

CHAPTER VI.

ESTCOURT.

LEAVING the "rebel" barracks behind us we slowly climbed the long steep hill which, rising above the town of Pietermaritzburg, forms the first and most difficult stage of the journey to Estcourt.

The Colonel's orders to us were to make short marches at first, in order that both men and horses should gradually be inured to hard work, and our first day's march, accordingly, was one of twelve miles only, to Houick, an inn close to the Falls of the Upper Umgeni. This is a general halting-place for travellers up-country, as well as a common resort for picnic-parties and visitors to the Falls.

We reached Houick at about eight p.m., marching having been but slow. But then, besides the fact that much of the road was uphill and our men

heavily laden, we met with various accidents which caused delay. We could not have started in better order than we did, and the Colonel's careful forethought and personal attention to every detail of our equipment, etc., should have saved us from mishap, if anything could. But it is in the nature of expeditions, however well planned, that something should go wrong, and we were not exempt from the general rule. That unlucky ammunition-cart in particular seemed bound to come to grief, whether from its weight, or that the driver was not as careful as he ought to have been. At all events the "danger-flag" struck twice during our two first days' march, the cart upsetting, and in one instance a keg of powder bursting. However, no serious damage was done except to the wheel-horse's knees, which were badly cut.

Then there was delay at Houick in waiting for slaughter cattle; delay again at Currie's, our next halting-place; and another twelve miles' march, owing to a report brought by one of the drivers that the Colonel's marquee had been lost or stolen from the

waggon in his charge. There were two waggons belonging to our party which had been sent on a couple of days before us, and it was from one of these that the marquee had vanished. All our efforts to recover it were in vain. We never saw it again.

Such, however, were the most serious disasters which we had to report when, during our fourth day's march, the Colonel overtook us, and preceded us into Estcourt, the chief village of Weenen county, where we remained four days before starting for the mountains for which we were bound.

On the morning after our arrival our camp was visited by our Chief, who had lodged for the night in the village. He inspected the party, making minute inquiries as to the health of the men and the fitness of the horses for service ; and, I am glad to say, finding everything to his entire satisfaction. He next ordered all the stores to be unpacked, carefully surveyed them, and had them repacked so that we should be ready to start at the shortest notice. That would be, as soon as the infantry detachment,

which was to accompany us under Captain —, should receive a fresh supply of boots from Pietermaritzburg, which they were awaiting, and without which the British soldier could not be expected to march any great distance.

His business at the camp concluded, the Colonel turned to me, saying: "Now I shall go and report myself to the acting resident magistrate, Mr. M——, as it is only right that the chief civil authority in the county should know of all the movements of the troops therein. You may as well come with me, Wylde."

Accordingly we walked across the Estcourt Bridge and turned our steps in the direction of the magistrate's office, when we were overtaken by that gentleman in person on horseback and accompanied by an armed native escort, without which, I was afterwards told, he never stirred a yard by night or day. This fact was very significant of the feeling of the magistrate as to the state of the county, and his subsequent speeches showed the condition of unreasoning terror to which men's minds had been reduced.

My Chief saluted him with courtesy, and the deference due to his office, making himself known to him in the following words; "Allow me, sir, to introduce myself to you as the officer commanding the troops in this county. I am about to patrol the line of country immediately under the Draakensberg, and to destroy the passes leading out of Natal."

The magistrate's reply to this courteous address astonished me not a little. "I should like to know, sir," he said, in very angry tones, "under whose advice Government has sent these rebels up to ravage the country. Not one of them will be with you in a week, and we shall all be murdered in our beds."

I confess that I felt very indignant on hearing my Chief so rudely attacked; but he replied: "I do not think, sir, that you have any reason to be alarmed. As to the men whom I have brought with me as pioneers, I can answer for it that every one of them will return with me when their work is accomplished. If there are marauders in the county they will fly before us. Nothing but good can possibly result."

Forbearance and condescension in explaining matters were quite thrown away upon the magistrate : so, with a quiet remark, my Colonel turned upon his heel and left him.

As we returned to the camp he exclaimed with an indignation which Mr. M——'s incivility to himself could not rouse in him : "*They* know how to treat the natives ! Up here they would enslave them if they could. And now," he said, "I must go and pay my respects to the family of the resident magistrate, who is himself away in England on sick-leave. He commanded the volunteers and native levies of the county of Weenen during the recent disturbances, and I made his acquaintance then. You can come with me, if you like, Wylde."

I could not help telling him that, ready and willing as I was to accompany him anywhere, I sincerely hoped that I should not often be obliged to stand by and listen to uncourteous language addressed to him without the power of resenting it.

He laughed, telling me that, were I to quarrel with everyone who spoke ill of him in Natal, I should

have my hands pretty full ; for that just now he was about the best-hated man in the colony.

I knew it well enough ; but it was grievous to me all the same, even although I knew also that it was for exactly those qualities which I respected most in him that the colonists and their newspapers reviled him.

“ If we had our own men here, sir, as in the old days, I hardly think the curs would venture a second time,” I exclaimed with some heat. “ They would have had the houses of some of these wretched editors down about their ears long ago, and have ducked them in the nearest stream.”

My Chief could not help smiling a little at the recollection I brought up of the hundred and twenty bronzed and stalwart men of his company, each and all of whom would have looked upon an insulting word to their captain as a wrong to himself, not to be passed over without punishment ; and who would, undoubtedly, in such a case as this of the colonial newspapers, have taken the law into their own hands, careless of the consequences to themselves. But none

the less did he reprove me for my intemperate language, warning me against allowing my indignation to get the better of me, and pointing out that, as his own personal follower, I must be doubly careful, as whatever I did or said would undoubtedly be laid to his charge.

I promised obedience and discretion the more readily as I had already had a little opportunity of relieving my feelings on that point, which I did not think it necessary to confess to my Chief, as no mischief had resulted. The facts were as follows ;—Immediately upon our arrival the previous afternoon, I had fallen in with a private of infantry who had known me by sight during the time that I was hanging about Durban. Finding me now attached to the service of the Colonel, whom, in common with his comrades, he held in the highest estimation for his gallant and soldierly conduct during the expedition of 1873, he hastened to inform me of the state of mind prevailing in Estcourt towards my Chief. The acting magistrate's speeches were fair examples of this. The people were mad with foolish terror, and looked upon the

Colonel as their deadly foe, about to bring death and destruction upon them at the hands of our poor peaceful, docile pioneers. The condition of panic which our operations would finally allay was at this time only augmented by our appearance. The man told me that numerous abusive placards concerning the Colonel were posted about the town, and that he knew who had done it.

“What is his name, and where does he live?” I inquired sharply. His name was X——, and he was staying at the Estcourt Hotel, was the information that I received. Consequently I came to the wise resolve of dining at the Estcourt inn myself that night, on purpose to pick a quarrel with Mr. X——. I wonder what my Chief would have said to me had he known of my intention!

At the hotel that evening we sat down to dinner some dozen men, amongst whom I was the only stranger. As such, however, my companions addressed me occasionally, with the lack of ceremony natural in a colony. They talked freely amongst themselves, and I soon discovered that the adversary that I sought

sat exactly opposite me on the other side of the table. Nor was I long in finding an opportunity for the remark that I had to make. The conversation very soon turned upon my Chief and his doings, and the tone of the comments made were such as to lead me to think that I should presently have twelve quarrels on my hands instead of one. A momentary pause in their talk gave me the opportunity I required. Looking steadily across the table at Mr. X——, I said very deliberately, and in a voice loud enough to be heard by all present: “By the way, I should much like to know the man who has been posting abusive placards concerning Colonel Durnford about this town. Could I see him before me I would certainly fling this glass of wine in his face.”

A dead silence followed my defiance. I had expected Mr. X—— to spring to his feet, and hurl it back again; but he only turned very red, and shifted uneasily in his chair without meeting my eye, and presently began to talk very fast to his right-hand neighbour upon some matter of farming.

Whereupon the rest of the company fell to feeding

again, and to talking upon indifferent subjects; and I, feeling that my dinner would certainly choke me on the top of so much unexpended indignation, rose and left the room and very shortly returned to camp, which I had much better not have left at all. I never heard any more of Mr. X——.

In order to pay our visit to the family of the resident magistrate we mounted our horses and rode for about a mile and a half by the riverside, through an undulating grass country, covered with mimosa bushes, arriving at a long thatch-roofed house, embowered in trees.

Here we were received by the ladies of the household, and by a brother of the gentleman from whom we had lately parted upon Estcourt Bridge. I suppose I must have been long enough out of the society of ladies to become shy; for, although I used not to be afflicted in that way, I was certainly so far overcome by being suddenly brought into an assemblage of the fair sex, that I had only a very confused notion of the names and number of those to whom I was introduced, and hardly knew what

I was about until I found myself seated on one side of the room, being entertained by a young lady,—name unknown,—who owned a pair of fine dark eyes, and the Colonel talking to several other ladies and Mr. ——— opposite us. Our conversation had not got very far when that upon the other side of the room became so interesting to us both that we simultaneously stopped talking, and turned our attention to what was going on.

The Colonel had just discovered that, in consequence of the supposed dangerous state of the country, the ladies were about to leave Estcourt and take refuge in Pietermaritzburg; and he was entreating them not to adopt such a measure, knowing full well that, did they do so, a universal needless panic would prevail. He called upon the eldest daughter of the house (the mother was in England with her husband) to behave as became her father's child, and to set the example which she knew he would approve. After some persuasion his arguments, more especially his appeal to Miss ——— as her father's daughter, prevailed. The young lady

of the dark eyes, who I now found was a visitor from Pietermaritzburg, expressed herself as quite ready to take her share of the expected dangers; and the Colonel dispelled any doubts that might remain by promising to leave a corporal and three men of the infantry as a guard to protect them.

I soon observed that Mr. ——'s attitude towards my Chief was very different from that adopted by his brother the acting magistrate, for the former seemed as friendly as possible. He was just concluding some agreeable speech or other with these words: "And I hope, Colonel, if you ever pass our way, you will do us the pleasure of stopping the night at our house" ("we" standing for himself and his elder brother)—when, to my great amusement, that unfortunate old gentleman entered the room in time to hear every word of an invitation which he certainly would not have ratified.

His look of horror, and his extreme discomfort at again so soon meeting the Colonel,—whom he evidently looked upon as a firebrand of the hottest description,—and finding him on such excellent

terms in the family with which he himself was residing *pro tem.*, were so marked that my anger against him almost evaporated in delight at his discomfiture.

Our visit had already lasted sufficiently long, and we shortly took our leave and returned to camp, in the appearance of which a considerable change had taken place during our absence. The place was now thronged with native women and girls—the wives, mothers, and sisters of our captive pioneers.

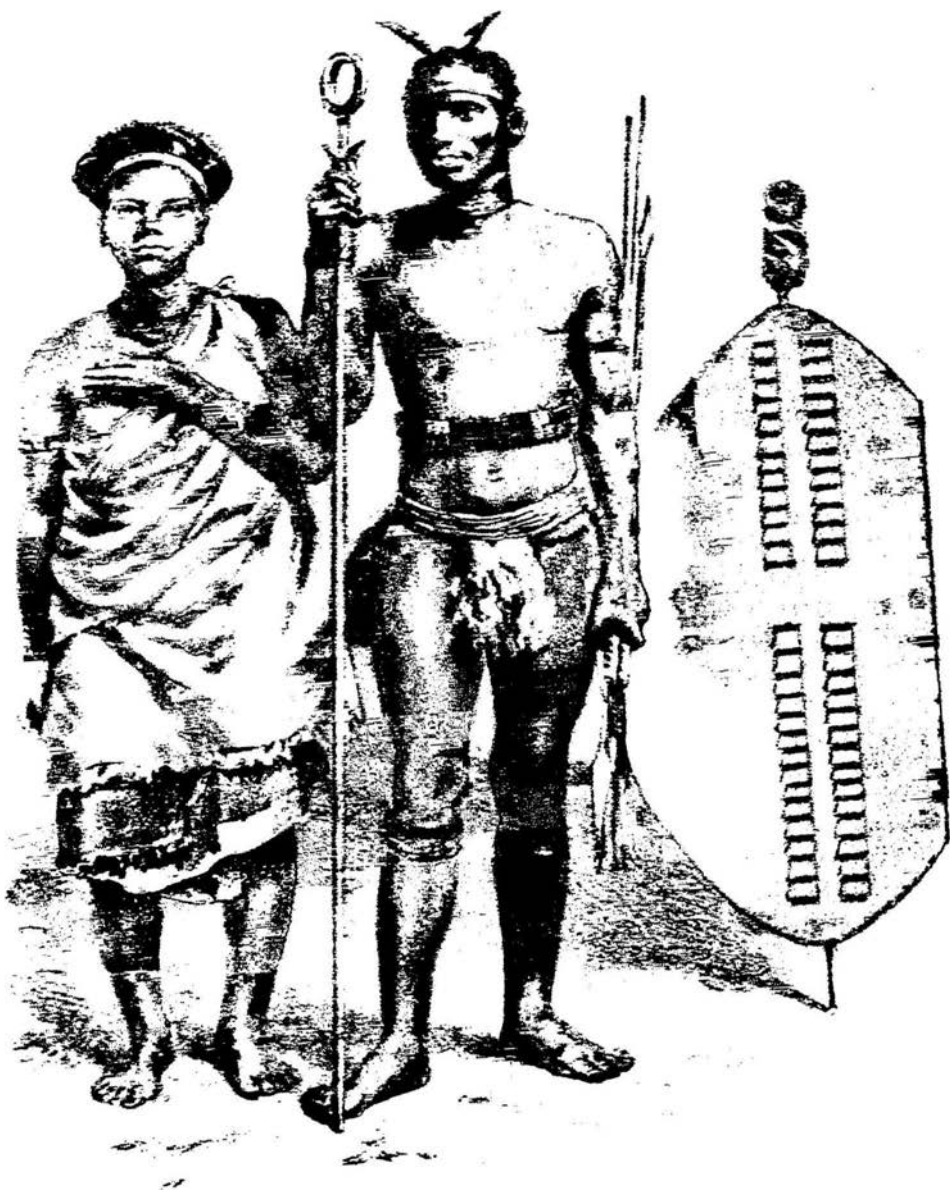
These poor women had seen all the men of their tribe torn from their homes some six months before, their homes burnt, and their land laid waste, while they themselves were sent to live in a sort of half-captivity under the guardianship of so-called “loyal native” chiefs.* They knew not what were their offences against the Government. To them it must have seemed that the white forces,

* There are facts connected with the treatment of these women by the said “loyal natives,” permitted and supported by the British authorities, which are hardly fit for these pages, but may easily be learned by those interested.

and their native auxiliaries who came out against Langalibalele, disappointed of their prey, finding nothing worth confiscating, and comparatively little to kill, had turned their arms against a peaceful well-to-do little tribe, an easy unsuspecting prey, that they might not return home empty-handed.

Ah! seeing how well the Putini spoils would have "paid expenses," and the Putini prisoners supplied "cheap labour," if only a convenient veil could be drawn over the little transaction to the eyes at home in England, I no longer wonder at the unpopularity of my Chief, who did so much towards tearing off that veil, and who, behind the scenes as he necessarily was, would not consent to the plan of "every man making his own little game." To him duty alone was clear, and he could not comprehend this "working round crooked places," as I have heard him term it.

Most of the Putini women had probably never expected to see their male relatives again, after they were carried off by the "impi" (army); for according to the customs of savage warfare, which



NAIVE COUPLE IN THEIR OWN COSTUME.

were carried out to a lamentable extent by us in that unlucky expedition of 1873, they would expect them all to be put to death. So now hearing, in the speedy way in which news always flies amongst the natives, that some of the long-lost ones were so near again, they poured into the camp to see them, all bearing offerings of native luxuries, such as pots of *tshwala* (native beer), mealies, pumpkins, etc. etc., for their respective relatives. The joy of the poor creatures on both sides was most affecting to witness, and no one present on that occasion could have doubted that warm family affection exists amongst the Kaffirs.

It was, however, but a short-lived happiness, for those precious colonial authorities seemed to have no vestige of human feeling towards their unfortunate victims. For that one afternoon content reigned in the camp; and I need hardly say that our Chief was heartily glad that his *protégés* should have their hearts cheered and their spirits raised by a meeting with the families to whom he hoped to restore them in a few months' time. But on

the following day a complaint was made to him by one of the "rebels" that while taking a pot of *tshwala* from the hands of his sister, a native policeman, belonging to the magistrate's court, had snatched it from him and struck him over the arm with a *knob-kerrie*. The Colonel directed the complainant to go at once to the magistrate's court then sitting, and attended himself, making the complaint that one of his men had been thus assaulted. The magistrate dismissed the case as one founded on insufficient evidence. But this was not all. He considered that in any case the policeman would not have exceeded his duty in taking the pot from the "rebel;" and he forthwith ordered that, in future, any women of the tribe of Putini found in Estcourt should be brought before him, in order that he might commit them to gaol, as, he said, *there was no knowing what mischief and fresh rebellion might not come from their being allowed any communication with their male relatives*. He further requested my Chief to give orders that no women should be allowed to enter his camp while

at Estcourt, in which the Colonel acquiesced in deference to the civil power ; although, in conversation with me afterwards, he freely expressed the indignation and contempt which he felt for the want of manliness and humanity which alone could dictate such tyrannical orders.

I must not forget to mention here that the party of Basutos, headed by their chief Hlubi, whom the Colonel had previously mentioned as forming part of his intended force, joined us upon the first day of our stay in Estcourt. These were some of the men who had so gallantly stood by him at that disastrous affair at the Bushman's River Pass ; and I was not a little anxious to see them after hearing the high terms in which the Colonel spoke of their valour and discipline. They were small active men, upon small active horses, to which they seemed to belong almost as completely as did Attila's Hunnish followers to the steeds from whose backs they were reported never to descend. Each man of the Basuto party carried a blanket rolled behind his saddle, and a great-coat rolled before him, and each man was

armed with a breech-loading carbine. This was the whole of their equipment, and they looked what they afterwards proved themselves to be, a most serviceable body of scouts.*

While we were at Estcourt, or soon after our departure, there appeared in one of the Pietermaritzburg newspapers an article which so exactly illustrates the feeling of the public concerning our expedition, before time and circumstances had proved our harmlessness, that I cannot do better than quote it entire, especially as it is a very amusing composition.

It will be in the remembrance of every reader that, during the last session of the Legislative Council, a scheme proposed by Major Durnford for drilling the Kaffirs for road-parties was submitted to the Legislative Council, and was unanimously and peremptorily rejected. Of course everybody considered the matter settled, and that the scheme had passed into the limbo of oblivion. But such we find is not the case. The Governor had the good sense to bow to the decision arrived at in the Council, because it was his duty to do so, especially when it was so well known that

* These Basutos are a far more civilised race than the Zulu Kaffirs. They dress in European clothes, live in square-built houses instead of huts, and can most of them read and write in their own language and in Zulu—not a few of them in ours also; but they are inferior in physique to the Zulus.

the Council had echoed the unanimous voice of the people. On the other hand, if the information we have received from Estcourt be correct—and we cannot doubt its truth—Colonel Durnford has deemed it to be part of his duty to disregard the authority of the Council, to insult it, and through it, the people, by placing a large body of natives under military drill. Two issues ago we informed our readers that Colonel Durnford had taken a large band,—about one hundred and twenty,—of the Putini tribe to blow up the passes in the Draakensberg. It was not sufficient for this recalcitrant Colonel, that sympathisers with, nay members of the rebel tribe should have been chosen for this purpose, which gives them abundant opportunity to escape from the surveillance under which they are at present held, but that they may be the more formidable when they do escape, the Colonel has been taking the trouble to drill them. We are told, on good authority, that the Kaffirs were drawn up in two lines, and ordered to dress, take open order, march,—all which they obeyed with considerable precision, which showed that the instruction had been going on for some time. A drill-sergeant accompanied the party. This process of instruction was gone through *near to the magistrate's office at Estcourt!* and Mr. M——, who was lately so nearly assassinated, very wisely remonstrated with Colonel Durnford for pursuing such a course, and, in particular, that he should have chosen a place in close proximity to the magistrate's court to make such an exhibition. The Colonel, who has an infinite opinion of himself, replied with much *hauteur*: “It is no business of yours, Mr. Magistrate, I know my duty.” The Colonel seems to be one of those high-minded persons who look upon the people of the colony as so many dogs as compared with himself, and who deems it good fun to insult a helpless Council, that may talk and pass resolutions, but can do nothing more, and which it is the duty of the officials to disregard and treat with contempt. Whether the people will quietly permit such open defiance of their will, and such barefaced violation of their orders, remains to be seen.

This effusion, amazingly incorrect, both as to fact and as to grammar, in spite of its comic magniloquence, afforded the "recalcitrant Colonel" and myself immense amusement. One could not help wondering with what object the colony supports its "helpless Council." Can it be from pure benevolence to the members ?