

PROMINENT FIGURES OF NEARLY 50 YEARS AGO

By W. H. S.

I HAVE referred to Standerton as being on the main road to Pretoria, and on this account we were kept fairly lively in the earlier days of my sojourn there nearly fifty years ago. The Zulu War was over. Lord Chelmsford had been able to save his reputation by the timely defeat of Cete wayo at the battle of Ulundi. The new High Commissioner, Sir Garnet Wolseley, had been arranging the settlement of affairs in Zululand, and was now coming to the Transvaal, where he was to inquire into the administration of the country, and to settle the native troubles Sekukuni, the Bapedi chief, had successfully defied the Boer commandos of the Transvaal Republic, and the British troops under Colonel Rowland. So it seemed time to call in "England's Only," as Sir Garnet Wolseley used to be called. (The writer, by the way, had come to South Africa in the same steamer as Sir Garnet.) We had an opportunity of observing the excellent organisation of the renewed general, especially as regarded the transport, which was remarkably efficient. Mule wagons with supplies and ammunition were coming through daily with the regularity and despatch of railway trains. Sir Garnet was determined to have his men and material on the spot before striking, and I was not surprised afterwards when the wire came through telling of the defeat and capture of Sekukuni in a one-day engagement.

I did not see Sir Garnet on his way up to Pretoria when he had his interview with the Boers in the Standerton district and made that famous declaration to Mr. Adriaan Standers to which I have referred in a previous article. I met him afterwards, however, when he rode on horseback down country from Pretoria to Pietermaritzburg, accompanied only by one officer of his staff. He did not look much like a great general when I met him to deliver a dispatch into his hands. He and his companion were in red serge undress uniform, rather dirty and shabby with the long ride, their white helmets a dirty drab with the weather. However, they both looked smart and fit physically.

Sir Garnet was a natty little man, however he was dressed, and could do with a wonderfully small amount of sleep and rest. He had been called by some disgruntled army officers the "lucky" general, but I think his luck was owing to his own indomitable energy and efficiency. He succeeded in his undertakings because he was determined to succeed; also he was a good judge of men and always managed to gather round him a brilliant staff. His chief of staff at this time was Sir George Colley, afterwards to meet with a tragic fate at Majuba. Colonel Colley arrived at Standerton with a small advance party just when the telegraph line had been completed to Pretoria, and it was in this way I came into personal contact with him.

Sir George Colley was most genial and chatty. There was nothing of the stand-offish haw-haw British officer about him. He was a true British gentleman. I met him again when he came back through Standerton on his way to Afghanistan to join the expedition under General Roberts which went to Kabul to exact satisfaction for the murder of Major Cavagnari and civilians. We had

quite a long conversation, shook hands and said good-bye. I never saw him again and was truly grieved to hear of his death when the siege of Pretoria was ended.

Colonel Lanyon, the Administrator of the Transvaal, was one of my first "customers" after I opened the telegraph office. A tall, dark gentleman with pince-nez glasses came in with long telegrams from the Administrator, and after remarking on the opening of the telegraph, he courteously asked me whether he might sit and watch me send off the wires. I agreed, thinking he must be the Administrator's private secretary, and we chatted familiarly before he left. Later on in the day a younger man, also tall and fine looking, came in with further messages from the Administrator, and said, "I believe Colonel Lanyon has been here already." So I found out that the first was the chief himself. The younger man was Mr. Godfrey Lagden, the private secretary, who afterwards became Sir Godfrey Lagden and achieved a great reputation for his able administration of Basutoland.

The British community in Standerton had no church, but services were held by a lay reader, who was the local attorney, until, towards the end of my stay a clergyman of the English Church came. The Bishop of Pretoria visited us and held services in Gibson's store. Bishop Botsfield was a fine-looking man, over six feet high and big in proportion. He had a natural dignity of appearance which made him look every inch a bishop. He was also a very fine preacher, having a mellow and sonorous voice, and usually preached without notes. He was very eloquent, with a good flow of language. I remember Mr. Charles Kember White, a prominent Pretoria citizen, remarking of him, "He just opens his mouth and a stream of eloquence pours out." As Mr. White himself was a public speaker of no mean repute, this was a great tribute to the Bishop.

Bishop Botsfield used to tour his diocese in a caravan drawn by a pair of horses, which was fitted up with all conveniences for living and sleeping. He was wont to remark "In my caravan out in the country I am quite independent of anybody." This, however, was no reflection on the hospitality of the people, of which he often availed himself. Naturally, following in the wake of General Sir Garnet Wolseley were the war correspondents, and amongst those who came through were the veteran, Dr. W. H. Russell, the doyen of all war correspondents, and Mr. Melton Prior, the celebrated artist of the Illustrated London News.

These were the days before khaki. All our infantry were still in the red except the 60th Rifles in sombre black. Dragoons in red tunic and yellow striped trousers, and, in fact, all branches of the service in the old picturesque panoply of parade, so unfitted for active service in South Africa. No wonder the Dutch name for all the army was "Rooibaatjes." It was really wonderful how the men were able to do long marches in their hot uniforms. But they did march well, and the 18th Regiment and the 4th K.R. were noted for their marching powers. In those days many of the officers wore beards and whiskers.

(To be continued.)

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