

manoeuvre charged the Boers' position. The horsemen were soon enveloped in a dense cloud of dust, which became denser and high as each successive regiment after another recklessly dashed into it. The enemy on the ridges at once opened intense fire upon them, but the 6,000 horsemen swept irresistibly onward at a thundering gallop, and dispersed the astounded enemy right and left. The impression caused by the dashing mass of horsemen was such that some of the Boers took to flight before the cavalry had approached within effective rifle range." ^yWaters W.H.H: German Official Account of the War in South Africa p.146). When the dust subsided, the cavalry was seen reformed in its brigades a mile beyond the Boer position, and deliberately making for Abon's Dam, well behind Cronje's left flank, and on the road to Kimberley. The Boer riflemen upon the kopjes must have seen a magnificent military spectacle as regiment after regiment, all in very open order, swept over the plain at a gallop, and so passed over the nek ^y(Conan-Doyle: The Great Boer War p.240). It was not for nothing that French was called "England's best cavalry officer".

In the evening French dispersed the Boers around Kimberley and amidst paeans and plaudits of jubilant inhabitants entered the city. Ferreira withdrew with the Free State commandos toward Boshof, while Du Toit retired with the Transvaal commandos towards the north, taking with them the big siege gun, that had pelted Kimberley for many months from Kamfersdam.

In the rear, Kelly-Kenny with the infantry (Sixth Division) remained on the northern bank of the Modder River on 15th to rest from the effects of the forced marches of the previous two days. On the same day Lord Roberts was at Wegdraai, south of Klip Drift with Henry Colvil's Ninth Division, while a brigade of Tucker's Seventh Division was sent off under Gen. Wavell to attack and occupy Jacobsdal, thus diverting Cronje's attention from French and his operations in the Kimberley direction.

On this day, the British forces were extended over a line of fifty miles, from the Riet River at Dekiels Drift to Kimberley, and Cronje's forces were also extended in a line of equal length, from Waterval Drift over Brown's Drift and Magersfontein and Spytfontein to Koedoesberg, west of the railway. The 15th of February also saw the relief of Kimberley by French, and the occupation of Jacobsdal by Wavell after its gallant defence by General Smit.

On the same day, De Wet in command of about 400 men with a ^{among the hills on the right flank of the advancing} Krupp and a Maxim emerged from British forces where they had concealed themselves for three days since they were driven off by French. Opening a brisk fire upon the weak and tired escort, he shot down several draught oxen, caused the rest to stampede, the drivers to take to flight and finally, the rest of the escort to abandon the convey. In this affair, besides the casualties of about sixty, the British lost about half a million pounds value of material. De Wet says (Three Years War pp. 47,48). "We had captured 1,600 oxen and 40 prisoners....Our booty was enormous and consisted of 200 heavily-laden wagons and 11 or 12 water carts and trollies. On some of the wagons we found klinkers, jam, milk, sardines, salmon, cases of corned beef, and other such provisions in great variety. Other wagons were loaded with rum; and ~~xxx~~ still others contained oats and horse provender pressed into bales. In addition to these store we took one field piece which the English had left behind. It was indeed a gigantic capture. The only question was what to do with it". This is quoted in full because it will be shown later how Cronje empties his vials of wrath and scorn on these activities of De Wet as mere puerilities, which deflected him from his primary duty of fighting the British, instead of "capturing tins of jams and sardines."

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De Wet's attack of, and seizure of the British convoy synchronised remarkably with French's cavalry charge, and its occupation of Kimberley. Both offensives commenced at 9 a.m., and finished off successfully at sundown of the 15th of February.

This was the first of the exploits that made De Wet's name a household word among his people, while his uncalculable movements were a source of constant worry to his enemies.

CHAPTER: 9. CRONJE'S RETREAT FROM MAGERSFONTEIN.

On the 15th of February, there was a heavy bombardment of Cronje's laagers by Methuen from his Modder River Camp, and Cronje thought surely the long-awaited attack was about to be launched by the enemy, the attack he was so well prepared for, the advance along the railway, which so many pessimists and would-be strategists among his colleagues had confidently prophesied would never come. De Wet, De Villebois-Mareuil, and even his own brother Andries Cronje: Where were they now? Then about noon, terrified burghers who had taken part in the fight against French at Klip Drift, and had been literally pushed out of the way by the momentum of the British cavalry charge and break-through, came in to relate their experiences. Then in the afternoon news came of the defeat of General Smit and the occupation of Jacobsdal by a British force under General Wavell. Any single item of this news was bad enough, but its combined effect was to create pale panic in Cronje's laager, ^t That is to say in every one except the imperturbable general.

Upon receiving repeated confirmation of these tidings, however, Cronje became for once bewildered and confused, incapable of thought, and still more of action. That day, the 15th of February was a dismal precursor and dark omen of the great disaster that was soon to overtake the hero of Potchefstroom, conqueror of Jameson, and victor of Magersfontein. A dark cloud, for a short time, obscured the sunlight, and coincidentally dark thoughts took possession of Cronje's mind. Bitter and despondent "he sat in his tent, a broken man, while his wife patted ~~xxx~~ his head"

^{as} (Count A. Sternberg, quoted by Times History of the War in South Africa Vol. III p. 402) and there he sat for most of the day, and those who knew him were shocked at his complete change of personality. Gone was the quick decision, the commanding voice, the sharp compelling look, the agility of movement and the self-confidence which amounted to incorrigible obstinacy. Cronje sat still like one bereft of thought, speech and action. One after another of his generals, commandants, field-cornets and burghers came into his tent to urge him to move and to escape while there was still time.

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But advice, entreaty and prayer might as well be made to cold marble. The collapse was however only temporary, for in the late afternoon, Cronje called a krygsraad in which a decision was taken, and at sunset (Thursday the 15th February) all the burghers assembled at the head laager, and Cronje at last gave them orders to move. This moving was not going to be an easy thing. Cronje's mobility had been greatly reduced and hampered by the immense lot of war material that he had amassed at his head laager at Brown's Drift, and in the trenches at Magersfontein and Spytfontein for two months and a half - from the 29th of November to the 15th of February also by the influx of women and children, and the accumulation of domestic utensils in the laagers. Further the horses had decreased in quality and quantity, while the burghers had cooled in enthusiasm and military ardour. Hundreds of oxen had died, and there were 400 wagons, and six field guns to move. The best hope for a successful retreat seems to have been for Cronje to abandon all his womenfolk, retreat-seems-to-have-been-for-Cronje to-abandon-all-his children and covoy, as well as all the unmounted men, and to have made a forced march with all the mounted men only to join the commandos which would were sure to be expecting him on the north, east and west. "Such a step, however, was impracticable in an army where every man thought first of his own property, and of his wife and family" (Waters W.H.H: German Official Account of the War in South Africa p.155).

These details did not worry Cronje. He had regained his equanimity. He was his imperturbable self again, and moving deliberately in his laager, he was to be seen smoking his pipe of peace while he gave orders and superintended the greasing of his wagons preparatory to moving his laager from Brown's Drift." (Davitt M: The Boer Fight for Freedom p.367P).

Cronje decided to retreat eastwards to Koedoesrand Drift on the Modder River, and there to cross the river and proceed to Blomfontein. This course involved his passing right in front of the British infantry and mounted infantry forming the Sixth Division of Kelly Kenny encamped at Klip Drift. It meant Cronje's taking

his large convoy through the narrow gap between the tail of French's cavalry at Abon's Dam, and the immense British forces following it up to Kimberley, and the decision to take this sporting chance is a remarkable proof of Cronje's courage, and another commentary on his baffling character. Between sunset and midnight on the 15th, there was bustle and commotion in Cronje's the commandos along the 25 mile Magersfontein lines were called in laagers at Magersfontein, and 400 wagons were loaded with ammunition, provisions and all manner of bag and baggage, all available oxen were quickly harnessed, and at midnight a start was made, the route being in the eastern direction, three miles from, and parallel with the Modder River, right across the British line of advance on Kimberley. There were about 8,000 souls—men women and children, 3,500 were on foot or in wagons, and 1,500 mounted on lean, jaded ponies. There were also 400 wagons: 80 after being loaded were abandoned at the head laager at Bosjespan for want of draught oxen. The moon was shining bright in the heavens when Cronje's trek started and the heavily loaded wagons creaked and lumbered almost within a stone's throw of the British forces. It was said and believed that a clever African medicine man and accomplished magician ('n slim kaffer dokter en bekwame toevenaar) who was permanently installed in the laager as a consultant and oracle had seen to it and after his nibbling and spitting out of secret roots towards the sunrise, and mysterious mumbling of an unintelligible jargon, he had given his assurance that it not only could, but would be done. Be that as it may, Cronje's guardian angel had definitely not quite deserted him, for the convoy successfully lumbered through the gap strangely unobserved by Kelly-Kenny's force, while Kelly-Kenny himself and Lord Kitchener were arranging to encircle him in the morning. Cronje took a chance influenced by some weighty considerations. His supplies and reinforcements were in the east; the Boer capital of Bloemfontein was in the east, water for man and beast was along the eastern route, but above all, Cronje had a towering contempt for British scouting and reconnaissance, and was sure that the outposts and sentries

would be fast asleep after midnight; and he was right. British scouting was so ridiculously erratic and notoriously remiss, that it cost them thousands of lives during this war, let alone the chances of inflicting severe punishment on the enemy.

¹⁰
Paardeberg. Early on the morning of the 16th, Kitchener awoke at Klip Drift to see the dense dust cloud of Cronje's convoy rolling away in the eastern direction towards Klipkraal Drift the next ford or drift across the Modder River. Kitchener at once ordered a brigade under Hannay, and the mounted infantry under Knox to chase after Cronje and stop him crossing the Modder River to the south. But Cronje was his old self again. When the British pursuers drew near, he arranged his rear guard on the heights above the drift, and ably assisted by Commandant Roes and Major Albrecht, commanded it with such skill that they not only held the British at bay, but inflicted losses on them. In the cover of the river bank, and falling over the steep walls, men and horses were thrown into the muddy waters. Cronje then moved further on, and formed a laager in a place of great natural defensive strength. Here at Drieput although more British forces came on both banks of the River under Kelly-Kenny in the afternoon the Boers easily held their own until dusk. Again unnoticed Cronje left Klip Kraal Drift in the night, with the British in bivouac under a mile away from his laager. After travelling for about three hours as fast as his exhausted bullocks could draw the wagons he halted his conveyance a little after midnight to rest his tired oxen, and feeling certain that he had at last shaken off his pursuers, he halted his conveyance again. He passed Paardeberg Drift at sunrise on Saturday the 17th, and reached Wolve Kraal Drift, about five miles further up the Modder River at 11 a.m. Feeling now quite certain that he had shaken off his pursuers Cronje called a halt, and the oxen were loosed from the yokes and driven off to graze, while the brughers busied themselves to make the midday meal, and others lay down to rest under the shade

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Commandant Froneman was detailed with a strong force to advance and soon occupy the heights overlooking the Drift.

Suddenly, to the utter consternation of the burghers, shells rained upon them from the heights ahead and to the north in the direction of Kameelfontein. In a few moments it was Spave qui pent, there was panic and confusion and men and women rushed for safety to the bed of the river, while hundreds of horses and oxen stampeded and strayed into the British lines much as had happened when De Wet shelled the British convoy at Waterval Drift, and the oxen had stampeded and rushed into the Boer lines.

After relieving Kimberley on the 15th of February^{any}, French employed the following day in somewhat desultory and prosaic pursuit of the rearguard of the investing forces, and clearing small pockets of the enemy from the vicinity of Kimberley. The intense heat of that day, and the over-tired condition of the horses helped to kill hundreds of them, and to render hundreds more unfit for use for many days. Late on Friday the 16th French received an urgent message from Kitchener still at Klip Drift to proceed with all possible speed to Koedoesrand Drift further up the Modder, to head off Cronje in his retreat to Bloemfontein. This was the first indication to French, that Cronje had slipped through between Kitchener's and Kelly-Kenny's fingers, and was making for the Free State capital.

Paardeberg
Leaving Kimberley before sunrise on Saturday the 17th with altogether 1,300 men mounted on more tired horses a cavalry brigade and two squadrons altogether 1,200 men mounted on more tired horses and two artillery batteries, French arrived at Kameelfontein thirty miles from Kimberley at 11 o'clock, just as Cronje's convoy was out-spanning for a rest before crossing the Modder at Wolvekraal. He at once arranged his guns on the heights about a mile from Cronje's camp and shelled it. In spite of the confusion in the Boer camp, Albrecht drew his guns to an elevated place and brought them into action, ^{reply to the British cannonade. This and the courage of the Boer} in guard under Froneman on Koedoesrand not only held the British force back but actually threatened to rout it.

On the night of the 16th, Ferreira had nearly 2000 men at Bothashoek about 12 miles from Wolvekraal. On hearing of French's approach early on Saturday the 17th, instead of checking him, or falling back to join Cronje, he panicked and withdrew towards Boshof. How different might not the story of Paardeberg have been if Ferreira and his Free State commandos had shown a little more spirit. Nothing in the world would have stopped Ferreira's 2,000 and Cronje's 4,000, walking over French's paltry 1,000. But even without Ferreira's help, if Cronje had from the first only realised that French's force opposed to him was so small, that in fact the whole thing was an audacious bluff, he would have thrust it aside and continued his retreat. Ignorant of these facts, however, he and his men went into the bed of the river and occupied a long donga between Wolvekraal Drift and Paardeberg Drift there to await developments.

On Saturday night, ^{cavalry} ~~cavalry~~ reinforcements arrived for French, and took their position on the northern bank. During this night, Cronje could still have crossed the Modder River at Koedoesrand Drift, and have got, if not all, certainly the major part of his convoy away before the arrival of the large British armies that were converging on him from north and west along both banks of the river. Once across the Modder, he would have been joined by the commandos of De Wet from the south, Ferreira from the north, Steyn from Bethlehem, and possibly others from Bloemfontein. General Ignaas Ferreira, having turned back from his ill-judged retreat sent Commandant De Beer through the British lines to urge Cronje to make a sally from inside to cooperate with him (Ferreira) and other Boer forces from Kimberley, who would simultaneously make an attack from the north-east. ^y Davitt M: The Boer Fight for Freedom p.389) ^y Hillegas H.G. With the Boer forces pp.187,188) His subordinate officers advised him to take this step, but, characteristically, Cronje followed his own mind. It is probable that he had meant to do as he was advised, but it is a fact that independent and stubborn natures

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are apt to reject the obvious ⁱ line of conduct and ^m immediately react contrary to the course they are told or advised it to adopt, and even withdraw from that course if they had started along it, and who in this world was more obstinate than Piet Cronje? Who indeed was as obstinate as he? To crown it all, he had been harried and hurried and hounded and hustled and bustled during the last few days. He was not going to move now, even though the Free State ^b Burghers were already deserting him in small organised parties. Cronje was not going to allow himself to be brow beaten or intimidated. He was not going to be rushed into some hare-brained precipitate action. General Ignace Ferreira, Commandant De Beer, Count Villebois de Mareuil can all keep their advice. He told them bluntly that they were as children to him. "I was a general before you were born, and I shall hold my ground against any number of the English, until stronger forces come up to help me". He was well entrenched; he was still full of fight, and was determined to seal ^f his life dearly. He still meant to teach his over-zealous and prematurely elated pursuers a lesson or two. He was going to make this humbled-Meth ~~this~~ a second Magersfontein and humble Hithener and Kelly-Kenny as he had humbled Methuen. The opportunity soon presented itself upon the following day - Sunday the 18th of February.

In the early hours of the 18th when the British cordon was beginning to close tightly around Cronje, De Wet and Philip Botha sent Field-cornet Grobbelaar and Douthwaite to lay their plans of effecting this escape before ^{him} Cronje. These plans were approved by Cronje's commandants, who shared his fate. But the grim general was immovable and burst out "Are you afraid of the English? If you are, you had better go away". ^{p.} (Ibid 390). The British legions arrived ^d at Welvekraal and took their appointed positions. Colville's Ninth Division took charge of the west side, with Smith-Dorrein's (19th) ^r Brigade on the north side, and MacDonald's Highland Brigade on the south of the river. On the east side French's cavalry Division and the Mounted Infantry took their

position on the north side, while Kelly-Kenny with his Sixth Division Infantry was on the south. Kitchener surveyed the scene with pleasure. He saw the Boer laager in the valley of the river and the shallow plain about it, encircled by the British army on the heights above. He thought, surely this was a concrete representation of what was in his mind, namely that Cronje was in the hollow of his (Kitchener's) hand. Cronje also realised that he was at bay. He was completely hemmed in on all sides by huge armies, each single member of which was thirsting for his blood, and the most impatient, the most inexorable of them was Kitchener.

The Boers were concealed in dongas and ditches which ran at all angles to the sinuous bed of the Modder River, and were fringed and hidden from distant view by thickets of mimosa trees and all manner of undergrowth. ^{British soldiers} Men who had fought at Modder River and Magersfontein knew from experience that "bravery can be of no avail against concealed riflemen well entrenched" ^f Conan-Doyle: The Great Boer War p.250) But Kitchener had not fought at either the one or the other, nor at Colenso. He had no experience.

Over-riding the more cautious policy of Kelly-Kenny, who was senior to him, and also that of Colville, French and other generals and brigadiers Kitchener ordered an all-out attack of the Boer trenches at seven o'clock and so confident of success was he that he said to his staff officers: "It is now seven o'clock. We shall be in the Boer laager at 10.30." ^f ^{Times History of the War in SA} blowing up hundreds of cases of ammunition and wagon loads of ammunition, and setting fire to several other laagers. The field batteries opened fire on the Boer laager while the Infantry of the Sixth Division (Kelly-Kenny) deployed for frontal attack. They were followed by the Highland Brigade (MacDonalld). The men advanced towards the concealed adversary by a series of rushes, but as they drew nearer the dongas, in widely extended order, they were met with a hail of bullets, and their lines became thinner and thinner. All the regiments and reserves that were pushed in had the same bitter experience of advancing under hot fire to about 1,000 yards, and then being forced to lie down with

the result that the attack came to a standstill.

In his ever-anxiety to complete the fell work of annihilating Cronje and his men inside three or four hours before reinforcements for them should arrive, Kitchener failed to convey clearly his intention and plan of strategy to his colleagues - the Divisional generals Kelly-Kenny, Henry Colville and French as well as the brigadiers Knox, Stephenson, Macdonald and Smith-Dorrien, with the result that the^{re} was no co-ordination in the attack, and Cronje inflicted a heavy penalty upon his assailants. From north and south, east and west, successive waves of battalions and regiments charged in superb formations at the Boer laager, only to fall and fall before the merciless hail of lead, and Kelly-Kenny, viewing this with the trained eye of experience immediately grasped the essentials of the tactical situation, and thought Kitchener mad for suggesting a renewal of the attempt. (Times History of the War in South Africa Vol. III. p.438)

When this very unsatisfactory state of affairs went well over the three hours which Kitchener had promised himself and his staff to possess Cronje's laager, he became visibly excited and wished to command all units in person, issuing orders ~~in~~ directly to the battalions without any regard to their divisional generals and brigadiers, a conduct which they naturally resented, and which threw them immediately into an attitude of sullen opposition.

All the generals and brigadiers and their senior subordinates thought the attack was a big mistake; and exhausted, resentful and fed up the officers and men saw nothing but callousness in Kitchener in unnecessarily wasting their lives and attempting the impossible. They had been thus immolated at the altar of Methuen's vanity at Modder River and Magersfontein, they were now being sacrificed to Kitchener's madness and ambition, and Col. Hannay, by nature somewhat choleric and mutinous, but now also utterly exhausted and goaded to desperation, saw Kitchener in the worst light as a heartless executioner. He lost interest in life, and deliberately riding right into the muzzles of Boer rifles was riddled with bullets and

and killed ⁷(Ibid 439)

More British assaults against Cronje's trenches only resulted in more futile waste of life until a diversion was created in the late afternoon by the appearance of De Wet and Philip Botha from Koffyfontein. Kitchener's game was now up. What he had tried to anticipate had now befallen, but also his prevision, that provoked him to the immediate attack of Cronje, against the united voices of all other generals and officers, was amply confirm^ded and fully vindicated.

With 500 burghers, whose numbers soon increased to 1,500 De Wet ^surprised and captured a detachment of horsemen (Kitchener's horse) and occupied an important strategic point called Kitchener's Kopje which they were guarding and which protected Kelly-Kenny's rear and right flank on the south bank of the Modder River. With a Krupp and a Nordenfeld Maxim or pom-pom, he harassed the Sixth Division from the back, who were thus caught between two fires.

The occupation of Kitchener's Hill by De Wet, opened a way of escape for Cronje, if he was minded to make the attempt. It was therefore necessary to destroy or drive off this force, which might become a formidable rallying nucleus of Boer commandos which were known to be approaching from Colesberg perhaps under the dangerous De la Rey, as well as from Ladysmith and Blom^ffontein.

On Wednesday, an attempt was made to surround Kitchener's Kopje and capture De Wet and his men. While it failed, De Wet was nevertheless driven off with a loss of fifty men killed and another fifty captured. At the end of a week's fighting the British had captured 600 prisoners, but De Wet still hovered about with nearly 2,000 men and joined by commandos from Natal and Glesberg he and ^{Andries Cronje} Anros tried to recapture Kitchener's Kopje on Thursday 22nd.

Sunday night the 18th descended upon the belligerents much as it had descended up them at Modder River. They were both exhausted, and they were both in doubt who had lost and who had

won the ~~ffigh~~ ~~fixhgt~~ fight. British casualties, totalling 1,262 out of 13,000 troops employed were the heaviest of any single day's fighting so far during the war, ^hHigher ^athan Magersfontein (970) and Colenso (1,126) and the Highland Brigade had again suffered most, as at Magersfontein. The Boer losses were 300 to 350 from the total of 5,000 men who took part.

Cronje was indicated. This ~~zw~~ was almost another Magersfontein, as ~~The-Boer~~ shown by Kitchener's reports to Lord Roberts at Jacobsdal - each report less hopeful than the one before it.

No matter what the morrow or subsequent days might hold in store for him, Sunday the 18th of February was taking all in all Cronje's. The annihilation that it was intended to inflict upon him had not materialised. So far from it, although himself torn and bleeding, he had inflicted the greater punishment, morally and physically, upon his adversary.

During the night of the 18th, Cronje had still an opportunity of escaping, as the encirclement was not yet complete, but he made no attempt, chiefly because of his wagons and women that ^{he} could not bring himself to leave behind. ^{Waters W.H.E: German Official Account of the War in South Africa p.163} ^(Times History of the War in South Africa Vol.111 p.445)

On Monday morning the 19th, Cronje ^{awoke} to a scene of confusion and desolation enough to cew the stoutest heart and shatter the steadiest nerves. Hundreds of dead and dying oxen ^{slain in the previous days fight lay still unburied and the wounded and horses were lying about, men/unattended, wreckage of wagons that had been blown up lay about, while others were smouldering, women weeping for their husbands, and fright--g- frightened children were huddled together in dingy dongas, and nobody seemed to know what to expect and what to do.}

The 19th February was a black day also for the Republican forces generally. They were suddenly called upon to mourn the premature death of General Ferreira, the Chief Commandant of the Free State, who was accidentally shot by one of his sentinels.

On that day, also, reinforcements arrived for Kitchener in

Tucker's Seventh Division from Jacobsdal, bringing the total of the men around Cronje's laager to 35,000, with sixty field pieces. The British at once resumed the battle, turning all their batteries upon the Boer ^llaager.

Soon after the commencement of the bombardment, Cronje wrote to Kitchener (or French) asking for a 24 hours armistice to bury his dead and to collect the wounded.

Kitchener sent a reply, on behalf of French: "I have the honour to acknowledge receipt of your letter of to-day's date, and have forwarded your request to the Commander-in-Chief of the British army. I will communicate with you as soon as I receive his reply. Meanwhile I will not attack your laager. As you are already completely surrounded, I would advise you to surrender with your troops, when peace will again reign in the land.

(Signed) J.D.P.French".

Upon receipt of this letter by Cronje, many Boers left their trenches and began freely moving about, but when Lord Roberts arrived from Jacobsdal at about ten o'clock, and consulted with his generals, it was felt that this request for an armistice was a mere stratagem on the part of Cronje to postpone the British attack until the arrival of Boer reinforcements, and in the meantime to improve his defences. Roberts therefore immediately wrote to Cronje at noon, breaking off the armistice and demanding unconditional surrender.

To this demand, Cronje answered at 1 p.m. "Since you are so unmerciful ^f as not to accord me the time asked for, nothing remains for me to do, you do as you wish".

This message from Cronje was misunderstood, ^{It was interpreted} as his acceptance of the demand to surrender, a thought that had so far not crossed his mind. In any case, labouring under a misapprehension, Roberts sent troops (3rd Brigade) under Captain Liebmann to disarm the Boers, and bring over the prisoners, and Liebmann was given a note for Cronje: "Accept surrender. Please return with Captain Liebmann."

Captain Liebmann and the troops that were sent to disarm

the Boers were however fired at as they approached the laager, the horse of Captain Liebmann's companion being shot under him. It was clear there had been some misunderstanding. Cronje gave Liebmann another note, clarifying his previous one; "Since you are so unmerciful as not to accord me the time asked for, nothing remains for me to do. You do as you wish. During my life-time I shall never surrender. If you wish to bombard, fire away"

Ref. (Waters W.H.H: German Official Account of the War in South Africa p.263)

This was clear enough both in letter and spirit, and Roberts at once reconnoitred the Boer positions in preparation for renewing the attack. He did not, however, order the full scale attack, but only a bombardment. He thought that his troops were still exhausted by demands recently made upon them, ^Llike other generals except Kitchener he also felt that there had been much wastage of man power, and that Cronje could be forced to surrender by artillery bombardment and by hunger. copy

It is however questionable whether in the long run Kitchener's decisive plan for immediate attack would not have saved more lives and time and money and morale, and entailed less suffering by shortening the period of hostilities. Roberts applied the physicians ointments and plasters to an abscess; Kitchener was for applying the surgeon's knife.

Many burghers, realising the hopelessness of their predicament, were furious with Cronje for refusing to surrender. Things were awful in the laager, dead cattle and horses lying about the camp were decomposing; the air was putrid; the water green, poisonous and undrinkable; provisions were running low, the women and children suffered miserably from exposure; and the ^{unhygienic} unhygienic conditions under which all were living were bringing typhoid fever and

On Tuesday (20th) Cronje's batteries were quickly silenced by the enemy cannonade, and were rendered useless for want of ammunition, the result of Monday's explosions. The British being beyond the range of rifle fire were thus able to advance their lines nearer the laager.

dysentery in their train.

On Wednesday morning the 21st, shortly after the cavalry and mounted infantry ^{had} started off in the attempt to surround De Wet On Kitchener's Kolje, Lord Roberts heard for the first time that there were women in Cronje's laager. He at once wrote the general

"I have only heard today that there are women and children in your laager. If this is the case, I will be happy to accord them a safe conduct through my lines to any place they may select. I must express my regret to you that these^s women and children were exposed to our fire during the late attacks. We did not know of their presence with your troops. I have also heard that you are in want of surgeons and medicines. If you require them, it will afford me great pleasure to send you either the one or the other."

To this offer, Cronje replied curtly; "Safe conduct declined. I accept the offer of surgeons and medicines, on the condition that when the surgeons have once entered this laager, they must not leave it until I have moved it to another place."

He no doubt feared that if the surgeons, after moving about the entrenchments went back to the British camp, ^tThey might reveal the lay out of the Boer defences, and help to direct the enemy artillery fire (S. Visser: Die Wit Vlag p.158)

In answer to Cronjes note, Roberts wrote again:

"I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of this morning which is the reply to my offer to send you surgeons and medicines. In view of the conditions which you impose, and of the circumstance that I cannot dispense with my surgeons for so indefiniteⁿ a period, I am compelled reluctantly to withdraw my offer". On the following day (Thursday 22nd February) Cronj^{je} again referred to the matter in another letter to Roberts: "On second thoughts, I beg to make the following proposal. You will supply me with a complete Hospital equipment, surgeons and medicines, to whom free entry will be accorded. I will then allow the hospital to be erected 1,000 yards to the west of my laager."

By this arrangement, the hospital would be on that side from which the major part of British operations were directed, and would therefore shield the Boer laager from attacks, and this consideration probably influenced Roberts, and he answered

accordingly: "I regret that I do not possess sufficient hospital equipment for my own men. If my original offer be not accepted, I am not in a position to make another."

On the 23rd (Friday), Roberts sent a verbal message to ask how many British prisoners and wounded were in Cronje's laager, to which General Cronje answered "Twelve prisoners and four wounded. I forward the list. Lord Roberts replied to this:- "Accept my best thanks for your letter. If you should send out our wounded and for^{of} your own wounded, they shall be sent to the German Red Cross Hospital at Jacobsdal, and set at liberty on their recovery." To this arrangement Cronje agreed. ^{Waters} W.H.H. German Official Account of the War in South Africa p.264)

About this time, General Cronje received another message and parcel which must have given him much pleasure. It was a token of encouragement in the form of the Orange Free State flag and a letter from the patriotic ladies of Bloemfontein. The address read: "Dear Sir, To show that we acknowledge that the God ~~xx~~ of our fathers - our Father in Jesus ^{Christ} - has used you as one of the means to help us hitherto, we consider it a privilege to be allowed to offer you this flag with the motto - 'EBEN -EVER' (Review of Reviews: Vol.XXI: p.213).

After De Wet had been driven off from Kitchener's Kopje, he still hovered around the British lines with a considerable force. He was fully aware of the strategic importance of the Kopje, and was anxious to make another desperate bid for it, and so, during the next few days, he with other Boer generals concerted plans for its recapture. Detachment had come from the Tugela, Colesberg, Boshof and Fourteen Steams bringing the total Boer force laagered at Poplar Grove to about 4,000 men. Under De Wet, Philip Botha, Andries Cronje, Froneman and Theunissen, these burghers, on Thursday the 23rd made an attack on Kitchener's Kopje and the heights to the north-east of it lying along the south bank of the Modder River, with a view to opening a road of escape for Cronje. The investment of Cronje by Roberts

in the bed of the Modder River at Wolvekraal was the absorbing topic in both Boer and British circles, and was considered to be an issue before which all others paled into insignificance. Accordingly Commandant-General Piet Joubert had issued a passionate appeal to all Afrikanerdom; -"Burghers of South Africa, go and help deliver your general from the might of the tyrant.. Relieve Cronje, cost what it will. If such a resolution is taken by you and your officers, and you trust in God, you shall certainly win. But wavering and doubt, unbelief and mistrust will not only bring bitter sorrow on our South Africa and the whole African people, but destroy our whole national existence. Therefore trust firmly in God and he shall give you strength. Relieve Cronje". (Times History of the War in South Africa Vol. III p.473)

Ref. The attempt of the Boers to re-occupy Kitchener's Kopje, however, ended in a dismal failure, and they more or less abandoned all hope of opening a way for Cronje. They felt and said that he must work out his own salvation by fighting his way out. The failure of De Wet and the abandonment of further efforts to relieve Cronje was keenly felt by the besieged burghers who thus lost all hope. They therefore made earnest representation to Cronje to surrender, but in vain.

Ref. After an intense bombardment on Thursday the 22nd, about 100 Boers ~~left-the-trenches-to-surrender-to-the-British-(Davitt p.394)~~ feeling that further resistance was of no avail and furious with Cronje for refusing to surrender left the trenches to surrender to the British ^{The Boer Fight for Freedom} (Davitt: p.394). General De Wet alone, who was the leading li in the attempts to guide Cronje amidst the encircling gloom did not give up hope, but tried one plan after another. So long as De Wet had occupied Kitchener's Kopje on the south of the Modder and behind the British lines on the 18th and 19th especially, but also on the 20th and 21st February, he should and could have helped Cronje more ^{German} Official Account of the War p,226) by attacking the British (Sixth Division) more ~~tharki~~ determinedly from the rear. There is

is perhaps some justification in thinking as Cronje thought that De Wet and the Boer commandos that were assembling behind the British lines did not display enough energy and determination in embarrassing the British, or even attempting to cut off their supplies by breaking across their long and tenuous line of communication. This at any rate is the view expressed in the German Official Account of the War in South Africa pp.226-227.

De Wet, of course sullenly blamed Cronje for lack of enterprise and thought he should have forced his way through with his horsemen, leaving all else behind - women, children, ⁱⁿ ^{the} unpoulted, men, ammunition, wagons and all supplies; a line of conduct which Cronje thought would be shameful and dishonourable and cowardly. Many, perhaps most people will agree with him. "Onse wagens, ons goed, onse vrouwen en kinderen in de steek te laten, en hen de volgende morgen in handen van de vijand te laten vallen en om met mijne mannen alleen de rivier over te steken: Ik wilde dit volstrekt niet in overweging nemen. Neen ik zag duidelik in wat mijn plicht was." (Herinneringen: Brandwag 15/10/1913 p.298) (That I should leave our wagons, our property, our wives and our children in the lurch, and let them fall, the following morning, into the hands of the enemy, and that I should cross the river with my men only: I most certainly would not even entertain it. Oh no. I saw clearly wherein my duty lay). Since the 19th of February, De Wet had been in constant heliographic communication with Cronje, urging him to keep up courage, and promising him help in the impending arrival of large relieving forces. These forces had now come and as shown above, they had brought no relief. Their ^{untied} effort of the 23rd had been in vain.

On Friday the 23rd February, it was cloudy, and on Saturday, rain began to fall, and the means of communication by heliography between De Wet and Cronje became impossible just when it was most necessary. At this juncture, Danie Theron volunteered to creep

through the British lines to carry De Wet's message to Cronje, urging him to make a sortie, and so co-operate with outside attempts to effect his escape ⁴/_{De Wet C.R: Three Years War p.57}). On Saturday night (24th February) in pouring rain, Danie Theron at great personal risk, crawled through the British lines, swam the flooded Modder River, reached the Boer laager, to explain De Wet's plans to Cronje. Early on Sunday morning, a krygsraad was called together, and Theron explained to the 36 officers present the substance of his message and De Wet's scheme, which ^{had been} ~~was~~ approved by Philip Botha, Andries Cronje, Froneman and other generals and commandants, advising, in fact begging Cronje to try and cut his way out towards Stinkfontein, another kopje on the south of Modder River, lying north-east of Kitchener's Kopje, and that they would co-operate with him by attacking the British from behind. Most of ^{Cronje's} ~~the~~ commandants did not approve of the scheme and when it was explained to the rank and file of the burghers, it was almost uniformly rejected. Many questions were asked and many difficulties raised to finally discredit the whole idea. "Wat van die vrouwens en kinders? (What of the women and children?) one would ask, "En die gewondes? (And what of the wounded?) another would chime in. "Nee, Generaal, ek sien nie hoe ons ooit hier sal uitkom nie." (No General, I can't see how we can ever get out here) and officer would observe "Ja Generaal maar ons het nie meer 'n ryding of iets om daarvoor te span nie" (Yes, General, but we no longer have any mounts or draught animals) another officer would add. "G eneraal, die Engelse kan my gerus maar hier kom vang, Ek gaan nie my dee op so'n manier soek nie" (General, the British can rather come and capture me here. I am not going out to look for my death in that manner) another would say with uncompromising finality ⁴/_{From S.Visser's Die Wit Vlag pp.167,168,170}).

Ref

Ref

A time comes in human affairs, when after trying and struggling in vain, one gives up all desire to try any longer, and resigns oneself to one's lot. Cronje and his men seemed to have reached that stage, and no amount of persuasion could have instilled any enthusiasm into them. After the war when Cronje was asked by a young Afrikaner officer why he allowed himself to be captured by the British instead of breaking through their lines, he answered "Seun, jy weet niks van die omstandigheid nie. Ek het nog nooit ver 'n Engelsman gevlug nie en was nie van plan om dit toe te doen nie". (Sonny you know nothing of the circumstances. I have never run away from an Englishman and had no intention of now doing so) ^{col} (G.C.A. van Dam) But it is quite obvious that he did not hold that view consistently if he thought cutting his way out was running away.

As a result of the rain that had fallen since Friday night (the 23rd) the Modder River was in flood, and this no doubt served further to discourage the already disheartened burghers. The water filled the excavations and trenches in the river bed, and made those on the banks uninhabitable, adding greatly to the discomfort of the wounded, and the misery of women and children while the explosion of shells, mingled with the screaming of children, the groaning of the wounded and the state of uncertainty and alarm made of Wolvekraal Boer laager a veritable pandemonium and purgatory.

On ^e great service, however the flood rendered. It was a useful dredge. It carried off hundreds of decomposing carcasses of horses and oxen and possibly of some human beings - the fell work of British shells and thereby diminished the insupportable stench that pervaded every part of the laager.

On Sunday (25th) the perplexed burghers in the laager agreed to make one more attempt to regain their freedom. They at once commenced to construct a chain bridge across the Modder River, with intent to complete it on Monday and use it for crossing to the south bank to make a sortie against the British lines on

Monday night. This work was carried on under very great difficulties, owing to the want of proper tools, the slippery state of the ground, and the constant alarm from British artillery fire. Above all there was a want of unity and enthusiasm in the work. Several men would have nothing to do with it, considering their position as hopeless, they began to whisper the word "surrender", and the whisper gained in volume and became a murmur.

The effect of all these growing hardships on Cronje's will was like pouring water upon cement. He became harder and more determined to hold on to the last, and he imposed his iron will upon some of his ^{us} bughers, some of whom, however, slipped daily across, some to the British, and others through British lines. (De Wet Cr.R: Three Years War p.57)

That whisper, that murmur "surrender" threw Cronje into a paroxysm of passion. "Tot dusver het julle so dapper soos leus geveg. Is julle dan nou te lafhartig? (Up to now you have fought like lions. Are you now faint-hearted?) he asked them. "Nou-ja, as julle dan te vrot is, kan julle hier bly sit to dat die Engelse julle vang. Ek gaan vanaand uit, en ek sal almal wat wil uitgaan met my saam neem" (If you are so rotten then, you may stay here till the British capture you. I am going hence to-night, and I shall go with all who wish to accompany me), he snarled at them.) Surrender, indeed: How could he, to whom the British had surrendered twice - once at Potchefstroom, during the First War of Independence, and again at Doornkop on the occasion of the Jameson Raid - how could he now surrender to them? It was unthinkable that he would surrender and be a prisoner of war. No, commandants must brace themselves up and not talk such nonsense. A stand must be made. "Kerels: Ons moet hier uit. Die kommandos daar buite is nie sterk genoeg om die Engelse wat ons omsingel te bedrywe nie. Ons moet nou self ons weg hier uitveg...Merenag moet ons hier uit. Generaal De

Wet salvan buite af vir ons help." (Comrades we must go hence. The commandos outside are not strong enough to disperse the British troops that surround us. We must now fight our way out ourselves.....General De Wet will help us from without.) (These quotes are from Sannie Visser's 'Die Wit Vlag pp.168, to 172) (These 172)

Cronje spoke again spoke words of encouragement, and imparted something of his indomitable spirit into his timid companions to raise them from their depression, as the blood of strong men is transfused into the collapsed veins of those who have fainted from much loss of blood to revive them. And in spite of the increasingly conclusive evidences around them that their predicament was hopeless in the extreme, the apparent sincerity in their General's assurances that all would be well, again instilled hope into some waverers, raised their drooping spirits to make one more bid for escape by means of the chain bridge on Monday night. God had delivered Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego from the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Why not them? He had delivered Daniel from the den of lions. Why would he not deliver them also from the dongas of Paardeberg and Wolvekraal? The angel of the Lord had opened the prison doors and brought forth Peter and John in spite of mighty locks and many keepers. Surely the Lord would again show his favour and manifest his power by leading Cronje and his comrades forth from the British cordon.

Influenced by these religious reflections, and now at the end of their tether, they decided to lift their voice to God with one accord. Accordingly, during the course of the day, special prayers were offered in the laager by Cronje and his burghers asking God to show them the way. (Davitt N: The Boer Fight for Freedom p.395). But as so very often happens with human beings, when God had shown them the way and opened it for them, they would not take it. They chose another for themselves and expected Him to follow them.

On this Sunday - the 25th of February also, at the special request of President Kruger, the dominees and congregations of all the Dutch Reformed Churches in the Transvaal held all-night services

Ref of intercession for the relief of Geronje. (Times History of the War in South Africa Vol.111 p.487). Further, in accordance with the practice of eighteen years, dating from the success of Boer arms at Majuba, a general service of thanksgiving and supplication had been fixed for Majuba Day - the 27th of February by order of the Government. It was a national day of thanksgiving for the attainment of Independence. It was only second to Dingaan's Day in its significance. Dingaan's Day was the anniversary of the smashing of agelong savage dominion, and the victorious planting of the white man's civilisation and rule in South Africa, while Majuba Day was an appropriate complement as the anniversary of the smashing of the eighty years Imperial domination, and the commencement of a new era of Independence for the Dutch-Afrikaner race - their freedom from the shackles of British overlordship and contumacy. As early as the 20th of February, a visitor to Pretoria could see numerous bills and placards stuck to walls and buildings, reminding the inhabitants of the ^{thanks} Thanksgiving services on the 26th and 27th of February in celebration of Majuba Day.

Ref. De Villebois Mareuil's Ex-Lieutenant: Ten Months in the Field with the Boers p.86). But when the day arrived, sorrow and mourning rather than gladness and thanksgiving were to be more appropriate and the bitter truth of the Majuba Day of the year 1900 was succinctly expressed by President Kruger when he said - "The English have taken our Majuba Day away from us." (Times History of the War in South Africa Vol.111 p.487)

Ref. On Monday (26th February) there was a particularly heavy bombardment of the Boer laager by the British artillery. Naval guns, 6 inch Howitzers and Maxims vied with each other in throwing their projectiles in the midst of the miserable and exhausted inmates of the laager. The bombardment was unremitting, grew in intensity as the day wore on, and was mainly directed at that part of the river where the chain bridge was ^{being} ~~being~~ constructed, so that it was impossible to carry on the attempt.

During this heavy bombardment on the 26th, the Boer women

in the laager united in prayer, and loudly sang ^{hymns} ~~hymns~~ and psalms of praise, louder at times, than the boom of the guns, as if in defiance they would say:

Roar on, rage on ye guns,
Our souls defy your roaring
To disturb our faith.
In vain to break the calm ye try,
The calm in a believer's breast.

In the afternoon, two shells fell on the chain bridge that had been constructed under such difficulties, and completely destroyed it, killing at the same time about ten burghers, including 'Dries', son of the Commandant Andries Cronje

It is asserted, without any attempt at proof and passed on as a revealed truth that "some kaffirs who had attended to the horses and cattle, ^{had} deserted to the British on Sunday morning while the Boers were engaged at prayers", and informed the British of the Bridge, whereupon they shelled it with results recounted above. There is no reason to believe that any such information was given at all, still less that it was given by African servants. If such

(Davitt M. The Boer Fight for Freedom p.398)

(Conradie F: Met Cronje aan die Wesfront p.163)

(Gedenkboek van die Oorlog p.272)

(Visser Sannie: Die Wit Vlag p.172)

If such information was indeed given, it would be more readily given by the Boers themselves, who were intensely annoyed at Cronje for refusing to surrender, and therefore deserted him in groups by day and by night to join the British.

The effect of ^{these} growing hardships on Cronje's will was like pouring water upon cement. He became harder and more determined to hold on to the last, and he imposed his will upon many of his burghers, some of who, however, slipped daily across, either to surrender to the British, or to return to their farms. (De Wet C.R.: Three Years War p.57)

Refs.

Volc
p. 171 *

The Surrender.

After the destruction of the chain bridge and the casualties caused by the British shells, the burghers, feeling more disheartened than ever dispersed unceremoniously, each one taking his way to his dug-out. That evening a momentous krygsraad was held. In it Cronje exerted his powers and influence to the utmost in trying to persuade the commandants to fight to the last and not give in. But they would not hear of any more resistance. They were almost unanimous in the decision to surrender. The men of the Free State commandos declared as one man that with or without Cronje's consent, they were determined to lay down their arms on the following day. All the officers, with exception of Commandant Brits, or Roes or Schutte (Authorities differ as to the name of the one man who supported Cronje against surrender) voted for surrender.

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1. Davitt M: The Boer Fight for Freedom p.396 gives the name of Roes.
 2. Conradie F: ^M met Cronje aan die Wesfront p.163 mentions Schutte or Roes.
 3. Hillegas H.C.: With the Boer Forces p.198- 193, mentions Schutte.
 4. Brettenbach J.H: Huisgenet 7/1051949 p.19 mentions Brits.
 5. Cronje himself Herinneringen (Die Brandwag 15/10/1913 mentions Brits.

Cronje then begged his comrades that the surrender should not be on the morrow - the 27th February, for that was Majuba Day. They must be held out a day longer, till the 28th, and thus save the Republic the chagrin of its principal general and army having to surrender to the very enemy who surrendered to it on that self-same date nineteen years previously. Cronje's pleading and prayer were in vain. The officers and men told him, point-blank that if at sunrise of the following day - the 27th February, he did not surrender to the British, they would themselves hoist the white flag.

It was not to be imagined that the British soldier would sit

quietly on the 27th of February - the anniversary of the British reverse at Majuba. For these nineteen years since 1881 "Avenge Majuba" had been their cry and their song, and every little difference between Boer and Briton had been avidly seized upon by the latter, and exaggerated as a god-sent opportunity to satisfy that elemental feeling of revenge, to wipe out the stain of the Majuba reverse from the Imperial escutcheⁿ on "Over that day there hung a shadow, and no British soldier could rest content until it had been lifted." (Brooke-Hunt V: Lord Roberts p.311) and ^ufigitive fate, or fortuitous circumstances conspired to bring about this tragic and ironical coincidence.

Meanwhile, during the last few days and nights from the 21st to the 25th of February, the British had been drawing the noose tighter and narrower around the Boer trenches until they had advanced to the proximity of 700 yards. During the night of the 26th Generals H.Colville and Smith-Derrien arranged to rush the Boer trenches with six companies of Canadian volunteers, supported by some Highland and English regiments. They were arranged in two ranks, the front carrying their rifles and ammunition only, while of the rear rank all had their rifles slung, and some carried picks while others carried spades. Under cover of the gross darkness before the rising of the moon they ^{advanced} stealthily for about 500 yards until they were about 90 yards from the Boer trenches, when suddenly a Boer "brandwag" or sentinel fired upon them. They had no sooner thrown themselves upon their faces than there was a furious blaze of ^mmausers along a line of 600 yards and a hail of lead from the Boer trenches in the proper Magersfontein style. To this the Canadians in the front line replied, while those in the second line dug themselves in. On the left side of the line, the men withdrew ^wtith some disorder, and as the moon rose, they made their way back in somewhat jumbled fashion. Fighting continued till dawn, when the Boers found the British entrenched about 90 yards from them and in position to enfilade their ^B(boer) trenches along

the Modder River.

At sunrise, the Boers in the closest proximity to the enemy threw down their arms and surrendered. Soon after, several white flags, ^{were} fluttering from various parts of the Boer trenches, and then a large white flag was hoisted over Cronje's dug-out, and several Boers came out to surrender to General Colville. Under a flag of truce, General Cronje then sent the following letter to Lord Roberts.-

Headquarters, Laager, Modder River

27th February, 1900.

I have the honour to inform you, herewith, that the Council of War which was held yesterday evening decided on the unconditional surrender of all the invested forces. Under the circumstances we are forced to this. We throw ourselves, therefore, upon the mercy of Her Majesty the Queen. As a token of surrender, a white flag will be hoisted this morning at 6 o'clock. The Council of War begs that you will at once order the cessation of all hostilities so that further loss of human life may be avoided.

I have the honour etc. ^Y(Waters W.H.H: German Official Account of the War in South Africa pp.219,210)

How painful it must have been for Cronje to write that letter, and with what bitter sense of humiliation must he have sent it. That it must come to this, he Cronje, the old, experienced general to have to surrender to "things like that": Well might a British historian of the Boer War write "Dark Cronje: Betrayer of Potchefstroom, Iron-handed ruler of natives, Reviler of the British, Stern victor of Magersfontein, at last there has come a day of reckoning for you:" ^Y(Conan-Doyle A: The Great Boer War p.253)

Roberts at once gave the cease-fire order, and sent General Pretymann with a small escort to fetch Cronje. At 7 o'clock Pretymann returned, followed by a man riding a lean white pony. It was none other than Cronje - the formidable and indomitable Piet Cronje, now the cynosure of all eyes. Cronje, of whom,

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