

One Sunday on the Drift

"Just see if that's a man over there, or an anthill," said the subaltern in command of the left flanking party of the rear guard. The corporal addressed hastened across between the half company, moving in single file, and the main column. Half way across he stopped and kicked at a dark object on the ground. There was a muttered curse and a man dragged himself to his feet and staggered on, taking no notice of half a dozen cart ridges which slipped from his hands.

It was pitch dark. The regiment had been plodding steadily ahead since sundown. They formed the rear guard that night to one of the long columns concentrating on Paardeberg and Koodostrand Drift. Not half a dozen members of the regiment, officers or men, knew their destination. Having set out from Klip Drift with the idea of an easy eight-mile march, and already wearied from the previous day's march from Jacobsdal, they found themselves still dragging their blistered feet through the sand as the sun rose on Sunday morning, the 18th of February.

Now and then during the night the deep boom of a heavy gun had told them that something was happening on ahead. Occasionally an obstreperous mule or a broken wagon wheel would cause a short halt. It was on such occasions that exhausted men would drop down and be asleep before they touched the ground. It was part of the above mentioned subaltern's duty to see that these men were not left behind.

At about 4 o'clock the long column passed through what was left of a large farm. In the dim light of early dawn the buildings looked ghostly with their gaping windows and shattered doors.

Here and there lay an empty biscuit tin left by the Highland Brigade just ahead; and all along the route, almost forming a hedge on either side, were the bloated and stinking bodies of the poor horses and mules that had dropped in their tracks. Sometimes an apparently dead charger would raise his head and make an attempt at a whinny, as though begging not to be left behind.

With water-bottles emptied of the vile, lukewarm water they had contained, the regiment at last halted near Paardeberg Drift. But not for long. Just as the worn-out men are with satisfaction viewing the camp kettles beginning to boil the command to fall in again and unpile arms is given. Magazines are charged and arms inspected. Something is going to happen. A battery on the slight ridge in front comes into action. Yes, Cronje is cornered here, and orders come for the brigade to cross the river and attack along the north bank.

And so, after a twenty-three mile night march, and no breakfast, with one last regretful glance at the simmering kettles, the regiment proceeds to cross the swollen river at a point where the rushing water is up to the necks of most men.

It is interesting to see how men of different temperaments take the situation; some cursing, some joking, others silently casting furtive glances at the faces of their comrades, as though looking for signs of the nervousness that is gradually stealing over themselves. Those who have been under fire before attempt to assume an air of indifference which most of them are far from feeling; for very few veterans, who are men and not machines, get over the feeling which comes just before a battle, and the regiment as a whole has not so far taken part in any big engagement.

To their left, at a shallower part of the river, a battery of artillery, which is to play an important part in this day's bloody fight, is crossing.

Now and then a horse will drop almost out of sight in some hole, only to stagger up again and go splashing ahead. The men, as they flounder across, fill their water bottles with the muddy water, which next day is to be polluted by the bodies of hundreds of oxen, horses and men to such an extent that the drift where the guns are now crossing will have to be cleared by fatigue parties, just as river-drivers loosen a jam of logs.

The regiment, soaked to the skin, drags itself up the opposite bank, reforms, changes direction right, opens to five paces interval and advances in successive companies at fifty paces distance.

Now comes the singing of bullets high overhead, fired by an unseen enemy, possibly two thousand yards away. As they advance the singing comes lower and lower, finally changing to the sharp crack with which a Mauser bullet passes the ear, giving rise to the idea that it is exploding.

"Hold up yer head, man; ye ain't hear 'em till they've passed ye," cries a sergeant to a young recruit, who, with white face and set jaw, is bending forward as though driving ahead against a storm.

A man in the company behind gives a choking gasp and crumples up in a heap on the sand.

The interval is increased to seven paces. The leading company doubles forward, throws itself prone, doubles forward again, tops a slight rise in the ground and disappears. The rest of the regiment lies flat in the sand and listens. Presently the crack of the Lee-Netford is heard, growing in intensity, then almost ceasing. Word is sent back for ammunition and to reinforce. The enemy is located in the trees and bushes bordering the banks at a bend of the river. The next company doubles forward and a renewed fusillade and throws itself down in the firing-line.

The ground in front and all about is spurring up little handfuls of sand. Apart from an anthill here and there and a few low shrubs rising but a few inches above the ground, there is no cover on the open plain.

The men, after a few minutes of feverish firing at the indicated position of the unseen enemy, begin to throw up little piles of sand in front of them, using the covers of their mess-tins, some, foolishly, their bayonets. Aha! The sun caught the back of that tin; a Boer marksman was quick to see it, and it goes whirling a dozen feet away, while the owner lies rolling on the ground, cursing and choking. Man after man is hit. Some do not move; others groan and dig their fingers into the sand until their broken nails drip with blood.

"Stretcher-bearers! Here—no, here! Stretcher-bearers! Stretcher-bearers!" comes the cry all up and down the long line.

But it is almost impossible to bring the stretchers up. The bearers are picked off time after time in their brave attempts to beat up against the hail of bullets.

"Here you, Jim, how the—can I tie yer leg if ye kick like that! Ah, bite me, would ye? It's no use, he's done."

The burning sun has dried out the men's clothes, but a thunder storm wets them through again during the afternoon. With no possibility of advancing further, and no chance of retreating, even if it had been thought of, the regiment lies there on the plain, panting for water. All except a few on the extreme right, who, crawling down to the river, are picked off almost to a man.

As the afternoon wears on the firing on both sides slackens, and there is a short respite except when some button or mess-tin, catching the glint of the sun, becomes the target of more than one hidden Boer.

Away on the left a battery of field artillery comes into action, opening fire on the Boers in the river-bed. There is the smokeless flash of a gun, a wait of a few seconds, and then each successive shell explodes at almost the same spot in the air ahead of the infantry, and scatters its leaden pellets into every donga and crevice of the Boer position. A few, unfortunately, going further, cause several casualties among the Highland Brigade on the other side of the river.

To the soothing accompaniment of screeching shrapnel, the subaltern, like many another man that day, drops into a doze, only to be awakened by the patter of a Maxim gun. Looking over his shoulder, he sees an ammunition wagon crawling across the plain in the direction of the battery. A cloud of dust some distance this side of them shows where the bullets from the Boer Maxim are striking the ground. Quickly the dust cloud flies across the intervening space until it reaches the team, about which it fastens just like the searchlight of a battleship. The horses rear and kick as though stung by a swarm of bees. Then slowly one by one they drop to the ground, till only one of the six is left standing. This is led away by a driver, crawling on his hands and knees. The Maxim ceases fire and the wagon, with its dead and dying men and horses lying about it, is left there in the open. For a short time again there is another lull, except for the intermittent banging of the field guns and the knocking of the Boer pom-pom or Vickers-Maxim, dubbed by the Tommies the "Come in, Eliza."

Suddenly there is a tremendous outburst of firing from the Boer trenches, and the rush of hundreds of bullets sounds like the hiss of driving sleet.

Instinctively each man crouches lower, but the fire is being directed elsewhere, and through his glasses

the young officer can see away on the left front the gallant Gordons attempting a flank movement.

In the distance they look like insects as they jump to their feet and make short rushes forward, only to suddenly disappear as they throw themselves down again at the end of the rush. Sometimes a man doesn't get up for the next rush.

Everywhere about them the bullets kick up the dust, and the youngster, forgetting that he had got safely through the same thing a few hours before, wonders how any of them can be left alive.

The smack of a Mauser bullet close past his ear reminds him that he is exposing himself, and turning his head he sees near him a man lying partly across an anthill. "Get down off that, man alive," he says. "Beg pardon, sir, that's Smith, sir. Tried to change cover, sir. He's dead!" Are they never to get any orders? The afternoon drags on. The advance of the Gordons is checked. The sun beats down pitilessly and the whole landscape shimmers in the heat. "Wonder what they are doing at home now? Probably going to church. When will they hear of this and will my name be on that list tonight?" The "thing" on the anthill has swollen to nearly twice its original size. Every now and then the body gives a quiver as another bullet pierces it. Suddenly there is a rush of feet from the rear, and the Cornwalls come up at the double and throw themselves down among the living and dead in the firing line, to the accompaniment of hundreds of pip-pops from the Mausers in the river-bed. And at last orders are passed down the long line, stretching for over five hundred yards: "Concentrate on the right! We will charge with the Cornwalls."

Charge, what? They are over four hundred yards from the Boer position, and the space between them is as level as a billiard table. However, anything is preferable to the present situation, and the men on the left begin to crawl from one bit of cover to another, now and then making a dash across some open space, working up towards the right.

Then when all is ready, with fixed bayonets and a cheer that can be heard far across the veldt, the two regiments rush forward. How far? Only a comparatively few yards. Then the leaden hail from the unseen marksmen mows them down in

groups. One man, true enough, is found next day only a few yards from the trenches—riddled.

The sun has just set. From every direction, in the quickly gathering darkness come the cries of the wounded, whose every sound or movement is the signal for a double pip-pop and the smack of a bullet close by in the sand, where it continues to rotate with a buzzing sound for a moment or two.

At length in the darkness the regiment slowly pieces itself together again, collects its wounded and retires in scattered parties towards the drift, near which a small farm house does duty as a hospital.

The roll is called and hardly half the regiment answers to their names; but men come dropping in all through the night, some with set, white faces and staring eyes, one or two quite unnerved, crying like children over the loss of some comrade. The casualty list is found to be over eighty. Over there the Argyle and Sutherlands are standing, and they have seven officers left for company duty.

The total British loss has been eleven hundred, but the Boers have been forced to retire and concentrate at the point where nine days later, surrounded on all sides, they are to hoist the white flag, this time in earnest.

C. S. Wilkie.

Trouble at Van Anda

Vancouver, Feb. 27.—The Van Anda mine management is again in trouble. Messrs. Allan and Downs, of Seattle, have been recently operating the property on a bond from the debenture holders of the company. This morning fifty men arrived here by the steamer Cassiar and seventy-five are still stranded at Texada without money. The mine is shut down, and two months' wages are owing. A committee of three of the miners was appointed to act as trustees, and to these the management has assigned 33,500 worth of matte now on hand. There is a possibility of the mine resuming, as money is expected from New York. The miners are sending delegates to Victoria appealing to the government for protection and assistance.

He Knows.

A married editor soliloquizes thus of the gentler sex: "There is gladness in her sadness when she's glad, and

there is sadness in her sadness when she is sad, but the gladness of her gladness and the sadness of her sadness is nothing to her madness when she's mad."

Henry Gets Contract.

From a private letter received a few days ago by Dr. F. J. Nicholson from Mr. E. E. Siegley, accountant for Mr. M. J. Heney at his headquarters in Seattle, it is supposed that Mr. Heney has received the contract for the construction of Mr. E. C. Hawkins' railroad to the creeks near Dawson. — Whitehorse Star.

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