

than ~~Kok~~ Klofontein to reconnoitre towards the Modder and Riet Rivers and were fired upon, yet with all these evidences before him, Lord Methuen felt sure that it was further on, at Spytfontein beyond the Modder River, that his next encounter would be <sup>y</sup> (The Times History of the War in South Africa p. 345) He contemplated that encounter with equanimity, and had been heard to remark to one of his subordinate officers "My good fellow, I intend to put the fear of God into these people". <sup>y</sup> (Ibid p. 322)

After the Battle of Enslin, Methuen had been reinforced, bringing his strength to 12,000 men. But what of that? The Boers had their 3,500 men and they had their newly discovered strategist Koos De la Rey, but above all they had the invincible Cronje for their commander, and in any case one Boer was equal to four Englishmen.

The Battle of Modder River was impending, and yet Methuen, although he had been in this district with <sup>he</sup> Charles Warren in 1885 did not know the topography of the place, and was entirely deceived by the flatness of the landscape and the casualness of his scouts, with the result that he was unaware of the existence of the Riet River, and the positions of his adversaries. For this military sin he had to pay heavily.

Early on <sup>T</sup>uesday, the 28th of November, the British army left Klofontein and marched to the Modder River Bridge. Unknown to them General Cronje was standing at the window of the Hotel on the Modder River, and by the help of field glasses was observing their every movement, while thanks to their shockingly careless reconnoitring, they were walking right into the three thousand muzzles of Boer guns trained on them from the <sup>h</sup> tickly-wooded banks and the well concealed trenches of the Modder River. Soon after sunrise, there was a fierce encounter over a line of four miles from the southward bend of the Riet River on the east, westwards beyond the railway line. The British army, forming a rising plain at 800 yards against the clean blue sky could not target, silhouetted ~~on~~ <sup>on</sup> advance against the invisible enemy, who were pouring a hail of lead on them, and they were unwilling

to retire, and so they fell upon their faces, each man trying to find an ant-hill or a shrub behind which to conceal himself, and there to lie motionless for hours on end under the scorching rays of the November sun, or until their ant-hill 'fortresses' were blown to smitherings and pulverised by the merciless shot and shell of Boer Mausers and guns, when the unhappy British soldiers were then over-run by thousands of disturbed and homeless white ants, but dare not make the slightest motion on pain of their being located and blown to pieces. [Conradie F: Met Cronje aan die Westfront pp.39,40] In the course of the day, British activity became largely confined to their artillery, which swept every house, kraal and bush on the ~~opposit~~ opposite bank of the Modder River. Meantime, amidst the tremendous noise occasioned by the boom and roar of large guns, the patter and peppering of Maxims and Pom-poms, and the rattle and crackling of Mausers and Lee-Metfords, Cronje was to be seen, whip in hand, moving up and down on the Boer left sector, now pointing this way and now that way, shouting out his commands in his somewhat strident voice, directing and encouraging his men, and quite careless and unconcerned about the blizzard of bullets that whizzed past him, and the shells that burst around him, and others that ploughed the ground before him.

So long as the British faced the Boers frontally, they were pinned down on the south bank of the Modder River. On the right (east) Henry Colville's repeated attempt to turn the Boer left was frustrated by the southward bend of the Riet River, and as the battle became stationary, Lord Methuen became mad with desperation, and at great personal risk courageously led a charge on the left flank. Later on in the day, a column under Pole-Carew succeeded in turning the Boer right wing at the little hamlet of Rosmead held by the Free State commandos under Jacob Prinsloo. As Pole Carew established a foot-hold on the northern bank, the Free Staters were siezed with panic, and fled from the field in spite of De la Rey's and Cronje's attempts to

rally them. This second exhibition of the "white liver" by the Free State commandos was to be a standing taunt against them by their Transvaal comrades. This led to friction between the burghers of the two sister Republics especially as some of the Free States had remained in the laager and refused to go to the firing line.

Once the Boer flank was turned and forced to give way, De la Rey in the centre and Cronje in the left were compelled to fall back, and as the day wore into the afternoon and evening, the Boers evacuated their trenches and retired across the Modder River. In the night Cronje stealthily removed all his army and his artillery from the scene of battle, and retired eastwards along the northern bank of the Riet River towards Jacobsdal. His purpose was to meet the rest of ~~xx~~ his commandos from Mafeking. Cronje's decision to completely evacuate the Modder River entrenchments and withdraw to Jacobsdal met the bitterest opposition from De la Rey. In his view the British could not have succeeded in forcing back the Boers, but on the contrary would themselves be forced back to the Orange River to find water for man and beast. <sup>4</sup>Conradie F: Met Cronje aan die Wesfront p.43). It is of course questionable whether the Republican forces once forced as they were from their prepared entrenchments, could have successfully resisted the onslaught of the large British army with its untrammelled reinforcements.

<sup>4</sup>(Times History of the War in South Africa. p .358)

This night move of Cronje was unknown to the British, who were exhausted after the heavy strain of three hard fights, under the broiling sun, and with very little water and food in one week, In the morning, the artillery threw shells on the positions last occupied by the Boers when darkness set in the previous night, but there was no reply, and it was soon discovered that the positions were completely evacuated.

The Battle of Modder River had been, so far, the fiercest battle of the war. In it Lord Methuen was wounded in the thigh, and Gen<sup>l</sup> De la Rey's son, a lad of 18 years, was mortally wounded, being one of the hundred casualties of the Republics as against five hundred British casualties. As at Belmont on the 23rd of November, and as at Enslin<sup>g</sup> on the 25th, so at Modder River on the 28th, the British drove back the Boers, but lost heavily in men. In those three engagements in one week, the British casualties amounted to the (then) hideous figure of 1,000. The Boers achieved part of their main purpose to delay Methuen's advance and to reduce his strength. *Ref* (The Times History of the War in South Africa Vol. 11 p. 340) But Cronje was not happy. He was so annoyed at the cowardly behaviour of the Free State commandos and the ineptitude of their commander <sup>Jacobus</sup> Prinsloo - that he at once reported the matter to President Kruger, who in reply wrote a characteristically biblical epistle to President Marthinus Steyn of the Free State, urging him to strengthen and exhort his burghers, and commend them to sacrifice themselves for the fatherland. "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori". *President Kruger's Letters reads:*

"Geerde Heer en Broer, Die saak is te gewigtig vir mij om die stilswye te bewaar, U Hoog Edele moet al u offisiere en burghers onder die oog bring dat, as ons ons onafhankliheid wil behou en ons land nie aan die vyand wil uitlewer nie, ons, selfs ten koste van ons lewe, moet besluit om hardnekkige weerstand te bied en nie terug te trek nie, maar ons te verweer totdat ons die oorwinning hehaal het. Die Here het getoon dat Hy met ons is, daar die vyand die verlies van honderde betreur, terwyl ons slegs die verlies van enkeles te jammer het.

As ons terugtrek, is dit uit lafhartigheid. Ek hat opgemerk dat gebrek aan samewerking die oorsaak was dat ons ons stellings ontruim het. My leeftyd veroorloof my nie dat ek by my seuns kan voeg nie, anders sou ek tans aan die front gewees het.

Die raad en lasgewing van UH.Ed. moet hulle geduriglik vergesê want die beslissende stryd wat sal uitmaak of ons die land sal oorgee of nie, nader snel. In geen geval moet ons die land oorgee nie,

sels al kos dit ons die helfte van ons mense.

"U Hoog Edele moet die offisiere en burghers laat verstaan dat hulle hul tot die dood toe moet verdedig. In die Naam van die Here vertrou ek dat ons met hierdie besluit, en gesterk deur die gebed voor die aanval, die oorwinning sal behaal. Want Christus het gese: Want wie sy lewe wil behou, hy sal dit <sup>3</sup> verloor; maar wie sy lewe verloor om My ontwil, hy sal dit behou. (Honoured Sir and Brother, The matter is too weighty that I should remain silent. Your Honour, must bring all your officers and men to the realisation that if we are to retain our independence, and not to <sup>Su</sup>surrender our land to the enemy, we must, even at the cost of our very lives, resolve to put up a stubborn resistance, and not to retreat, but to defend ourselves until we shall have won the victory. The Lord has shown that He is with us in that the enemy mourn the loss of hundreds, while, we, on the other hand, regret the death of few individuale.

If we retreat, it is purely due to cowardice. I have noticed that the want of cooperation has been the cause of our evacuating our positions. My age precludes me from joining my burghers, otherwise I would at this very time be at the front.

Let the constant advice and orders of Your Honour accompany the burghers, for the decisive encounter, which will determine whether or not we must surrender our land draws quickly near. Under no circumstances must we surrender our land even should it cost us the half of our population.. Your Honour must impress upon officers and men that they must hold out to the death in the name of the Lord. With this resolve and strenghtened by prayer, I trust that we shall win the victory. For Christ hath said - he that will save his life shall lose it, and he that ~~lose~~ loseth it for the truth's sake shall save it". (The Times History of the War in South Africa Vo.11 pp.384-5).

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On hearing of the unsoldierly conduct of his commandos, President Steyn also administered a veiled rebuke *by letter* :-

Dear Officers and Burghers,

While we cannot sufficiently thank our God for the assistance He has thus far lent us, and while with thankful hearts we acknowledge the courage of our burghers in their facing the tremendous odds of the enemy, it is nevertheless my urgent duty to show you that we can only expect continued help from above if there is co-operation and love between officers and men, and if every one performs his duty faithfully. We have learnt with pain that only 1,000 men of the Free State commandos took part in the last battle, and that many others stayed in their laagers while their kinsmen faced the enemy and ~~conquer~~ conquered him. Such action can only lead to tragic results for the freedom of our nation.....

Let us never forget that we are fighting for all that is dear to us."

President Steyn had no sooner sent off the above letter or telegram than he decided to proceed himself to the front to instil courage into the faint-hearted of his commandos, to compose the quarrel that had arisen between the Transvaal and the Orange Free State commandos, and to give what ever advice might be necessary or might be asked of him. Accompanied by his chief adviser Abraham Fischer, he arrived at Scholtz Nek on the 3rd of December and after accomplishing all that he had set out to do, he returned to Bloemfontein on the 7th. Perhaps, if Steyn had not visited the Republican forces, there might never have been a Battle of Magersfontein. *with the lustrous credit it reflected upon Cronje*

At the close of the Battle of Modder River, both the British and the Boers had learnt to respect each other. Both Cronje and Methuen realised that they must receive reinforcements before facing each other, and therefore while the one retired to Jacobsdal, the Boer ammunition depot, the other was content to encamp and recuperate on the Modder River, the field so hardly won by the

British.

*between*

The correspondence of Kruger and Steyn at this time also  
betrays the anxiety which weighed upon their minds. *Waters* Col.  
H.H. (German Official Account of the War in South Africa p.85)

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## 6. THE BATTLE OF MAGERSFONTEIN.

On Wednesday the 29th November, Cronje removed his commandos from the vicinity of Jacobsdal and went across Magersfontein to Scholtznek and Spytfontein. These are three most southerly hills of a group of hills between Kimberley and Modder River. Magersfontein, the highest and most easterly of them is nearly 200 feet high, and lies five miles north of the Modder River, and three miles east of the rail way line from De Aar and Orange River to Kimberley. <sup>\* and the Modder River, the country is of flat stone</sup> Between the hills <sup>is</sup> a stone formation, covered with tufts of grass, brushwood, stunted mimosa trees and prickly pear, and rises gently northwards. Thanks to President Steyn, Cronje received reinforcements in men of the Bethlehem, Heilbron and Kroonstad commandos from the Natal theatre, the Ficksburg and Ladybrand command stationed along the Caledon to watch Basutoland, as well as the Transvaal men of the Bloemhof and Wolmarans<sup>s</sup>stad besieging Kimberley. <sup>\*</sup> Cronje had thus at his command about 8,000 men to dispute Methuen's further advance towards Kimberley <sup>Ref</sup> (The Times History of the War in S.A. p.385). Cronje at once prepared himself to meet the expected clash with Methuen at Scholtz Nek and Spytfontein. He had trenches and rifle pits dug on both sides of the railway, along which he felt sure Methuen was going to make the attempt to break through. On the 4th of December, however, Cronje, at the advice and insistence of De la Rey left the Spytfontein and Scholtz Nek defences and had new trenches made further <sup>f</sup>oward in the plain below Magersfontein Hill at a distance of about three miles from the Modder River. These trenches, when completed extended in a deliberately interrupted line from 1 mile north-west of the railway line at Merton siding across the front or south of Magersfontein and eastwards to MosDrift on the Modder river. Though they were themselves only three miles in extent, the full line which the Boers ultimately held as a precautionary measure was twelve miles long. They were concealed with branches of the mimosa trees and vaal bosch, shrubs and tufts of grass to approximate as near as possible the trenches of the



Modder River, which had proved so useful to the Boers and so fatal to the British on the 28th of November. This bold step in the choice of the next battle ground, and in the disposition of the trenches was a prophetic inspiration on the part of De la Rey, and stamps him as a master tactician and strategist, and one of the greatest military geniuses South Africa has produced. It was a position calculated to completely deceive his adversary so as to pounce upon him when he was himself crouching for a decisive pounce, and, <sup>as</sup> a military critic has said "In war, it is of the utmost importance to gauge correctly the adversary, and what he is likely to do in any give case. (Waters H.H.: German Official Account of the War in South Africa p.132) In his Memoirs (Brandwag 1st October 1913 p.262) General Cronje does not rise to the desirable grace and greatness of according De la Rey this deserved honour of having selected the position before Magersfontein, but ~~th~~ actually appropriates it for himself. He says - "Op de 29ste November sond ek een kommando uit om de stelling te bezetten te Magersfontein, doch toen ik daar de volgende dag aankwam bevind ik dat Generaal Prinsloo en kommandant Maartens te Scholtznek stelling genoem hadden in plaats van te Magersfontein, terwyl ik er overtuigd van was dat laastgenoemde plek beter voor verdediging geschikt was. Wybreden over het hele terrein, en na een deeglik onderzoek werd er beslotten myn plan te aanvaarden en post te vatten te Magersfontein in plaats van te Scholtznek. De volgende dag naam elk commando ~~X~~ zyn aangewen stelling in, maakte loopgraven en wierp verschansingen op. ~~X~~ En met vertrouwen wachte ik de volgende aanval van Lord Methuen af." (On the 29th of November I sent a commando to take its position at Magersfontein, but when I arrived there on the following day, I found that General Prinsloo and Commandant Maartens had taken their position at Scholtz Nek instead of at Magersfontein, whereas I was convinced that the last-mentioned place was better suited for defence. We rode over the whole terrain, and after a careful inspection it was decided to adopt my plan and to make our stand at Magersfontein instead of at Scholtz Nek. On the following

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day, each commando took its appointed place, excavated trenches and arranged fortifications. And with confidence, I now awaited Lord Methuen's next assault.)

Most writers say, and it is universally accepted that the Magersfontein positions were chosen by General De la Rey, and that, in fact Cronje had strongly opposed him. (The Times History of the War in South Africa Vol.11 p.386; Davitt M: The Boer Fight for Freedom p.210; Kemp J.D.G: Vir Vryheid en vir Reg pp.242,243; Conradie F.: Met Cronje aan de Wesfront pp.58,59) and only reluctantly agreed to take position at Magersfontein instead of Scholtz Nek, when President Steyn supported De la Rey's choice. (Waters H.H. German official Account of the War p.87)

On the 6th of December, Cronje directed Commandant Prinsloo in charge of 1,000 horsemen and three guns manned by Major Albrecht, the Orange Free State artillerist, to proceed south and destroy the British line of communication beyond Enslin. Prinsloo again failed in this important mission, and was easily repulsed by a small British force. (Times History of the War in South Africa Vol.11 p.388; Kemp J.C.G: Vir Vryheid en vir Reg.p.243)

According to Conan Doyle, however, Prinsloo vigorously attacked the British at Enslin, destroyed some culverts and tore up 300 yards of the railway and closely pressed some companies of the British regiments for several hours (The Great Boer War p.118) In any event, Prinsloo was adjudged not to have discharged his commission satisfactorily, and in view of this further proof of incompetence and timidity, was removed from his position

X position as Head Commandant of the Orange Free State forces, and was replaced by A.M.Ferreira of Ladybrand, a change which immediately brought a new tone and courage among the Free Staters.

Meantime, Lord Methuen at the Modder River camp was receiving accessions to his strength in men ammunitions and guns until his force amounted to 14,000 men and 38 guns. In this connection may be mentioned the arrival of Australian and Canadian troops, and also that of Major General A.J.Wauchope with his famous Highland Brigade in the first week of December.

In the meantime also, Methuen's patrols were busy with their infantile and ineffectual scouting while the Boers were successfully laying a most murderous ambush under their very eyes.

As soon as the trenches were completed and when re-inforcements had arrived, Cronje made his dispositions. On the extreme right wing - to the west of the railway - he placed his brother Commandant Andries Cronje, in charge of about 1,500 burghers of the Klerksdorp, some of the Potchefstroom, and a few of the Orange Free State commandos. On the left, most of the Free State commandos under Commandant A.M. Ferreira, and some Transvaal commandos under Commandants F.J. Potgieter, Vermass and Tollie de Beer. These were nominally under the chief command of De la Rey, who however was temporarily away to Kimberley. Cronje himself, assisted by Commandants P. Schutte and Maartens, occupied the centre with his bravest burghers, the Potchefstroom commando, upon whom he placed the greatest reliance, and some Bloefontein and Hoopstad commandos. In the gap between the left wing and the centre, ~~white-the-~~ was placed the Scandinavian corps under its leader Field-Cornet Flygare. Five Krupps and two Maxim-Nordenfelds were posted on the ridges dominating the railway between the right flank and the centre, while the Jacobsdal and Fauresmith commandos, supported by Major Albrecht with a Krupp took their position behind the extreme left wing to watch any movement from the British camp in the Jacobsdal direction. Finally Cronje had fixed his headquarters at Brown's Drift about four miles north-east of Magersfontein. Here Mrs. Cronje and many other officers' wives had their laager.

With a feeling that the coming battle was to be the decisive struggle of the war, and conscious that the eyes of the world were turned upon him, who was still considered the ablest Boer general, Cronje left no stone unturned in preparing himself for the coming contest, and took every precaution against surprises by the enemy. He gave strict orders to his officers and their

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commandos, and instituted a strict system of inspection. Every night the trenches were occupied.

The burghers were allowed to rest and sleep in relays for specified hours, that is to say, a section of the burghers slept while some of their comrades were ready for battle at any moment, and others were posted as 'brandwags' ~~and~~ or sentinels at various points well in advance of the lines. By day, the burghers left the trenches and retired to the hills, where they demonstratively desported themselves so as to be seen by Methuen's observers, to focuss their attention on the hills. Every night, Cronje, accompanied by his staff made a round of the trenches, and by precept and example instilled courage into his men.

**Methuen rested his forces at the Modder River camp for ten days, from the 29th of November to the 9th of December (Saturday)** On the latter day, his heavy guns commenced to bombard the hills of Magersfontein and Scholtz Nek, in which he thought the Boers were entrenched. The shells certainly made much noise and ploughed up the hill sides, but were otherwise quite innocuous. This bombardment was a clear sign <sup>n</sup> to Cronje that ~~commandants and~~ <sup>Methuen was about to attack.</sup>

On Sunday afternoon Methuen made his final preparations for his long-deferred attack. The Boer observers on Magersfontein could easily see the great activity and movement in the British camp on the Modder River. The Highland Infantry of General Wauchope was moved up to Methuen's headquarters, then the Black Watch, the Lancers and the cavalry were also advanced, and then the whole artillery again came into action, howitzers naval guns and field batteries each emitting fire and pouring their missiles with profuse extravagance on Magersfontein. "The hail of shrapnel and the great volcano jets of red earth and ironstone boulders hurled fifty feet high by the bursting lyddite seemed to convert the whole hill side into a perfect inferno of fire" but to the Boers, "securely intrenched, the appalling roar of bursting shell meant little more than the din of a thunder-storm!" (The Times History of the War in South Africa Vol. 11 p. 394) Now feeling absolutely certain that Methuen was about to attack, Cronje rode from his Head laager at Brown's Drift to the commandos. After inspecting the trenches he assembled his commandants and commandos, and harangued them in a manner reminiscent of Napoleon addressing his legions before the Battle of Austerlitz in which he won his greatest victory. "Burghers" said he, "before you stands Piet Cronje. You all know him. From the earliest days he was classed among the fithers. How many bombs went over his head or fell at his feet? How many bullets have whistled right and left of him? And yet, here he still stands before you, unharmed. Where is your faith? Believe that no bullet will hit you or do you any harm without the will of God. Where, I ask, is your faith? You must not continue to lie in the trenches, but when necessary you must saddle your horses and storm the English in the flats."

(Quoted Davitt M: The Boer Fight for Freedom p. 215).

On Sunday afternoon the 10th of December Methuen made his final preparations for attack. The weather which had been overcast for the greater part of the day now broke down into a nasty drizzle of rain, that hampered movement and made everything unpleasant. This drizzle and the rain that followed it were ominous for Methuen's attack, like the drizzle and the rain that preceded Napoleon's attack at Waterloo in 1815. At sunset the soldiers struck their tents, crossed the Modder River and bivouacked on the northern bank, while the transport and heavy guns were moved up close to Methuen's headquarters, and everything was got ready for the <sup>army</sup> command to move. Every step taken every movement made, everything done in the British camp was thoroughly known to Cronje and his commandants. The Boer non-combatants that passed up and down, and even visited the British camp, were not blind, deaf, dumb or paralysed, neither were they indifferent to the best interests of the Boer republics.

Shortly after midnight of Sunday the <sup>10</sup>10th December, Methuen gave the fateful command to his subordinate officers, and his battalions, 14,000 strong received their orders. A few minutes later 4,000 of them, with 38 field pieces moved from their camp on their perilous march of 2½ miles to Magersfontein.

The steady drizzle that had continued the whole afternoon now became a steady down pour. The night was pitch dark, and the ground was sodden and slippery. In a compact mass of quarter-column formation, the Black Watch, the Sea Forths, the Sutherlands, the Argylls, and the Highland Light Infantry moved on at the head of Methuen's force, splashing into pools of water, walking into brushwood and clumps of mimosa and thorny cactus, stumbling on boulders and anthills, and falling into pits, ignorant of their destination, and still more of their fate. As they advanced, the thunder-storm increased in violence and forked flashes, <sup>and</sup> vivid tongues of lightning surrounded them, and their compasses were affected by the highly charged atmosphere. These

~~They were not allowed to speak to Methuen~~

were inauspicious manifestations. Short of speaking to Methuen and his officers in the English language, nature did everything possible to warn them against their desperate enterprise. Tired, hungry and depressed, these men were unfit for the physical and moral strain they were called <sup>upon</sup> soon to endure. There were doubts and dark foreboding in the minds of many men, who had never known fear, but as usually ~~fatal~~ happens, these very doubts only served to steel the hearts of the ill-fated men, destined to be torn to pieces by merciless lead and steel in the next few minutes. Of them it might have been written - "The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on."

Cronje had been somewhat nervous and restless since his retreat at Modder River on the 28th of November, and had visited the trenches regularly every night, determined to take every possible precaution against ambushes and surprises. In this he was assisted by his scouts, and, as already mentioned, by the Afrikaner farmers as well as their African servants around Jacobsdal. Early on Monday morning the 11th of December, in the darkness preceding dawn, having been warned by his shadowy spies, Cronje was making his rounds when he noticed the huge mass of the approaching enemy (Gedenkboek p.225; Davitt M: The Boer Fight for Freedom p.214; Memoirs - Brandwag 1st October 1913 p.264) vaguely silhouetted against the southern horizon, and soon attuning his ear, he could hear the dull thud of 8,000 feet, as in dense quarter column formation, the Highland Brigade in blissful ignorance approached the death trap. Conradie, who seems to entertain the greatest contempt for General Cronje, thinks this is most improbable and in fact laughable. Says he "Ek kan 'n glimlag nie bedwing nie: Daar is geen <sup>k</sup>suiling in die <sup>voorn van</sup>voran huis of tent op die heuwel nie. Dis nag, dit reen, die weer is onstuimig. Die hoofgeneraal met ses adjudant bring die nag daar deur; die adjutante slaap, die generaal is goed wakker: Hy hoor die Engelese kom aan, al is hulle nog 'n paar myl ver( I cannot suppress a

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a smile.....There is no shelter in the form of a house or tent on the hill. It is night, it is raining, the thunder is violent. The commanding general with his six adjutants passes the night out there, the adjutants sleep, while the general is wide awake: he hears the English approaching although they are still a couple of miles distant). This vigilant, energetic tactician and strategist is not the indolent Cronje he knew. <sup>Ref</sup> (Conradie F:Met Cronje aan die Wesfront p.77), and he dismisses, almost with scorn, "the fiction" of Cronje's watchfulness and efficiency.

The rain ceased at 3 a.m. Cronje primed his officers, who in turn <sup>a</sup> give final orders to their commandos in the centre and left flank entrenchments, and in the line of the British approach. Each man now stood ready in the trenches with his Mauser - its magazine charged with five cartridges - trained on the enormous unmissable human target creeping nearer and nearer.

Shortly before dawn, at 4 a.m., when General Wauchope had just given the order to deploy, Cronje gave the signal to fire, accompanying it with the imperious order given in his strident voice "Skiet kerels" (Shoot comrades), and immediately point-blank fire flashed at 450 yards from right, left and centre in a line; from the top, side and foot of the hill; from behind boulders, bushes and sand heaps, and a murderous hurricane of lead crashed out of the darkness and burst with fell fury upon the front columns of the Highland Brigade, who fell as grass before the mower's sickle.

The accounts of what happened in the next few minutes are various and conflicting, and it is not easy to form a clear mental picture of the battle, but the essential facts and outline leave no doubt of the moral effect of the contest in either belligerent. The Boers had the immediate mastery of the <sup>fight-</sup> fight, and were buoyed up with confidence, while the British received a terrible shock, and were temporarily disorganised, while <sup>and</sup> their advance was crippled.

~~In five minutes, 500 or more Highlanders were cut down-killed~~

Historians of the Battle of Magersfontein have vied with each other, and exhausted their vocabulary in pictorial and descriptive narration of the rapid sequence of events during those hair-raising moments of Scotland's tragedy. And well they might, for in no battle anywhere in the world has a higher dramatic light nor greater piognancy been reached by the futile display of military courage under the most adverse circumstances, and bravery against odds than in the Battle of Magersfontein.

In five minutes, 500 or more Highlanders were cut down-killed or wounded. After a few moments of surprise, there was confusion and chaos in the British ranks. Most of the survivors in the front rank of the Black Watch lay down to fix their bayonets and wait for orders, but some men from the Seaforth and Argyll regiments in the rear dashed forwards to the invisible trenches, and charged right and left in a confused way, determined to seal their lives dearly. Some others again, seized with panic rushed back into the rear columns and caused a temporary stampede, with the result that many more fled <sup>pre</sup>recipitately from the fatal field. In vain Wauchope tried to rally these men, and pressing forward to the head of the leading batallion, his clear voice rang out above the din - "Steady, boys steady!" and he was about to lead a confused group of the Black Watch remnants, the Seaforths and the Argylls to charge on the right, but three minutes later the heroic Highland chieftain was down, shot through by as many bullets. If at this precise moment <sup>discomfitted and</sup> the dazed Highland battalions had but heard the maddening skirl of their national bagpipes, or if the pipers being slain, one Highlander had but shouted out Burns's familiar verses

"Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled,

Scots, wham Bruce has aften led;

Welcome to your gory bed,

or to Victory:

"Wha will be a traitor/ knave?

Wha can fill a coward's grave?

Wha sae base as be a slave?

Let him turn and flee."



*The dying would have*

~~the dying would have~~  
 crawled forward to die a few yards nearer the Boer trenches, the wounded would have once more disputed the mastery with the Boers, and the faint-hearted and fleeing would have turned back and have had courage and spirit inspired in them. Under such <sup>e</sup> circumstances there is no saying what the results of the contest might not have been.

Agonising groans and pitiful cries, not unmixed with reproachful accus<sup>at</sup>ions and bitter curses from the wounded and dying men, who felt that they had been unnecessarily sacrificed, rent the air. It was a hair-raising and blood-curdling moment of the war.

As day broke, attempts were made to rally the remnants, and indeed, throughout the day, again and again regiments ranks and regiments reformed their broken lines, and tried to rush the Boer trenches, but there was no leader nor unity nor objective, and the ranks were repeatedly depleted by the pitiless Boer fire.

At one time at 4.30 a.m., General Cronje and six of his adjutants found themselves face to face with a group of the Seaforth regiment, who were about to turn the Boer left flank on the eastern slope of the Magersfontein hill. Pointing to the enemy, Cronje peremptorily commanded his men - "Skiet kerels: Skiet hulle terug: (Shoot mates, shoot them back:)" The six men at once took shelter behind some boulders and opened fire on <sup>the</sup> enemy, who imagining that there were more adversaries in hiding fell back and fled.

In the course of the morning, part of the British artillery - the Howitzer Field Batteries - came into action at two miles, and gradually drew nearer and nearer until they were three-quarters of a mile from the enemy. They had a noticeable effect in restraining the victorious ardour of the Boers <sup>y</sup> (Waters H.H: German Official Account of the War in South Africa p.104) and as Methuen <sup>e</sup> threw in more reinforcements of mounted infantry, the battle flared up, anew on the east or Boer left, nominally under De la Rey, <sup>x</sup> <sup>y</sup> He had gone to Kimberley to meet his wife and convey the sad news of

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their son's death) but after a while the Boer fire weakened. About this time, the Scandinavian Corps of about 60 men under Field Cornet Flygare in the gap between the central and eastern entrenchment having pushed too far into a body of retreating Seaforths, was ~~surrounding~~ surrounded by that regiment and completely wiped out. At this time of the morning, the battle ebbed backwards and forwards, and swayed from right to left until Cronje brought in his guards, the Potchefstroom commando from his right, and finally tipped the scales. But the battle of Magersfontein had already been lost and won in the first five minutes of its commencement, chiefly because the possibility of defeat seems never to have crossed Methuen's rigid mind.

Lord Methuen lost many opportunities of partially retrieving his initial blunder of ordering a night march without a previous reconnaissance of his adversaries' position. It is strange to remark that he held back about 6,000 men at Headquarters, who took little or no part in the battle, while the Highlanders were having a gruelling time, and 4,000 men to support them might have changed the fortunes of the day. Of thirteen battalions at Methuen's disposal, only seven, making 7,300 men, were seriously engaged. During the morning, he watched the contest from Headquarter Hill, two and half miles away, and was probably ignorant of the exact state of affairs. In the afternoon, while his army was bleeding to death, he looked on as one dazed, and bereft of ~~his-army~~ thought either to support a movement or to change tactics, or to entertain any other idea than that the Highlanders must hold on at all costs, and fight their way through the valley of death. No wonder the survivors of this terrible ordeal afterwards sullenly cursed their general (German Official Account of the War in South Africa p.116) (Times History of the War in South Africa Vol. 11 p.417)

In the afternoon, the endurance of the brave Highlanders, reached its limit after having been subjected to a super-human strain for about ten hours. With depleted ranks and decreasing strength,

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without food or water or shelter or help or hope, lying prostrate on the damp ground under the scorching sun the whole livelong day, it was impossible for any man of flesh and blood to hang on till nightfall. Suddenly, as if at a given signal, by hundreds the men rose from the ground and rushed back in jumbled disorder to the guns and Headquarter Hill, careless of all else, bent only upon increasing the distance between themselves and the death-dealing trenches of their enemy - Cronje. Even this they did at great personal risk, and many of them paid with their lives.

The battle was nearly over. Cronje had won a resounding victory over Methuen, and Magersfontein was the greatest disaster the British arms had sustained for fifty years.

From 4 p.m. the battle abated, and finally died away at nightfall when the curtain rose upon another scene in the work of the army surgeons and stretcher bearers, which continued through the night into the following day under conditions of armistice.

During the armistice the Boers behaved with touching humanity to the British wounded, who had been without food or water for more than thirty hours, and had lain all day on Monday in the broiling sun, and all Monday night in the cold. Cronje showed his adversaries every consideration besides offering fifty of his men to help bury the British slain. For these courtesies Methuen sent Cronje a letter of thanks. Ref (Davitt M: The Boer Fight for Freedom p.223)

Next day Wednesday the 12th of December, Lord Methuen, hesitant, hartsore and humbled ordered a retirement on Modder River camp. The British casualties were heavy - 971, of whom 205 were slain and 690 wounded, and 76 were missing. Of these casualties, by far the greater number were sustained by the Highland Brigade - 46 officers and 706 men killed and wounded. The Black Watch and the Seaforth Battalion suffering most.

Against this the Boer losses amounted to 250 killed and wounded. "Whip in hand, Piet Cronje stood with the fierce light of triumph in his eyes, gazing exultingly across the plain as England's best troops were driven from the field by the defenders of Transvaal

liberty. Turning to his secretary, Cronje dictated the following brief message to President Kruger:

"God has given a great <sup>vie</sup> ~~fi~~ctory to the Federal forces. The enemy were repulsed three times with fearful losses. Our casualties were small. The Scandinavian Corps lost heavily. Cronje"

Ref. Y (Davitt M: The Boer Fight for Freedom p.222)

So ended the battle of Magersfontein. It shot the name of Cronje to the skies, and wrote it with large underlined capital letters of gold in the annals - not only of the Boers or Dutch-Afrikaners, but of South Africa and the world. The name of Piet Cronje was upon every tongue in the civilised world. Cronje had climbed higher and higher, and had now arrived at the appointed zenith of his prestige, the highest point of his fame and honour. If only he had known it, if only the world had known it, his work was done. If he had died a day or so after this dramatic victory of his, all that need be inscribed upon his tombstone was his name - Piet Cronje, or at the very most, his name and his victories - General Piet Cronje of Potchefstroom, Doornkop and Magersfontein.

But fate is notoriously fickle, and often permits her pampered favourites thus to ascend the ladder of fame, step by step, in overweening pride and boundless self-esteem and universal applause, and then, when having almost reached the topmost rung they lift their eyes and become giddy, she suddenly forsakes them, and they come crashing down with hideous ruin to a fall from which they never rise again. Thus it was to be with Piet Cronje.

After the Battle of Magersfontein as Methuen and the British forces retired to Modder River the commandos also left their entrenchments and returned to the laager between Magersfontein and Scholtz Nek. Contrary to what might be expected, and even justified as natural, there was not a single word of boastfulness or self-glorification to be heard in the laagers. On the contrary, there were many expressions of genuine admiration for the gallantry and heroism <sup>i</sup> displayed by General Wauchope and his Highland Brigade, and sympathy for them in their sad fate. Cronje also went back

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