

## CHAPTER VII.

### OUR PERILS ON THE ROAD.

THE next few days were spent by the Colonel in inspecting us, our men, waggons, carts, horses, stores, etc., and in seeing that all our arrangements were perfected, until at last, upon the afternoon of the fifth day after our arrival at Estcourt, the troops were ready to march. The boots had arrived, and the detachment joined the expedition. The carts set off by one route across country, the waggons by the road, we ourselves keeping with the former. All promised a fair day's journey, when a messenger, sent across to us from the road, brought us the unwelcome intelligence that one of the waggons had stuck fast in a mud-hole, in which it remained immovably fixed. We camped for the night at a native kraal, near which the news of the accident

had reached us, having made but seven miles that day.

Of course no further advance could be made until the unlucky waggon was on the road again. So the next morning saw a working-party engaged in digging out the wheels, which had sunk above the axletrees in mud.

No pleasant piece of work at any time is that of getting a heavily-laden South-African waggon out of a hole. The patient suffering oxen, struggling under the repeated lash against a dead weight upon which their strength makes no impression,—the shouts and oaths of the drivers and crack of the whips,—all under the blazing sun of an African midday, intensely hot even in winter, and surrounded by a parched brown-looking country,—all this forms no agreeable picture for the memory to dwell upon. We, of course, prevented as much as possible the ill-treatment of the beasts; and when they — fourteen or sixteen great creatures, with humped backs and wide-spreading horns, harnessed (or “inspanned,” as they say in Natal) two-and-two

with huge wooden yokes,—fell back exhausted and in confusion, the men seized pick and shovel and worked away at the buried wheels; and then, after ten minutes' toil, we tried once more what the results of our labour, and the recovered strength of the oxen, urged on by voice and lash, would do for us;—yet still in vain. The work must be done. There was no help for it. We off-loaded the waggon at last, and even then the attempt was repeated a dozen times, before, with toiling straining cattle, groaning and creaking timbers, and hot tired drivers, the huge lumbering machine stirred from its muddy bed. Then, with another effort, the spent oxen urged once more to full exertion, all hands pushing and tugging at the wheels, the waggon was on dry ground. The men loaded-up again, and it proceeded slowly on its way, with the chance of sticking fast in like manner in some other mud-hole before the day's journey was over.

Such is waggon travelling over most roads in Natal; and such, I have often been told, was the case even on the main-road between Durban and Pieter-

maritzburg, until my Chief took it in hand as colonial engineer. Since that time such scenes have not occurred upon that section of the road. Our own experience was what I have described, though it was not the same waggon which stuck fast a second time that day. The latter accident occurred to another very heavy one, called in South - African parlance a "buck-waggon," which was laden with the equipment of the troops, and which came to grief at the first muddy stream we crossed.

"This won't do at all," said my Chief, and next day he sent out a working-party to repair about four miles of road, which was in a particularly bad state, crossing a stream with very muddy banks. This was done on the principle that a stitch in time saves nine, and that it is easier to mend a hole than to pull your waggon out of one. Indeed, although the work delayed us another day, it was time well spent, and saved us much in the end.

The change in temperature, after leaving Pietermaritzburg, had been very great. There the nights

were still warm when we left, but they were very cold by the time we reached Estcourt, where we found frost nightly, and saw snow upon the hills about seven miles off, an unusual occurrence, I believe, so early in the year.

Naturally we found it colder as we approached the mountains, and we were all of us, white and black, glad enough to sit round our blazing camp-fires at night.

Upon the last evening of our encampment at the Kaffir kraal, all were thus resting and warming themselves when a suspicious incident occurred. Round one of the fires sat some half-dozen pioneers, their dark faces and white teeth lit up by the glare, and brought into strong relief against the black moonless night. They were talking fast, but in subdued tones, for close by, although in the shadow, sat the Colonel, attended, as usual, by myself, while at a little distance stood a British soldier on guard, also shrouded in darkness.

To anyone arriving in camp the assemblage would have appeared to be merely one of natives belonging

to the kraal, for there were not even "white voices" at this particular fire. My Chief and I were equally silent, while we chanced to be the only Europeans close at hand except the sentry. The rest were either distributed around the other fires, or asleep in their huts.

Suddenly we were aroused,—my Chief from his thoughts, myself, I confess, from a doze,—by the sound of horses' feet, and next minute three natives, armed and mounted, appeared within the fire-lit circle. They saw neither us nor the sentry, and, evidently looking upon the party as a gathering of their own kind only, dismounted without more ado.

From where we were sitting their every motion was visible to us, and I never saw faces express greater consternation than did theirs when they caught sight of the Colonel's tall commanding figure, clad in uniform, as he advanced into the light of the blaze and demanded who they were. I kept close to him, meanwhile, under the influence of that vain hope of some day coming between him and danger, which throughout our expedition caused me

to follow him as closely as his shadow whenever the work he gave me to do permitted it.

Without making the slightest attempt at an answer or explanation, the men rushed to their horses, endeavouring to mount and escape; but under such suspicious circumstances, and the still unsettled state of the country, that could not be permitted. My Chief sprang forward to arrest them. The sentry and I immediately following his example, and the fugitives, seeing that they had no choice but to submit, made no resistance, but laid down their arms and surrendered. They seemed unable to give any satisfactory account of themselves, or of the arms in their possession, consisting of five guns besides native weapons; nor had they any passes, without which it was at that time unlawful for natives to travel. Accordingly the Colonel detained them for the night, but released them on the following morning upon their being identified by Hlubi as retainers of the chief Zikali, a well-known "loyal" subject, and one who had rendered service to the Government during the late disturbances.

They were of a class whom I had already learnt to know as "Government devils," on account of the savage character of the acts perpetrated by them in the name and under the protection of the Government. I confess that I looked upon them and their kind as far more worthy of being kept prisoners and punished than our poor peaceful "rebels," except that after all they did but follow the example and carry out the orders of their white masters, who, not being ignorant savages, were therefore far more guilty than they.

Nor was this our only experience of the same sort. On the afternoon of the following day, as I was riding with my Chief and the advanced guard of Basutos, we saw about two miles distant a party of five armed natives on foot, running towards some rocky and broken ground, as if for concealment. The Colonel immediately ordered two of the Basutos to ride in one direction, and two in the other, for the purpose of cutting them off, while he himself rode straight for the flying men, followed, of course, by me.

The country was open and undulating, affording capital galloping ground, over which our horses went at full speed, doubtless sharing with their riders the exhilarating effect of rapid motion through the fresh, almost frosty air. I was enjoying myself to the utmost, feeling that I should never care to draw rein, when suddenly and unexpectedly I found myself brought to a standstill in a way which I by no means relished. My horse had plunged up to the girths in a morass, from which I extricated him and myself with considerable difficulty. Much annoyed at the delay occasioned by my accident, I pressed on again as quickly as possible, and breasting the heights beyond, I saw, at a few hundred yards' distance, my Chief alone, parleying with the fugitives, who appeared indeed to have turned at bay. I made all haste to reach the Colonel's side, but, as I galloped down the gentle incline towards the spot, I became aware, to my no small alarm, that the demonstrations upon the other side were decidedly warlike. Those men who had guns were beginning to handle them in a sus-

picious manner, while the others were unmistakably brandishing their assegais.

“One against five,” thought I, as I urged my horse to his utmost speed. “He with but one hand for weapon and reins, and I out of the way as usual. Just like my — luck!”

But before I reached the spot my anxieties were relieved. My Chief had quietly dropped the reins upon his horse's neck, and drew the revolver which had hitherto been carried in his holster. The sight of it intimidated the foe, and, a couple of Basutos galloping up with cocked carbines in one direction, and I in another, the men laid down their arms and surrendered. We kept them with us for a couple of days, until we could identify them. After what has gone before, my readers may not be surprised to learn that these prisoners also turned out to be “loyal natives,” also without passes, and carrying unregistered guns. They proved, however, to have been out upon Government service, and to be on their way home after escorting a Government official from one place to another; under which circumstances one would have imagined that

they would have been carefully supplied with the passes requisite for their safety, which, however, was not the case. Of course the Colonel released them, while we rather wondered why they should have given us the trouble of chasing them, still more, why they should have resisted the Colonel's authority.

Their behaviour puzzled me considerably. At first I was inclined to think that their fear of us was a plain evidence of guilt of some sort. Were they, I argued, on a little expedition of their own, hunting out stray fugitives of the dispersed tribes for purposes of plunder or murder? Were they, perhaps, tacitly permitted so to do by their white captains, some of whom are known to have called for "no prisoners," with a bloody significance in the words, during the late "rebellion?" My mind, I confess, was in a state of suspicion, owing to the tales of wrong and cruelty which I had already heard, and I was ready enough to believe anything of "Government devils" and their masters. After the full explanation which we received from these five men, however, that little theory of mine was

destroyed in this individual case ; and upon further consideration I could only arrive at one conclusion as to the cause of the behaviour of both parties of would-be fugitives from our path. The conclusion left upon my mind is that these men, although one party at least was in Government employ, and doing no wrong, were afraid to trust themselves in our hands, because the native experience of white men's justice and mercy, especially during the late disturbances, were such that they felt that no innocence on their part was a safeguard against cruelty and oppression. They had lost all faith in their white rulers ; and my Chief was a stranger to them, who, for aught they knew, might promptly have them stripped and flogged, if not even put to death, as rebels, and no question asked or answered. Before we left this part of the country, the tribes residing in it learnt to know the Colonel better, and to fear no wrong or injustice at his hands ; although, at the same time, they learnt to fear his just displeasure, and to pay prompt and entire obedience to his commands.