twenty feet above, the shells chase each other fiercely. But the officers have become accustomed to shells; a search for a lost cigar-holder, which is going on under their very eyes, is of greater interest. And when at last a Tommy pounces upon it with a laugh of triumph, the officers look their disappointment, and, with a sigh of resignation, pick up their field-glasses.

It is all a question of familiarity. On Broadway, if a building is going up where there is a chance of a loose brick falling on some one's head, the contractor puts up red signs marked "Danger!" and you dodge over to the other side. But if you had been in battle for twelve days, as have the soldiers of Buller's column, passing shells would interest you no more than do passing cable-cars. After twelve days you would forget that shells are dangerous even as you forget when crossing Broadway that cable-cars can kill and mangle.

Up on the highest hill, seated among the highest rocks, are General Buller and his staff. The hill is all of rocks, sharp, brown rocks, as clearly cut as foundation-stones. They are thrown about at irregular angles, and are shaded only by stiff bayonet-like cacti. Above is a blue glaring sky, into which the top of the kopje seems to reach, and to draw and concentrate upon itself all of the sun's heat. This little jagged point of blistering rocks holds the forces that press the button which sets the struggling mass below, and the thousands of men upon the surrounding hills, in motion. It is the conning tower of the relief column, only, unlike a conning tower, it offers no protection, no seclusion, no peace.

Today, commanding generals, under the new conditions which this war has developed, do not charge up hills waving flashing swords. They sit on rocks, and wink out their orders by a flashing hand-mirror. The swords have been left at the base, or coated deep with mud, so that they shall not flash, and with this column everyone under the rank of general carries a rifle on purpose to disguise the fact that he is entitled to carry a sword.

The kopje is the central station of the system. From its uncomfortable eminence the commanding general watches the developments of his attack, and directs it by heliograph and ragged bits of bunting. A sweating, dirty Tommy turns his back on a hill a mile away and slaps the air with his signal flag; another Tommy, with the front visor of his helmet cocked over the back of his neck, watches an answering bit of bunting through a glass. The bit of bunting, a mile away, flashes impatiently, once to the right and once to the left, and the Tommy with the glass says, "They understand, sir," and the other Tommy, who has not as yet cast even an interested glance at the regiment he has ordered into action, folds his flag and curls up against a hot rock and instantly sleeps.

Stuck on the crest, twenty feet from where General Buller is seated, are two iron rods, like those in the putting-green of a golf course. They mark the line of direction which a shell must take, in order to seek out the enemy. Back of the kopje, where they cannot see the enemy, where they cannot even see the hill upon which he is entrenched, are the howitzers. Their duty is to aim at the iron rods, and vary their aim to either side of them as they are directed to do by an officer on the crest. Their shells pass a few yards over the heads of the staff, but the staff has confidence. Those three yards are as safe a margin as a hundred. Their confidence is that of the lady in spangles at a music-hall, who permits her husband in buckskin to shoot apples from the top of her head.

From the other direction come the shells of the Boers, seeking out the hidden howitzers. They pass somewhat higher, crashing into the base of the kopje, sometimes killing, sometimes digging their own ignominious graves. The staff regard them with the same indifference. One of them tears the overcoat upon which Colonel Stuart-Wortley is seated, another destroys his diary. His men, lying at his feet among the red rocks, observe this with wide eyes. But he does not shift his position. His answer is that his men cannot shift theirs.

On Friday, February 23d, the Inniskillings, Dublins, and Connaughts were sent out to take a trench, half-way up Railway Hill. The attack was one of those frontal attacks, which in this war, against the new weapons, have added so much to the lists of killed and wounded and to the prestige of the men, while it has, in an inverse ratio, hurt the prestige of the men by whom the attack was ordered. The result of this attack was peculiarly disastrous. It was made at night, and as soon as it developed, the Boers retreated to the trenches on the crest of the hill, and threw men around the sides to bring a cross-fire to bear on the Englishmen. In the morning the Inniskillings found they had lost four hundred men, and ten out of their fifteen officers. The other regiments lost as heavily. The following Tuesday, which was the anniversary of Majuba Hill, three brigades, instead of a regiment, were told off to take this same Railway Hill, or Pieter's, as it was later called, on the flank, and with it to capture two others. On the same day, nineteen years before, the English had lost Majuba Hill, and their hope was to take these three from the Boers for the one they had lost, and open the way to Bulwana Mountain, which was the last bar that held them back from Ladysmith.

The first two of the three hills they wanted were shoulder to shoulder, the third was separated from them by a deep ravine. This last was the highest, and in order that the attack

should be successful, it was necessary to seize it first. The hills stretched for three miles; they were about one thousand two hundred yards high.

For three hours a single line of men slipped and stumbled forward along the muddy bank of the river, and for three hours the artillery crashed, spluttered, and stabbed at the three hills above them, scattering the rocks and bursting over and behind the Boer trenches on the crest.

As is their custom, the Boers remained invisible and made no reply. And though we knew they were there, it seemed inconceivable that anything human could live under such a bombardment of shot, bullets, and shrapnel. A hundred yards distant, on our right, the navy guns were firing lyddite that burst with a thick yellow smoke; on the other side Colt automatics were put-put-put-ing a stream of bullets; the field-guns and the howitzers were playing from a hill half a mile behind us, and scattered among the rocks about us, and for two miles on either hand, the infantry in reserve were firing off ammunition at any part of the three hills they happened to dislike.

The roar of the navy's Four-Point-Sevens, their crash, their rush as they passed, the shrill whine of the shrapnel, the barking of the howitzers, and the mechanical, regular rattle of the quick-firing Maxims, which sounded like the clicking of many mowing-machines on a hot summer's day, tore the air with such hideous noises that one's skull ached from the concussion, and one could only be heard by shouting. But more impressive by far than this hot chorus of mighty thunder and petty hammering, was the roar of the wind which was driven down into the valley beneath, and which swept up again in enormous waves of sound. It roared like a wild hurricane at sea. The illusion was so complete, that you expected, by looking down, to see the Tugela lashing at her banks, tossing the spray hundreds of feet in air, and battling with her sides of rock. It was like the roar of Niagara in a gale, and yet when you did look below, not a leaf was stirring, and the Tugela was slipping forward, flat and sluggish, and in peace.

The long procession of yellow figures was still advancing along the bottom of the valley, toward the right, when on the crest of the farthest hill fourteen of them appeared suddenly, and ran forward and sprang into the trenches.

Perched against the blue sky on the highest and most distant of the three hills, they looked terribly lonely and insufficient, and they ran about, this way and that, as though they were very much surprised to find themselves where they were. Then they settled down into the Boer trench, from our side of it, and began firing, their officer, as his habit is, standing up behind them. The hill they had taken had evidently been abandoned to them by the enemy, and the fourteen men in khaki had taken it by "default." But they disappeared so suddenly into the trench, that we knew they were not enjoying their new position in peace, and every one looked below them, to see the arriving reinforcements. They came at last, to the number of ten, and scampered about just as the others had done, looking for cover.

It seemed as if we could almost hear the singing of the bullet when one of them dodged, and it was with a distinct sense of relief, and of freedom from further responsibility, that we saw the ten disappear also, and become part of the yellow stones about them. Then a very wonderful movement began to agitate the men upon the two remaining hills. They began to creep up them as you have seen seaweed rise with the tide and envelop a rock. They moved in regiments, but each man was as distinct as is a letter of the alphabet in each word on this page, black with letters. We began to follow the fortunes of individual letters. It was a most selfish and cowardly occupation, for you knew you were in no greater danger than you would be in looking through the glasses of a microscope.

The battle unrolled before you like a panorama. The guns on our side of the valley had ceased, the hurricane in the depths below had instantly spent itself, and the birds and insects had again begun to fill our hill with drowsy twitter and song. But on the other, half the men were wrapping the base of the hill in khaki, which rose higher and higher, growing looser and less tightly wrapt as it spun upward. Halfway to the crest there was a broad open space of green grass, and above that a yellow bank of earth, which supported the track of the railroad. This green space spurted with tiny geysers of yellow dust. Where the bullets came from or who sent them we could not see. But the loose ends of the bandage of khaki were stretching across this green space and the yellow spurts of dust rose all around them. The men crossed this fire zone warily, looking to one side or the other, as the bullets struck the earth heavily, like drops of rain before a shower.

The men had their heads and shoulders bent as though they thought a roof was about to fall on them; some ran from rock to rock, seeking cover properly; others scampered toward the safe vantage-ground behind the railroad embankment; others advanced leisurely, like men playing golf. The silence, after the hurricane of sounds, was painful; we could not hear even the Boer rifles. The men moved like figures in a dream, without firing a shot. They seemed each to be acting on his own account, without unison or organization.

As I have said, you ceased considering the scattered whole, and became intent on the adventures of individuals. These fell so suddenly, that you waited with great anxiety to learn whether they had dropped to dodge a bullet or whether one had found them. The men came at last from every side, and from out of every ridge and dried-up waterway. Open spaces which had been green a moment before were suddenly dyed yellow with them. Where a company had been clinging to the railroad embankment, there stood one regiment holding it, and another sweeping over it. Heights that had seemed the goal, became the resting-place of the stretcher-bearers, until at last no part of the hill remained unpopulated, save a high bulging rampart of unprotected and open ground.

And then, suddenly, coming from the earth itself, apparently, one man ran across this open space and leaped on top of the trench which crowned the hill. He was fully fifteen yards in advance of all the rest, entirely unsupported, and alone. And he had evidently planned it so, for he took off his helmet and waved it, and stuck it on his rifle and waved it again, and then suddenly clapped it on his head and threw his gun to his shoulder. He stood so, pointing down into the trench, and it seemed as though we could hear him calling upon the Boers behind it to surrender.

A few minutes later the last of the three hills was mounted by the West Yorks, who were mistaken by their own artillery for Boers, and fired upon both by the Boers and by their own shrapnel and lyddite. Four men were wounded, and, to save themselves, a line of them stood up at full length on the trench and cheered and waved at the artillery until it had ceased to play upon them. The Boers continued to fire upon them with rifles for over two hours. But it was only a demonstration to cover the retreat of the greater number, and at daybreak the hills were in complete and peaceful possession of the English.

These hills were a part of the same Railway Hill which four nights before the Inniskillings and a composite regiment had attempted to take by a frontal attack with the loss of six hundred men, among whom were three colonels. By this flank attack, and by using nine regiments instead of one, the same hills and two others were taken with two hundred casualties. The fact that this battle, which was called the Battle of Pieter's Hill, and the surrender of General Cronje and his forces to Lord Roberts, both took place on the anniversary of the battle of Majuba

Hill, made the whole of Buller's column feel that the ill memory of that disaster had been effaced.