

CHAPTER IX.

THE MOUNTAIN PASSES.

WE marched before daylight upon the fifth, as I remember well, for it was a new and unwelcome experience to me. I was roused from the sound sleep consequent upon the previous day's severe toil by the bugle sounding the reveille, and dressed as hastily as the bitter cold would permit, by the dim light of a lantern, which I lit as soon as I could persuade myself that it was not still the middle of the night. Then, after rapidly putting my things together, I turned out of my tent,—which was warm in comparison to the freezing outer air,—to find a crisp hoar-frost lying on the ground, and the stars twinkling from a cold and wintry sky.

It was not yet daylight, but all was alive in the camp. Through the darkness lights flitted in

all directions, oxen lowed and men shouted, white tents were struck and packed, beasts of burden laden, and arrangements made for the morning's march. Hard by a tiny camp-fire was struggling with the mists of night, and at it a servant was preparing coffee. One was glad enough to crouch beside the little blaze, and to warm one's hands for a moment, while fortifying oneself with the fragrant beverage, before hastening away to do one's share of the work in hand. Not that there were many minutes to spare in loitering over the fire. Our Chief was here, there, and everywhere, and shamed one's inclination to play laggard by his own incessant activity.

But half an hour was allowed from the time the bugle sounded the reveille until the "Advance" rang out, during which time we had all to turn out, pack up our things, strike the tents, and load-up the animals, an operation of no little difficulty in the darkness of the early morning. Gradually the lights appeared less brilliant, and the figures more distinct, as the darkness became more trans-

parent with the coming day. Then suddenly it was light, the eastern clouds glowed rosy for but a moment, and the sun came bounding up with that singular swiftness and suddenness which it has in these latitudes. Its rays slowly dispelled the mists which lay lightly upon the hills, but heavily piled as it were in the valleys, and instilled a little welcome warmth into our frozen frames.

At the sound of the bugle half the Basuto scouts galloped to the front as an advance-guard. Then came a section of the pioneers with their tools, to smooth the way for the pack-animals, wherever the ground became too difficult for them. Close behind these followed the infantry, with Captain B—— at their head; then the pack-horses and pack-oxen, followed in their turn by the remainder of the pioneers, the slaughter-cattle bringing up the rear, with, however, the usual rear-guard of Basutos, riding a few hundred yards behind the column of route.

At the head of all rode our Chief, attended by the faithful pair Jabez and Windvogel, and with the

white guide at his side. At every place of more than usual difficulty the Colonel halted, and watched until the whole party had defiled before him, so as to make sure that no avoidable accident should take place. Then, galloping past over such rocky ground that it seemed a wonder how any horse could keep his feet, he and his orderlies were soon in their old places at the head of the column. As for me, I had my own place assigned to me; and, although out of working hours I looked upon myself as a somewhat privileged person with the Colonel, during them I should no more have ventured to leave my post without an order from him than any private in the ranks without his captain's command.

Our order of march was conducted with strict military precaution, as, from the reports which we had heard at Estcourt, it seemed very probable that at any moment we might find ourselves face to face with Mabudhle and his warriors. The country was a most difficult one, and the track which we followed led over great spurs running from the Draakensberg, with deep valleys between, the sides of which latter,

bordering on the mountain streams, were generally clothed with a thick underwood, through which we had to force a passage, and which afforded admirable concealment for an ambuscade. As we advanced we came upon numerous indications of the presence of men; traces of fires, rude bivouacs formed of branches of trees and shrubs planted in a circle, the spoor of horses and cattle, etc., all showed clearly that there were fugitives from the scattered tribes still lurking in these secluded spots; for in this part of the country there are no settled inhabitants. In one place, indeed, on the banks of a sparkling stream whose icy-cold waters take their rise in the mountain, we found half-a-dozen low huts, fairly constructed, with all the signs of a settled habitation. It had been deserted, probably, at the rumour of our approach, for there was no living thing to be seen in it. Poor creatures! They must have thought their enemies most relentless, and I, for one, regretted that we had passed that way.

Such were the incidents of the day's march,

diversified towards its close by a not entirely unsuccessful hunt after six eland, which we first beheld about half-a-mile to the left of our march.

These pretty, and now rather scarce, animals, which are about the size of ordinary cattle, remained perfectly quiet for some time, yet evidently watching the unwonted sight presented to them by our party with curiosity, if not with reasonable alarm.

Of course we could on no account have passed them by, for the eland is looked upon as especially deserving of the huntsman's attention; nor might we ever fall in with such a chance again. Half-a-dozen of the Basutos were promptly dismounted and sent on foot up the almost precipitous sides of the ravine, in order to drive the game in the direction in which we had taken up our post; the "we" in this instance comprising the Colonel, Hlubi, Jabez, Windvogel, our guide, and myself. All six of us crouched down amongst the rocks, while our horses were carefully concealed in the brushwood, so as to give the eland no premature alarm.

Before long the game was afoot and moving in

our direction, the Basutos having driven it most judiciously. The eland appeared heading towards a small pass within forty yards from where we had taken our stand. They did not see us, and all promised well. But alas! the luckless Windvogel, in his anxiety to learn whether they had yet come within range, exposed himself to view, and the eland, catching sight of him, turned short off, and, re-crossing the stream, made off in the direction from whence we had all come. They gave us, however, fairly easy shots at about two hundred and fifty yards range, all of which, save one, proved unsuccessful. One beast staggered and fell, but, rising immediately, followed its companions, who were disappearing at that easy slinging pace peculiar to their kind. Just as they were vanishing from our sight, over the crest of a rocky hill appeared the head of the infantry column. Half-a-dozen of the men threw off their coats, dashed up the hill and, opening fire with their rifles, brought the wounded animal to the ground. There it was despatched by an assegai thrust, delivered with great satisfaction by one of the pack-

horse leaders, all of whom,—some twelve in number,—on seeing the game, had simultaneously dropped their bridles, and, leaving the animals to take charge of themselves, had dashed off in hot pursuit.

Very shortly the eland was skinned and quartered, furnishing us with an ample supply of venison for the next few days.

Next day we camped about three miles from the old Bushman's Pass, where we were to commence our labours of demolition. This pass is so called owing to its having been the route by which almost the latest raid was made by the Bushmen. These were followed by a hastily-collected party of farmers, who tracked them by the dead bodies of the cattle and horses which had become their booty, but never came up with the marauders themselves, except in the case of one straggler, who was overtaken and shot.

It was as a sort of frontier guard against these same Bushmen that the chief Langalibalele and his people were settled, five-and-twenty years ago, in a "location" bordering upon the Draakensberg mountains. His land lay, however, not near this Bush-

man's Pass, but near the Bushman's River Pass, some fifty miles away, where my Chief was wounded in 1873.

In reference to this I may borrow a paragraph quoted by the Bishop of Natal: "It must be admitted that the Ama Hlubi* discharged well the special duties imposed upon them by the Government, and that, in consequence, the farmers in Weenen County conducted their operations, and guarded their flocks, with comparative ease. Langalibalele performed his part of the compact, and protected the county of Weenen from inroads of Bushmen by the passes he commanded." (Parl. Blue Book, 1874, p. 10.)

One might have imagined that if it was convenient to post this tribe so as to protect the country from the Bushmen, they would not have been so hardly dealt with for possessing gunst to defend themselves and us.

Our camp was pitched about three miles from the actual pass, or rather from the actual passage on

* The tribe of which Langalibalele was chief.

† The original cause of dispute.

to the top of the mountain, for pass, properly so called, there was none. There were two approaches to this, one to be made by following the course of a stream for a considerable distance, and then turning off up a watercourse, dry at this time of year, but a roaring torrent in summer-time. Near the mountain-top this track joined the only other one possible, which followed the watershed line of a high and broken range of very difficult country. From the point where these two ways met it was but a hand-and-foot scramble of the most arduous description to gain the top of the mountain. Yet, in the old Bushman days, stolen cattle were frequently carried off by this pass, and that, during the flight of the Ama Hlubi, men, women, horses and cattle followed the same route was evident from their spoor.

We blasted no less than eight scarps out of the solid rock in order to render these approaches inaccessible, and we were engaged upon the work four days altogether.

This pass was supposed to have been destroyed

in 1866 on account of the Bushmen. But the work done then would have been utterly useless had it ever been put to the proof. It consisted simply of a cutting about six feet deep in the turf across a great spur running from the mountain-ridge, and leaving an easy passage to the right.

It appears, however, that the very report of the operations was sufficient to keep the diminutive and crafty, though daring foe, away, for no more cattle were driven over the spot.

While we were at work upon this pass our camp was visited by one of the corps of Volunteers who followed the Colonel to the Bushman's River Pass the previous year. He remained with us two days and nights, during which time, of course, he was entertained with as much hospitality as our temporary camp afforded. I suppose his heart was opened by the friendly manner in which he was received, and the courtesy shown him by the Colonel, whom he approached at first with a somewhat suspicious and doubtful air, as though not certain of a kindly reception in that quarter,

after the occurrences, and more especially the newspaper letters, a few months before. Possibly he even expected to be personally recognised and repulsed by the Colonel, not understanding that to him one of a party who were simply troopers for the nonce would be the same as another, especially as they had served under him for so short a time, and had never been seen by him, to his knowledge, before or since. But the gentleman in question became very friendly indeed when he found that no difference was made even after he had introduced himself as a member of the gallant —— corps. On the second evening of his stay, the Colonel having left the fire to write in his tent, he turned the conversation towards the affair of the Bushman's River Pass, and argued the whole thing out with a private of the 75th, who happened to be well up on the point. I sat by and listened, for I was greatly interested in the matter, and glad of an opportunity of learning whether there was anything at all to be said upon the other side, which I very much doubted. I cannot say that any argument brought

forward by our guest in support of his case struck me as being worthy of record, or even of remembrance ; but I do recollect very distinctly that he was obliged to give up one point after another to his opponent, and that finally he fairly allowed that he and his comrades had run away in a panic. Some of them, he said, would have stood after the first shock was over, but, seeing the others streaming away a mile ahead, they all followed suit. He further declared that he would stick to this, whoever questioned him ; for it was the truth, and nothing more.

I have often wondered since whether he kept his word, and whether he spoke out so boldly at the "Court of Enquiry," of which I have heard, but which took place after I left Natal. If he spoke then as he did beside the camp-fire at the Old Bushman's Pass, he would be a valuable witness upon the Colonel's side, and an awkward one for his brother-volunteers.

Next morning, after breakfast, he came up to the Colonel and made him a little speech about

his kindness, but went on to inform him that many of the members of his corps had been much hurt and offended at finding that he did not recognise or notice them when he met them. Some of them, he said, did all they could to keep up the feeling that this was intentional neglect, but he himself saw now that the Colonel was "not that kind of man at all," and wished to take the opportunity of clearing up the matter. My duty carrying me away at this point in the conversation, I heard no more, and am not in a position to report the Colonel's reply; but as the volunteer remained talking to him with an air of gratification for some little time, I conclude that it was a satisfactory one, and that Colonel Durnford succeeded in impressing upon his mind the fact that he might possibly fail to recognise men whom he had commanded as troopers upon one solitary occasion without having any intention of wounding their feelings.

On Thursday, June 11th, we marched a distance of seven miles to "Gray's Pass, No. 1," so called because discovered by a man of that name while

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in charge of a native party in search of fugitives early in the year. His "discovery," however, was limited to the fact that a party of some half-dozen fugitives had fled in this direction and escaped over the mountain. We camped about two-and-a-half miles from the pass itself, which was as near as we could get the pack-animals, owing to the broken character of the ground.

Here we found three approaches leading on to the mountain-top, of which two were the beds of streams coming from the mountain-crest, and the third the watershed line between. It took us a couple of days to secure them, by scarping the rock and blasting, and I will not attempt to describe the difficulties that beset us in every yard of ground over which we passed. The excessive wildness and ruggedness of these little-used mountain-passes must be experienced in order to be realised. None but fugitives in danger of their lives, or desperate men, reckless what they did, would attempt to cross them. Nothing short of the indomitable courage and determination of our Chief could have carried him

and us through our tremendous undertaking. The hearts of many of us would have failed had we ventured to think of turning back before our work was done. Sometimes amidst our own severe toil and great difficulties we came upon spoors which were indubitable proof that some of the unhappy fugitives six months earlier had passed this way; and the hardest amongst us could not but feel pitiful at the thought of them,—not men only, but women and children,—without food or shelter, flying over these awful mountain wilds. That they had here found a temporary place of safety, however desolate, was also plain; for we found upon the mountain-top some rude stone kraals, recently constructed, and evidently made for the shelter of human beings. Looking at these dreary relics of six months ago, I wondered what had caused them to be built; no man would needlessly remain in such a spot, none could exist there without provisions brought from afar; it was no fit hiding or resting place for the fugitives, nothing but the direst necessity could have kept them there. Was it for

the protection of some sick man or feeble woman that these rough stones were piled together in this bleak barren place? Had wounded frame and weary spirit parted company here, with the roar of Africa's summer thunder for a dirge and heaven's scathing lightnings for the funeral volley? Or did here some less happy little mortal first awake to consciousness and life at such a bitter hour for babe and outcast parents?

Surely only such as these could have tenanted these rude bivouacs, for strong men would have hurried on in search of better cheer. I own that such thoughts oppressed me, although I kept them to myself; nor, perhaps, was I the only one, for, standing near my Chief that day, beside the deserted shelter, I heard him ejaculate, *sotto voce*, "Poor things! how cold they must have been!"

Luckily for them, however, they could not have had such cold to bear as we experienced now, for it was summer weather then, although, as it happened, wild and stormy. Cold and wet and comfortless they doubtless were. The Colonel told

me that he found it bitterly cold when encamped at the Bushman's River Pass, upon his second visit during the summer of 1873. But such cold as we endured in the winter-time would not have left one of them alive, entirely without resources as they were.

Nevertheless, we considered ourselves truly fortunate in our weather, as, up to the last day on which we worked at "Gray's Pass, No. 1," though cold, it was perfectly fine. We worked under a cloudless and warm sun by day, and protected ourselves with rugs and blankets from the hard frost which reigned nightly from sunset to sunrise.

But on the day before we left the second pass we had a fall of snow, a phenomenon which most "old colonists" have lived their twenty or thirty years in Natal without witnessing, as one must go up the Draakensberg in winter-time to meet with snow.

The sun shining out again made a pretty scene enough from our camp-ground. The immense dark frowning precipices, of which the mountain-range

seems chiefly to consist, were touched on every crest with glistening snow, and falling clean over the highest perpendicular surface, a waterfall of no inconsiderable volume, but frozen into a column of ice, was glittering in the sunlight. Every other waterfall, of which there are many smaller ones, was similarly turned to ice; but the one above mentioned, near Gray's Pass, was the most striking from its size and prominent position.

On the 13th of June we left these passes, and marched over more very broken country, intersected by many streams which ran through deep and rocky beds, either bank of which was well-nigh impracticable. Indeed without the aid of the pioneers they could not have been crossed by our beasts of burden at all.

After about twelve miles of such travelling we got back to our old camping-ground on a spur leading from Champagne Castle, under the remarkable hill before mentioned with a hole in its crest, and, on the following day, recrossing the Little Berg, we found ourselves once more at the camp where we had left our waggons, etc., without any other casualty

than the fall of one of the oxen over a cliff, in consequence of which it was so severely injured that it had to be shot.

We rested here for one whole day, and the next morning marched for Cathkin, which place formed a sort of principal depôt for us, from which we could take up fresh stores of provisions and ammunition, and make fresh starts for the various mountain passes to which we were bound.