

CHAPTER VII

LORD MILNER AND THE DIAMOND LAW

THE gold law of the Transvaal had not been designed to meet the conditions which developed after the discovery of the Witwatersrand. The old law regarding pegging claims became quite unworkable. A climax was reached just before the War, in 1899, when proclamations had to be cancelled and pegging prohibited. A final attempt by President Kruger to deal with this impossible problem was the institution of the Lottery System which, to put it briefly, provided that the area or claims on a proclaimed farm which had previously been allocated to the public by reason of pegging according to priority, was in future to be withheld from any public pegging but would still be distributed to the public by means of a lottery. This solution, which was very widely condemned as immoral, impracticable and unjust, had not been decided when the War broke out; thus, when Lord Milner assumed the Civil Administration of the new Colonies, and the pressure to extend mineral development was again resumed, he found that among all the old laws of the country which were his working inheritance there was this untried and little-favoured Lottery Law which he himself roundly condemned. In order to deal with these problems which closely affected the people, and in order to begin the introduction of self-government, Lord Milner established the Nominated Council. All the so-called representatives of the people were to be nominated, not elected; there was no electorate established apart from the old and exclusive Boer system, which had been regarded as the greatest of all the injustices complained of by the newer population. Lord Milner endeavoured to select those generally recognized as representative men of different classes. He offered participation to the late Republican party and, looking on General Botha as the representative, Lord Milner asked for nominations. But General Botha and General Smuts refused to participate in any way in a form of government to which they objected, and assumed the line that they would take no part except as critics, of course until complete self-government was given to the Transvaal.

Everyone realizes that such a demand for immediate self-

Lord Milner and the Diamond Law

government in the circumstances was an impossible one, and was intended to be. Lord Milner realized perfectly well what this refusal meant. It was not merely a refusal to participate or co-operate; it was a determination to defeat his efforts and to wreck the British administration. He made yet another effort and nominated prominent men who were more moderate in their views and who believed that they could help by expressing the Boer view of questions that might crop up. The position of these men was an unhappy one. Several of them had distinguished themselves in the field on the Boer side and, as far as anyone knew, were sincere and faithful in representing the views and the rights of their people. Yet because they were moderate, and had decided to help instead of standing aloof, they were regarded as traitors by those who were building up the political party, and were, as it were, excommunicated with that pitiless finality which had so often been revealed in South African history.

Many years later, when Smuts, co-operating with Milner on the War Council and in the settlement of the Great War, had gained his first real knowledge and experience of Milner, he revealed both his previous ignorance of him and his ultimate insight in a single sentence. Having been asked how he got along with Milner, he answered promptly as though revealing something unknown to others and only recently discovered by himself: "Do you know what that man is—he is a Socialist Autocrat." And, without endorsing that as a complete judgment, one may accept it as throwing valuable light on the period of his administration.

Many old-time enemies and critics freely recognized that it was due to Milner's personal foresight, wisdom and experience, not less than to the immense power that he wielded, that the entire system of government in the new Colonies was reconstructed; that science and system were introduced, you might say enforced, where they were unknown before; that he brought in his principles—efficiency, constructive effort and an unyielding sense of practical justice. He was the first authority in South Africa to place agriculture upon the sound basis of these principles. All that is best in that vast field, fundamentally the most important of all, was initiated by him, wholly inspired by him.

Remembering the hostility with which his administration and his acts and policy were attacked at the time, and the avowed determination to wipe the slate clean of all his works, it is almost unkind to recall that the things with which they are most satisfied to-day are the remains of his great work which they failed to bring down in wreckage.

South African Memories

When Lord Milner paid his last visit to South Africa, just before his death, he stayed a couple of days with me on my farm. I had been so intimately connected with all his work in this country that discussion of details was not attempted, but, summarizing it all, I asked him what he thought of his plans and work as they had passed through the hands of others. He replied with a queer expression, almost a grimace of dissatisfaction: "Of course, it is all different; everything changed and much of it entirely gone." Then, breaking into a laugh, he added: "Mind you, I feel more satisfied than I expected to feel. It is really wonderful how much there is left; far more than they realize."

Among the many measures which bear the clear impress of Milner's character or policy, the Diamond Ordinance, as passed by the Nominated Council, is a conspicuous example. I was at that time in the closest daily contact with him. I believe I was also then President of the Chamber of Mines and a member of the Nominated Assembly, and necessarily had a knowledge of local affairs, policy and history, business and persons, as intimate and extensive as anyone else's; and, as a leading partner in H. Eckstein & Co., who represented Wernher, Beit, by far the most powerful group or personal combination in the country, I had opportunities and responsibilities which involved constant participation in public affairs.

It soon became imperative that the diamond law be dealt with in some permanent and practical way to remove the chaos in which it had been left, with its literal provisions which could not be put in operation, and it was inevitable that Lord Milner should mention this matter to me and wish to discuss it. It was only a few months after the discovery of the Premier Mine and the negotiations already described. In the meantime I had been appointed to the Nominated Council, and Lord Milner's expressed trust that I would help him to arrive at some solution which would safeguard the rights of the country and at the same time prove a practical working measure, certainly put me in an unexpected position and one full of personal embarrassment.

To put the position in the fewest possible words: the old law entitled the owner of the farm to something like $12\frac{1}{2}$ per cent, or one-eighth of the mine. The seven-eighths theoretically open to pegging by the public comprised the area which the literal provisions of the law had designed to distribute to the public by the ordinary process of lottery. Of course, numberless proposals had been made to prove this distribution, but practically all these suggestions meant substituting some sort

Lord Milner and the Diamond Law

of privilege for what they called the moral division by lottery. The suggestion which was most strongly favoured was that the owner should be granted the whole mine. Many arguments were used in favour of this, and what one might call the sentimental appeal was the strongest of all. The sentimental argument was that whilst none other had any legal or moral claim to participation, the owner and discoverer, by reason of his work and his enterprise and success in finding the mine, was in a much better position and had a claim which none could equal or contest.

My own position, not of much account on the whole, yet of some importance and of some interest in this story, was made still more embarrassing by my personal friendship and keen sympathy with Tom Cullinan, who was himself the discoverer and hoped to become the owner of the whole mine. I was in truth in a most unhappy predicament.

I cannot recall Lord Milner's first reference to this subject, but he was clearly determined to deal with it, and equally and candidly clear that whatever personal interest or feelings I might have, it was my duty now to face the responsibility. At that moment I am convinced that his reference to my personal responsibilities meant the business responsibilities of my firm, and especially the relationship between the chiefs, Wernher and Beit, and the great De Beers combination. I am not aware that he ever knew of my attempt to bring together the Premier and De Beers people, but I, of course, was acutely conscious of it, yet feeling that it was the kind of ordeal any man must be prepared to face in the discharge of his obligations, I put it to Lord Milner at once that we should try and get a clear view of the facts on which judgment should be based, and to my mind they were simple. Firstly, one-eighth of the mine would go to the discoverer under the existing law, and seven-eighths belonged to the public. These were the fundamental facts, not in the least influenced by any provision, whether pegging or lottery, by which the public should be enabled to exercise the right to this property. Next I urged that the sole problem, and a great one, was to devise a means by which the public could work or profit by its property.

I recall only one question or reminder from him. He was extraordinarily silent and attentive, and afterwards I thought that he was pumping me and not giving himself away. But it is impossible to say whether all this had been in his own mind or merely something that was broadly acceptable to his own judgment. The one question that revealed his attitude was: "You mean that the Government, as representing the people,

South African Memories

should work and own that share which is meant for them and which is theirs?"

Intellectually he was ice-clear and never sacrificed the candid view of anything. Personally I had an absolute horror of Government intervention in business and commercial enterprise, and, doubtless with the appearance of shuffling and yet with absolute sincerity, I detailed the objections I had, and then recited the well-known one that Government employees rarely have business experience and training for business enterprise, nor the technical training and experience required for the responsible and complicated work of diamond mining, and so forth.

He nodded as though agreeing with everything, and then said: "The problem remains to devise some plan by which these conditions would be avoided."

Many a time have I recalled these efforts since I first heard Smuts's judgment—"A Socialist Autocrat"—for then, even at that time, I realized that he was in favour of this new principle of straight participation because he believed in it as a principle, whereas I favoured it only as a last and desperate resort to deal with problems otherwise insoluble.

The Diamond Ordinance to be passed by the Council was drafted by Lord Milner's Ministers or state officials—I believe by Sir Richard Solomon—but long before this was done I had submitted to him the vital provisions and discussed them very thoroughly. Although my proposal was to apply this expressly and only to diamond mining, and emphatically not to gold, this limitation and certain other expressed proposals were not accepted. The gist of the proposal was that, as a sentimental concession, and to ensure more cordial co-operation, one-quarter should be given to the discoverer instead of one-eighth; that the remaining three-quarters should pass to the Government as the representative of the public; that this division be recognized in the distribution of profits, not by the breaking up and sale of the mine; that the whole of the working should be entrusted to those representing the discoverer's share; that the capital for development should be repaid to the discoverer out of profits alone, and thereafter the profits be distributed as stated, namely, one-quarter to the discoverer, three-quarters to the Government.

The members of the Council were wholly inexperienced in Parliamentary procedure, and it was owing to a misunderstanding that these provisions were not passed in the Ordinance. None of us understood the Parliamentary procedure which necessitates the deletion of certain words in order to substitute others, and through misunderstanding, which created roars of

Lord Milner and the Diamond Law

laughter, Sir Arthur Lawley pointed out that in the confusion the original clause had been deleted and there was nothing left for it but to substitute the next best: thus the law was passed that the owner should have one-third and the Government two-thirds; a very happy, although very laughable, occurrence for the owners.

My own attitude in this matter became known before the matter was raised in Parliament. I was given prominence which I was very far from seeking, and the whole of the credit or discredit of this innovation appeared to be given to me. Lord Milner, without whose wise advice, warm approval and strong influence it would never have been passed or introduced, seemed to me to escape notice; at any rate he appeared to escape the virulent criticism which was all too commonly his reward. My own experiences were very unpleasant. The severest criticism and most unjust insinuation came from both camps. By those who favoured the Premier Mine I was represented as a hireling of De Beers, whose devilish ingenuity had robbed the owners of three-quarters of their property; all to cripple a hated rival. On the other hand, by certain of the De Beers people I was regarded as a monster of black ingratitude. This is no gossip. By accident I entered the room in which the Chairman, Mr. Francis Oates, was holding forth in this strain, and made him repeat the substance of it. His charge was that everything I had got in the world had come to me through Wernher and Beit, the life-governors of De Beers; that by this proposal, which vested the bulk of the new mine in the hands of the Government, I had deliberately made it impossible for the De Beers diamond control to be extended by the purchase of this rival; that I had been the snake in the grass and had betrayed those to whom I owed everything.

I had no difficulty in silencing him; firstly, by reminding him that this mine which I had designed to use for smashing De Beers was the same mine which a few months before, when I had tried to bring them together, he described as being salted with Jagersfontein stones; secondly, by suggesting that it would be more suitable if he discussed the matter with my senior and chief, Sir Julius Wernher, whom I had kept posted with every detail at every stage. He was then in the next room, having just arrived from Johannesburg. But the bluff collapsed, and further steps were unnecessary.

It is true that I had discussed the matter fully with Wernher, and I did so with Lord Milner's permission; but there is another incident which no one else has ever known, and it is due to the name of Julius Wernher that I should tell it.

As the controversy progressed and we were getting near to

South African Memories

the stage when the Ordinance would be submitted to Parliament, the unrestrained criticisms and the frequent insinuations that I was doing things inconsistent with my duty to my seniors, Wernher, Beit & Co., made me so worried—probably rattled is the word—that I took notice of what ought to have been ignored, and I had it all out one day with Wernher.

I pointed out the effect that my proposal would have on De Beers policy, if they still entertained it, of securing control of all the output and of the diamond market, and begged him specially to recognize that if the proposed draft went through, the best proportion of the Premier output would be for ever excluded from De Beers control, and would thus look like deliberate hostility to De Beers upon my part; that I had started out, firstly, to bring them together, then, when consideration of the law came up, to define what seemed to me to be fair; that it was impossible for me to back out now and to resign my seat in the local parliament and abandon all participation in what I myself had started as a duty to the country; but that I thought, in view of what was being said quite openly by responsible people on behalf of De Beers, of my faithlessness and ingratitude to him and to Beit, who was ill and away then, there was only one course that I thought was open and convincing, and that was, much as I should hate it, to resign from the firm and to be entirely free to devote my time to the public work in which I had become involved.

Wernher, whom I had got to know personally only years after my association with Beit, was one of the wisest and biggest of men. Always quiet, reserved, strictly just and, because of his strength and strict business principles, often represented as being hard, he was as splendid and loyal a friend as one could have. As soon as he had got the drift of my somewhat embarrassed remarks he betrayed his thoughts by a very characteristic action. Most of us express our emotions by some particular mannerism of which we are quite unconscious. He took off his pince-nez and carefully polished them with his handkerchief, rose from his chair and, putting a hand on my shoulder, he said: "My dear boy, I have known what your position is; you have no need to worry about these things and they do not need any explanation. Apart from everything else, you know, you can remember that we are so big in this country that what is good for the country is good for us. You just go and do what you think is right!"

Wernher was incapable of any display of emotion, but I feel that no more gratifying evidence of what he really was

Lord Milner and the Diamond Law

could have been given, and I only wish that others knew it as well as I do.

Before closing this reference to the diamond control it is only fair, and not without interest, to record two things which were not done when the Diamond Ordinance was passed. In my proposed Ordinance what I regarded as very vital provisions were not accepted. I had represented the view held by many that mining products, especially gold and diamonds, were part of the country; that is to say, they were irreplaceable assets which were being sold, and that therefore they demanded some practical recognition in the form of replacement, otherwise we should be living on our assets; and the form proposed by me was that the 60 per cent of profit which would fall to the Government after all proper allowances or deductions had been made should not be put into current revenue but should be utilized as to one-half for the redemption of public debt, and as to the other half in provision for permanent public works. I was deeply disappointed that this was not accepted by the Legislative Council, and more disappointed still because the rejection was made possible by the votes of some of the Government representatives.

The leading official in the Government, who was what might be called the Leader in the House, was Sir Richard Solomon, then Attorney-General, afterwards Lieut.-Governor, a very able man, but one who had previously shown, and subsequently revealed again, a tendency to vacillation, and a very marked sensitiveness to what he regarded as the opinion of the public; and when he failed to give the lead and official support and yielded to the absurd mob orator's protest that the Nominated Assembly had no right to tie the hands of the free and unenlightened electors of the future, I knew these provisions were lost. The ridiculous pretence that future Parliaments would have no power to alter an ordinance passed by the Nominated Council and, if they chose, reverse its decisions, was instantly exposed, but it made no difference; the fear of criticism for so bold an act, and the chance of some unpopularity, prevailed.

Two results have followed. The entire Government share of mining profits has been paid into current revenue, not a penny of it to the redemption of debt or creating of permanent public works. The principle of Government participation in the form established in the Diamond Ordinance was afterwards applied to the gold, and the Government's share of profits has been throughout a fortuitous subsidy which has paid for and even incited enormous extravagance and expenditure upon unwise and unnecessary purposes. The use now being made of the

South African Memories

Government share in what is now a wasting asset, by passing it into revenue account, may be in part realized by the reminder that for several years the Government share of profits in one single gold mine has been just about a million a year. What has been done is bad enough; but what will happen when the sources of these windfalls dry up?

CHAPTER VIII

A MEETING WITH MR. BALFOUR

The Transvaal from Within was written from day to day in rough form and almost as a diary, while we were in Pretoria gaol or in the Arcadia Cottage under guard. It was roughly completed up to date by about August, 1896, and I had it printed privately some time after that and intended to circulate it privately among the Reformers and a few of our friends as a memorandum of the facts of our case.

It was our defence against charges of cowardice, treachery, folly and mercenary greed which the whole world hurled at us in anger and contempt. For no section in the world—except the understanding British South Africans—had anything but contempt for us. The Boer and his friends, whether in South Africa or throughout the world; the Jameson raiders and their friends; Rhodes himself, but more certainly the vast numbers of his believers; the British public of all parties; the Dominions of the Empire; the United States; Germany; France—all who might and did differ on any other subject were agreed on this that *we* were beneath contempt. Edmund Garrett, just appointed Editor of the *Cape Times*, and most brilliant of all journalists who have adopted South Africa, had given up the *Pall Mall Gazette* and his collaboration with his chiefs, W. T. Stead and E. T. Cook, and come to South Africa as a last hope to spin out his generous, indomitable spirit on half a lung. His name and fame and character were known a little to us; and as he knew neither fear nor hesitation nor any excuse for dishonour, he had let himself go on the facts as known to him. He came up to see us himself a few days before the Trial of the Reformers and to get at the facts. He was the first of the front-rank men who tried to get at the truth. *But* he came to us as the man who in the first explosion of disgust had rechristened Johannesburg as 'Judasburg'; and we hated and mistrusted him.

He came to the Cottage where we awaited the trial. The others, Lionel Phillips, Frank Rhodes, and George Farrar, met him—I would not do so. I hated him, holding him to be a doubter and scorner and slanderer of his own flesh and blood, the Britishers of South Africa. He spent all the morning with

South African Memories

them and I stuck to my room, working on the Reformers' defence and *The Transvaal from Within*; and although Frank Rhodes came to me twice urging me to join them as they could not answer some of Garrett's searching questions, and others, too, asked me in, I felt that it would end in a row, and that such vicious indignation at his ignorance of the truth as I was nursing would only make another enemy and drive him off. I refused to budge.

I had never met, and did not know Edmund Garrett. That day there began an intimate collaboration and warm personal friendship which only ended in his death!

He stayed for lunch, and I took a seat as far removed from him as our little table would allow. As I look back on it I was a morose brute, silent and watchful, just waiting for the savage remorseless spring at the unsuspecting interloper; and he—indifferent to food—intent only on getting at the real truth, no matter whom or where it hit, emaciated, sallow, wasted by illness, with his longish, wavy, untidy hair, his lean long, ugly face and sunken grey eyes, all redeemed and glorified by the restless and amazing vitality and the gay laughing courage—the stupendous courage that was food and sleep and strength to what would else have been a shadow.

I did not know Garrett. He ate nothing—just talked—question and answer, facts, suppositions, alternatives, passed like the fire of rival musketries. But it was not a battle of wits or brains or principles; it was not a fair fight. All the odds were on one side. I was ready and knew the facts; he came to draw the fire. He had no chance at all; and yet it was he who won. The first straight blasting shot that shattered his whole theory of our full foreknowledge and preparedness, and therefore real responsibility, produced a surprising effect. Garrett burst out in a cackle of laughter and exclaimed, "By Jove—that knocks the bottom out of everything." Then jumping up he said to the man opposite me, "I say, change places with me, will you? I must have this out."

We ate no lunch and at 4 o'clock he had to go. He was back for dinner and stayed the evening until the guards ordered lights out. After each break he had come back with his characteristic eagerness and gaiety. "I think I have got you now! You said——" Then would come the answer—simple, indisputable, obvious facts, but facts which no one had yet had a chance to know. Early next morning, long before breakfast, a guard let him into my bedroom—it might have been 6 a.m. Without a word of preliminary he burst out: "I sat up all night and a dozen times I was sure I had

A Meeting with Mr. Balfour

got you, but then recalled something you told me—but I have you this time. Look here!” Then he put the case on one point as it was believed by all to be true; but once more there was the simplest of answers—the real truth as yet unknown outside but easily verified. That was the first impartial testimony from a competent judge that some day the world’s judgment on the Reformers would be changed, and that even the Raid might be thought worthy of examination in a wider field and from a more commanding view-point.

The commuted sentence of three years’ abstention from politics, with the alternative of banishment (there being no appeal from President Kruger’s own interpretations) decided me not to publish *The Transvaal from Within* until the three years had expired. In any case I thought no more of it than as a diary or Apologia for private circulation among the Reformers and intimates. A few copies of the first print were bound in covers, but without title, for my use and revision—the set type was kept in London for over three years. I have described elsewhere how a copy fell into Milner’s hands, and he advised me to publish the book as soon as possible. I was ill from overwork and worry and was due to leave for England, but twice put off the trip, first for what became known as the Capitalist Negotiations, and then for the Bloemfontein Conference, when Milner met Kruger and Steyn.

Meanwhile I had urgent messages from Milner to go and make our case and publish the book. Even he, in Cape Town, when I was eventually going to the ship, failed to make it seem right when he said, in effect, “You have done your work here, almost alone, maintaining the British cause. Your work now lies in England. Get that book out. You do not understand what it means. You do not know what you have done by that book. It is the whole case; it will be a revelation to the world, and, most of all, to the British Government. They do not know how good their own case is. It is not for the sake of the Reformers that it appeals to me, much as they deserve to be cleared; it is because the fate of South Africa and of the whole Empire is at stake now!”

Still I was not convinced. The depression was due partly to illness, but mostly to what appeared to me like leaving my comrades to face the risks. However, the voyage provided the idea and the time to bring the book up to date, and I added that portion which dealt with the last three years, and finished revising it all in England during August. The three years’ prohibition had expired in June, but by then the position had become acute and threatening, and I was afraid that publication might aggravate it and embarrass those who

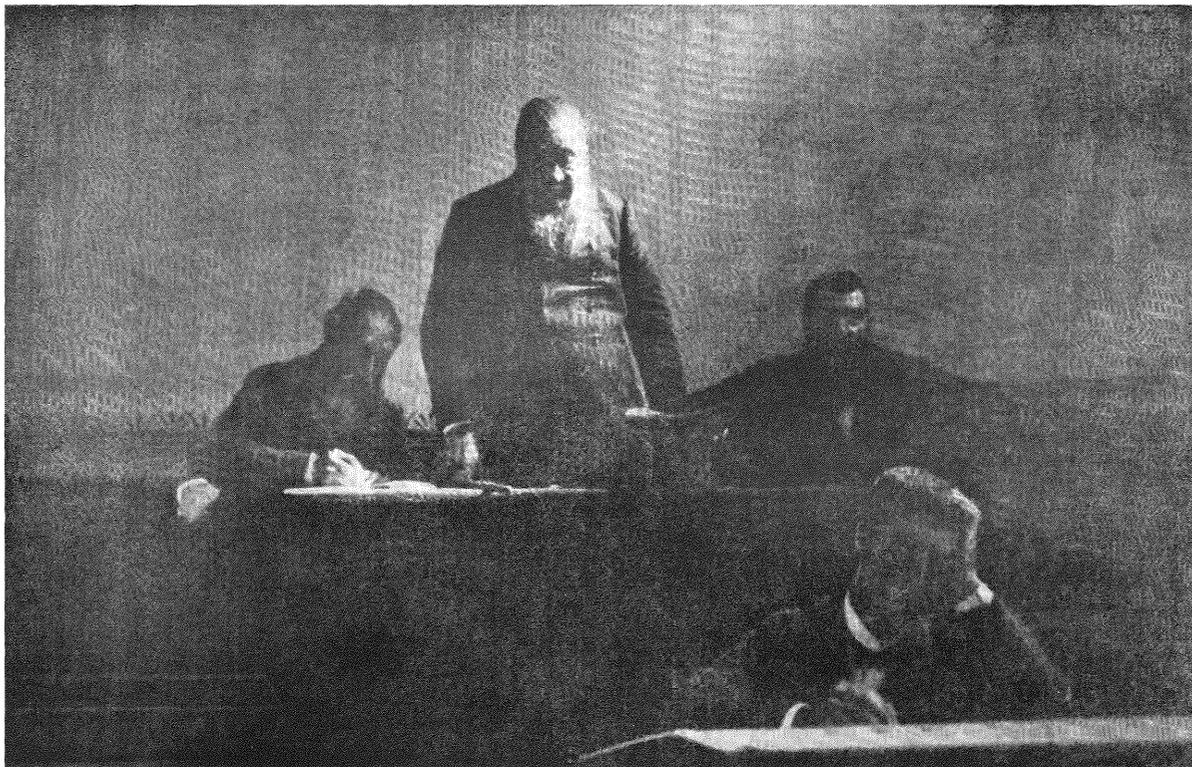
South African Memories

still strove for a 'satisfactory settlement' by peaceful means which, as Milner had impressed on me more than once, would be 'a triumph indeed!' By that time some friends had read the book and others had heard of it, and I was urged strongly by them, by friends of the British Government and, most of all, by the publisher, to let it come out. I consulted Wernher—whose detachment from politics, cool head, and friendship for me made him a safe counsellor, and I decided against publication and held firmly to this resolve until Kruger's ultimatum disposed of the question. Although I did not believe that the book would attract any attention, I took the stand upon a principle often and clearly expressed: "I have had to leave the Transvaal, but all my friends are there and in this. If by any act of mine I were to precipitate a war needlessly and lost a friend or a brother I should feel like a murderer." Few know that the book was so withheld; indeed, many have called it the cause of the war; but a tragic justification of my attitude came when my youngest brother, George, in the I.L.H. was killed at Willow Grange within six weeks of the outbreak.

So little did I expect in the way of circulation that I had contracted to print, at my expense, one thousand copies which were to be distributed gratis among the members of both Houses of Parliament. Three thousand copies in all were printed. The result was stupefying. The publisher was incoherent and hysterical with laughter when, the day after publication, I called to remind him that the 1,000 gift copies for which I was to pay had not been delivered. The whole impression of 3,000 had been sold out within 48 hours. It was the hit of his career, he said. I begged for a cheaper form so that the public might have a chance, and told him that profit was no object. He merely laughed. Thirty thousand copies of the 10s. edition were sold, and, with succeeding editions, the total circulation of the English version alone came to about 250,000 copies. It was also published in French and Dutch.

Years later I learned from one who had been on President Steyn's staff through the war that on one occasion Steyn (then unknown to me) in alluding to the book had said: "That man is our worst enemy; for unfortunately what he has written about our allies is true!"

It was with this as introduction that I found myself in the political world of London, utterly unconscious of what the book had done and of how I might be, and was, regarded by others. I was ill and worn by anxiety, and worrying to be back with my own comrades. I spent most of my days in bed,



PRESIDENT KRUGER ADDRESSING A MEETING AT KRUGERSDORP, IN 1893

From a photograph taken by Sir Percy FitzPatrick

A Meeting with Mr. Balfour

and my nights in Fleet, Street where nearly all the leading journals were at their wits' end to find anyone who really understood the facts, names, persons and places. Thus it was that when my friend, St. Loe Strachey of the *Spectator*, asked me to dinner to meet Mr. A. J. Balfour I had to leave my bed to keep the engagement. It was the evening of December 15, 1899. I had not met any member of the Government during my five months in England. It seemed strange to others, not to me, that they alone ignored the source of information which the Press, without distinction of party, were keen to use. Many had asked me if I had seen the Government; and, under pressure that it was my duty, I had once called at the Colonial Office and had left a card on Mr. Chamberlain, but nothing more had happened.

On the outbreak of the war I had represented to Wernher and Beit that they, so largely interested in the Transvaal might volunteer help; and they authorized me to give £50,000 to be devoted to equipment of volunteer forces—earmarked (at my suggestion) for the purchase of remounts to be ready and available in South Africa by the time the men could be raised. This was in addition to the £50,000 which our firm put up to form and equip the original I.L.H.

I saw Mr. George Wyndham (then Under-Secretary for War, I think). It was a heart-breaking experience. All I asked them to do was to accept delivery in South Africa of £50,000 worth of horses suitable for irregular mounted corps. Day after day passed; no one was interested. Sir Evelyn Wood (Q.M.G.) was away hunting, and was not to be worried during his holiday; it was the wrong time to attempt this; also the proposal prejudged military decisions: mounted men were unsuitable and not required. In the end came the urgent advice from George Wyndham, whose own opinion I never ascertained, although I had known him well enough since the Raid: "You are up against a brick wall. Better give the cheque without any conditions and save your time." Beit was annoyed by the failure to realize what was needed. Wernher rubbed his glasses and smiled, "Good old War Office: Good old British Government!" And he signed the cheque.

Months later I heard from Mr. Chamberlain himself why he had not seen me, or anyone from South Africa. It seemed to me a sound reason. He said he had been so misled and so badly treated by one who professed to know the circumstances at the time that the Raid was being arranged that he had no inclination to meet me, especially as he knew my connection with the Reform Committee.

South African Memories

It was therefore with surprise that I heard that in the meantime Mr. Balfour had expressed the wish to meet me as he had read my book, and he wished to learn all he could about the position. I had never presumed to think that I could be of real service to them, or that they did not have at command all adequate advice and information. I had yet to get the proof of amazing ignorance, unpreparedness, and neglect of—or serene disbelief in—good information. I was fully alive to Milner's qualities and his untiring care and patient investigation, his wisdom and far-seeing watchfulness, his sobriety of judgment and his inflexible adherence to fact and principle. This very naturally made me feel myself of no account. I had yet to realize that what was not welcome was dismissed as groundless and alarmist; and that they held the conviction that South Africa, like Ireland, would "Always be with us," but never of vital consequence in a big world. I had been warned by Strachey to hold myself in readiness for an invitation at very short notice because Mr. Balfour's time was very fully occupied and he was not going out anywhere and would probably send word at a few hours' notice if he would be free. Lady Salisbury was ill—in fact dying—and, in spite of the very critical time and the string of disasters and the chaos that marked the middle of December '99 the weary, big-hearted, and devoted old Prime Minister spent most of this time at Hatfield by the side of his dying wife. Mr. Balfour acted as Prime Minister and was also in constant attendance at the War Office. It was known to few at the time, but the fact is that he carried the burden almost alone, and that by his serene faith in the British people and their cause, and by his calm and perfect courage he carried the Government and the country through a time of disaster and humiliation which might well have broken many who have been reckoned leaders of their people.

I had four hours' notice and, as the chance was one which might never occur again, I left my bed—where I had been for some days suffering from an old illness, and what was then called La Grippe—to take it. It was the evening of December 15, 1899. After a short dinner we moved to a large smoking room or lounge where a big fire in a very roomy fireplace warmed us up and gave all the light we needed. There was a wide flagged space, enclosed by a dressed stone kerb about 3 inches high on three sides of the fireplace, large enough for several to stand and warm themselves as is the habit of men. Outside this, well away from the blaze, were three armchairs. It was only afterwards that the forethought and perfection of the setting and the easy natural tact of my

A Meeting with Mr. Balfour

host were realized. Often and often since then have I felt the uneasy consciousness that a simple and earnest South African, quite unconscious of the ways and conventions of the Old Country, and accustomed to meet men simply as men and to talk freely and naturally to them, did not realize what it meant that one of the great ones of the Empire, and indeed the *de facto* Prime Minister, was giving us a whole evening in the midst of a crisis. I noted the deference paid by my host, but it seemed to me just a lesson in old-world courtesy which our more free and easy ways miss.

There were others present, and the servants were told that if wanted they would be summoned. It was the first time I had met or seen Mr. Balfour, and I can warmly endorse what has so often been said about the almost diffident gentleness of his manner, the charm that instantly won one's confidence, and made one feel even more than at ease—sincerely welcome. The quiet voice, and hesitant, yet perfectly selected words, and the self-effacing concern for others were apparent the moment he began to speak. His first words were to apologize for the liberty of naming a time at such short notice, and the plea that he hoped it would be pardoned because no part of his time was his own just then. "Even now," he added, "I have had to tell them where I am to be found, and at any time I may be called to the telephone by the War Office as we are expecting important news at any moment from Buller; so I hope" (to our host) "you will pardon any interruption!" Orders were given that any call on the telephone was to be reported to our host himself. It must have been clear to Mr. Balfour that I was an innocent without a plan. Many a time since then I have felt myself 'colour up' when realizing with what perfect ease and adroitness and yet with what complete candour and naturalness I was led to tell just what he wanted to know, and to do just what he wished.

He disarmed and surprised me by an appeal for an explanation of what had appeared to me might be taken for granted. He asked me to regard him as being without any knowledge of the facts and conditions, and added that the war had developed suddenly and unexpectedly and he was as "innocent as a child" of the factors and conditions now obviously vital. He could not conceive even now the insanity of a small people provoking and making war upon a great and friendly nation whose interests were peace; whose chief preoccupations were elsewhere and world-wide; and whose past history had proved—as witness Mr. Gladstone's termination of the last war—that the last thing they wanted was to

South African Memories

annex territory or interfere with others. He could not understand the Transvaal's action. He was not so angry with them as he was amazed at their folly in adopting a hostile, aggressive and unnecessary policy. In a sense he could understand them; disturbed by the large Uitlander population; obsessed by the old Kruger Boer idea of monopoly; and justly suspicious on account of the Raid, however wrong they might be in their methods. But what did make him thoroughly angry was the attitude of the Free State. They had been regarded as a model little State, and treated with a warmth of kindly feeling and trusting friendship by the British Government for many years; ever since the Government and independence of their country had been voluntarily handed over to them. He stopped and smiled apologetically and then added—hesitatingly, “Do you know I—I—feel almost vicious against them. I have never known or heard of such base and inexcusable ingratitude!”

It was a surprise to me to hear this; not because he conveyed any impression of vindictiveness, but because it was such a revelation of complete misunderstanding of the position. It proved the genuineness of the Imperial Government, of course, but it revealed a woeful misconception of the facts and factors. I explained that *we* did not share that view, and had expected nothing else from the Free State, or from a large section of South African Dutch. Whilst *we* were harshly judged for calling this sympathy between all the South African Dutch racialism, it was always overlooked that this co-operation included and implied the best as well as the worst motives of racialism; it included, for example, the sympathy of brothers—the blood loyalty which every good race must feel; and it was in fact by far the most honourable ground on which the Free State and other South African Dutch could be defended. As to the hopeless folly of attacking a great power I volunteered that, had I been by birth a Transvaaler and a Dutchman, I should not have admitted the hopelessness or even the folly of forcing a war. The changes of mind, as frequent as the changes of representatives or parties, on the British side; their treatment of their own people after the previous war and since then, and the general attitude that South Africa was a worry to them and not essentially one part of a United Empire, all encouraged the belief so coolly and convincingly expressed to me by Mr. J. C. Smuts¹ (Attorney-General) in February '99, that they would stick it out long enough “until a change of Govern-

¹ Now General the Rt. Hon. J. C. Smuts.

A Meeting with Mr. Balfour

ment occurs in England. The Liberals will come into power, and *this time* we shall get all we want!"

Mr. Balfour was frankly taken aback! "It seems almost incredible that one such as you, who are British and who know what the Empire means, should be able to hold that view! You must be a very convinced opponent if you can see things in that light and still oppose them."

"I have tried to see things from both viewpoints, for the hope or chance of a peaceful settlement. Both sides know, they realize or they feel it, that the issue is clear and cannot be avoided. South Africa is essentially one, and it must be a British South Africa or a Dutch and Republican South Africa. I can *understand* the two sides and the two aims, perhaps that is why for me, like many others, only one is possible."

The talk lasted over two hours, and during all that time he asked questions on all subjects and led me on as he liked. Once or twice it struck me that he was not quite "as innocent as a child," or he could not have put the questions which, while seemingly impulsive or almost irrelevant, invariably uncovered something of interest or significance. One such question led to the revelation of a fact which, although often disputed then, and not generally believed even now, has since become of world-wide significance: "How do the Germans stand? You have a large and influential German element in the Transvaal, have you not?"

I told him briefly about the Dynamite Concession; about Lippert and the attempt to outmanoeuvre Rhodes; of Lippert and the so-called 'Capitalist Negotiations' in that year; of how the German manager of the Pretoria Cement Company (who had been a Prussian officer) was secretly employed to design and build the Pretoria forts long before the Raid—and of many other things. He listened, much concerned, and then turning more pointedly to our host digressed into what he safeguarded as "of course quite private", a condition which was observed until, as will appear, it was no longer necessary. "This Kaiser is an extraordinary fellow—one does not know if he is mad or has some deep-laid plan, or is just puffed up with vanity. You will hardly credit it, but only a few days ago he wrote privately to his grandmother, the Queen, enclosing a complete plan of campaign which he had ordered his General Staff to prepare for him for the use of the British Army against the Boers."

The effect produced upon Strachey and me can be imagined; it cannot be described. "Yes," he went on laughingly, "and that is not all. In his letter he points out that Buller in

South African Memories

attacking Natal is only running his head against the battlements of the mountain ranges and playing the game of his enemies; and it is impossible for him to succeed! The plan worked out by the German Staff (which by the way reveals that they have a very complete survey of South Africa for military purposes, and we have no maps at all, I am told) is for the main advance to be made on the plateau along the railway to Kimberley, and so into the plains of the Free State and Transvaal; while Durban and the other coast regions would be held defensively. I may tell you that this happens to be the plan which Lord Roberts has always favoured, and it has made me feel very uneasy as to the results of Buller's plan of campaign!"

Whether this disclosure was meant to lead to a discussion of the war problem and so to concentrate my attention, I cannot say. He had already asked several questions on this subject and I had not risen to them because, as I told him frankly, and more than once, I was not a military expert and did not believe in criticism of the man on the spot by those who have no professional or intimate knowledge. After this, however, he disposed of these objections by saying that he asked only for expressions of opinion such as one who knew the place and the people must have formed; and from that onward his interest centred in the war position. Asked what I thought of Buller I replied that inasmuch as he knew the country and the people from the Zulu War time, and had a great reputation as a General, we felt confident; but there was grave doubt whether a man of his age and easy living could stand the strain of active service in Natal during summer. He pressed the point that age had not always disqualified leaders, and mentioned that Lord Roberts, who was an older man, had been greatly favoured, but that the job had not seemed big enough to warrant sending him. Then came the retort (which I felt sure he had probed for) that Roberts was well known to be a very different man, one who had kept himself fit and trained to the moment for his work! "You mean that Buller has lived in too great comfort and ease?" "I mean that he is not in training. No man of his age, physique and habits can be expected to stand ten or fifteen hours' hard work a day in such a climate, and in such a country."

At some point such as this, as though thinking aloud and somewhat amused by his recollections, he remarked, "I know Buller well. He was with me when I was in Ireland!" He offered no explanations, and after a while returned to his questionings. "Now you know the country—tell me what do you think Buller will do?"

A Meeting with Mr. Balfour

"I know it from trekking and shooting through it, but I am not a soldier—I know nothing of the military value of natural features, not even the meaning of long-range guns! This would be absurd criticism on my part, and I can only urge very seriously that of the hundreds of critics and authorities who are so busy telling you what should be done, there is probably not a single one who really knows the country; not a single one who, even if familiar with it, ever considered it from the military view-point, and as a potential terrain of this unforeseen war. It is sheer nonsense for amateurs to offer opinions. I know only one rule: Trust the man on the spot who is the professional expert."

"I agree, and one wishes more people shared that view. Fleet Street is full of generals now; London teems with them. But I am not asking you to be critic. You must look on me as deeply interested but wholly unfamiliar with the conditions, and I want to know all I can. Forgive me for saying so, but this is the first time I have talked to one who knows so much and has no desire to force it down one's throat, as it were; who is really unwilling to say anything that can appear to be critical. Now," he said smilingly, "I want to press you; it helps me to understand. Tell me, as you know the country and you know the Boers, tell me what do you think he will do? What would you do in his place?"

"I understand what you mean; but you must see how ridiculous I must appear—to myself—if I pose as an authority in matters that are for the experts and specialists alone. Buller knows the country and he knows the Boers; that is the most important thing."

"Well, then, tell me, what kind of people are they? In what way do they differ from us? They are physically very fine, and are a brave and independent people. Is it in habit, in moral or intellectual character? Do they look at things in a different way? Do they act as we do or as we would in given circumstances?"

"No, that is where you are all at sea. You have not realized their point of view and you do not understand the mental attitude or methods of a small people who have had a hard battle for life against nature, savages, wild animals, wilderness, and all that; people who are silent and slow to realize, to think, to feel and to move; who are dour and secretive, and strangely, deeply sentimental and religious too, in ways that are sincere, but not by any means up to date or generally accepted. You have had their kind in England and in Scotland. But they are most intensely practical too! They want to get a definite result and as cheaply (in money or in

South African Memories

blood!) as they can. They 'create a plan' first. It is one of the maxims of the race—'First let us make a plan!' And they are past-masters in their own small way of the art of concealment!"

"I begin to understand now! You know them thoroughly and it is. . . ."

"Pardon me, Sir, there is no greater mistake possible than to think that any of us really understands the Boer. The old-type Boer is by nature a sort of exclusive secret society. We cannot enter into his mind any more than we can into that of an Oriental or a native. There are times when they seem to go against every kind of reason or instinct or interest—as we understand things. They seem at times to move with a slow, blind persistency which nothing can stop or divert; they move together and as one, just as big game will migrate or fish will desert for years some old haunt; and we cannot see the reason. I do not pretend to understand the old Boer, but he interests me deeply. The younger generation, yes! But they are influenced by things we understand—education, frank racialism of a simpler kind, the change and developments in South Africa. But not so the old Boer! He does not change, and many men, Cape Dutch and Holland Dutch, who have had far better opportunities than we English have had, are just as much 'without the pale' of the Boer's innermost mind as we are."

"This is all very interesting," he replied—in effect—"but forgive me for coming back to my point. It is clear from your book that you did know a great deal. Moreover, you were one of the very, very few who had no doubt that there would be no solution except by war, and that they were prepared to force this solution; and with confidence in the results! Now, you must understand these people, at any rate far better than any of us, or you could not have held your own against them, so to say."

"I am afraid you will think very little of me if I give you the key to that. I have never departed from the conviction that we are no match for them in manœuvring, so our only line of safety was to stick to plain facts and direct, almost stupid, simplicity. We are no match for them at their own game! That being so, it is almost impossible to find out what they mean to do; but it is not nearly so difficult to find out what they want you to do! That was my simple, almost stupid rule. Find out what they want us to do; and then—*do the opposite!*"

Mr. Balfour laughed heartily at the superficially absurd explanation, and before he asked another question I had

A Meeting with Mr. Balfour

thought of an illustration of my meaning, something that had appeared in the papers within the last day or two.

"Look, for example, at what is going on now at Colenso!" and I noticed the sudden change in his manner to an alert interest.

"Yes! What was that?" he asked rather anxiously.

"You must have noticed in the papers the report that the Boers have destroyed the railway bridge?"

Before I could go on, he interjected quickly, "Yes, but you see that they have overlooked the old road bridge. That was stupid. You see even Boers make mistakes. They are not always as clever and careful as you have pictured them."

"I am afraid it was no mistake, Sir. Any of us would know that that is just the Boer way. It is a crude attempt, audacious if you like; but it is just the bait in the mouth of the trap—nothing more. And a well advertised bait too!"

He thought for a moment and then said: "Then you are quite sure Buller will not make a frontal attack at Colenso?"

And I replied positively: "Never! He is not going to play their game. Of course I do not know what big guns can do; but infantry, over that bridge! Never! That net is set within sight of the bird. He knows!"

I could see then that for some reason unknown to me he was really anxious and even alarmed, as he asked hurriedly what I meant by "the bait in the mouth of the trap."

I explained then the position of the Tugela and its bridge, with the flat amphitheatre across the river—under the surrounding hills (Pieter's Hill, etc.) on the Ladysmith side, and pointed out that no doubt the idea was to draw Buller's force across the river by the wagon bridge until they were safely committed to the little arena. The Tugela, probably unfordable owing to summer rains, would bar their retreat, and then the Boers, holding the overlooking hills, would have the attacking force at their mercy and another Bronkhorstspuit slaughter and surrender would be the end of it. "But," I added, repeatedly, and with the greatest assurance, "Buller knows the country and he knows the Boers. You need not feel a moment's uneasiness; he is not to be caught that way; of that I have not the faintest doubt!"

Mr. Balfour did not seem to be reassured by this, and I repeated it many times; but his manner was quite changed and he seemed to become more and more uneasy, and plied me with numbers of questions. Once he said: "You speak with great conviction, and with much greater knowledge than you have admitted. Have you any information from other sources—anything that supports this view?"

South African Memories

"Not at all," I replied quickly. "On the contrary, my own advices, including letters from Buller's base, and from men organizing our irregular Corps and Scouts, all quote the general talk of the country, 'the common knowledge of Natal' as they term it. They are critical of Buller, and say that he means to make a frontal attack at Colenso, and has prepared for that alone, and even so has not prepared at all well. He has no mounted force to strike elsewhere, and the Boers can move quickly. They say he has no use for the Irregulars, and has ignored warnings and reports of men who know the country. They complain that he will not occupy Hlangwane Hill on his right flank, and they tell me that he does not know it is on his own side of the Tugela River. But how can my friends know this? These things must be hearsay and gossip. My advices are a month old, mind you! Now apart from all else it is absurd to suppose that a general would take the rank and file, and even outsiders into his confidence, or would publish his plans a month or two beforehand, unless he had the real alternative ready somewhere else. I mentioned the bridge only as an example of what I meant by our simple old rule. Buller has found out what they want him to do, and of course he will—do the opposite. He knows them!"

It was a wild, wet, cold night—raining dismally, and the big fire in the lounge was very acceptable. Mr. Balfour's figure and habits have been made familiar to all by the caricaturist. One has seen him sink down on the Treasury benches until he seems to be sitting on the small of his back with his long entwined legs stretching far out before him, his knees almost nose high! In the pause after this final assurance he dropped back from his earnest questioning into just such an attitude and his legs reached well across the hearth. I had risen during the talk and was standing well to his left against the corner of the mantelpiece. After a long pause he remarked, without moving, "They think things out and make a plan—these people. They seem to prefer the circuitous ways; they are not like our people, as you say." I felt that the effect had been more serious than I had intended, and that unwittingly I had been led into talking military plans and science; and I tried to turn it aside by an idea which occurred to me then and was acted upon on the impulse of the moment. It would have seemed an impertinence had it been premeditated.

"It is second nature with them. Experience in pioneering made them cautious and secretive. I do not say it disparagingly, but it is a habit. Say, for example, the Boer

A Meeting with Mr. Balfour

stood where I stand now and he wanted the way open to pass along here (indicating the hearth, which was barricaded by his legs) he would——” I stopped for a moment and looked quickly to the door in the far corner behind Mr. Balfour, and he drew up his legs and turned round to see who had entered, or what had attracted my attention. I stepped across the open hearth and resumed laughingly, “He would do that!”

It was a simple and absurd sort of illustration, but all laughed at the mechanical precision with which it had worked itself out, and when I apologized for the liberty of a sort of practical joke, he replied that he was very grateful for it, and could but hope that Buller would not be drawn to the bait quite as unsuspectingly as he had been. We were all laughing over this when a servant reported a telephone call for Mr. Balfour. In spite of his serenity and his gentle and courteous apology for this interruption, we became conscious of something unusual; and an atmosphere of restraint, tension and anxiety developed at once. His last words, as he left, “I am afraid that is from the War Office,” or something in his tone, perhaps, left the two of us worried and silent during the quarter of an hour of his absence.

He returned quietly and, with the same smiling self-possession and hesitant politeness, reassured us as he explained that it was a message from the War Office and that he was very sorry to say he would have to leave us to return there, as he had feared would be the case.

We had been prepared for this and expected him to leave at once; but he came towards the fire and still smiling and with the extreme gentleness and slow choice of words that in no way detracted from the clearness and courage of one who softens the blow of bad news without concealing the truth, he told us what had come through. Overwork, illness and strain had bitten deeper than I knew. My youngest brother, who had been born on my eighth birthday, and committed to my care on my father's death-bed had been killed only three weeks before. He had joined the I.L.H., the Reformers' Regiment which I had helped to raise, and was killed in his first engagement at Willow Grange whilst carrying a number of wounded under heavy fire. The blow was a heavy one! Then there was the dreadful ever-present doubt whether the British Government, Parliament and people understood what was at stake, and would face the necessary efforts and sacrifices to see it through. The news of that Colenso disaster came as a shattering blow to me. I cannot recall the words of that past-master of phrase—Buller had made his attack, a frontal

South African Memories

attack! The full report was not to hand; but he had failed. By three o'clock he had managed to withdraw his forces, but the losses had been heavy—over one thousand casualties, many killed. His present position, to which he had retired, was quite unassailable. Unfortunately he had lost some of his guns—at least temporarily—perhaps ten or twelve. It was possible some might be recovered!

Then something of which I had no experience happened. The other two began to stretch up to the ceiling. The room seemed to move slowly round, revolving towards me, and something relaxed behind my knees. Someone guided me into an armchair, and then to my utter humiliation I found myself gasping, with half a wineglass of brandy held before me. For the only time in my life I had fainted.

It was a matter of seconds only before I shook it off. It seemed to me a display so effeminate and theatrical that I had to tell them then that I had been in bed and without food for days, and had come out with a high 'Flu' temperature. No doubt that did help to make the blow go home; but the truth is it looked like the end of everything—another Majuba! And I realized in advance the sure developments, grimly and coolly foretold by Smuts ten months earlier—"and this time we shall get all that we want!"

From the recollection of that blurred and hateful scene there emerges one figure, unconsciously revealed in circumstances, and amid contrasts unforeseen and with no audience or gallery to affect or to judge its essential nature. The gentleness and modesty and considerate politeness were still there; but through them shone something of which men had more than a glimpse in Ireland, and have learnt to rely on in each national crisis. The serene, unshakeable faith in England, in his people; the lofty, inspiring calm of a leader; the 'noblesse oblige' wonderfully expressed; the firmness, the nerve and the finest tempered courage! These, it seemed to me, breathed from the man who had been described as effeminately polite, lazily indifferent, and incapable of those great qualities which it is 'not good form' to acknowledge.

I raise my hat to Mr. Balfour!

It was with no loss of gentle courtesy that he made me feel—and it is the only time before or since that faith failed me—that I did not understand our people. "Forgive me for saying so, but when you speak of our people, and mean the people of these Islands, you must allow me to speak for them as one who has lived his life among them and knows them. No doubt we must call for more men and great efforts and

A Meeting with Mr. Balfour

sacrifices. It may be unpleasant to have to admit the facts; but that is all they need. Governments may suffer, but our people will not quail; they want to know the truth and they will face it. If we have to find 50,000 men as you say—we shall get them. And if another 50,000 are needed, they will be forthcoming; and so, again and again to the end! All they will ask is that the cause be right and the truth be known to them.”

Then indeed I felt humbled; but uplifted too and confident; and when he repeated it all in another form, I felt almost too grateful to feel ashamed of the momentary doubt. “You and your people have suffered and endured, and have kept your faith and courage in the face of misrepresentations, and I would not like you to go away now with any doubt in your mind. I have given you this assurance in all sincerity. I *know* it is true! You can trust our people!”

The news of the disaster had obliterated all that had occurred before he left us; indeed it seemed as though nothing else had happened that evening. It was therefore with dazed surprise that I heard him address me again very directly.

“I want to thank you for one of the most interesting evenings I have ever spent: and I owe you an apology and an explanation. I hope you will not feel that a great liberty was taken, and that you who were so frank and trusting were deliberately imposed upon! The fact is that I could not tell you before, but I can now, and I ask your forgiveness. When I pressed you to tell me what you thought Buller would do I knew that by that time the battle must be over, and I knew that he had actually made a frontal attack at Colenso. He cabled earlier in the day that he had begun the attack. I want to tell you that I had known all along he intended a frontal attack and, feeling very uneasy on this ground, I wished to get your dispassionate views and information. I owe you this apology; but I wish to add I owe you much more than that. I shall never forget ‘the bait in the mouth of the trap.’”

Then there came over me like a flood the recollection of all that had passed. I protested earnestly that I had never intended it as a criticism, and had urged, as I still urged, “trust the man on the spot, and do not listen to amateur critics.” He put it aside with a quiet smile—“It is very nice of you, but, I shall never forget, ‘the bait in the mouth of the trap!’”

He had bidden us good-night when he turned once more to me—“Do you know what you have done? Do you

South African Memories

appreciate it?" I had no idea of what he referred to and said so. "I thought so," he said, "and I take the liberty of telling you, as it is something that, as far as I know, has never been done. By means of a book you have completely changed the opinion and feelings of a great nation in a moment of crisis; and I know of no instance in history in which this has been done before!"

CHAPTER IX

SIDELIGHTS ON THE BATTLE OF COLENZO

I

It was in October, 1908, that the National Convention of delegates from the parliaments of the four self-governing colonies of South Africa, with three from Rhodesia added, met in Durban to consider the Union of South Africa. The Dutch, in common with many other people, have an unavowed faith in omens, and they cultivate coincidences for that reason. The war of 1880 was begun by the Declaration of Independence at Krugersdorp on December 16—Dingaan's Day—the day on which (in 1838) the treacherous murder of Piet Retief and his party of Voortrekkers was avenged by the final defeat of the Zulu King Dingaan. For years the anniversary had been observed in religious spirit by a small section of the Dutch—mostly in the Transvaal—but the significance, the facts and even the date were unknown beyond this small section. The occasion of a religious gathering which had been well organized in advance, had been seized as an appropriate one for the Declaration of Independence in 1880. The successful ending of that war had given Dingaan's Day a new national, political and racial significance, and a great increase in observance; still it was not a public holiday, even in the Transvaal, and was hardly known and not at all observed outside the Transvaal.

In 1899 the defeat of Buller at Colenso on December 15 had given to the following day, Dingaan's Day, a fresh and still wider significance. There is no doubt it impressed the Boers. It is forgotten now that the true meaning of this day, which is marked by the heroic sacrifices of the old Pioneers as the triumph of civilization over barbarism, was restored in the Transvaal by Lord Milner's nominated Parliament and government, and afterwards commemorated throughout the land by the National Convention's resolution to make the day a public holiday throughout the Union of South Africa.

The second Boer war was the result of the ultimatum presented by the Transvaal on October 9, 1899, and expiring on the night of October 10,¹ which was the birthday of President

¹ The ultimatum actually expired at 5 p.m. on October 11. It was received by the British Government on October 10.

South African Memories

Kruger. It was a birthday present to the leader of the Boer people. Who can doubt it?

A spirit of inspiration of happier omen, as I see it, possessed the Boer leaders when they chose that same date as the opening day of the National Convention which aimed at the Union of South Africa! The tenth of October (1908) was the anniversary of Kruger's birthday and the ninth anniversary of the outbreak of the war, but it fell upon a Sunday and so the National Convention was formally opened on October 12, which was the anniversary of the first shot fired in the war, when De la Rey (who was also a delegate) attacked the British troops at Kraaipan.

There were to be yet two more coincidences in anniversaries which are almost unknown, but more significant, more powerful, and touching world-wide interests, and they were wholly free from human influence—true and most striking coincidences.

When the Peace Conference met in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles, there were two men present who had been divided even more than the leaders on warring sides are as a rule opposed. Lord Milner was present as the British Secretary for War; General Botha as Prime Minister of South Africa. Volumes might fail to express all that is brought to mind by that one line. Save that both were representatives of the Empire, it was by accident that they found themselves seated side by side. The question of reparation by Germany for her wanton aggression and her crimes had so possessed the whole world that the sub-committees which had been appointed to deal with scores of subjects all set about their work with one injunction ringing in their ears—"Germany, the criminal, must make amends!" The result was a thoroughness and even an overlapping so conscientious that when all recommendations were put together the cumulative result was beyond the limits of possibility under any conceivable circumstances.

The first to sound a sane, reasoned, patriotic note was Lord Milner; and within a few hours this man, who had staked and sacrificed his career once and even again for the Empire with such splendid result, was howled at as a Pro-German. He took it all philosophically, as many times before in the Boer War and after, when advocating military training and efficiency and social reform, when urging higher prices for the farmers to stimulate food production and guard against isolation in the war by submarines, when he gave the call to face the fact of failure and withdrawal from Gallipoli—so now he just waited, and was justified. But he had difficulty in getting a hearing, even at the Conference. Then there came a critical moment, and it seemed that no one could appeal

Sidelights on the Battle of Colenso

to reason, and it was General Botha who rose and, although he spoke in Afrikaans—his words were then and there translated into many tongues—the strange compelling call which the record of South Africa and its two white races made—so different from all theory and experience—gained him a hearing. It was a call to the best emotions in men of many races: by that, and by his obvious simplicity and sincerity, he captured and held this gathering of many nations. And it was a coincidence that played no small part.

Before the representatives of all the nations, and to the ablest political leaders of the whole world, this uneducated farmer made his appeal in the only language in which he could trust himself to speak—Cape Dutch; and the unknown and homely patois had to be translated and retranslated. But the simplicity of his statement and the knowledge that it was true, spoke for him. There is, I believe, no record of it, and what is set down here comes from two who were present. Lord Milner himself told it all to me.

It was, Botha said, the greatness, the moral greatness of the cause that had united the Allies and called into one brotherhood many who had been divided on other questions. That cause had triumphed but unaccountable sacrifices had been made; yet the triumph of right had justified the efforts and sacrifices. That was the only adequate reward. No material gain had been sought by those who had served, no thought of revenge should move them in the day of triumph. He did not know of anyone there who had gone through the experience of a war in which all had been lost—Government, flag, country, all! None but himself and his colleague (Smuts). It was natural for them to remember, and to try to realize the position of the beaten. He had no wish to minimize their guilt. It was that which had united the civilized world to destroy this danger to its very existence; but “you cannot, you must not destroy a nation; you cannot, you must not take vengeance on a whole people and punish them so as to make it impossible for them to recover or even to exist!”

The plea for moderation was made in greater detail and with great feeling, and it was at some such point as this that the speaker stopped suddenly, and, after a long-drawn breath, said slowly and with obvious control: “Gentlemen! Seventeen years ago to-day,” and here he laid his hand on the shoulder of Lord Milner sitting beside him, “my friend and I made peace at Vereeniging.”¹ The words caused an intense, subdued sensation, but he went on in measured tones—“It was a bitter peace for us—bitter hard! We lost all for which

¹ May 31, 1902.

South African Memories

we had fought for three long years and had made untold sacrifices. Our independence, our flag, our country, all gone! For us there seemed to be nothing left; but we turned our thoughts and efforts then to saving our people; and they—the victors—helped us. It was a hard peace for us to accept, but, as I know it now, when time has shown us the truth, it was not unjust—it was a generous peace that the British people made with us; and that is why we stand with them to-day side by side in the cause that has brought us all together. Remember, I say to you, there was no spirit or act of vengeance in that peace; we were helped to rise again, and were placed on equal terms, and to-day I feel that our people have proved themselves worthy of that trust and that opportunity.”

What the practical effect may have been none can say, but there is no doubt that the circumstances of the speaker and of South Africa, and the dramatic coincidence of dates and purpose, made General Botha’s speech one of the most moving and remarkable heard at that World’s Convention.

I have noted some coincidences partly because in these notes of a few experiences the “long arm of coincidence” plays its part more than once. If the appearance of General Botha and Lord Milner side by side at Versailles offered most striking evidence of the working of time within twenty years of the outbreak of the Boer War, the change in attitude and feeling of the two rival races—especially in the Transvaal—was almost more significant; for within a single decade the Union of South Africa and the peace between the two white races had been agreed to on the only possible basis—freedom and equality. It was just ten years after the outbreak of war when the Act of Union was adopted by the Imperial Parliament. It was nine years to the day when the work of union began in the National Convention.

It will be seen, then, that the date of December 16 already marked several important anniversaries. It was Dingaan’s Day, and for that reason was chosen for the distinction of the commencement by the Transvaal of the 1880 war against England. Later it was marked by the battle of Colenso,¹ in which Buller’s invading army was heavily defeated and narrowly escaped annihilation, as these notes will show. October 10 was even more remarkable for coincidences. It was Paul Kruger’s birthday, and for that reason was chosen for the presentation by the State Secretary (Dr. Leyds) of the ultimatum to England, and the commencement of the 1899 war, “as a birthday present to Oom Paul.” It was also, with

¹ The battle of Colenso was actually fought on December 15, 1899. On the following day, December 16, Buller asked for an armistice for the burial of the dead.

Sidelights on the Battle of Colenso

happier result, the date chosen for the opening of the National Convention in 1908, nine years later. Again, in 1926, by the purest accident, it became the date of the unveiling of the South African National Memorial on the battle-ground of Delville Wood by General Hertzog, the Prime Minister of the Union. The ceremony had been fixed for a date several months earlier, and had been postponed for a date fixed by General Hertzog, merely to make it possible for him to combine in one trip this great and striking act of unveiling the Memorial to South Africa's sons of both races who gave their lives in the Great War, with his attendance at the Imperial Conference—he had no thought of coincidences, and no option in choice of dates. It was the finest and happiest of coincidences.

2

It is beyond the purpose of these notes to record, or even to suggest, how much had happened during those nine years; but it is necessary to show how a strange intimacy of association between former opponents came about. In the earliest days of Transvaal self-government, a grant disfigured, opposed, embittered and almost spoiled of all good by issues imported and used for party reasons by the Liberal Party and Government in England, one great redeeming fact full of hope and promise became clear. It was immeasurably easier for old opponents who had been "out-and-out-ers" in the South African War to understand each other and to meet frankly, than it was for others who were partisan meddlers. The leaders of the late Boer forces and party in the Transvaal, "the home and source of unrest," were big men, and when the big issue of Union or chaos in South Africa had to be faced they 'took it big!' Before the delegates from all South Africa met in Durban, those representing the Transvaal had met to consider the position. It is fair to say that, whilst the proposal came from the side of the English-speaking opposition, the Transvaal, which was the very corner-stone of the whole future Union, should endeavour to compose its own internal differences and go into the Convention, united on all vital points and under the leadership of one man, the Prime Minister, General Botha; at the same time, nothing would have been possible but for the sincerity and readiness of the Dutch leaders to meet them, their broadmindedness and their regard for South Africa as a whole. The verbal and informal agreement than made was faithfully observed by both parties and at no small cost in effort and sacrifice; and

South African Memories

in all its fundamentals it was accepted unanimously by the Convention and became the foundation and framework of the existing Union. The co-operation was so close that the delegates practically lived together, and hence it happened that what remains to be told now was not strange but almost inevitable.

We travelled from Johannesburg to Durban, enjoying the exceptional facilities of observation cars, and times and stoppages for sightseeing that the Prime Minister and his government were able to command; and it was only next morning that I realized how and why it had been so arranged. It was when we arrived at the Transvaal-Natal border in broad daylight hours later than is usual that I became aware of the fact that General De la Rey, who was one of the Transvaal delegates, had never been in that part of the country and that General Botha was anxious to show this redoubtable fighter, the hero among fighting men, and the hereditary and outstanding leader of the Western Border, what the Eastern Border was like, and to impress upon him the difficulties and achievement of which so much had been said and written.

Before the Western Border became known to fame through the Warren expedition,¹ Rhodes's negotiations, the Rev. John Mackenzie, Moffatt Bethel and the many native 'affairs,' the two brothers De la Rey were there as Voortrekkers, boldest and most remarkable among pioneers—buccaneers we called them—and indeed the nickname of 'the old Buccaneer' was given by us in affectionate admiration to 'Oom Koos,' their son and nephew, this better-known and most gallant General De la Rey, of the generation following 'Groot Adriaan' and his brother. The elders had been the Lords of the Border, and great characters, with the strong qualities and the limitations of the Border Barons or the Elizabethan buccaneers, who knew no law but what they made and changed as circumstances required; who relied on themselves and their rifles; who put their trust in God—as they interpreted Him—and in no one else!

It was consistent with the family attitude and character that for nearly forty years General De la Rey should have fought for his country whenever called on—and all burghers were liable, and none more ready than these—that he should have gone where required and yet have found that duty had never taken him to the Eastern (the Natal) Border. I believe he would have regarded it as a waste of time—idle curiosity or something equally beneath notice—to have gone a step out of his way, or given an hour of his time, to scenes

¹ Bechuanaland, 1885.

Sidelights on the Battle of Colenso

of historic interest or to discussion of what was already done or might have been done. This, to him, seemed to be mere foolishness. When he had done what he had to do, a campaign, a business trip, a session of the Volksraad, or a meeting of Commandants, he was off home at once where his herds and flocks and family occupied his time and thoughts. Unostentatious, silent, but swift, he produced an almost uncanny impression of character in which utter simplicity, indifference, trustfulness and calm gentleness combined to hide and protect—as the husk the kernel—a spirit that baffled analysis or comprehension.

By the humour of fate and the will of an American gentleman who wished to give expression to his feelings, a sum of £10,000 had been given to help the Boer people after the war; and the trustees of that fund were Generals Botha and De la Rey and myself—hence an association which had been friendly but not intimate before the war began, was renewed upon closer terms a few months after the conclusion of peace.

I got to know, in circumstances that make for understanding, and to feel that the invisible barriers which separate people fundamentally and for ever did not exist in this case. However the views may have differed, from the different standpoints there seemed to be one all-extenuating factor which was, I hope, eventually recognized, and that was love for the country of our birth, South Africa. Much was understood, and much forgiven, although the dour, obstinate and unforgetting character of the old Boer forbade the admissions and concessions which the traditions and training of the British people claimed as a part of "playing the game!" One can but guess at these things; for despite all opportunity and desire it remains true that, in regard to the older generation at least, "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet" in complete and unreserved understanding. Somewhere there is a screen which none of us can penetrate.

De la Rey himself was a great character—honoured by all, and much loved; amazingly candid and outspoken in a careless, smiling, indifferent way. No one was safe or proof against his calm frankness. He spoke briefly and to the point whether seriously or in casual reminiscence or comment. Among his friends and more intimate acquaintances the certainty that he would "put his foot in it" by some disconcerting, tactless and indifferent personal reference or an almost reckless "letting the cat out of the bag" was well known, and confidently looked for with mischievous pleasure, always in the hope that someone else would be given away—always with the lurking apprehension that the laugh would be against

South African Memories

one's self. It is wrong to say that he spared no one and respected no one; it was simply that he seemed to be unconscious of conventional usage or ulterior meanings and just spoke as he thought, simply, and unhampered by surroundings.

On his sixtieth birthday, during the sitting of the National Convention in Durban, the Transvaalers united in affection and admiration and gave him a very handsome, up-to-date gold watch, suitably inscribed. It was the best obtainable. That night at dinner the presentation was made by General Botha, who rose to express what we all felt; he spoke in the happiest terms, and in his homely Cape Dutch made laughter-provoking reference to the war, and the past—talking over the lighter side of this ten-year-old struggle between former enemies just as we were, happily, able to do. De la Rey did not rise to reply. He took the watch and looked at it with careless, but not discourteous good humour; his eyes which could be so penetrating and hawklike in their keen hard swiftness were soft with kindly thought, almost tender and dreamy; and toying with the watch and gold chain that lay at his right hand he began chatting, ostensibly with Botha on his left, and yet by his curious compelling way he included us all.

He began, I don't know how, but soon drifted on to recall the time, just after the Peace of Vereeniging, when he, Botha and De Wet had gone to Europe as a deputation, to raise funds from their Continental friends. With careless candour he alluded, smilingly, to experiences in England, France, Germany and Holland. It was then that the simple old Boer revealed how much he had 'seen through' everywhere, and how unmoved and philosophically observing yet silent he must have been. As seen from his point of view everything appeared in a new light. With indulgent penetration he hit off Germany and France, the Liberal Party in England, the Pro-Boers, the 'talkers' in Holland, and so on. It was all gentle, but all utterly penetrating; all spoken dreamily as though the sixtieth birthday had lifted him to some Olympian height where kindly, half-contemptuous indulgence was the only way.

As far as I can reconstruct it: "They were very nice to us everywhere and were full of sympathy. Of course the Governments had to be careful and put nothing in writing and did nothing officially. They were all afraid of England. They were very pleased that we had done what they couldn't do, or were afraid to risk. They all wanted to see England humiliated and worried; but many of them didn't want to see England beaten or crippled; it wouldn't pay them. They

Sidelights on the Battle of Colenso

were jealous of England and hated her, but were much more frightened of some of their friends. The private people were best. They wanted us to stay everywhere and would give us everything. It was funny in Holland. Some of them seemed to be quite mad because we were the same blood and had fought the great British Empire for three years. They were so proud of us; there was nothing like it in South Africa. But I often laughed. They did all the talking while we had to do the fighting. Even when Kruger went over to get help they talked all right, but couldn't or wouldn't do anything. Even the German Kaiser, who talked so big about his help, was frightened to receive Kruger and wouldn't let him go to Berlin. . . .

"There was one old fellow, I think he was about eighty—he was something like a lord or a prince—I never could remember these names and things. He sent to me one day at the hotel; an officer came, and asked for an interview privately. I said, 'Ja. Come if you like. I have nothing to do except walk about—everyone comes here.' So he came, with this officer, and" (then De la Rey's eyes crinkled up with amusement) "he had a great big thing wrapped up in a cloak and in flannels and he put it on the table and unpacked it. I couldn't understand much that he said, but it was his father's and grandfather's sword. They tell me he was a great man once and fought in some wars—in France or the Netherlands—somewhere there—and was a friend of—of, I don't know—Napoleon, or William of Orange, somebody. Man! It was big and heavy, all silver and gold, and things hanging on it. No man could fight with a thing like that. He bowed many times and handed it to me—with both hands. I couldn't help laughing and asked him what could I do with it; but he was crying, and I could see it was a big thing for the poor old man; so I took it. It's there somewhere on the farm now. They were just foolish, but they wanted to give something!

"There was another old chap. He was *very* funny; he brought me a gold watch; it was as big as half an orange. You've never seen a watch like that. I asked him what it was, and he told me it had belonged to his family for—*nie ek weet nie*—a hundred, two hundred years, more perhaps. I asked him if it kept good time, but he said it was not for that, and to tell the truth no man could carry such a thing with him. I showed him my watch" (and here De la Rey pulled out a large sized, modern, nickel or silvered watch from which dangled a strip of leather—*voorslag*) "and told him he should get one like that, as mine never gave any trouble. I had it

South African Memories

years before the war—of course you don't want a watch round on the farm. You know when to eat and go to bed and get up; and that's all you want. But I took his watch; it seemed to please him, and these people were good to us. It was like saying something that they couldn't say, so they wanted to give something that they had had for a long time and had talked a lot about."

By this time all of us, with the exception of one whose gathering gloom and look of intense worry showed how he repented the misguided extravagance of our gift, and the ghastly failure of it, were most concerned to hide from De la Rey our convulsions of laughter, and the reason. Enjoying it all from a new angle, we 'drew' him quietly by asking if he had received other presentations of watches, and with the same easy tolerance of well-meant foolishness he told us that there had been more than he could remember. There was a box full of them—20 or 30 perhaps—"out on the farm." They were of no use to him, and his partiality for his own old watch came out once more when he added the useful tip: "This is the kind you want—if you need a watch at all!" And then drifted on to other things.

He was a man of middle height and rather spare frame; quiet, but quick and active, and with great reserve of energy; obviously in the perfect condition of health and fitness that wiped out a score of years. In the manner of the Boer he wore a full beard which in later years was slightly trimmed, and of dark brown tinged with grey. His face reminded me of the works of old masters—the strong aquiline features, the expanse of forehead, the nobility of the whole face, carriage and expression, the eyes brown and deep set, watchful, but not suspicious, thoughtful, and kindly when at rest, and amazingly swift in movement and expression when alert. It was to my mind one of the most striking, commanding, and handsome faces I have seen.

On a day when we went whaling off Durban the man revealed, or suggested all unconsciously as ever, other qualities. It was impressed on one with the certainty of having witnessed it, that this man, after many generations of veld life, reincarnated his ancestors on the sea. The little steam tug or whaler rolled and tossed with an irregularity and abruptness that might have beaten any landsman; yet there he stood, swinging easily, calmly but unceasingly observant and watchful, smoking the most deadly old pipe, placidly refilled with strong tobacco. Heredity seemed to shout its claims over the whistling wind and the jets of spray. The man seemed born to it and clearly enjoyed every moment.

Sidelights on the Battle of Colenso

He was exhilarated—his blood warmed to it all! He was master there, and at home; yet except for that one trip to Europe he had never even seen the sea. For a long time he stood alone, with feet well apart and occasionally one hand resting lightly on a stay. I had to hold on and made no pretence about it. When we sighted whales and at last drew closer and could see with naked eye the spouting and tumbling and playing, and then saw the great creatures 'sound,' to be lost for half an hour and reappear perhaps a mile or more away, it was more interesting to me to watch him than to track the whales. It might have been an hour or so later when he turned suddenly, and with a happy smile on his face, as though he had spotted the solution of some conjuring trick, or detected, but would not expose, some trifling blunder, he said, "Watch now! This Captain is a fool. He does not understand his work properly, and he is also timid (bang). (The 'Captain' was the man who fired the harpoon from a gun in the bows, when he got alongside a whale.) He is frightened of a fight and wants to get the whale while it's asleep! Also he is wasting time, and has gone in the wrong direction twice already. Look now; I'll tell you. Those three whales will come up over there, in 25 minutes. I took the time." He pointed away to starboard almost at right angles to our course; and then, with a nod, walked lightly back to his place. And when the whales rose again precisely as he had foretold, he half turned to look his amusement, gave another nod and never referred to it again.

Norseman, Buccaneer, Van Tromp, Pilot, Fisherman! What was it? I felt, yet could not define it; and when the whale was killed and to the tumbling sea was added the blood and the awful reek of that blood and grease-soaked boat and the stench of the whale alongside, and the enormous sharks that darted like blue-white streaks, belly upwards, to carve out huge slices from the carcass, and when over it all there stood the lithe, alert figure with the smiling eyes and brown beard, swept back by the wind, one felt like crying aloud, "Lord, what a buccaneer this would have been!"

In the evening I heard one of our party ask what he thought of the day and listened eagerly for his views; but the exhilaration of sea and ancestry was gone then. The inevitable old pipe was just drawn from the mouth to enable him to say tolerantly: "There was nothing in it. The man was timid."

South African Memories

3

Such, in brief, and all too brief, was General De la Rey, and it was with keen interest and astonishment that I learnt from the opening words that morning that this was his first visit to Natal or the Natal Border, where the war of 1880-81 had been fought, and where, in 1899-1900, Buller's campaign and all that Ladysmith suggests had been enacted. It was Botha, supremely qualified and well prepared to explain it all to his fighting colleague, who explained to us that De la Rey had never been in these parts before and had only heard from others of the places famous in the two wars. De la Rey said nothing, but continued half-facing the glass front, with his observant, thoughtful eyes taking it all in.

As we passed out of Volksrust, over the Natal Border, Botha leaned forward, and pointing to a dark, flat-crowned hill on the right said, "You see that mountain, Oom Koos?" De la Rey did not move; his eyes gave one swift glance as of polite recognition; he loosened the pipe in his mouth just enough to say—"Yes, Majuba"—and nodded curtly.

I felt uncomfortable. Botha had in a way laid himself out to do the guide, and it was chilling to anyone to find so little surprise and so little interest shown in what was expected to produce much effect. One could not resist contrasting and comparing the two men. Botha had been against President Kruger's policy and against the war; both had obeyed the call of duty and of loyalty. It was De la Rey who, in his blind way, as a member of the First Volksraad, had spoken out strongly at the last sitting of that Parliament before the outburst of war, denouncing the folly of Kruger's policy and the action of the war party. The President himself in a burst of anger had vehemently defended his policy and ended by taunting the critics who would not face the risks of war. De la Rey rose instantly and with flashing eyes, but a voice of cool contempt gave the answer that silenced all. "I shall do my duty as the Raad decides," and, turning quietly to the President, added, "and you will see me in the field fighting for our independence long after you and your party who make war with their mouths have fled the country!" No others would have dared to say that to the dominating old President.

Botha, far more enlightened and progressive, gifted with a wonderful faculty of assimilation, and with tact which amounted to genius, tact which was an endowment, a policy, a cultivated art, a life's study, and yet most largely the outcome of a kindly, humane nature—Botha who was more than a

Sidelights on the Battle of Colenso

decade younger than De la Rey, and who, with the little experience of a scrap with Zulus had been put over the heads of the old leaders as Commandant-General, and had since become the accepted leader of all—Botha did feel and to others did show an affectionate disdain for the 'old man's' intelligence, and with all his patience and personal regard and all his wariness of offending the old guard, did in fact reveal by his elaborate painstaking his contempt for De la Rey as a politician. De la Rey on his side had no use for the new-fangled notions. Without rancour against anyone, whether races, nations, or individuals, and with intimate friends and family connections on both sides (it was one of his jokes that he and I were connected by marriage) he remained one of the old guard to whom the Boers were the Chosen People who owned South Africa; and all concessions of right to others, white or black, were 'foolishness' and merely the beginnings of trouble.

But there was more than that between the two men. They differed fundamentally in temperament and character as much as in experience and outlook, and this difference found expression on this occasion in connection with the very activities by which both became famous—the war.

The incident of the day's whaling occurred only a month later, but has been told out of chronological order because it throws a light on what I must call De la Rey's genius. My sympathy that day was with Botha, because he seemed to feel acutely the unconscious snubbings, and yet came again, after strained pauses it is true, and with cheery references and affectionate persistence tried to interest his calmly indifferent colleague. But my admiration was all for De la Rey—swift, penetrating, impersonal! So calm, so clear and so decisive! Master of his job, and at home. One could well realize the devotion and unquestioning confidence that his men had in this born leader in the field. In a word, he seemed to reveal in simple truth the very best of things that had not been clear before.

Some minutes slipped by after the Majuba incident, and the train was climbing towards Laing's Nek tunnel when Botha pointed towards the ridge and explained that it was "Laing's Nek." De la Rey nodded again and said, quietly, "The long slope must be to the left, on the Natal side?" Botha, grown cautious, realized that somehow his colleague knew it all already, and added a few words of casual explanation, which De la Rey acknowledged again by a silent nod. He was in no sense discourteous or offhand—it was clear that he needed no explanations and that talk was superfluous.

South African Memories

His glance was keen and alert and his eyes took it all in, both sides of the train, yet he did not move or seem to be making any effort, mental or physical. He absorbed it!

Then a faint smile slid into his eyes as he gave a half-glance down to the wide valley or plain on his right, and his lips parted in response to the unspoken thought. All he said was, "And that was where we had our *laager*." All smiled at this, but no one said anything; for it must be explained that the Boer *laager*, full of women and children, food and cattle, etc., had been placed just behind the hill in the belief that the British could not occupy any of the commanding heights; and when Colley did actually occupy Majuba and could look down into it there was a scene of terrible confusion and stampede.

Ingogo was passed in much the same way. No one knew what he thought, as he said nothing. Then we came to the scenes of the late war in which Botha had been one of the principal actors and for the most part Commander-in-Chief. Here Botha could speak with authority, and no one living could better explain it all. This country was, in a sense, the home of Botha's childhood and later years. He had grown up in the neighbouring district; he had, with Lukas Meyer, taken from the Zulus the territory afterwards formed into the New Republic and still later annexed to the Transvaal as Vryheid and Utrecht. He had represented this area in the Volksraad. He knew every inch of it, so he claimed, and indeed he must have done so!

We had passed Newcastle when he began to describe the operations which culminated in the first big disaster to the British side—the advance and attack during which General Penn Symons was killed and the whole force practically surrounded and only saved by the knowledge and exertions of Colonel Dartnell of the Natal Police, who knew the country and led the British force back towards Ladysmith by the one unguarded and little-known valley, a 'back door' of retreat.

Now and again De la Rey broke his constant but effortless sweeping of the view by a short glance at Botha, while the latter, warming to his subject, gave a vivid and, indeed, dramatic account of the affair. It was a masterly description, of course from his own Boer view-point; for although the chief command that day had been vested in General Lukas Meyer, the latter was in poor health and died soon after; and in any case he was no outstanding leader. It was Botha, his second in command, and closest colleague, who was *de facto* leader, as he indeed stated. De la Rey gave evidence of

Sidelights on the Battle of Colenso

interest, or it might have been surprise or doubt, now and again, by the occasional glances at Botha. For some unknown reason I felt apprehensive, yet there was no evidence of scepticism, still less of opposition. De la Rey's manner, indeed, revealed nothing. Botha's account made no mention of the break-up of the Boer *laager*, similar to that in the '80 war at Laing's Nek, or of the chaos of that stampede when it was thought that the Lancers would get home. He dismissed in a few words the retreat of the British, never mentioning Colonel Dartnell and the escape of the British force by night; he finished off by a description of the British losses and the effect of the victory, and by generous references to Penn Symons, the dead general, and the gallantry of the British officers individually and sympathy with the poor fellows, the infantry, and their clumsy, slow and conventional movements.

When he had stopped De la Rey continued for a while looking out, and then, in a curiously quiet tone, almost contemplative one might call it, repeated: "You and Lukas knew the country well?" Botha answered almost eagerly (the Lord knows why, but I felt on the instant that he was swallowing a bait!) and explained volubly how they had known it all their lives and had drawn the English forward between the hills about Dundee or Talana, and had them all surrounded before Penn Symons suspected anything.

It was then that a screen seemed to drop from De la Rey's eyes and he looked full at Botha, with a glance of startling directness and purpose—"And yet they escaped! And an English policeman led them out by night by a valley that was not stopped or guarded. And you knew nothing till next morning. Look here, Louis!" and he gave the slightest turn to his chair, resting both hands on the arm rests, "you and Lukas knew the land; you had time to prepare; it was no victory that. You should not have let one single man of the whole army escape that day! Wherever the English pushed and fought hard, there our people gave way. You never drove it home! Not one should have escaped!"

The silence was positively painful, and for a good while I kept my eyes on the landscape. Botha was sallow with anger. As was his way, his two front teeth showed between parted lips, and I knew that the effort to recover control was a severe one. He was exceptionally sensitive to, and deeply resentful of personal injury and humiliation. Even the cartoonists of the press were referred to at times with a sort of vindictive ferocity or a shocked, almost horrified, disapprobation which made severe calls on the gravity of his friends. In this instance one felt he had every excuse, until one saw the calm, thoughtful,

South African Memories

unmoved profile of the man whose dispassionate comments had upset everything and everyone.

General Schalk Burger sat in a corner of the observation car, muffled up to the eyes, silent as the thoughtful parrot. Smuts in a deep chair reading, writing, glancing about now and then—missing nothing, always ready and agreeable and philosophically cheery—made no obvious sign and took no part. What he thought no one knows. Now and again with a preoccupied air he asked a question or referred to a matter of Government business or public interest, so wholly alien to the subject of the battlefields that one felt convinced it was his way of easing the position by diverting attention—and it did so. Now and again he would break into a laugh, boyish and contagious, as though irrelevance and interruptions had no deterrent meaning for this irresponsible tourist, and would break in on De la Rey with some most amusing recollection or yarn; and the unruffled old Buccaneer would respond with slow but ready and gentle smiles, softening away the appearance of grave and all-absorbing thoughtfulness. Smuts was by far the best actor and the ready and resourceful deviser of expedients. He was the peacemaker who had none of the human weaknesses of personal feeling, and who saw no sense, just waste of time and force, in friction; but it was De la Rey alone who seemed to be single-minded, undisturbed, unconscious and uncaring for what anyone may have thought. He spoke only what he thought and, as far as he was concerned, the effects produced by his words or manner were of no interest, and did not even exist.

4

We reached the high bridge at Waschbank, and here Botha, avoiding all risk of describing personal experiences, told of an incident much talked of at the time. The bridge was a comparatively large one over a deep ravine, and in rough hilly country, and in the early stages of the war all supplies for the British forces had to be rushed up by train from the base at Ladysmith. When the Boer forces were still on the Natal border a Russian officer who had volunteered on their side had begged the privilege of destroying this essential bridge, and so paralysing the transport. The distance might have been about 50 or 60 miles across rough country, and supplies of explosives had to be carried on pack-horses. The bridge itself was some 30 miles behind the British advanced posts on the railway. Botha warmed up in his description of the

Sidelights on the Battle of Colenso

difficulties and dangers—in fact he was over generous in this respect and one could not but feel that it was making a great deal of an exploit which was not out of the ordinary, even in that war. Probably the circumstances made him too lavish of his praise; possibly he was spurred by De la Rey's lack of appreciation of the "heroic achievement"—"One of the bravest deeds I have known." De la Rey was indeed not responsive. He inclined to look out and gave no sign; but I noticed that when the superlatives were most lavish he turned very slowly as though towards the distant landscape until his back was towards Botha, and from where I sat his profile showed a slight frown and a flicker of the eyes as though from a passing irritation.

It was when Botha had done and we were well past the scene that he turned again and, looking over his shoulder at Botha, with a half-dreamy, half-puzzled expression in his eyes, said, very calmly: "Louis, I don't understand you! To me there is nothing wonderful, nothing brave, in blowing up a bridge. This Russian is like the rest of these Uitlanders. They all like to do what is talked about, something that no one else has done. But what does it all amount to? In the dark he comes and puts in dynamite and runs away while the English sleep—and the bridge is blown up." (He almost laughed in his careless, indifferent way as he said this!) "What is there brave in this? The bridge can't shoot back. Then he comes back and says proudly, 'I did this, with only two men. I beat the whole British Army'; and everybody says 'Wonderful! What a hero!'"

At this point his look and attitude changed, and he turned his chair full round and spoke, almost sharply by contrast, but without raising his voice. "Louis, I can't see what you gain by this sort of thing. I ask myself, what is the object? What is the result? What advantage do we gain? What did we do? To me it seems just foolishness. That is not war. Over in the West I would not allow a man to blow up bridges or tear up the rails or hinder the traffic except for a definite purpose. I kept the lines open so that the English should bring up the supplies and ammunition and money as far as I wanted them to come, and then I took it from them. I have often wondered what plan or object there was for this kind of thing when nothing more seemed to be done. This man blows up a bridge fifty miles away—and you do nothing. What is the result? Yes, you cause some inconvenience, but you get no prisoners or food or money or ammunition or clothing—nothing! All you do is, you give them warning, and the English have plenty of soldiers—we haven't. They

South African Memories

repair the bridge and put on more guards. What have you got out of it? No! To me this is foolishness; but it is just like these foreigners, Russians, English, all the same, something for people to talk about, something no one else has done!"

In his simple candour he was indifferent to, or unconscious of, the effect which his references to the English might produce on me, as he was supremely oblivious of Botha's personal feelings. Those who knew him intimately will recall scores of incidents, social and political, in connection with war, business or religion, in which his disconcerting, often devastating candour was revealed, but never one when there was a desire to hurt or even consciousness of doing so.

On another occasion the subject was the characteristics and points of view of different races, when he told me of the capture of a considerable force and convoy west of Pretoria. He began it with a laugh and the remark, "You English are funny people!" His plan had been well considered, his information accurate, and he knew the country. Our force had marched straight into the trap and it closed on them. There was little bloodshed, for De la Rey found no satisfaction in killing. It was humiliating to me to learn how perfectly all was managed and how complete and immediate was the success. He took the officers as prisoners and then removed all stores, clothing, food, ammunition and animals.

"We had little time," he said, "there were other English columns all about and it was difficult to get anything away. It was necessary to take the officers away for some days as they gave trouble. We could not keep prisoners for long then. It was also necessary to prevent the men" (the 'Tommies' he called them) "from escaping immediately and giving information. I had to destroy much good food and they did not like that; nor did I, but it could not be helped. I allowed no liquor with my force, but I did not destroy that. When we were ready to go I sent word to the Tommies that I could not take them with me or send them back—nor could I leave them food for more than that day; but that I had left them all the drink, and they were free to help themselves." It was all told in Dutch of course, for he spoke no English, and as he reached the end his face softened indulgently: "Would you believe it! These men asked to see me and the whole lot of them came crowding round me, all laughing, and they sang, 'For he's a yolly goot fella!' Man, you English are a funny people!"

The reference made to the English in connection with that Russian exploit did not express his whole opinion; it was applicable to that incident and that was enough for him;

Sidelights on the Battle of Colenso

he did not bother about what might be inferred. On many other occasions I have heard him speak freely about officers and men—almost invariably with regretful and kindly contempt for their stupid courage and hidebound methods and discipline; their sense of duty; and the most bewilderingly unpractical thing of all—their ‘sporting’ spirit. The officer giving a determined and desperate lead was the real thing; but how an officer could walk out stupidly and calmly to certain death because if he didn’t do it someone else might think he was afraid, was ludicrously stupid. What did it matter what others thought? His men would soon understand him. What good was he dead? What is gained by it? What is the sense of it? Of the Tommies he spoke with amusement, pity, admiration of sorts, regret, and always with kindness. None the less, his candour was a bit bracing at times, and like a cold shower after a warm bed!

To turn the subject somewhat I referred invitingly to the ‘foreign’ volunteers, and the conversation became free and general, with many amusing anecdotes about Hollander, German and Irish contingents or individuals, for it was natural that the lighter side should be the easier to discuss. There was no apparent reticence; indeed there had never been any feeling shown on either side to make the war a ‘delicate subject,’ and as we had on many previous occasions discussed Germany’s attitude towards South Africa and towards England I went a step further and asked whether all these preparations in German South West and the building of railways and the military garrison, etc., were as disinterested as we were asked to believe. As no one answered the questions I tried again by asking what the Germans were like during the war—from the Boers’ point of view. It was Botha who said then, “The Germans! They tried to fool both sides. They were for Germany!”

It was without any thought of getting any reply that I then made the remark which brought out the most significant comment of all.

“If they failed to pull it off when we were divided, as we were, what chance would they have against us *united*?”

For a space no one answered. Then Smuts, whose back had been towards me, turned slowly. His face was pale and set and his eyes large with some intense feeling as he said slowly and deliberately, “The chance of a snowball in Hell!” The strength of conviction, and the cold, deliberate emphasis on the last word made that use of an old saying sound like a solemn, strong-considered judgment.

South African Memories

5

We passed the field of Elandslaagte, the one real victory of the British at that time, when French was in command! Who foresaw his future then? There was no explanation there by Botha. No one said anything. I saw De la Rey read the name at the station and watched him sweep his glance over the field—but he never opened his lips.

As we neared Ladysmith the main points were indicated by Botha. It was clear enough that De la Rey could piece it all together and even pick out places he had never seen. Only once his face relaxed somewhat; it was when Botha pointed out where Nicholson's Nek stood. I did not understand until later what amused them all when Botha said that that was where De Wet became the fighting General, or was first heard of; I did not notice the exact expression, but I remembered De la Rey turning with a smile of understanding, and how they laughed when De la Rey said one word—'cannon!' It was much later that I learnt the story of the real and the legendary De Wet, and had to stand much candid chaff and laughter at the cost of the British people from my Transvaal colleagues.

The train, as I have said, was stopped at intervals to enable Botha to view and explain the scenes of interest. He had indicated the main features from a spot just outside Ladysmith, sketching briefly the significance and history of the ring of hills enclosing that considerable amphitheatre, and with the art of an accomplished story-teller he had saved his chief effect for the last, drawing attention to it, almost carelessly, as though an afterthought, and then in moderate but very effective words describing the fight.

"You see the high hill far away, the one that stands up above the rest?" Up to that his explanations had been addressed more to the others, but this one he addressed to "Oom Koos" direct. De la Rey looked up instantly and steadily at it and nodded. "That is Spion Kop!" Again a brief nod; and Botha told of the fight and whilst properly content with what his men had done that day he gave point to it by sympathetic references to the terrible losses sustained by the British, and their extraordinary bravery, and by his sorrowful pitying tone in repeatedly emphasizing how they had never a hope from start to finish, being out-generalled, out-manceuvred and outfought by the mobile, eager and self-reliant burghers and expert shots. To tell such a story in such a way to a mixed audience of Boers and British, and

Sidelights on the Battle of Colenso

to avoid giving offence or provoking comment was an achievement in an art of which Botha was a master. I believe it would have been allowed to pass without any direct comment at all but that he overdid the glorifying of the 'historic achievement' a little bit more than the candid old fighter cared to accept. It seemed to touch his honour and reason as a soldier; one felt that he disliked it because it savoured of what he had already resented in others as 'gallery play' or 'Hero-making.' That is my guess. But it is not for that that I recall his amazing comment, calm, judicial and swift as a flash, but because it put in a nutshell what many have tried to discover or explain, and because it revealed so startlingly qualities that go to make a great fighter and leader: the eye of an eagle and the sense of proportion.

Botha had stopped or paused; he had not finished, for he was the only speaker and there was much more to be said about those parts, yet it was De la Rey who, without any appearance of interruption or boredom, summed up and dismissed the subject by the finality of his judgment.

"Yes! Spion Kop, Majuba—they are the same. *Observation posts!* Neither side could *hold* them!" It is for military experts to say whether this is right—or new; but to one who has read and heard all that he could see or hear, it seemed to crystallize in a sentence all that has been laboured in many volumes. Whatever the real value of the comment may be, its immediate effect was beyond all doubt, for from that time on Botha gave no further explanations in the presence of his old colleague. It was not that he was offended or hostile, but almost as though stupefied by the shattering of a cherished illusion. Later on, when he had recovered his composure, he did appear to feel hurt and humiliated. When we stopped at Colenso on the Tugela bank, and all got out the better to command the wide battlefield, he ceased to give special attention to De la Rey; the latter self-contained, thoughtful, quietly observant as ever, was apparently unconscious of this, unconscious of the need of any guide, and strolled off alone!

I knew that Botha was very sensitive, and had taken pains to inform and interest De la Rey, and I was not surprised that he felt hurt and snubbed. He had been the Commander-in-Chief and had personally been present at the battle of Colenso, and was surely the most competent and interesting of guides. I felt warm sympathy for him, but I could also understand the simple old fighting general who appraised things at their actual value.

If any have the patience to read these notes and remember certain incidents, it will be recalled that this Colenso, this

South African Memories

very spot where the bridge spans the Tugela, was, so to say, the kernel of my meeting with Mr. Balfour. Nine years had passed since that night, described in a previous chapter. The matter had not been discussed with any of the principals or witnesses since that day; but when this tour of the battlefields under General Botha's guidance was first mentioned I recalled the nine-years-old meeting with Mr. Balfour—"the bait in the mouth of the trap"—and determined to get from the Boer leader himself the account of the battle from his own point of view.

It was De la Rey who, all unconsciously, helped me and made this easy. When the train was stopped just across the Tugela Bridge to enable Botha to view and explain that region, the rather embarrassing experience of the morning had left him with his principal subject untouched, and an audience restricted and different from that on which he had counted. It would be unfair to judge these men by the standards of others and very unjust to suppose that what may appear to some to be rough manners or uncultured ways indicates any lack of decent feelings. In my experience, dignity and courtesy are characteristics of the old Boer; hospitality was a marked feature before the racial troubles began and before the diamond fields and gold fields with their hurrying and mixed populations and their unrestful and inevitable influence disturbed the easy tenour of their way. They have not the graces, nor do they observe or know the formalities of courtesy and manners as others of different experience or extraction require them; but there is a code of simplicity, grave dignity and essential courtesy which is observed naturally; and it is not unknown among the country folk of other lands. There was nothing in De la Rey's manner to detract from but much that would strengthen his right to be called one of nature's gentlemen!

On the other hand it is difficult not to feel for Botha, even if one recognizes his mistakes. I felt a good deal embarrassed; I was the only 'opposition' member of the party, and an 'out and out' Britisher, as they called the South African-born British, and this naturally prompted me to 'make it easy' and try to smooth things away. It was due to this no doubt, as well as the keenness to know all about it, that Botha found in me a sympathetic and welcome listener; and to that I owed the 'personally conducted tour.' This is no attempt to describe the battle of Colenso. I give only such other detail as will bring into relief the main incident.

Sidelights on the Battle of Colenso

6

During November, 1899, Botha, who was then only thirty-seven, was appointed by Kruger to be Commandant-General in succession to General Joubert (who had held that position during and since the first Boer War). Age and failing health had told on Joubert. The raid into Natal, past Ladysmith down towards Pietermaritzburg, which had been led by Botha was (the latter told me) intended by him to be carried to the hills over Durban. This was exactly as I had learnt the 'Cronje' plan to be a year before and had communicated it all personally to General Sir William Butler long before the war, when I begged him to strengthen, or withdraw from Ladysmith, that "emporium in an isolated basin." Joubert, Botha said, had lost his nerve and had recalled the force when success was certain and within reach. The appointment as Commandant-General of a man so young and inexperienced as Botha was without any precedent among the Boers; it was stated at the time to have been insistently urged on and eventually agreed to by Kruger through that other young man whose vigour, talent and will-power had already impressed themselves on the closest observers on both sides.

Smuts was then State Attorney, only twenty-nine, and therefore not old enough to become a burgher or high official except by special dispensation! But, besides much else, he was a very old young man, and his temperament and talents and character enabled him to influence or manage, even to manipulate, the older heads, not excepting the wily, often wise, and generally obstinate, old autocrat, Kruger himself. One can well believe that the lifelong and intimate association of Botha and Smuts became definite in these circumstances. It will serve to distinguish between what was learnt from Botha's lips that day, and the explanation gleaned elsewhere, if I attempt to reproduce the former as a personal narrative. There is no suggestion that the actual words were his; in fact one could not repeat here what was frequently broken up by questions and explanations and repetitions during a couple of hours' tour. It may serve to illustrate the intimacy of the talk and also throw light on the mental attitude of both of us to explain that the youngest brother of the writer, whilst serving in the I.L.H. had fallen at Willow Grange near by in one of the fights of that raid under Botha's leadership, and that the latter, for old acquaintance sake, had kept the lad's field glasses and carried them for more than a year to return them as a memento of one who was killed in the act of saving wounded comrades.