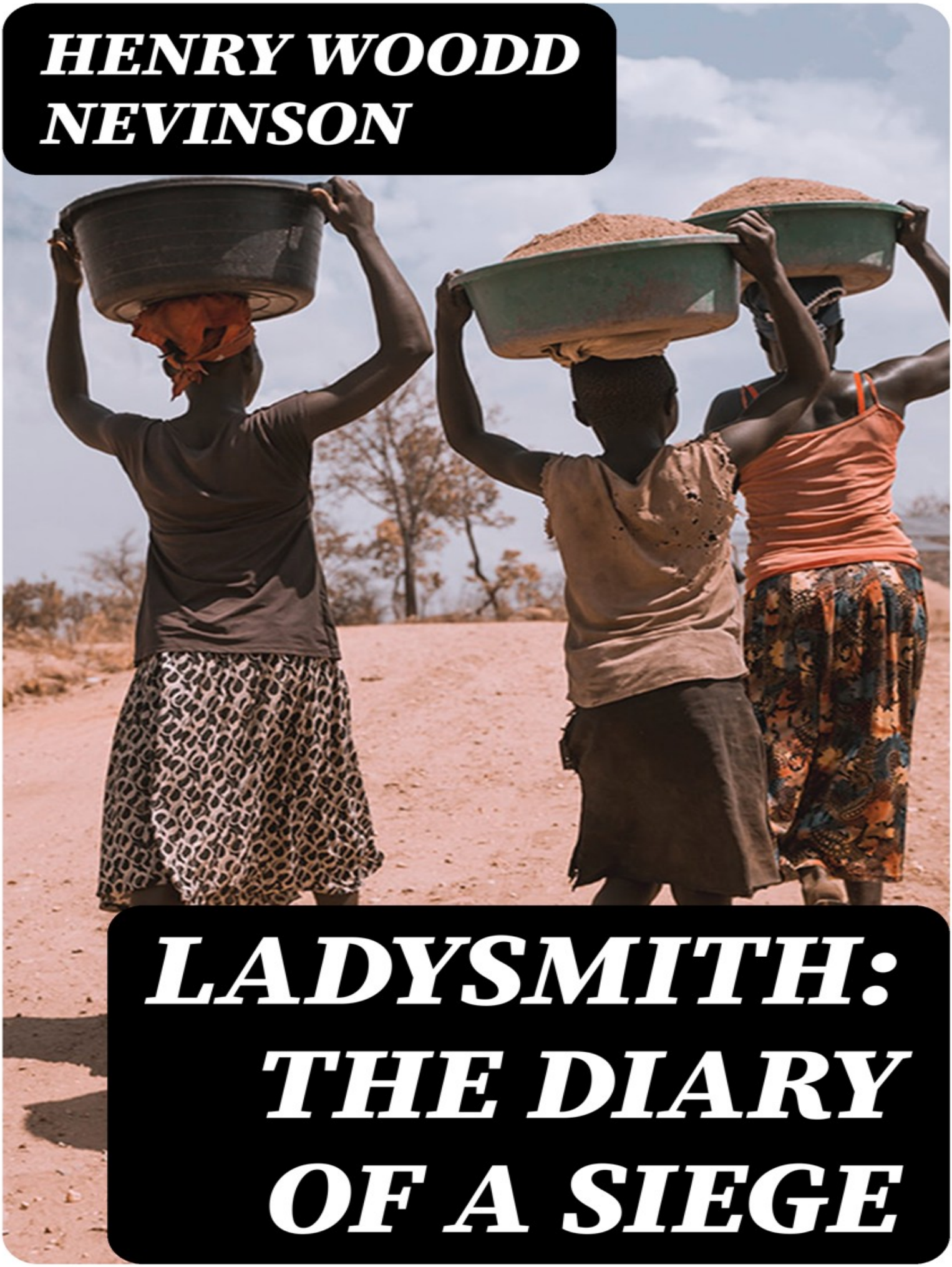
HENRY WOODD NEVINSON



LADYSMITH: THE DIARY OF A SIEGE

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CHAPTER I

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ON THE EDGE

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NEWCASTLE, NATAL, *Thursday, October 5, 1899*.

Late last Sunday night I found myself slowly crawling towards the front from Pretoria in a commandeered train crammed full of armed Boers and their horses. I had rushed from the Cape to quiet little Bloemfontein, the centre of one of the best administered States in the world, where the heads of the nation in the intervals of discussing war proudly showed me their pianos, their little gardens, little libraries of English books, little museums of African beasts and Greek coins, and all their other evidences of advancing culture. Then on to Pretoria, the same kind of a town on a larger and richer scale—trim bungalow houses, for the most part, spread out among gardens full of roses, honeysuckle, and syringa. But at the station all day and night the scene was not idyllic. Every hour train after train moved away—stores and firewood in front, horses next, and luggage vans for the men behind. The partings from lovers and wives and children must be imagined. They are bad enough to witness when our own soldiers go to the front. But these men are not soldiers at all. Each of them came direct from his home in the town or on some isolated farm. They rode up, dressed just in their ordinary clothes, but for the slung Mauser and the full cartridge belt over the shoulder or round the waist. Except for a few gunners, there is no uniform in the Boer

Army. Even the officers can hardly be distinguished from ordinary farmers. The only thing that could be called uniform is the broad-brimmed soft hat of grey or brown. But all Boers wear it. It is generally very stained and dirty, and invariably a rusty crape band is wound about the crown. For the Boer, like the English poorer classes, has large quantities of relations, and one of them is always dying.

By the courtesy of the Pretorian Government I had secured room in the guard's van for myself and a companion, who was equally anxious to cross the Natal frontier before the firing began, and that was expected at any moment. In the van with us were a score of farmers from Middleburg way, their contingent occupying four trains with about 800 men and horses. For the most part they were fine tall men with shaggy light beards, reminding one of Yorkshire farmers, but rougher and not so well dressed. Most of them could speak some English, and many had Scotch or English relatives. They lay on the floor or sat on the edge of the van, talking quietly and smoking enormous pipes. All deeply regretted the war, regretted the farm left behind just when spring and rain are coming, and they were full of foreboding for the women and children left at the mercy of Kaffirs. There was no excitement or shouting or bravado of any kind. So we travelled into the night, the monotony only broken by one violent collision which shook us all flat on the floor, while arms and stores fell crashing upon us. In the silent pause which followed, whilst we wondered if we were dead, I could hear the Kaffirs chattering in their mud huts close by, and in the distance a cornet was playing "Home, Sweet Home," with variations.

It must have been the next evening, as we were waiting three or four hours, as usual, for the line to clear, that General Joubert came up in a special train. A few young men and boys in ordinary clothes formed his "staff." The General himself wore the usual brown slouch hat with crape band, and a blue frock coat, not luxuriously new. His beard was quite white, but his long straight hair was still more black than grey. The brown sallow face was deeply wrinkled and marked, but the dark brown eyes were still bright, and looked out upon the world with a kind of simplicity mingled with shrewdness, or perhaps some subtler quality. He spoke English with a piquant lack of grammar and misuse of words. When I travelled with him next day, almost the first thing he said to me was, "The heart of my soul is bloody with sorrow." His moderating influence on the Kruger Government is well known, and he described to me how he had done his utmost for peace. But he also described how bit by bit England had pushed the Boers out of their inheritance, and taken advantage of them in every conference and native war. He was particularly hurt that the Queen had taken no notice of the long letter or pamphlet he wrote to her on the situation. And, by the way, I often observed what regard most Boers appear to feel for the Queen personally. They constantly couple her name with Gladstone's when they wish to say anything nice about English politics. As to the General's views on the crisis, there would be little new to say. Till the present war his hope had been for a South African Confederacy under English protection—the Cape, Natal, Free State, and Transvaal all having equal rights and local self-government. He knows

well enough the inner causes of the present evils. "But now," he said, "we can only leave it to God. If it is His will that the Transvaal perish, we can only do our best."

At Zandspruit, the scene of the old Sand River Convention, the whole Boer camp crowded to the station to greet the national hero, and he was at once surrounded by a herd of farmers, shaking his hands and patting him warmly on the back. It was a respectful but democratic greeting. The Boer Army—if for a moment we may give that name to an unorganised collection of volunteers—is entirely democratic. The men are nominally under field cornets, commanders, and the General. But they openly boast that on the field the authority and direction of officers do not count for much, and they go pretty much as they please. The camp, though not in the least disorderly, was confused and irregular—stores, firewood, horses, cattle, and tents strewn about the enormous veldt, almost haphazard, though the districts were kept fairly well separate. Provisions were plenty, but the cooking was bad. It took three days to get bread made, and some detachments had to eat their meat raw. I think there were not more than 10,000 or less than 7,000 men in the camp at that time, but the commandeered trains crawled up every two or three hours with their new loads.

By a piece of good fortune we succeeded in crossing the frontier in an open coal-truck. The border-line runs about six miles north of Majuba and Laing's Nek, the last Boer village being Volksrust, and Charlestown the first English. The scenery changes rapidly; the high, bare veldt of the Southern Transvaal is at once left behind, and we enter the

broad valley of Natal, sloping steadily down to the sea and becoming richer and more tropical as it descends. All regular traffic had stopped three days before, but now and then a refugee train came up to the frontier and transhipped its miserable crowd. Fugitives of every nation have been hurrying to the railway in hopes of escape. The stations far down into Natal are constantly surrounded with patient groups, waiting, waiting for an empty truck. Hindoos from Bombay and Madras with their golden nose-rings and brilliant silks sit day and night waiting side by side with coal-black Kaffirs in their blankets, or "blue-blooded" Zulus who refuse to hide much of their deep chocolate skin, showing a kind of purple bloom like a plum. The patient indifference with which these savages will sit unmoved through any fortune and let time run over them, is almost like the solemn calm of nature's own laws. The whites are restless and probably suffer more. Many were in extreme misery. Three or four young children died on the journey. One poor woman became a mother in the train just after the frontier, and died, leaving the baby alive. At the border I found many English and Scotch families, who had driven across the veldt from Ermelo, surrendering all their possessions. All spoke of the good treatment the Boers had shown them on the journey, even when the waggon had outspanned for the night close to the Boer camp. I came down to Newcastle with a Caithness stonemason and his family. They had lost house, home, and livelihood. They had even abandoned their horses and waggon on the veldt. The woman regretted her piano, but what really touched her most was that she had to wash her baby in cold water at the lavatory basin,

and he had always been accustomed to warm. So we stand on the perilous edge and suffer variously.

CHAPTER II

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AT THE BRITISH FRONT

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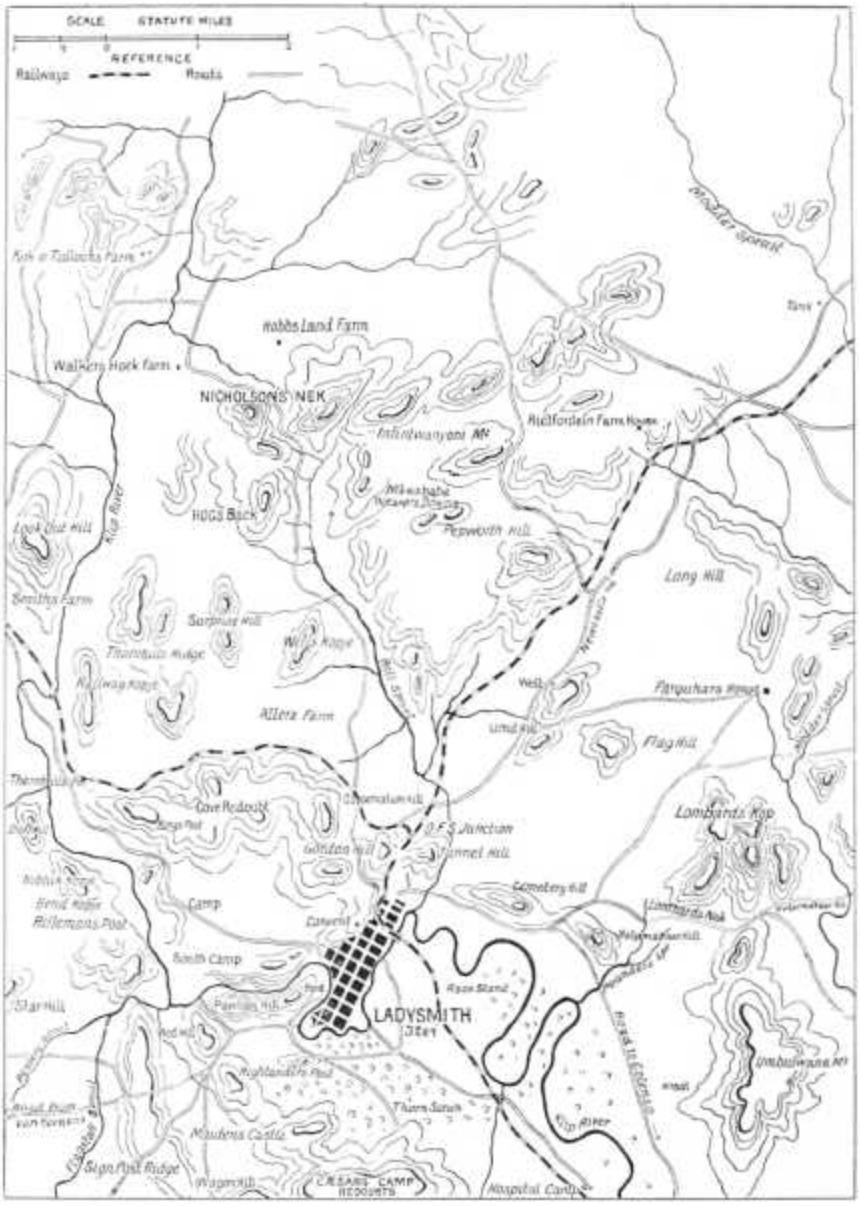
LADYSMITH, NATAL, *Wednesday, October 11, 1899*.

Ladysmith breathes freely to-day, but a week ago she seemed likely to become another Lucknow. Of line battalions only the Liverpools were here, besides two batteries of field artillery, some of the 18th Hussars, and the 5th Lancers. If Kruger or Joubert had then allowed the Boers encamped on the Free State border to have their own way, no one can say what might have happened. Our force would have been outnumbered at least four to one, and probably more. In event of disaster the Boers would have seized an immense quantity of military stores accumulated in the camp, and at the railway station. What is worse, they would have isolated the still smaller force lately thrown forward to Dundee, so as to break the strong defensive position of the Biggarsberg, which cuts off the north of Natal, and can only be traversed by three difficult passes. Dundee was just as much threatened from the east frontier beyond the Buffalo River, where the Transvaal Boers of the Utrecht and Vryheid district have been mustered in strong force for nearly a fortnight now. With our two advanced posts "lapped up" (the phrase is a little musty here), our stores lost, and our reputation among the Dutch and native populations entirely ruined, the campaign would have begun badly.

For the Boers it was a fine strategic opportunity, and they were perfectly aware of that. But "the Old Man," as they affectionately call the President, had his own prudent reasons for refusing it. "Let the enemy fire first," he says, like the famous Frenchman, and so far he has been able to hold the most ardent of the encamped burghers in check. "If he should not be able!" we kept saying. We still say it morning and evening, but the pinch of the danger is passed. Last Thursday night the 1st Devons and the 19th Hussars began to arrive and the crisis ended. Yesterday before daybreak half the Gordons came. We have now a mountain battery and three batteries of field artillery, the 19th Hussars (the 18th having gone forward to Dundee), besides the 5th Lancers (the "Irish Lancers"), who are in faultless condition, and a considerable mixed force of the Natal Volunteers. Of these last, the Carbineers are perhaps the best, and generally serve as scouts towards the Free State frontier. But all have good repute as horsemen, marksmen, and guides, and at present they are the force which the Boers fear most. They are split up into several detachments —the Border Mounted Rifles, the Natal Mounted Rifles (from Durban), the Imperial Light Horse, the Natal Police, and the Umvoti Mounted Rifles, who are chiefly Dutch. Then of infantry there are the Natal Royal Rifles (only about 150 strong), the Durban Light Infantry, and the Natal Field Artillery. As far as I can estimate, the total Natal Volunteer force will not exceed 2,000, but they are well armed, are accustomed to the Boer method of warfare, and will be watched with interest. Unhappily, many of them here are

already suffering from the change of life and food in camp. That is inevitable when volunteers first take the field.

But Ladysmith has an evil reputation besides. Last year the troops here were prostrated with enteric. There is a little fever and a good deal of dysentery even now among the regulars. The stream by the camp is condemned, and all water is supplied in tiny rations from pumps. The main permanent camp is built of corrugated iron, practically the sole building material in South Africa, and quite universal for roofs, so that the country has few "architectural features" to boast of. The cavalry are quartered in the tin huts, but the Liverpools, Devons, Gordons, and Volunteers have pitched their own tents, and a terrible time they are having of it. Dust is the curse of the place. We remember the Long Valley as an Arcadian dell. Veterans of the Soudan recall the black sand-storms with regretful sighs. The thin, red dust comes everywhere, and never stops. It blinds your eyes, it stops your nose, it scorches your throat till the invariable shilling for a little glass of any liquid seems cheap as dirt. It turns the whitest shirt brown in half an hour, it creeps into the works of your watch and your bowels. It lies in a layer mixed with flies on the top of your rations. The white ants eat away the flaps of the tents, and the men wake up covered with dust, like children in a hayfield. Even mules die of it in convulsions. It was in this land that the ostrich developed its world-renowned digestive powers; and no wonder.



MAP OF LADYSMITH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD

The camp stands on a barren plain, nearly two miles north-west of the town—if we may so call the one straight road of stores and tin-roofed bungalows. Low, flat-topped hills surround it, bare and rocky. But to understand the country it is best to climb into the mountains of the long Drakensberg, which forms the Free State frontier in a series of strangely jagged and precipitous peaks, and at one place, by the junction with Basutoland, runs up to 11,000 feet. Last

Sunday I went into the Free State through Van Reenen's Pass, over which a little railway has been carried by zigzag "reverses." The summit is 5,500 feet above the sea, or nearly 2,000 feet above Ladysmith. From the steep slopes, in places almost as green as the Lowlands or Yorkshire fells, I looked south-east far over Natal—a parched, brown land like the desert beyond the Dead Sea, dusty bits of plain broken up by line upon line of bare red mountain. It seemed a poor country to make a fuss about, yet as South Africa goes, it is rich and even fertile in its way. Indeed, on the reddest granite mountain one never fails to find multitudes of flowering plants and pasturage for thinnish sheep. Across the main range, Van Reenen's is the largest and best known pass. The old farmer who gave it the name is living there still and bitterly laments the chance of war. But there are other passes too, any of which may suddenly become famous now—Olivier's Hoek, near the gigantic Mont aux Sources, Bezuidenhaut, Netherby, Tintwa, and (north of Van Reenen's) De Beer's Pass, Cundycleugh, Muller's, and Botha's, beyond which the range ends with the frontier at Majuba. Three or four of these passes are crossed by waggon roads, but Van Reenen's has the only railway. The frontier, marked by a barbed wire fence across the summit of the pass, must be nearly forty miles from Ladysmith, but from the cliffs above it, the little British camp can be seen like a toy through this clear African air, and Boer sentries watch it all day, ready to signal the least movement of its troops, betrayed by the dust. Their own main force is distributed in camps along the hills well beyond the nine-miles' limit ordained by the Convention. The largest camp is

said to be further north at Nelson's Kop, but all the camps are very well hidden, though in one place I saw about 500 of the horses trying to graze. The rains are late, and the grass on the high plateau of the Free State is not so good as on the Natal slopes of the pass. The Boer commandoes suffer much from want of it. When all your army consists of mounted infantry, forage counts next to food.

At present the Van Reenen Railway ends at Harrismith, an arid but cheerful little town at the foot of the great cliffs of the Plaatburg. It boasts its racecourse, golf-links, musical society, and some acquaintance with the German poets. The Scotch made it their own, though a few Dutch, English, and other foreigners were allowed to remain on sufferance. Now unhappily the place is almost deserted, and Burns himself would hardly find a welcome there. In the Free State every resident may be commandeered, and I believe forty-eight hours counts as "residence." You see the advantage of an extended franchise. The penalty for escape is confiscation of property, and five years' imprisonment or £500 fine, if caught. The few British who remained have had all their horses, carts, and supplies taken. Some are set to serve the ambulance; a few will be sent to watch Basutoland; but most of them have abandoned their property and risked the escape to Natal, slipping down the railway under bales or built up in the luggage vans like nuns in a brick wall. In one case the Boers commandeered three wool trucks on the frontier. Those trucks were shunted on to a siding for the night, and in the morning the wool looked strangely shrunk somehow. Yet it was not wool that had been taken out and smuggled through by the next train. For Scot helps Scot,

and it is Scots who work the railway. It pays to be a Scot out here. I have only met one Irishman, and he was unhappy.

But for the grotesque side of refugee unhappiness one should see the native train which comes down every night from Newcastle way, and disappears towards Maritzburg and safety. Native workers of every kind—servants, labourers, miners—are throwing up their places and rushing towards the sea. The few who can speak English say, "Too plenty bom-bom!" as sufficient explanation of their panic. The Government has now fitted the open trucks with cross-seats and side-bars for their convenience, and so, hardly visible in the darkness, the black crowd rolls up to the platform. Instantly black hands with pinkish palms are thrust through all the bars, as in a monkey-house. Black heads jabber and click with excitement. White teeth suddenly appear from nowhere. It is for bread and tin-meats they clamour, and they are willing to pay. But a loaf costs a shilling. Everything costs a shilling here, unless it costs half-a-crown; and Natal grows fat on war. A shilling for a bit of bread! What is the good of Christianity? So the dusky hands are withdrawn, and the poor Zulu with untutored maw goes starving on. But if any still doubt our primitive ancestry, let them hear that Zulu's outcries of pain, or watch the fortunate man who has really got a loaf, and gripping it with both hands, gnaws it in his corner, turning his suspicious eyes to right and left with fear.

The air is full of wild rumours. A boy riding over Laing's Nek saw 1,000 armed Boers feeding their horses on Manning's farm. The Boers have been seen at a Dutch settlement this side Van Reenen's. Yesterday a section of

the Gordons on their arrival were sent up to look at them in an armoured train. It is thought that war will be proclaimed to-day. That has been thought every day for a fortnight past, and the land buzzes with lies which may at any moment be true.

Half the Manchesters have just marched in to trumpet and drum. When I think of those ragged camps of peasants just over the border the pomp and circumstance seem all on one side.

Friday, October 13, 1899.

So it has begun at last, for good or evil. Here we think it began yesterday, just at the very moment when Sir George White arrived. Late at night scouts brought news of masses of Boers crossing the Tintwa Pass, and going into laager with their waggons only fifteen miles away to the west. The men stood to their arms, and long before light we were marching steadily forward along the Van Reenen road. First came the Liverpools, then the three batteries of Field Artillery with a mountain battery, then the Devons and the Gordons. The Manchesters acted as rear-guard, and the Dublin Fusiliers, who were hurried down from Dundee by train, came late, and then were hurried back again. The column took all its stores and forage for five days in a train of waggons (horses, mules, and oxen) about two miles long. When day broke we saw the great mountains on the Basuto border, gleaming with snow like the Alps. Far in front the cavalry—the 5th Lancers and 19th Hussars with the Natal Volunteers—were sweeping over the patches of plain and struggling up the hills in search of that reported laager. But not a Boer of it was to be seen. At nine o'clock, having advanced eight or

nine miles, the whole column took up a strong position, with all its baggage and train in faultless order, and went to sleep. About one we began to return, and now just as the mail goes, we are all back again in camp for tea. And so ends the first day of active hostilities.

GENERAL SIR GEORGE STEWART WHITE, V.C., G.C.I.E., G.C.B., G.C.S.I.

CHAPTER III

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THE FIRST WEEK'S WAR

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LADYSMITH, *Thursday, October 19, 1899*.

It is a week to-day since the Boers of the Transvaal and Free State began their combined invasion of Natal. So far all action has been on their side. They have crept down the passes with their waggons and half-organised bands of mounted infantry, and have now advanced within a short day's march of the two main British positions which protect the whole colony. It will be seen on a map that North Natal forms a fairly regular isoceles triangle, having Charlestown, Majuba, and Laing's Nek at the apex, the Drakensberg range separating it from the Free State on the one side, and the Buffalo River with its lower hills separating it from the Transvaal on the other. A base may be drawn a few miles below Ladysmith—say, from Oliver's Hoek Pass in the Drakensberg to the union of the Tugela River with the Buffalo. Newcastle will then lie about thirty miles from the apex of the triangle, nearly equi-distant from both sides. Dundee is about twelve miles from the middle point of the right side, and Ladysmith about the same distance from the middle point of the base. Evidently a "tight place" for a comparatively small force when the frontiers to right and left are openly hostile and can pour large bodies of men through all the passes in the sides and apex at will. That is exactly what the Boers have spent the week in doing, and

they have shown considerable skill in the process. They have occupied Charlestown, Newcastle, and all the north of Natal almost to within reach of the guns at Dundee on the west and Ladysmith on the east and centre. Yet as far as I can judge they have hardly lost a man, whereas they have gained an immense amount of stores, food and forage, which were exactly the things they wanted. "Slim Piet" is the universal nickname for old Joubert among friends and enemies alike, and so far he has well deserved it. For the Dutch "slim" stands half way between the German "schlimm" and our description of young girls, and it means exactly what the Cockney means by "artful." Artful Piet has managed well. He has given the Boers an appearance of triumph. Their flag waves where the English flag waved before. The effect on the native mind, and on the spirits of his men is greater than people in England probably think. Before the war the young Boers said they would be in Durban in a month, and the Kaffirs half believed it. Well, they have got nearly a third of the way in a week.

But to-day they are brought within touch of British arms, and the question is whether they will get any further. So far they have been unopposed. Their triumphs have been the bloodless capture of a passenger train, the capture of a few police, and the driving in of patrols who had strict orders to retire. So far we have sought only to draw them on. But here and at Dundee we must make a stand, and all yesterday and this morning we have thought only of one question: Will they venture to come on? They have numbers on their side —an advantage certainly of three to one, possibly more. The rough country with its rocky flat-topped lines of hill is just

suited for their method of warfare—to lie behind stones and take careful shots at any one in range. Besides, if they are to do anything, they know they must be quick. The Basutos are chanting their war-song on the Free State frontier. The British reinforcements are coming, and all irregulars have a tendency to melt away if you keep them waiting. But on the other hand it is against Boer tradition to attack, especially entrenched positions. Their artillery is probably far inferior to ours in training and skill, and they don't like artillery in any case. Nor do they like the thought of Lancers and Hussars sweeping down upon their flanks wherever a little bit of plain has to be crossed. So the chances of attack seem about equally balanced, and only the days can answer that one question of ours: Will they come on?

Yesterday it seemed as though they were coming. The advance of two main columns from the passes in the north-west had been fairly steady; and last night our outposts of the Natal Carbineers were engaged, as the 5th Lancers had been the night before. Heavy firing was reported at any distance short of fifteen miles. There was no panic. The few ladies who remain went riding or cycling along the dusty, blazing road which makes the town. The Zulu women in blankets and beads walked in single file with the little black heads of babies peering out between their shoulder-blades, and roasting in the sun. Huge waggon-loads of stores—compressed forage, compressed beef, jam, water-proof sheets, ammunition, oil, blankets, sardines, and all the other necessaries of a soldier's existence—came lumbering up from the station behind the long files of oxen urged slowly forward by savage outcries and lashes of hide. Orderlies

were galloping in the joy of their hearts. The band of the Gloucesters were practising scales in unison to slow time. Suddenly a kind of feeling came into the air that something was happening. I noticed the waggon stopped; the oxen at once lay down in the dust; the music ceased and was packed away. I met the Gordons coming into town and asking for their ground. Riding up the mile or two to camp, I found the whole dusty plateau astir. Tents were melting away like snow. Kits lay all naked and revealed upon the earth. The men were falling in. The waggons were going the wrong way round. The very headquarters and staff were being cleared out. The whole camp was, in fact, in motion. It was coming down into the town. In a few hours the familiar place was bare and deserted. I went up this morning and stood on Signal Hill where the heliograph was working yesterday, just above the camp. The whole plain was a wilderness. Straw and paper possessed it merely, except that here and there a destitute Kaffir groped among the *débris* in hopes of finding a shiny tin pot for his furniture or some rag of old uniform to harmonise with his savage dress. In one corner of the empty iron huts a few of the cavalry were still trying to carry off some remnants of forage. It was a pitiful sight, and yet the rapidity of the change was impressive. If the Boers came in, they would find those tin huts very luxurious after their accustomed bivouacs. Is it possible that tin huts might be their Capua?

The camp was thought incapable of defence. Artillery could command it from half a dozen hills. Whoever placed it there was neither strategist nor humanitarian. It is like the bottom of a frying-pan with a low rim. The fire is hot, and