

No. 6.

From Field-Marshal Lord Roberts to the
Secretary of State for War.
Head-quarters of the Army in South Africa,
Kroonstad, 21st May, 1900.

MY LORD,

MY despatch of the 15th March, 1900, ended with a description of the entry of the Head-quarters of the Army in South Africa into Bloemfontein.

In the present letter I propose to give a brief account of events from that time up to the 12th May, on which date the force under my immediate command occupied Kroonstad, which had been made the temporary head-quarters of the Orange Free State Government.

2. Our rapid advance from the most western portion of the Orange Free State and the seizure of their capital had greatly dispirited the Boers, and the forces which fell back in front of our main army retired towards Kroonstad, while those which were in the northern districts of Cape Colony crossed the Orange River, and retreated in a northerly direction along the Basutoland border and the fertile district of Ladybrand.

3. As these forces cleared off, the southern portion of the State appeared to be settling down. Many Burghers surrendered their arms and horses, and took an oath to abstain from further hostilities against the British Government. Had I then been able to follow the enemy up and take advantage of this condition of affairs, the task of bringing the Orange Free State to terms would have been a comparatively easy one.

4. I found, however, it was impossible to do so. Cape Town, our main depôt for supplies, is 750 miles distant from Bloemfontein, with which it is connected by a single line of railway, and communication with Cape Colony had been interrupted by the destruction by the enemy of both the bridges over the Orange River.

From the country itself we were able to get scarcely anything in the shape of food except meat, and every mile we advanced took us further away from the only place where a sufficiency of supplies was obtainable. Moreover, the army needed rest after the unusual exertions it had been called upon to make, and by which its mobility had been greatly impaired.

5. The enemy knew exactly how we were situated. They had accurate information as to the condition of our supplies, our transport, and our artillery and cavalry horses; they regained courage by our prolonged and enforced halt at Bloemfontein, and their retrograde movement was arrested. They showed considerable strategical skill by reoccupying Ladybrand, and by concentrating a large force between Brandfort and Thabanchu. This gave them free access to the south-eastern districts of the Orange Free State, and prevented me from moving until they had been forced back north of the Thabanchu-Ladybrand line.

6. I may here mention that, as soon as railway communication with Cape Colony had been restored, the 3rd Division, under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir W. Gatacre, was directed to move up along the railway from Pethulie, via Springfontein, towards Bloemfontein; while the column under Major-General Clements, which had previously dislodged the enemy from Colesberg and Norval's Pont, marched through Fauresmith and Petrusburg, joining my head-quarters on 2nd April. Mean-

while I had occupied Glen Station and Karee Siding, and on the 29th March a force under Lieutenant-General Tucker as detailed in the margin,* attacked the enemy and drove them back to Brandfort, afterwards holding and entrenching a position which effectually protected the siding and the railway bridge under reconstruction at Glen.

7. On the following day, in consequence of a report that a large hostile force had collected near Thabanchu, I found it necessary to withdraw the Cavalry outpost at that town towards Bloemfontein. During its retirement to the Waterworks, 21 miles east of Bloemfontein, the Boers rapidly followed it up, and, by means of a cunningly laid ambush near Sannah's Post, to which I shall refer in a separate despatch, succeeded in capturing seven 12-pr. guns, with the entire personnel of a Horse Artillery battery and many other prisoners, besides inflicting heavy loss on the troops engaged, and seizing a convoy which accompanied them. Encouraged by this success, the Boer commanders moved southward and came in contact with a weak detachment which had been sent to Dewetsdorp by Lieutenant-General Sir W. Gatacre, and was being withdrawn by my orders. The enemy surrounded the detachment, and, before assistance could arrive, it had surrendered to superior numbers, and the Officers and men composing it had been removed, as prisoners of war, to Kroonstad.

8. The enemy then occupied Dewetsdorp, while a considerable force attacked Wepener, where a column of Colonial troops, under Lieutenant-Colonel Dalgety had arrived a few days previously.

Retiring from the town to a defensible position 3 miles to the west, which commanded an important bridge over the Caledon River, Lieutenant-Colonel Dalgety entrenched his force, and for 16 days he succeeded in keeping the Boers in check, despite the fact that they far outnumbered the small body of about 1,600 men under his command, and had also a considerable superiority in artillery, under pressure from the south and west caused them to withdraw northward along the Basutoland border.

9. While these events were taking place, the state of my mounted troops prevented me from attempting any operation which demanded rapidity of movement. I was determined, moreover, to adhere, if possible, to my plan of campaign, and not to be led into diverting from it, for operations of subsidiary importance, the troops which I required to attain my main objective, namely, to advance in adequate strength through the northern portion of the Orange Free State on Johannesburg and Pretoria. I had to content myself, therefore, with carefully guarding the line of railway, and with collecting a force strong enough to drive the enemy north of the Brandfort-Thabanchu line. For this purpose I brought the 3rd Division up to its full strength by the addition of some Militia battalions, and concentrated it, as well as the newly arrived 8th Division, at Edenburg. I had previously, on the 5th April, requested General Sir Rodvers Buller to transfer the 10th Division, under Lieutenant-General Sir Archibald Hunter, together with the Imperial Light Horse, to Cape Colony, additional troops being urgently required to effect the relief of Mafeking, the state of affairs in Natal justifying some reduction in the force quartered there. I utilized

* 7th Division, 3rd Cavalry Brigade, Le Gallais' Mounted Infantry.