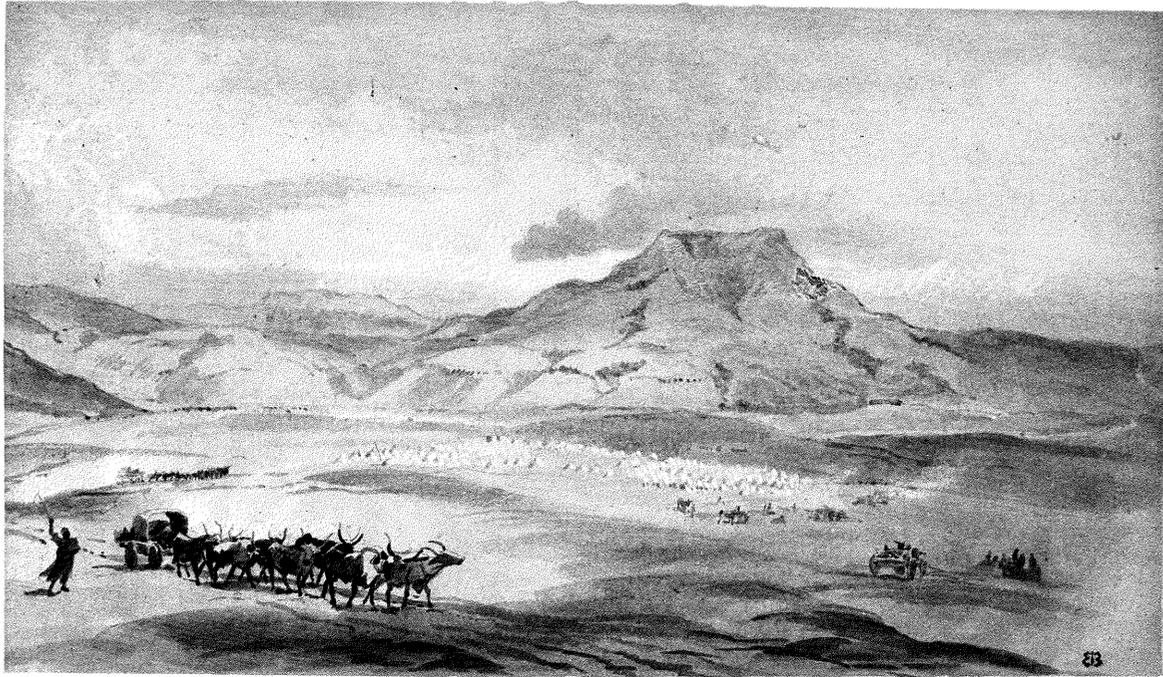


a picquet on the summit, which was withdrawn at sunset and re-established at sunrise next morning. Round the steep sides of this hill nearest to Mount Prospect, and about on a level with the crest of their position at Lang's Nek, they had extended their line of defence so as to enable them to command the road leading to the Nek on the west side, as the curve of the hills on the east side (where the attack of January 28 was made) commanded it in that direction. But the summit of the mountain had, as already said, no permanent occupation. A spectator standing at Mount Prospect, and facing Lang's Nek, had to his left front this imposing mountain, its flat top standing so clear against the sky that the outcrops of volcanic rocks which are so frequent in these singular hill-formations could be distinctly seen and counted; the natural schantzes or wall-like layers of perpendicular rock running round the mountain just below its crest and at other points further down, the thickets of wood and bush that grew on the narrow ledges between the steeper pitches of the mountain, could all be noted.

Westward from where the road into the Transvaal crossed Lang's Nek, the crest of foot-hills gradually ascended until it became merged into the mountain about halfway up. Thence to the flat summit the hill rose with the same abruptness that elsewhere characterised the last thousand feet of its ascent. The space at the top seemed to be about 300 yards in length, and at its south-western end the hill again dipped suddenly down at almost as steep an angle as had marked its rise. Following it downwards, another saddle was gained at perhaps a thousand feet higher than the lower ground whereon our



*Majuba Hill*  
*From a sketch by Lady Butler*

*James electro Engraving Co*

camp stood, and this saddle still curved further round towards south and west until it rose again to the loftier level of the Imquela Mountain. From Mount Prospect camp to the summit of the mountain would be a distance of less than four miles in a direct line, but following the lower part of the Imquela hill, thence climbing the saddle and scaling the steep face that rose above it, the route to the top would be quite six miles. What the width of the space at the top might be it was not possible to determine from Mount Prospect, neither could the angle of ascent on the further (or north and west) sides of the mountain be seen from that point. Native report, however, averred that these sides were almost as steep as those which could be seen, and it was also said that although the top, looked at from below, appeared to be nearly level, it was in reality depressed in the centre, that water could be easily found in this depression by digging only a few feet, and that the width taken across the top of the hill was not so great as the length of the axis visible from the camp. The jagged edges of trap outcrop already spoken of denoted clusters of volcanic rock at intervals on the summit. This singular mountain, the freak of some vast volcanic agency in remote geologic ages, was called the Spitz Kop by the Dutch settlers, and was known to the native inhabitants as the Amajuba.

This then was the situation. The Boers, daily strengthening the edges of Lang's Nek, had rendered a frontal attack on any part of that semicircle of hills more and more difficult. The Majuba Mountain still held no sign of the enemy, save the daily picquet of observation which was withdrawn at night. It stood directly above and partly in advance of the

Boer lines of defence, and was within easy cannon-shot or rocket distance of these lines, and of the camps and laagers behind them. If Colley meant to take the Nek, there, in the Majuba, seemed the way to do it. Undoubtedly the senior staff-officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart,<sup>5</sup> who had just joined the column, shared very strongly with his General the belief that the occupation of the Majuba by a *coup de main* under cover of night was a perfectly feasible operation—a daring and brilliant conception—a movement which once effected might result in the withdrawal of the Boers from Lang's Nek, and the consequent opening of the road into the Transvaal without further fighting.

<sup>5</sup> Afterwards Sir Herbert Stewart who commanded at Abu Klea in 1885 and died of wounds received there.

## CHAPTER XVI

*THE NIGHT MARCH*

**A further view of the Majuba—Colley's decision—Preparations and intentions—Composition of the column—Evening of February 26—The ascent of the mountain—The summit gained.**

THERE WAS one side of the Majuba Mountain which Colley had not yet seen—that lying furthest from Mount Prospect. Any attempt to reconnoitre the hill from the Natal side would be sure to awaken the suspicions of the Boers, and would probably cause its permanent occupation by them ; but by crossing the Buffalo River, and proceeding to a hill lying level with the Boer camp, beyond the river, the northern slopes of the Majuba would be visible, while it might easily seem to observers that the recon-naissance had for object the camps and laagers of the Dutch at the foot of the mountain, and the slopes of the position of Lang's Nek in the neighbourhood of the Buffalo. Accordingly, long before day-break on the morning following his return from Newcastle, Colley and his staff left camp with an escort of cavalry, crossed the Buffalo some miles in rear of Mount Prospect, ascended the Transvaal shore of the river, and gained a lofty spot, abreast of the Boer position, from which the hitherto concealed slopes of the Majuba were visible. Long and atten-

tively Colley looked at these northern slopes, as a week earlier from the Imquela Mountain he had studied the western and south-western sides of the position. No one except his chief staff-officer, Colonel Herbert Stewart, imagined the real purpose of this reconnaissance across the Buffalo, and least of all did the Boers suspect it. All believed that it foreshadowed a movement against the east flank of the Boer position at the Nek, and no one dreamt that the great hill dominating the western end of the enemy's line was the real object aimed at.

February 25 and the forenoon of the 26th passed over without movement of importance on either side, beyond the march of one or two companies of infantry from camp, again in the direction of the Buffalo, and away from the Majuba. The afternoon of Saturday, February 26, came clear and fine. All the kloofs and crests of the Drakensberg showed distinctly to the naked eye, and as the sun drew towards the west, every indentation along the ridge of the Boer position could be seen, and the nearer slopes and summit of the Majuba searched, with the aid of field-glasses, to the fullest advantage, in the wonderfully clear and limpid atmosphere of the South African summer. Colley and his chief staff-officer spent some hours during this fine afternoon in following through their glasses every portion of the opposing heights. 'In fact, from the attention they paid it (the Majuba) that afternoon,' wrote Mr. Carter, who noticed them, 'one might have thought that they had never seen it before.' As the afternoon wore on, a Kaffir who lived on one of the neighbouring farms, and had a hundred times climbed every kloof and schantz in the surrounding hills, was seen in close conversation with

the General. It was noticed, too, that in the heat of some description about ground, this Kaffir lifted his hand and pointed to the Majuba Mountain, but the General quickly motioned the outstretched arm down. This native had ascended the hill the night before, and reported 'there was not a Boer posted there.' Equally important information he had brought still earlier when he declared that water was to be found, if not on the surface, immediately below it, in the saucer-shaped hollow that lay within the space at the top.

Very anxiously that hilltop was scanned by Colley and Stewart, as the evening shadows drew out longer to the east. From inside the canvas openings of their tents they watched through glasses for signs of Boer movements, when the hour came at which the picquets were usually withdrawn from the hill, and at length the scrutiny was rewarded by seeing the heads of men moving against the sky-line, and disappearing round a sharp conical pile of rocks which marked the south-western edge of the summit. The account given by the Kaffir of the previous night's experience was being repeated, and there was every reason to suppose that Majuba would be clear of Boer patrols and vedettes until sunrise on the morrow. It was this point that had chiefly absorbed Colley's attention since he had returned from Newcastle on the 23rd. The approach of the reinforcements must mean to the Boers that active operations were again becoming possible. Would they then continue to leave this commanding hill at his mercy, should he choose to occupy it? That was the consideration that had secretly influenced every military move on his part during several days.

Let us here review certain successive steps in the progress of this movement on Majuba. On February 4, General Colley, writing to Sir Evelyn Wood, who had not yet reached Natal, explicitly informs that officer that he, Colley, 'means to take the Nek himself.' Nothing could be attempted in that direction until the reinforcements had reached Newcastle, and therefore it was only on February 21 that any fixed and definite plan of attack became possible. On the 22nd, Colley returned to Mount Prospect from Newcastle, bringing with him, as we have seen, the best battalion under his command (the 92nd Gordon Highlanders), fifty Naval Brigade with two guns, and a squadron of Hussars. It will be remembered that the second battalion of the reinforcements, the 60th Rifles, was brought out from Newcastle as far as the Ingogo, and from that point was marched back again to Newcastle, there to remain until further orders.

Why not have brought the Rifle Battalion on to Mount Prospect, the reader will at once ask, and the answer is a simple one. That second battalion was not brought to Mount Prospect, because its presence there could scarcely have failed to put the Boers on the alert, to make them call in all their outlying forces, and to lead them to occupy the Majuba by night as well as by day; but bringing the Rifles halfway along the road and then sending them back to Newcastle would, on the contrary, make the Boers believe that no attack was for the present intended, and that, so far from meditating a forward movement, General Colley was still apprehensive about his communications in rear. Sir Evelyn Wood had gone back to Pietermaritzburg; half of the first batch of

reinforcements were still kept at Newcastle, eighteen or twenty miles distant from Lang's Nek ; there was nothing to indicate that the English General had any intention of making a hostile or forward movement at the moment.

Another consideration in his mind was that of the proposed armistice with the Boers. In the telegrams already given as having passed between Sir George Colley and the Colonial Minister, it will be remembered that a proposition had been made by Lord Kimberley, and forwarded in a letter from Colley to Mr. Kruger on February 21, announcing the terms upon which the British Government were prepared to negotiate.

The subsequent military action taken by Colley has been criticised as conflicting in some way with the offer of negotiation, and it is therefore necessary to follow closely the history of this offer between February 21 and 26. According to Boer statements, the letter written at Newcastle on February 21 was received by General Smidt at Lang's Nek on Thursday the 24th. It seems probable that the letter had been brought from Newcastle by Colley himself, and sent in to the Boer lines on his arrival at Mount Prospect. At all events, it was received at Lang's Nek by the 24th at latest, for on that day General Smidt's acknowledgment of the letter reached Colley. The Boer leader added in his reply that he had despatched the letter to Mr. Kruger at Heidelberg, and told the messenger to drive his horse as hard as he could, but that the letter could not reach Mr. Kruger in less than two days, nor his answer come back in less than four.

On Saturday, February 26, an intimation appears

to have been made by the Boer leader to Colley's military secretary, Colonel Stewart, that, after all, Mr. Kruger was *not* at Heidelberg, but had been called away to Rustenberg, a place still more remote, and that consequently there must be a further delay in sending a reply to the letter of the 21st.

Now Colley's letter had proposed conditions the acceptance of which would lead to an armistice, and had fixed forty-eight hours as the period open for acceptance. This proposal, in answer to Mr. Kruger's letter *from* Lang's Nek, had been sent *to* Lang's Nek, four miles from Mount Prospect. Although the Boers might not unreasonably suppose that the term of forty-eight hours named for acceptance might be extended to meet the altered circumstances of distance now alleged by them, there was not, so far as I can discover, a word, hint, or action on the part of Sir George Colley to make them imagine that any suspension of hostilities had been even tacitly arrived at pending the receipt of Mr. Kruger's answer. On the contrary, there had been a hostile reconnoissance on the 24th; cannon had been fired on that day from Mount Prospect against their extreme left outpost beyond the Buffalo. Again, on the 25th there had been a movement towards the drift on the right rear of Mount Prospect; and again on the morning of the 26th there had been another movement in the same direction and across the Buffalo, which resulted in a good deal of rifle fire on the part of our troops, though without any loss to the enemy. During these days, too, the Boers extended their own entrenchments. Clearly there could not with any reason have existed in the minds of the Boer leaders at Lang's Nek an idea that active operations had for the moment lapsed.

It is possible that General Colley, actuated by a desire to avoid even the semblance of a misconception, might not have chosen to exercise fully his belligerent rights during the forty-eight hours named for the acceptance of his proposals. But it cannot be supposed that he was bound to allow further delays, however unavoidable, to affect his action beyond that time. Mr. Kruger, said the Boers, had returned to Heidelberg, and had gone on to Rustenberg. What if the Boer President went still further away? Meantime our garrisons remained unrelieved.

As to the situation between Colley and the Home Government, the Colonial Office telegram of February 19 did not limit his military action beyond denying him to march to the relief of the garrisons or to occupy Lang's Nek if the arrangement proceeded. But suppose that it did not proceed—was he to be debarred in the interval before reply to his proposal was received from making any movement or taking up any position within the territory of Natal, which might strengthen his own line or render that of the Boers less tenable?

So far as I have been able to read his mind at this time, he would gladly have accepted compromise or arrangement with the Boers, as putting an end to a conflict which was hateful to him, provided only that the honour of the British arms were assured, and that the force under his command stood on Lang's Nek and not in front of it. But however distasteful might be the proposed negotiations, while yet the army he commanded lay in the shadow of the valley of defeat, and the Boers stood triumphant on the ridge of victory above, he was not the man to deviate a hair's breadth from the course which duty towards

his enemy demanded of him by the rules of honourable warfare.

In the balance of his mind at the moment there was, over and above the natural soldier-like desire to take the Nek or press the Boers to relinquish it before any words of negotiation could be spoken, a strong conviction of the permanent national disadvantage of any other course. But that Colley, no matter how strong might be his desire, national and personal, to put possession of Lang's Nek first, and negotiation second, in the order of events, would have deviated from the strict interpretation of honourable military practice in his dealings with the enemy is a supposition as unworthy of him and of his whole career as it is untrue to the actual facts before us. Much as he valued the honour of his country's arms, deeply as he loved his profession, his mind was too well schooled in all that was best and noblest in its history, ever to permit him to risk his honour as a man for his success as a soldier.

When night fell on Saturday, February 26, more than forty-eight hours had passed since Colley had received Commandant Smidt's acknowledgment of the letter written at Newcastle on the 21st. No intimation of Boer acceptance of the proposal had arrived, and by the rules of war and of honour he was free to move.

Only three persons in the camp at Mount Prospect knew anything of the adventurous movement so soon to begin—the General in whose mind it had been conceived, Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart, who seems to have been told of it some days earlier, and Major Fraser, of the Royal Engineers, who, like Stewart, had joined the staff at Newcastle, and was now doing

duty as Assistant Quartermaster-General and head of the Intelligence Department. This officer was made acquainted with the outline of the scheme only on his return from the reconnaissance to the Buffalo at about 3 o'clock that same afternoon. It has been generally said that this movement on the Majuba was the result of a sudden inspiration, a decision arrived at and executed almost simultaneously, and many questions apparently perplexing have been disposed of by the hypothesis of action taken on the spur of the moment, and therefore prohibitive of deliberate calculation or adequate provision against those many contingencies which war, prolific in the unexpected, so frequently produces. Nothing is further from the truth than this supposition, that the movement on Majuba had not been fully considered. Every contingency had been provided for; every step in the ascent, every detail of the position had been thought out. The considerations which finally decided the exact date are given in Colonel Stewart's report of the action :

Some days previous to the above-mentioned date [February 27] Sir George Colley informed me that he proposed to endeavour to seize and occupy Majuba Hill, upon which the right of the Boer position rested. It was not, I believe, in the first instance the General's intention to have endeavoured to obtain possession of the hill until considerable reinforcements had reached him, but upon his return to Mount Prospect from Newcastle, the rapid strides that had been made by the Boers in throwing up entrenchments on the right flank of their position, and the continuance of these works in the same direction upon the lower slopes of the Majuba Hill during the days subsequent to his return, induced him to believe that if the hill was to be seized before it was occupied, and probably fortified, by the Boers, it must be done at once.

I would here mention that the most careful study of the hill, so far as it could be observed from neighbouring heights, had been made by the General on several occasions. The distance of the hill from the road and the extent of its table-topped crest had been estimated, whilst a cavalry reconnaissance was carried out upon February 24 to a height on the left bank of the Buffalo River, with the object both of distracting the attention of the Boers from their right flank, and also more especially with a view to observe the eastern face of the hill. From his previous knowledge of the country the General was aware that the character of the hill was somewhat similar on all sides, and full inquiries had been made by him as to the northern slopes.

The hill was always held by a Boer picquet during the day, and the movements of this picquet had been carefully watched, and their departure from their post and disappearance from the southern slopes towards the evening had been noted for some days. Upon the evening of the 26th this picquet was seen to leave in the direction that the General had been informed led to the path by which the easiest ascent or descent of the hill could be made.

There remains no written document to show what were the exact intentions of the English General after the occupation of the Majuba had been effected. We can only follow the sequence of plan and event through the bold attempt and the semblance of achievement, till we reach the blank where Death blots out the record. Still, the scope and purpose of the movement can be partly discerned in the light of the orders issued to the troops. The men were to take three days' full rations, an amount of food which with careful distribution could, if necessity demanded it, be made to sustain the garrison on the mountain for twice that period. Seventy rounds of ammunition were to be carried by each soldier, and an additional supply was to be sent later in the night to the foot of

the mountain, where the abrupt ascent began, and where a small post was to be established to hold the line of communications. This extra ammunition could be carried from the advance post to the summit as circumstances might require. Entrenching tools were to be taken, consisting of six picks and four shovels per company, and every man carried his great-coat and a waterproof sheet.

Turning from the equipment of the force to its composition and proposed distribution, we can equally infer what was the intention of the General after he had gained the summit. The entire force detailed for the night march consisted of seven companies of infantry and a detachment of the Naval Brigade, numbering in all 554 rifles. The companies were divided as follows: Three of the 92nd Highlanders (180 men); two of the 60th Rifles (140 men); two 58th Regiment (170 men); Naval Brigade (64 men). An eighth company, of Rifles, was to leave camp after midnight and escort the reserve ammunition which was to be brought to the post at the foot of the Majuba. Two of the original seven companies were to be left 3,000 yards from camp on the ridge of the Imquela Mountain, and a third company was to be similarly dropped at a point 2,200 yards further along the track and about half that distance from the foot of the Majuba, leaving four for the summit of the mountain. Thus there would be a chain of posts connecting the mountain with the camp, and as the route to be followed formed almost two sides of a square of about equal length, until the steep ascent to the Majuba summit began, field artillery, pushed forward from the camp 1,500 yards directly towards the mountain, would cover most of the route through-

out its distance ; while rifle fire from the Imquela Mountain on the south and the Majuba on the north would go far to protect the whole of the ground around the advanced post near the base of the latter hill.

These arrangements, all very carefully considered, point to the following intentions : to seize the crest of the Majuba Mountain under cover of darkness ; to entrench some portion of the ground on the summit, and to remain there for at least three days ; to keep open with two entrenched posts, and by the fire of artillery from the near neighbourhood of Mount Prospect, the line of approach to the mountain. Meanwhile, before the three days had expired, the extra battalion of the Rifles, the infantry battalion due to arrive at Newcastle on the morrow, and the three squadrons of Hussars still at Newcastle, could be brought up from that place and used, together with the troops still at Mount Prospect, either in a direct attack upon the front of Lang's Nek or in an attack upon that position from Majuba itself. Unless indeed the occupation of Majuba led to the withdrawal of the Boers from Lang's Nek and the peaceful conclusion of negotiations.

So far the plan. The necessarily doubtful element lay in the question of what the Boers would do supposing the mountain top once occupied by our troops. Would they attack the camp at Mount Prospect, attack the line of communication between the camp and Majuba, or attack that mountain itself ? The camp at Mount Prospect was now covered by several strong forts mounting many guns ; the line of communication could be protected, as we have already seen, by a cross fire of rifles and

artillery. The Majuba crest once occupied by resolute troops might well seem as impregnable a position as any spot on earth could be—towering aloft over all surrounding hills, a depression in the ground at top to hide men occupying it from sight or fire, the rim around this saucer bare to the sweep of bullets from the centre, the sides so scarped and steep that nearly the whole circumference of the summit was inaccessible. With such a position it might well be thought that the danger of the enterprise could only lie in the night march, and that once the troops had gained that dominating summit they might rest in absolute security of possession.

At half-past six Colley and his little staff sat down to dinner. Those who were with him describe his manner as being perfectly cheerful; his conversation easy; no sign of pre-occupation or anxiety of mind about him. The orders for the march had not yet been issued. The camp had been unusually bright and pleasant that afternoon. The day was fine; the band had played. All the depression consequent upon the defeats of three and four weeks earlier had disappeared. But the General, despite his quiet cheerful manner, had many a troubled thought that evening. There can be little doubt in the minds of those who have read his intimate letters that for some weeks the old idea of good fortune, the buoyant conviction that luck—as it is called—was with him, was distinctly on the wane. Frequently in his letters there comes a stray sentence which shows the presence in his mind of some feeling that a turn had come in that career whose long-continued success he had so often acknowledged. And latterly there had come into his mind a kind of vague impression that even

the officers most closely associated with him in this enterprise shared, as it were, the shadow of his altered fortune. Not in the smallest degree did these thoughts ever influence the course of his action or make him deviate a hair's breadth from the line of policy his judgment deemed to be right in the interests of the State he served. The action I can trace to them is, indeed, a more absolute renunciation of self; a more active thoughtfulness for the needs and feelings of others. It seemed that as this idea or presentiment of unpropitious fate grew upon him, all the gentler and kinder instincts of the heart grew in proportion; and that as the frowns of adverse fortune deepened, and he set himself with more unflinching purpose to the course he had originally marked out, all the stronger became his appreciation of the labours of those around him, his desire to leave no services unacknowledged amid the pressure of work now imposed upon him. Only on the previous day, February 25, we find him referring to a letter of his to Sir Leicester Smyth, who had written contradicting a statement implying that he (Sir Leicester) had been the author of a criticism in a Cape journal upon Colley's strategy :

I wrote him back a nice letter to the effect that under no circumstances could such an idea have entered my head, but that the name and reputation of 'Leicester Curzon' had been familiar to me from my earliest days of soldiering at the Cape, when Sir George Cathcart and his picked staff were so admired as typical English gentlemen. He was one of them, and I used often to hear his praises sung by the officers of the command. Considering what a man so much my senior might easily feel at being left idle with a few hundred men, while I am commanding a large force in the field, he has been wonderfully nice to me.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Mount Prospect, February 25, 1881, to his wife.

In the last sentence of the same letter there is an allusion to the peace negotiations. Referring to his letter of the 18th (see p. 338), as to the possibility of ultimately resigning his Colonial Office appointment, he says: 'I do not contemplate doing so unless either they ask me to carry out a future policy which I disapprove of, or I feel that making peace at this moment handicaps me too heavily to admit of my doing good service.'

Only one more letter will be quoted in this book. It was written to his wife apparently in the interval preceding the fall-in for the night march, probably about 8 o'clock on February 26, and was found on the top of the papers of his private despatch-box. It was the last he ever wrote. As it contains his sole comment on all that had happened and was about to happen, its insertion here has been allowed—notwithstanding its closely confidential character.

February 26, 1881.

I am going out to-night to try and seize the Majuba Hill, which commands the right of the Boer position, and leave this behind, in case I should not return, to tell you how very dearly I love you, and what a happiness you have been to me. Don't let all life be dark to you if I don't come back to you. It is a strange world of chances; one can only do what seems right to one in matters of morals, and do what seems best in matters of judgment, as a card-player calculates the chances, and the wrong card may turn up and everything turn out to be done for the worst instead of for the best. But if one sticks to this steadily I don't think one can go wrong in the long run, and, at any rate, we can do no more. Remember, darling one, that there are many who love you, and to whom you can still be a source of happiness or the reverse, and that one still has one's work to do in the world, even if it becomes very uphill work, and can still give pleasure or do good to many. Good night,

darling. . . . How I wish I could believe the stories of meeting again hereafter ; but it is no use complaining because things are not as one might wish—one must only brace oneself to meet them as they are. Think of our happiness together, and our love—not a common love, I think—and let that be a source of comfort and light to your future life, my own much-loved one, and think lovingly and sadly, but not too sadly or hopelessly, of your affectionate husband,

G. P. C.

At a quarter before 8 P.M. orders were quietly sent round the camp directing the troops already named to fall in at 9.30 o'clock. The strictest vigilance was enjoined ; no lights were to be used ; the parade was to form up to the west side of the camp by the redoubt nearest to the road leading to Lang's Nek. Scarcely had this intimation of immediate movement been given when the usual night signal for 'lights out' was sounded, the tent lanterns were extinguished, and all was dark and silent throughout the camp.

To the Boer vedettes on the hills along Lang's Nek, who could easily hear the long-drawn signal of the bugles and mark the disappearance of the luminous tents which had glimmered like distant lanterns in the plain below, it must have seemed that another night of unbroken quiet was before them. The night, though fine and free from cloud, was dark. There was no moon. Above the outline of the mountains the stars shone brightly, but the hollow formed by this circle of higher ground, and the deep colour of the grass now in its summer luxuriance, caused the wide space around the camp to seem darker than the darkness of the night really warranted. No one among the force, except the three officers already named, had any idea of the real destination of the

movement. That, whatever its nature, the men were extremely eager to take part in it is very certain. 'In the lines of the several regiments which were to take part in this night march,' wrote a correspondent, 'there prevailed two sentiments. Those who were going were in high glee—those who were to remain behind were bemoaning their "hard lines." There was not a man in camp whose confidence in their chief had abated one jot.'

As Colley was leaving his tent to join the parade, he met Mr. Ritchie, the chaplain, of whose services on previous occasions he had often spoken. Shaking hands with the chaplain, he wished him good-bye, adding in an undertone a request that Lieutenant Bruce Hamilton, his A.D.C., should not be wakened. That officer had been obliged through illness to lie down in his tent on his return that afternoon from the reconnaissance, and knew nothing of the intended movement. He was now asleep. 'Take care there is no noise round young Hamilton's tent,' Colley whispered to the clergyman. 'I don't mean to take him to-night. There seems a kind of fatality about my staff. If anything were to happen to him, it would kill his sister.' That sister was the wife to whom he had just written the farewell letter above given.

Soon all was ready among the companies of the three battalions and the Naval Brigade drawn up to the west of the camp. Ammunition had been distributed, rations issued, water-bottles filled, men inspected; at 10 o'clock the word to move was given and the march began. Major Fraser with two Kaffir guides led the column; the 58th companies followed; then the 60th, then the 92nd. The detachment of sailors under Commander Romilly

brought up the rear. This composite formation has been much blamed. It has been widely said that it would have been better to have taken one complete battalion, the 92nd, in place of these four detachments. When a thing has failed, it is easy to find fault, and to say if so-and-so had not been done, the disaster would not have occurred. Many of the daring feats in our history have been accomplished by composite forces—forlorn hopes, sorties, stormings have been largely their work. When in the old wars of the latter part of the last century and the early part of the present one there was some action to be done of an exceptionally hazardous and daring nature, it was a battalion made up of the flank companies of many regiments that was usually selected for the service. It will be remembered that Colley had promised the 58th after Lang's Nek that they should have a place under his command when the time came for a final move against the Boer position; and whatever may be the value of the criticism evoked, this much is certain, that in taking with him on the night of February 26 detachments of the two battalions who had served under him in the previous actions, he kept his word to one of these battalions and declined to cast a slur upon the reputation of the other.

The road which led from Newcastle to the Nek was soon passed by the column, and then everybody guessed that the real object of the night's march must be the lofty hill-top which in the daylight had so long formed the most conspicuous object in the circle of vision, and which even in the uncertain light now prevailing could be distinguished as it rose in darker outline amid the stars. The course of the

column was not direct towards the mountain, but to a ridge lying considerably south of it. This ridge rose in a long slope to the west, culminating in a mountain called the Imquela, the summit of which was distant from that of Majuba about 4,000 yards. A point on the north shoulder of the Imquela was reached after an hour's stiff march, and here were left the two companies of the Rifles whose duty, as we have already said, was to cover the communications with the camp. Up to this point the path was well known, as the position selected for the two companies was that on which our vedettes had been daily posted, and was the spot at which five days earlier an insolent and ill-written paper had been found in the morning addressed by some Boer soldier to 'Mr. Cooley, Great Britian's Camp:'

Mr. Colley.

February 21, 1881.

Sir,—We will be greatly oblige if you will send out your troops at once, as we are getting quite tired of laying here. We always understood that Great Britain is a powerful and pluckey natian, but now we see for ourselves that they are not so.

Truly yours,

'DUTCHMAN.'

Outside it was endorsed 'Please forward this to Colley. You must please make haste. All the troops are starving in Pretoria.' At this same spot, too, one of our vedettes had been fired at and mortally wounded about the same time. From this place a Kaffir track turned off to the north at right angles to the path which had been previously followed. This track was only wide enough for one man or horse to use in single file, but it was fairly level,

having probably been scooped out of the very steep side of the Imquela Mountain in lapse of time by the passage of wild animals and Kaffirs. Above it the shoulder of the mountain rose at an angle of forty-five degrees, and below it the hill continued to descend in the same steep grade. Following this narrow path for about 1,000 yards, the col or saddle between the Imquela and the Majuba was gained, at a height of about 1,200 feet above that of Mount Prospect, and still about the same elevation below that of the top of Majuba. The saddle between the two hills was fair going, and the light better than in the lower ground. The formation of fours, instead of single file, could again be used, and for another half-hour the march was continued straight in the direction of Majuba.

It was about midnight when a halt was made, at the point rather more than midway between the two mountains, where it had been intended to post another company of infantry, in whose charge the horses of the officers were to be left, for from that place forward the track became too broken and too steep for animals to travel at night.

This temporary halt revealed the fact that the rear of the column had straggled in the darkness, lost connection with the front portion, and disappeared. One company of the 92nd and the whole of the Naval Brigade—about one-fourth of the force—were missing. Major Fraser was sent back with a Zulu to endeavour to find the missing tail. After searching for some time, the quick eye of the Zulu discovered two heads showing against the sky-line. There was a chance that they might be Boer scouts, for this part of the trail lay well within the limit of

the enemy's patrols. Fortunately, however, they proved to be our people. Nearly an hour had been lost by this mishap, and it was 1 o'clock before the company of the 92nd had been placed in the position it was to occupy, and orders given it to entrench and prepare cover for the horses and for the reserve ammunition, hospital requirements, and other supplies expected to arrive from Mount Prospect with the eighth company of infantry before daybreak. The bare mention of this loss of direction by the tail of the column, and the consequent delay in a movement the essence of which was time (for if daylight broke before the summit was gained the expedition could scarcely avoid failure), conveys but a faint idea of the significance of such an incident to the mind of the commander.

Some who were assisting in the expedition have left us, in diaries or letters, scant record of their experiences on that eventful night. We know that a keen north wind blew across the saddle between the mountains; that away to the right, down in the valley, the baying of dogs could be heard from O'Neill's farm, the solitary homestead that stood between the enemy's lines and the British camp. In the stillness of the valley some Boer patrol, as sharp of hearing as were their dogs, might detect the movement and enable the enemy to forestall the little column in the coveted possession of Majuba. The night march of troops bound upon some perilous enterprise is, of all operations possible in war, by far the most impressive. Darkness which has merged into a common void the features of the landscape has revealed the starry firmament and made it a colossal partner in the movement. We steer by

the stars as a ship at midnight amid the wastes of the ocean. Things that had no voices for us in the glare of the sun begin to speak audibly. The great constellations which have heretofore been only names to us become realities and agents in our lives. They are watchmen set on high to give mute warning of the passing of the night, and tell us the time is near, and the time that is near may be the end of that little span of moments we call our lives. These things make men silent even where silence is not a law, and as night has hidden the familiar objects of our everyday existence and opened up vast reaches of the heavens to us, it has called, too, out of its depths old landscapes of recollection—distant gleams of forgotten times, vague as the outline of the horizon where the stars and the mists are mixed together.

When Barac led his ten thousand men from the rugged defiles of Mount Tabor against the chariots and warriors of Sisera, and the oft-quoted verse tells that 'the stars in their order and courses fought against Sisera,' there can be little doubt that the march which caused the overthrow of the Canaanite enemy was made by the light of the constellations wheeling in slow circles over the plain of Esdraelon.

The missing party found, the march of the main column was again resumed, and the foot of the mountain was soon reached. From here a rough path led up the very steep side of the hill by its south-western flank. The track soon became entangled with clumps of thorny brushwood and strewn with rocks and boulders. The men, encumbered with their arms, ammunition, and other impedimenta, could make only very slow progress. At times the Kaffir guides lost the path. In the deep silence of the night the noise

made by the nailed shoes of the men and the strike of rifle or pickaxe against the rocks could be heard in the post beneath, where the company of Highlanders had been left. But no alarm occurred, and at about 3 o'clock the last spur immediately below the summit was gained by the leading files. From this point a smooth rise, steeper than anything yet encountered, led to the top. It was only about 200 feet, but hands had to be used to hold on by the tufts of grass that grew upon it. Beyond this glacis the rim of the summit could now be discerned through the darkness. This was the point at which the Boer picquet had been seen at sunset—seven hours earlier—leaving the mountain. It was the place, too, where the enemy would be if he was now in possession of the hill-top. The Kaffir guides, closely followed by the General, soon gained the brow. The dim prospect was no longer that of a hillside rising at a slope of one foot in three. It was into level dimness that the eye had now to seek its way. The top of the Majuba had been gained, and it was not yet 4 o'clock.

For fully an hour longer the stragglers kept slowly topping that last rim of the summit. The long and toilsome climb had broken the continuity of the little column, and the companies and corps had become intermixed. Colley had placed himself at the point where the final rise ended, in order to personally direct the men as they arrived in ones and twos upon the summit. He had sent his two staff-officers, Stewart and Fraser, down the hill some little distance, to help and guide the men over the last bad bits of the ascent. After they had lain down for a few moments the General urged them in

quiet word of command to move further forward to the positions they were meant to occupy. 'No bullying or driving ever came from Sir George Colley,' wrote one of the correspondents; 'and none was necessary on this occasion, as the men went readily to take up their posts.'

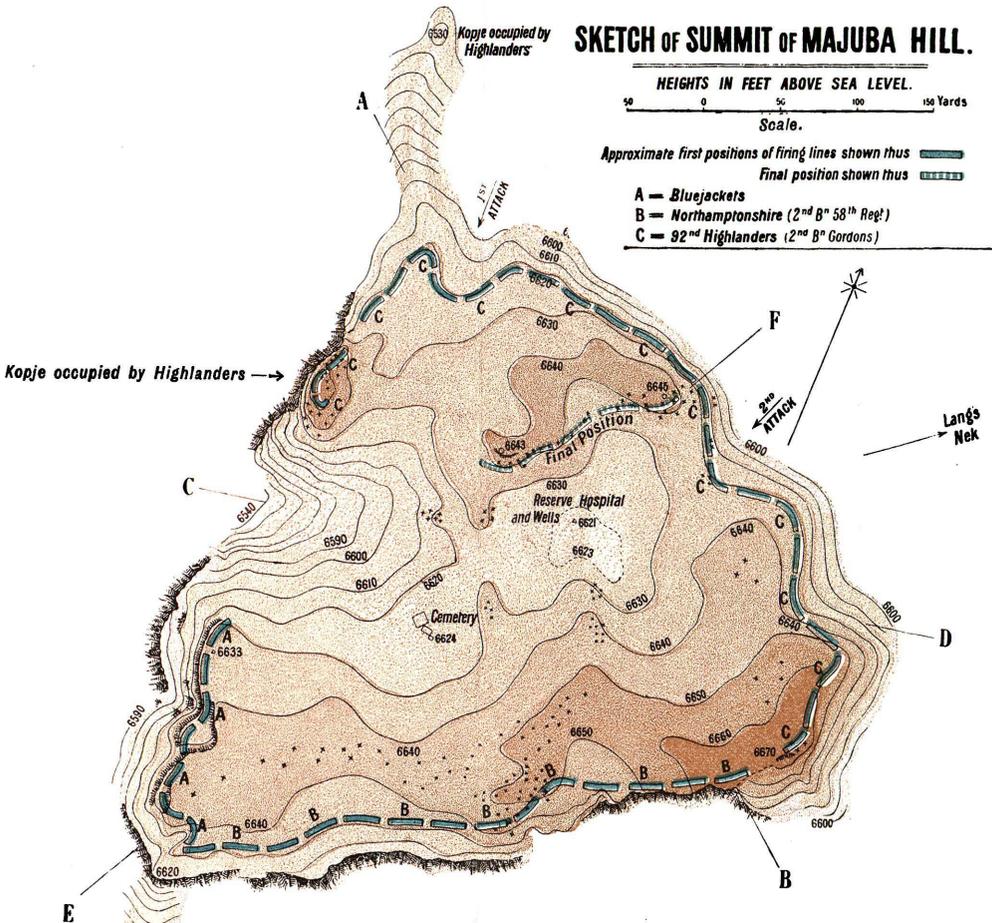
When all, or nearly all, had arrived, it became possible for the General and his staff to make fuller examination of the ground on the summit. The shallow depression dipping from the encircling rim occupied almost the entire mountain top. The floor of this depression was from 10 to 40 feet lower than the edge—viz., some 40 feet lower than the south edge of the mountain (that nearest to the British camp), and from 10 to 20 feet lower than the northern, or Boer, side. The rim of this hollow, which measured 900 yards round, was composed largely of rocky outcrop. It was nearly conterminous with the edge of the summit on its south and west sides, but at its northern side (that nearest to the Boers) the space at top sloped for some distance before the steep outer brow of the volcanic hill was reached. Thus the edge of the hollow nearest to the Boer camps was not the edge of the Majuba hill top itself, but on that side there was a grassy roll or slope, descending some 40 feet in a distance of from 50 to 100 yards, between the rim of the basin and the true brow of the mountain. As the inner edge of rocks did not command the steep outer drop of the mountain side, it was necessary to make the line of defence taken by the soldiers follow the outer circuit, which measured about 1,200 yards in perimeter. From this outer circuit two or three steep isolated spurs of rock projected. One abrupt rocky eminence, or koppie, stood at the north-

# SKETCH OF SUMMIT OF MAJUBA HILL.

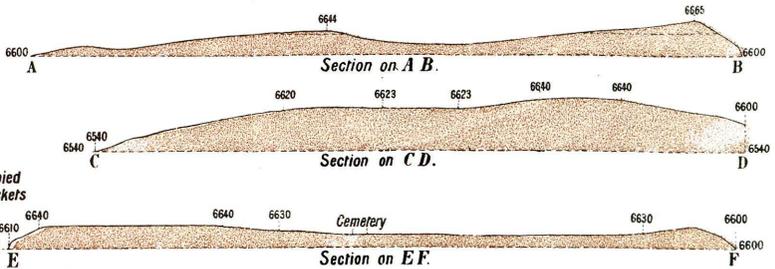


Approximate first positions of firing lines shown thus Final position shown thus

- A = Bluejackets
- B = Northamptonshire (2<sup>nd</sup> B<sup>n</sup> 58<sup>th</sup> Reg<sup>t</sup>)
- C = 92<sup>nd</sup> Highlanders (2<sup>nd</sup> B<sup>n</sup> Gordons)



## SECTION OF SUMMIT OF MAJUBA HILL.



*Line of ascent by British troops*

The position of the troops marked on this Map is not intended to show the actual ground held by them, but only to indicate generally the faces of the mountain held by the different regiments.

western angle of the summit, and another on the western face. On the inner rim also small eminences arose, forming the highest points of the summit—from 6,500 to 7,000 feet above sea level. Below the brow the hill plunged down so abruptly that a considerable part of the lower mountain was invisible to men at top. But these more distant features were all hidden for the moment, and nothing was visible from the edge of the hill-top save a few lights dotting here and there the dark void below.

All at once those who were looking over the edge of the mountain saw a strange sight. The whole of the Boer laagers, extending from a point in the valley directly below the north face of the mountain to the point where the attack of January 28 had been made, became suddenly a mass of light. 'The Boer army,' wrote an onlooker, 'had risen from sleep, and in every tent and waggon there was a light. The valley, into which it seemed we could throw a stone from where we stood, was a mass of light. It was a thrilling sight from our point of vantage. There was our enemy at our mercy, and unaware of our proximity.' A wonderful sight indeed it was, and had these laagers been nearer to the men who looked down upon them from the cold summit of the Majuba a still deeper wonder might have struck the beholders. From all these separate camps arose the voices of men engaged in prayer. It was the Sabbath morning.

## CHAPTER XVII

*AMAJUBA*

*Organisation of the defence—Natural strength of position—Colley's intentions—Commander Romilly—The koppies—A Boer volley The rally at the rocks—The end.*

WHEN day began to break, the aspect of the hill on which they stood, and the positions of the Boers beneath, unfolding from the obscurity of night, became revealed to the men on the Majuba. The Boer laagers behind the ridge of Lang's Nek, and the Nek itself lay immediately below the mountain. Every detail of the position, every tent, waggon, and earthwork, stood in view. 'Looking down from our position,' wrote the correspondent already quoted, 'into the enemy's lines, we seemed to hold them in the palm of our hands.' But if the position attained by the night march was strong in an offensive sense, it was, in the opinion of its occupants, ten times stronger for defence. So fully did this belief impress itself upon the force, that the men, carried away by the feeling of security, forgot orders, custom, and prudence, and began to show themselves openly on the sky-line. 'When I went to have a look at the Nek from the northmost limit of the hill,' wrote the correspondent already quoted, 'there were at least twenty Highlanders standing up boldly on the ridge, exposed to the full view of the Boers on the Nek below us. This was about 5 o'clock. From other incidents recorded,

it is easy to see that the troops, confident in the dominating strength of their position, were more anxious to invite attack than to conceal the fact of their possession of such a vantage-point. 'The Highlanders stood watching, and, pointing at the camp below them, shook their fists in exultation, and laughingly challenged the enemy: "Come up here, you beggars."' <sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, as soon as there was sufficient light to show the ground, General Colley organised the defence as follows. 'Taken generally,' wrote Colonel Herbert Stewart,

The men were extended along the outer crest of the table-top of the hill, a large proportion being kept in reserve, whilst the main strength of this line of defence was devoted to the eastern and northern faces, much of the other two faces being, in the General's opinion, practically unassailable. At daylight I accompanied the General around the hill, and he selected three points upon which to establish small square redoubts, to be occupied respectively by the companies of the 58th Regiment, 92nd Highlanders, and Naval Brigade. Two of these forts were to be erected on the southern side of the hill-top, such positions being suitable to the defence of the hill, and adding also to the protection of the line of communication. The General decided that he would not at once commence their construction, considering that the men might be fatigued by a march which, although short, was nevertheless severe, owing to the nature of a great portion of the ground.

Between dawn and sunrise, the dispositions above described were carried out, and, when completed, the position on the summit was as follows. The northern side of the Majuba, facing the Boer camps, was held by the 92nd Highlanders, whose line extended from

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Carter.

the abrupt rocky eminence or koppie near the north-western corner of the hill, along its northern face to another of these elevations overlooking the ridge of Lang's Nek on the north-east of the mountain, a total distance of from four to five hundred yards. In this interval, however, there were only a few places at which access to the mountain-top could be gained from below. Continuing the line of defence from the point overlooking Lang's Nek, the southern brow of the mountain nearest to Mount Prospect was held by the 58th Regiment for a distance of some three hundred and fifty yards; this brought the circle to the spot at which our troops had gained the summit at the end of the night march. From this point to where the 92nd line began, a distance of about two hundred and fifty yards along the western face was held by the Naval Brigade. The isolated peaks on the west and north sides held small detachments. On the north side of the central basin, three companies of the column remained in reserve. At this central point, too, the hospital was established, wells were sunk, and a good supply of water was found close below the surface. Taking the entire summit of the Majuba, both within and without the line of rock which marked the northern rim of the basin, a space of about ten acres was held by the English troops. Such was the summit of the Majuba—a position deemed impregnable by its defenders, when daylight enabled them to examine its features. That like all positions it had certain weak points, notwithstanding its apparent strength, subsequent events too surely showed. These weak points—if indeed their inequality of strength merits that word—have since been much exaggerated, but it is doubtful if the real causes of failure on one side,

and of success on the other, will ever be fully understood—or, if understood, admitted.

The sun rose at about a quarter before six that morning, and a very brilliant sunrise it was. The great grass-covered uplands, the long succession of distant table-topped mountains extending far into Zululand, the deep gorges through which the dividing torrent of the Buffalo wound its unseen way—all lay spread below in a panorama where the absence of town, hamlet, or homestead, served to emphasise the strange fact which the presence of two hostile camps at the base of the mountain marked—namely, that all this untenanted wilderness, and the enormous wastes that lay removed from sight around it, were not wide enough for the separate dwellings of a few thousand descendants of two kindred European nations. If, to any among the four hundred men on the mountain, such thoughts came when the sun revealed the landscape, they must have been of short duration, for it was about this time that the Boers below first caught sight of their enemies above; and so extraordinary was the change which immediately took place, that its development must have centred upon it every thought and interest of the beholders. So far the Boers, as Joubert afterwards admitted, knew nothing of our movements. The General was anxious this ignorance should be prolonged. He wished that the enemy should be given no provocation to attack, and seeing some men about to fire shortly after daylight, he stopped them. A little later, however, a shot was fired without orders, at a patrol of Boers passing below, and about the same time the party of Highlanders already mentioned were visible to the Boers. The alarm was thus given; the command 'to saddle'

ran quickly through the Boer camp, and in an incredibly short time the plain beneath was dotted with horsemen. The oxen were quickly driven in and waggons were inspanned. From our point of view it seemed as if consternation had seized the enemy, and they were preparing to evacuate their ground. Out of the apparent confusion of the camps below, bodies of mounted men began to move quickly towards the lower spurs of the mountain, still well out of rifle range. Looking down at this scene, it appeared doubtful to our officers whether the forward movement of the men who drew in towards the foot-hills was more than a screen behind which the work of retirement would be carried out. It has since transpired that in a rapid council of war, held when the occupation of the Majuba was first observed, an abandonment of the Boer position had been spoken of. To this proposal there was vehement opposition. Those who had fought in the previous actions volunteered to assault the mountain. It was accordingly agreed that covering parties should invest the Majuba on three sides, and maintain a long-range fire upon the summit from points of the lower eminences whence the mountain-top could be seen. At the same time patrols were despatched down the Buffalo Valley to examine the road to Newcastle and ascertain whether there was any movement of troops from that place upon Mount Prospect. When these patrols returned it would be time to determine whether the assault on the mountain-top should be delivered.

In the official narratives afterwards published there is no indication that at this time, or for many hours later, any misgiving was felt on the summit as to the result of an assault. Neither men nor officers seem

to have believed in an attack being made. What were the thoughts of the General himself we can never know. If he shared the confidence around him, he had reason to do so. He could estimate the strength of the position, and he saw that it was the point from which the Boers could be subsequently forced to relinquish the stern hold they had taken of Lang's Nek. 'We could stay here for ever,' is the remark he is said to have made to his chief staff officer, Colonel Herbert Stewart, when daylight had sufficiently broken to permit the configuration of the ground to be realised.

This universal belief is largely responsible for (what now appears to have been) omission to entrench the position the night march had given our troops. Nature had already entrenched it with lavish hand. She had built a fortress, stronger a thousand times than all the defences the military engineer could erect. The subterranean fires, the long erosions, the vast smeltings and castings of prehistoric ages had upreared this mighty mass, had scarpred its sides and smoothed its summit, had strewn around its base enormous boulders. The men who had climbed in the night the easiest line of final ascent could judge what the difficulty would be to a foe who should attempt to scale the hill-top at the few other spots where alone it could be climbed at all. It was this vast natural strength of the position which gave weight to the decision, apparently arrived at in the early morning, not to begin at once the construction of works, on rocky soil, at certain points commanding the summit. Another reason, that of the fatigue of the troops after their labours in the night march, is stated in some of the official documents to have been a chief cause of this

delay; <sup>2</sup> but any force which that reason may have carried at the time sprang undoubtedly from the accepted security already supplied by Nature—which seemed to render additional precautions a perfunctory labour unnecessary to impose on tired men. Whatever may have been the General's intentions as to setting the men to work upon the construction of the three redoubts which he proposed to establish for the protection of the summit during the night, it is certain that the men extended in the front line along the edge of the table-top were directed to put up at once individual cover of stones and turf to shelter their positions from fire.

Describing a look round the summit at about 6 or 6.30, when some of the Boers were already filing out from their laagers and approaching the base of the mountain, Mr. Carter thus mentions these shelters :

Immediately within our own line of defence the men were putting up cover—but such cover! Each man cast about for a few loose stones, made a breastwork for himself

<sup>2</sup> In endeavouring to account for the defeat at Majuba it has also been said that the General was himself much fatigued by the night march. His physical strength and extremely active habits would, in themselves, make this suggestion most improbable, but it was always strongly denied by Sir Herbert Stewart, and is disproved by other evidence. Nor were the men unduly strained by the ascent. Colonel Herbert Stewart writes under date May 12, 1881: 'I need scarcely say that I utterly disagree with the view of the men being exhausted . . .' and again: 'The march was not rapid nor over-severe. Sir George was not a bit tired.' Colonel now Sir Charles Mitchell, then Colonial

Secretary of Natal, writes in April 1881: 'I started early in the morning for Lang's Nek and Amajuba, going over the whole position thoroughly. Lang's Nek must have been as near a success as possible, and as for Amajuba, I can only share every one's opinion (except X. and Y.'s) that it is as impregnable a position as could well be found, and it is incredible that over three hundred British infantry could have been driven off it like a flock of sheep by half their number of Boers. I saw Stewart on my way through Prospect. . . . He says Sir George was *as fresh and bright as possible and showed no signs of weariness.*'

on the ridge by piling them loosely on the top of each other, to a height sufficient to cover the head of the man who was going to trust to that for shelter, and of a width of, say, two feet. Anything more trumpery and miserable as a protection against a bullet could not be conceived. . . . I remarked to several, 'What's the use of that? The splash between these stones will be worse for you than the bullet coming without obstruction.' 'Oh, it's all right, sir; it's good enough for what we shall want up here,' was the nature of every reply I got.

This sense of security was the real explanation of the non-entrenchment, the explanation given before events had proved it fallacious; the other reasons are all given subsequent to the knowledge that it was fallacious.

It was not until about 7 o'clock that anything like steady firing took place on either side. The Boers had by this time got up the foot-hills sufficiently to be within range of the top, and from many detached points they kept up a fire which varied in intensity. No effect whatever was produced by this fire from below; the bullets flew harmlessly over the mountain, or, falling short, flattened themselves against the steep walls of rock below the first dip of the descent; occasionally a better aimed missile, striking the very edge of the rim, ricocheted into the hollow in the centre of the summit, but this was a rare occurrence, and the security of the position may be judged by the fact that in three hours of this fusillade not one man on the hill-top had been hit. That this constant whizzing of bullets over the hill had other use for the Boers, in keeping the troops in the firing line still in the unrested condition in which the night march had left them, was no doubt true. Sound has much to say to what is called the moral effect of fire. Our men replied steadily to the

much more rapid discharges of the enemy. By 10.30 they had eaten some of their three days' rations; most of those forming the reserve were lying asleep on the sheltered side of the basin behind the outcrop of rocks; the sun now shone brightly, and the high altitude to which they had climbed no longer caused the troops to feel cold and uncomfortable.

There is in existence very little record written at the time dealing with these early hours on Majuba, but that little is of extreme interest. As soon as signalling operations between the mountain and the camp at Mount Prospect became possible, a telegram had been despatched *via* the camp to the Secretary for War in London announcing the successful occupation of the position. It was worded as follows: 'To Staff Officer, Camp (Mount Prospect). From Colley. (By flag signal.) Send following to Secretary of War and to Wood: "Occupied Majuba Mountain last night. Immediately overlooking Boer position. Boers firing at us from below." (Received about 8 A.M.)'

The next message, sent about three-quarters of an hour later, can be read either as signifying some more serious outlook, or as a preparation for the occupation of the position at Lang's Nek which the Boers were then supposed to be abandoning. It ran thus: 'To Staff Officer. From Colley. (By flag.) Order up 60th and 15th Hussars from Newcastle to leave this afternoon and try and get in to-morrow morning. Convoy to wait Amiel. Dartnell to call in detachment Biggarsberg and Ardincross Farm, and be ready to follow. Inform Wood.'

A few minutes later a message followed asking 'Are ammunition and groceries at post above O'Neill's farm?' And at 9.30 came the next signal.

It was sent by Colonel Herbert Stewart, the chief staff officer. 'Send out some rations to post with a troop of 15th Hussars. All very comfortable. Boers wasting ammunition. One man wounded in foot.'

Slight though these flag signals were, they throw light upon the forenoon hours and show us a good deal of what was in the General's mind. It appears to have been his intention, after he had placed the troops in position on the Majuba, laid out the three redoubts already mentioned, and seen their construction begun, to return to Mount Prospect, leaving Commander Romilly, R.N., in command of the force on the mountain. He would then, with the troops ordered from Newcastle, and with all the knowledge he had gained of the Boer positions behind the Nek by his survey of their camps from the Majuba, be in a position to direct an attack upon the front combined with a flank movement from the mountain, if such operations became necessary.

It has been said in a former chapter that until the Majuba had been actually occupied, any movement of troops from Newcastle might only have resulted in alarming the Boers and frustrating the object of the night march. Once the Majuba was gained and the dispositions of the Boer forces seen, the moment had arrived for bringing up the reinforcements. There is no reason to suppose that Colley had the least idea of renewing the attack on Lang's Nek until all the troops then at, or near, Newcastle were available. This concentration might have required three days to effect—the period for which his troops were provisioned. How far the knowledge of the position gained after daylight affected his original plan cannot be known, but the apparent preparations

of the Boers to abandon the Nek would have called for increased force at Mount Prospect to secure the advantage of the withdrawal, and would have required an earlier occupation of the Nek than may have originally been contemplated. Hence no doubt the order to Newcastle for the troops already there. A successful occupation of the Majuba did not ensure to Colley an immediate withdrawal of the Boers; but it could not be without effect upon the course of negotiation, and upon the tenor of future instructions from home; while in any event the mountain was the vantage-point which would make certain the success of a subsequent attack, if the Boers, in face of the occupation of the Majuba and the concentration at Mount Prospect, remained still in position.

It has been falsely said of the General that, feeling assured of the safety of the position, he had lain down to rest and knew little or nothing of what was passing on the exterior line of defence. On the contrary he had been throughout the morning in close touch with that outer ring. His movements during the forenoon hours are thus described :

Sir George Colley kept moving about round our lines. He never rested for more than a few minutes together, but there was no sign of excitement or trepidation about him. Everything he did was in his usual deliberate, quiet, cool manner, and that was his demeanour as long as he was alive that day, or at least up to the moment I saw him last. Every now and again he went to the brow overlooking Mount Prospect Camp, where a flag signalman was stationed, and communicated with either the officer in command of the redoubt occupied by the company of Highlanders on the ridge, or else with Colonel Bond at our standing camp.

These frequent visits to the line most exposed to

the enemy's fire, that facing north and east, are also mentioned in other statements.

We will glance now at the plains and valleys below the Majuba an hour before noon. The Highlanders in the post at the foot of the mountain were still entrenching; the troop of Hussars and an additional company of Rifles had reached that place, bringing ten mules laden with reserve ammunition (20 boxes); another mule carrying groceries for the force on the mountain had also reached the post about daylight, but in attempting to get to the top of the mountain, the conductor was wounded and taken prisoner by a Boer patrol.

In the camp at Mount Prospect everything was quiet. The officers and men left behind bemoaned their fate. 'We could see the smoke from the volleys distinctly,' wrote one of the officers, 'and I have a vivid recollection of our laughing as we sat in our mess, and wishing we were up there potting "Pin-heads" as they came up the hill.'

Crossing over to the north side of the Nek we find a very different state of affairs. The practised eye of Commandant Smidt had discovered that the force holding the mountain was not a large one, and the word had been given to storm the summit. For this duty two small separate bodies of Boers, all tried men and deadly shots, were told off under different leaders. These bands were to climb the mountain at different places, and await, at spots not far below the summit, the signal for assault. Meanwhile the same steady rifle fire was to be maintained from round the northern and western slopes of the mountain. On the edge of the top, at every puff of smoke, and at every figure showing against the sky-line, this unre-

mitting fire was to be kept up. It was not the waste of ammunition the staff officer's message described. It prevented a full examination being made of the ground below the first precipitous drop of the mountain. It covered, almost as well as artillery could have covered, the advance of the small assaulting parties. It kept the strain upon the defenders of the position still tightly drawn. If in this war the fighting General of the Boers had done nothing except the attack he was now directing against the Majuba, the manner in which he carried out the movement would suffice to stamp him as one of the ablest leaders of mounted infantry that have appeared in modern war.

It was about 11 o'clock that General Colley, in one of his circuits round the summit, came to the position held by the Naval Brigade under Commander Romilly, at the edge of the basin near the point of ascent. This was the spot selected by the General for erecting one of the three redoubts for occupation by the troops at night. The group of officers standing near the edge of the mountain at this place was soon noticed by a Boer marksman, and bullets began to drop close to the little party. Commander Romilly inquired of one of the staff officers the range at which the Boer was firing. The estimate of distance was 900 yards. Scarcely had the answer been given before a bullet, striking into the group, hit the Commander in the body, wounding him mortally. Although he fell, rolled over into the hollow, it is said that he instinctively cried out to those around him that he was 'all right.' 'I heard,' writes Surgeon Mahon, R.N., in his report, 'a bullet explode close to us. I heard the General say, "Captain Romilly is hit;" and turning round saw General Colley kneeling

by the side of the commander, who was lying on the ground about four yards from us.' The men loved this brave officer, and his fall was a sorrow and a shock to them.<sup>3</sup> To the General it was a still deeper blow. Commander Romilly was the officer he had destined to succeed to the command of the entire force on the summit of the mountain when the time came for his own return to the camp at Mount Prospect. It is said that when the wounded officer was brought back to the hospital at the wells in the hollow the face of the General wore a grave and reserved expression. Another old friend had fallen at his side.

Still there appeared no cause for misgiving as to the result of a Boer attack. All this uphill shooting had resulted in putting only three or four men *hors de combat*, and only one case was serious. There was nothing to indicate that the attack was not a curtain behind which retreat from the Nek was being carried out. Looking over the brow directly above the Boer laagers the waggons could be seen inspanned; some even had moved away from the Nek northwards towards the Transvaal.

A little after 11 o'clock the following message was signalled from Majuba to the camp at Mount Prospect. 'Send following to Secretary of State: "Boers still firing heavily on hill, but have broken up laager and begin to move away. I regret to say Commander Romilly dangerously wounded; other

<sup>3</sup> A year or two earlier there had occurred in the ship to which he belonged a terrible outbreak of smallpox. The disease was almost confined to the black 'Kroo' boys, as they are called who are taken for service on board ships of war on the African station. Commander Romilly would not abandon the

stricken sailors whatever might be their colour. Attending to them closely through their sickness, he too caught the infection, and though he recovered, it was to bear on what had been a handsome face the deep scars of the disease. Such things tell for much in a community of sailors or soldiers.

casualties, three men slightly wounded.”’ And to the Commodore on the South African station another message was sent: ‘Deeply regret to report Commander Romilly dangerously wounded.’ This was the last message we know of from the hill-top. The general outlook of the situation on Majuba had undergone no change up to 11 o’clock, nor can we find in the narratives of survivors, written when their recollections were necessarily tinged with the shadow of the catastrophe that followed, a single word to indicate that a doubt existed in anybody’s mind upon the security of the position.

Another hour passed. The midday sun hung almost vertically over the mountain. The reserves lay dozing in the central basin. The Boer fire still sounded on the lower slopes, replied to at intervals by our men at top in steady, and what seemed to be accurate, shooting. Especially was this the case among the detached groups of men occupying the isolated points already described—the two peaked koppies jutting out from the main mass of the mountain, forming on the north and west faces, those nearest to the Boers, flanking bastions from whose summits men could see further down the steep mountain sides than could they who held the ring of the hill-top. The flanking koppies were the keys of the summit, and were so regarded by the main portion of the defence line. As long as they were held, no enemy could possibly scale the last hundred feet of the mountain—that smooth ascent bare of trees, rounded like a skull, and so steep that only on hands and knees could it be climbed.

The koppie on the north-west corner of the mountain covered the northern flank of the ascent. The

one overlooking the western slope did the same service upon that side. From these points the shooting had been more sustained than in other parts of the line, but even in these places the expenditure of ammunition had been controlled, and when inquiries were made as to cartridges it was found that at half-past 12 o'clock only a few men in the most advanced positions had expended thirty rounds, and that by far the larger portion of the force had still in their possession the seventy rounds they originally carried. Such was the position of affairs on the summit at 1 o'clock, at which hour, according to Colonel Herbert Stewart's report, General Colley lay down at the northern side of the basin for a few minutes' rest. At his side sat Colonel Stewart, who was charged to rouse the General should any change occur in the situation. 'No change occurred,' continues the report, and within half an hour the General was again turning his attention to the redoubts.

During the last two hours a development on the part of the enemy had, however, taken place. Small parties of Boers had moved in closer to the mountain some five or six hundred yards lower down. The officer commanding the party of Highlanders overlooking the north face noticed this movement and reported it. The accuracy of the fire with which the Boers covered their advance may be judged by the fact that while crossing the short open space between his advanced line and the reserve, the officer's clothes were cut twice by bullets; but excepting the one or two slight casualties already mentioned, no loss had here occurred. A reinforcement from the reserve was sent back with the officer to the exposed point, and these, mostly, if not all, 58th men, were extended

with the men of the Highland regiment who already occupied that part of the firing line. The Boers still seemed to be wasting their ammunition in fruitless fire upon the mountain. The last hundred feet, almost precipitous, appeared to defy ascent, and the belief in the impossibility of any attempt to take the top was as complete as ever.

The fire from below now became less severe ; there appeared to be altogether on the mountain a force which in the opinion of the officer already mentioned might amount to from three to four hundred men. It was difficult to say what was the number of Boers who had crossed the open space five hundred yards beneath and disappeared in the unseen terraces below the upper drop of the hill, but their concentration in that dead ground did not affect those last hundred or more feet of bare smooth acclivity, climbing which any enemy bold enough to face the final ascent could be easily annihilated from the flanking koppies.<sup>4</sup>

But now about the hour of half-past one there occurred, immediately below the koppie commanding the northern face, a sudden and totally unexpected movement on the part of the enemy. A body of Boers, about sixty in number, had a little while earlier reached a position some eighty yards below this isolated projecting point. There they had paused and reconnoitred ; peering cautiously from between brush-wood, their scouts could see the soldiers in the koppie above, as every now and again they stood up to fire at some Boer rifleman four or five hundred yards below, thus showing themselves against the sky-line.

<sup>4</sup> It was afterwards ascertained that the fire of our men had been altogether ineffective ; the total

Boer loss throughout the day was only one killed and five wounded.

**Sketch**  
 shewing ground between  
**MAJUBA AND THE BOER CAMPS.**

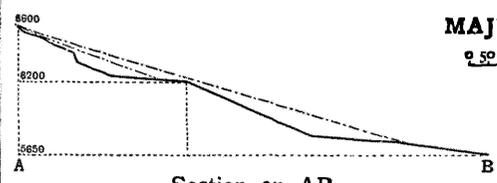
0 50 100 200 300 400 500 600 800 1000 Yds.

Scale,  $3\frac{1}{4}$  inches to 1 mile.

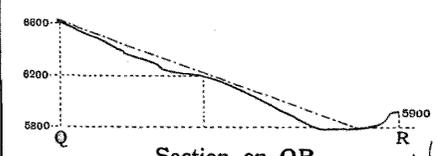
Contours at 50 ft. V.I.

*N.B. Ground shaded is "dead" to direct fire from the 6000 contour.*

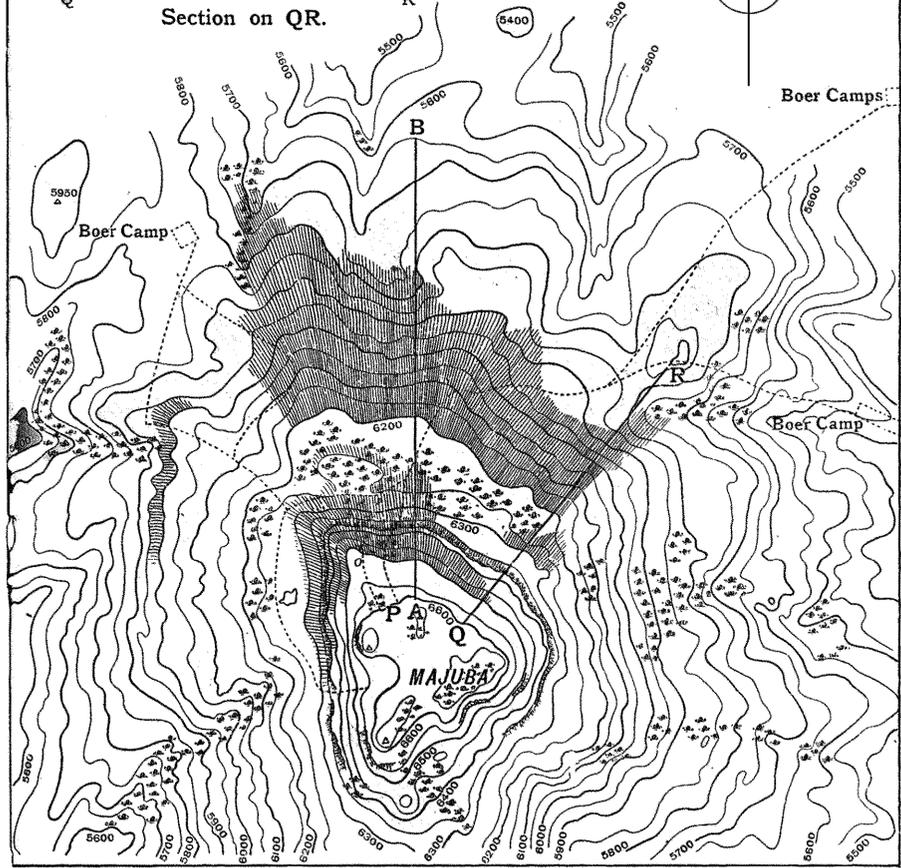
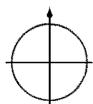
*P. Point where first attack came in.  
 Q. " " second " " "*



Section on AB.



Section on QR.



Suddenly, acting under a command given by one of the captains who had been closely watching the procedure of the soldiers above, a body of Boers with rifles at 'the present' stepped back a pace or two from the rock which had hitherto concealed them, and fired a volley point-blank upon the figures above. The effect was instantaneous. The men on the koppie overhead were killed, wounded, or dispersed, and the sudden collapse of the picquet so dumbfounded those who were in sight of the spot that they recoiled instinctively from the brow of the hill, thus leaving unguarded the only paths by which ascent to the summit was practicable on that side.

At the moment when this sudden outburst of firing took place from the ledge immediately below the north crest, the General, who a few minutes before had begun to detail the arrangements for the construction of the redoubts which were to serve for holding the mountain against a night attack, moved towards the point whence the fire came. Midway to the north crest he met the men retreating from it.

There is much confusion and discrepancy in the accounts of the events now occurring. In such moments of confused action and equally confused thought, the sequence is easily lost, nor can after-thought ever wholly relink the broken chain. It is, however, certain that a few seconds after the outbreak of sudden fire below the koppie, the surprise and panic which had cleared the koppie of its garrison spread to those of the Highlanders holding the crest who were posted immediately behind this koppie, and these men ran back towards the central basin. At the same moment the reserve men in the basin had been taken forward to reinforce the point at which fire had so suddenly broken out.

At the first indication of danger, the officers had sprung forward, the General moving at once to the threatened point—all urging by voice and gesture the men of the reserve to follow in the same direction. But before these mixed companies could shake themselves out and reach the fighting line, the backward wave had begun. The two lines met on the exposed slope of the hill; there occurred here a moment of great confusion, which finally shaped itself into a general backward rush, and neither voice nor gesture nor reinforcement could arrest it. The men of the reserve had not been too ready to go forward when the first outbreak of sudden fire had called for their assistance, and now catching the contagion of panic which had just caused the men on the crest to abandon it, they turned and ran back towards the basin they had a moment before quitted. Thus the crest line of the mountain was left open to the further advance of the Boers, now at the very lip of the summit. A few moments of strenuous effort on the part of the General, aided by his officers, succeeded in rallying the men and restoring to them the outward form of order. In the central hollow they were stopped in their retreat, and turning, they inclined towards the north-west, rallied on the ridge of the basin, and fronted again behind its prolongation on the left, which there consisted of a steeper escarpment of rock. The new position behind which they stood was by no means a weak one. It was formed by the ridge, in some places an outcrop of rock, marking generally the north-western side of the central basin. The line of rocks, however, was not continuous, but had gaps where the slope of the ground descending into the basin alone offered shelter. The eastern end of this ridge

formed a denser group, or cluster, of rocks rising from the centre of the northern crest line. Thence the rocky reef extended south-west, and beyond its termination the koppie held by the Highlanders stood upon the western edge of the hill, overlooking the descent on that side. Between these two knolls the line of broken rocks stretched across an angle of the summit. From the outer slope of the mountain whence the Highlanders had retreated, to this second position at the rocks, the distance at the widest part was a little over a hundred yards. In that interval the ground fell forty feet, at first almost imperceptibly, then with steeper rolls and in closer contours which prevented men at the central part of the ridge seeing the actual edge of the mountain. The weakness of the position lay in this outer roll of surface, which, after some forty yards immediately in front of the rocks, hid the ground beyond.

In the momentary lull following the rally there was time to see how far the few minutes of confusion and retreat had compromised the situation. The actual number of the enemy that had so far shown at the edge of the mountain was very small—not above sixty men, but these were all expert shots, and the quickness and accuracy of their fire no doubt impressed our soldiers with the idea that their assailants were far more numerous. Our men could not have realised how few places of possible ascent existed in the whole circumference. Unfortunately, by the abandonment of the northern face, two of these few places were now in possession of the enemy. It would not be easy to determine whether the moral apprehension that the Boers would appear on every side—or the material disadvantage involved in the

loss of the command of two places at which an enemy could find access to the summit—was the most serious in its effect upon the military situation at the moment when the rallied troops were about to make a last effort to hold the hill-top. The panic of the first retreat was still upon them, and that it was already spreading to other parts of the original line of defence was shown by momentary arrivals at the rocks of men from parts of the position so far quite unmolested by the Boers. Two circumstances combined to produce unsteadiness in these remoter parts of the little field which had suddenly become a battle-ground of intense importance. The bullets, fired with extraordinary rapidity by the Boers on the northern face, flew fast among the few men holding the south side, the rim of which was about fifty feet higher than the opposite edge from which the Boers fired. Again, some men of the reserve running back through the basin had passed on over the opposite brow, through the ranks of the men holding it, and were already descending the mountain by the track they had come up.

Thus it was that a position of fair natural strength—and capable of being further strengthened could any possibility of losing the brow have been foreseen—now became weakened in its elements of resistance by the fact that the men who were holding it had suddenly retreated into it. Although in this moment of suspense they were certainly stronger in number than the enemy about to advance against them, all the weight of moral force was with that enemy, and in war the great captain has told us that moral to physical force is as three to one. Never had that famous saying received more conclusive proof than it was now to get.

The dispositions which the few moments of delay in the attack of the Boers allowed the General and his staff to make were these. The men, clubbed together at and behind the line of rocks, were somewhat straightened out to right and left, and efforts were made to get them into their places by companies and corps. Men from the rear of the position were sent to reinforce the koppies on the right and left flanks.

When the final phase on the Majuba was about to begin, the General was standing in the centre of the line. So far, despite the firing, the confusion, and the retreat, there were but few wounded men in the hospital in the basin. The General is described by an observer who was close behind him at this moment as being 'cool and collected as ever.' It is the last account we get of him but one.

The upward wave of the Boer storming party had meanwhile gathered itself at the abandoned brow, and was now about to break over the crest, and roll forward towards the centre of the summit. The men composing this leading attack, though few in numbers, were admirably handled, or perhaps it would be more correct to describe the method of their advance not as being due to the will of one acting upon the many, so much as to the instinct of each individual unit acting on the whole body, and producing, without order or command, the best result obtainable. This, indeed, had been the secret of all the successes the Boers had hitherto gained. Their methods of fighting, their fire tactics and knowledge of ground were instincts imbibed from early youth upwards in the exercise of daily life amid the storm and sunshine of this wild land. Ours were the dogmatic teachings