

ST. JOHN, N. B., SATURDAY, DECEMBER 2, 1899.

THE BOERS' LOST CHANCE.

Now that the cable news of the war has dwindled to the barest negative announcements, the story as told in the uncensored letters from muzzled correspondents becomes increasingly important and interesting. We are told for instance by the Times correspondent, who was in Pretoria at the outbreak of the war, how it happened that the Boers failed in their plan to seize all Natal as they might have done if they had begun the campaign a single week earlier. Writing under date of Oct. 25, this correspondent says:

'From the Boer point of view there was, it must be admitted, a great deal to be said for the policy of taking the bull by the horns. If they were determined to fight sooner than make the least concession it was evidently better to fight with 15,000 men than with 50,000. They were confident they could crush the small force in Natal long before reinforcements could arrive, and could raise a vast region of Cape Colony in revolt by the mere presence of their invading commandos. Mr. Reitz's ultimatum, which was not handed in to the British Agent till Oct. 9, was decided and actually framed before the end of September. The intention of the Transvaal Government was to present the ultimatum on Oct. 1 or 2 and commence hostilities at the expiration of the forty-eight hours. At this moment a hitch occurred which temporarily upset the whole arrangement. In the evening of Sept. 30 and the morning of Oct. 1 the Executive made two unwelcome discoveries. The first was that their forces were not ready. They had mobilized almost the whole male population of the country, supplied them with arms and ammunition, and sent them to the front in the remarkably short space of four days; but they had done so only by dint of neglecting all arrangements for transport and commissariat. The men, and with them the rolling-stock, had all gone off to the borders of the Republic while the food was left in Pretoria without means of conveyance. The other unwelcome discovery was that the Free State army was equally unready. Accordingly, on Oct. 1, the uncompromising attitude of Pretoria was slightly modified. Rumors of some last attempt to make peace, of an impending visit to Pretoria of Messrs. Schreiner and Hofmeyr, of divisions in the British Cabinet, were given free play. After the lapse of another week the mobilization had been really as well as nominally carried out and the Transvaal was ready to come out and challenge the British Empire to battle. But in that short interval over 5,000 troops from India had landed in Natal and the policy of attack had already lost some of its justification.'

The same correspondent uses strange language, but not too strong, upon the subject of the danger of a native rising in connection with the war. Hostile feeling is so strong in this country against the Boers that the idea of turning the Basutos loose against the burghers is not everywhere rejected with the scorn that such a proposition merits. The following clear statement of what such a thing would mean for British interests in South Africa is therefore very timely:

'The one serious danger that remains is the possibility of a native rising, especially among the Basutos or Swazis. Nothing could do such incalculable mischief to the Imperial power as to tolerate even for a moment the possibility of a native attack upon the Boers. Nothing in such an event as an invasion of the Free State by the Basutos could prevent the Dutch in the colony from going to the help of their kinsfolk, and nothing could do more to alienate the sympathy of all colonists. English or Dutch, from Great Britain than any weakness or hesitation in dealing with such an issue. It is the absolute duty of the Imperial authorities to do all in their power to avert such a rising, by sending up troops, if need be, and to do that duty all purely military considerations must for the time give way.'

There is no abler war correspondent in Ladysmith today than Wm. Maxwell of the Standard. His descriptions of Kitchener's march to Khartoum were perhaps the best that were printed and he has already distinguished himself in the present campaign.

He sends to his paper this week a description of the Boer as he finds him which is the best and on the whole the most impartial character sketch that has come from an English pen. In the course of a most interesting letter Mr. Maxwell says:

'Between the Boer of fiction and of fact there is no affinity. They differ as much as the 'noble redman' who scalps his way through the pages of Fenimore Cooper differs from his squalid, degenerate son in the native reserve. The Boer of fiction is a chivalrous, though somewhat sleepy, gentleman in corduroy—a mountain of beef and bone, given to solitary musings, and to the shooting of buck or 'redcoats,' whichever happen to cross his path. Hunter and hermit, patriot and philosopher, is the mixture out of which he is compounded. The Boer of fact is a creature of another clay. He is a dull, lumpish, lazy animal, with a capacity for ignorance, superstition, and tyranny unsurpassed by any white race. His good qualities—for he has redeeming characteristics—appeal strongly to the imagination. He clings with the passionate of a Covenant to the single and sublime faith of the literal teaching of the Bible. Love of independence is deep rooted in his nature. The history of South Africa during two and a half centuries is full of examples of his dogged and unconquerable spirit. But he has in overpopulation degree the defects of these qualities. His piety is apt to degenerate into superstition and sanctimonious Pharisaism. Love of independence has begot in him hate of everything that might tend to disturb his reverence for the past, and suspicion of the stranger who threatens to 'tread him to death,' in the solitude of the veldt. The unconquerable spirit that has made him one of the boldest pioneers the world has seen has become corrupted into obstinate conceit.'

'The absolute seclusion and independence of the pastoral life of the Boer farmer are accountable for his ignorance. His education is limited to six months' instruction by a tutor, who visits the farm on the silent veldt as soon as the children of the farm are grown up. Few of them can read, and still fewer are able to write. Yet the Boer will tolerate nothing that would dispel his ignorance or contradict his superstitions. He is still convinced that the sun moves round the earth, and that the earth is a flat and solid substance resting on unseen foundations. 'What is this nonsense in which you English believe about the earth being round?' asked a wealthy Boer who is a member of the Volksraad. It was vain to offer Galileo's explanation, 'I have seen the shadow of the earth on the moon.' The familiar proof of a ship on the horizon [was treated with derision. 'Do you not always see the top of a thing first?' was the retort. 'No,' said my friend, the Boer legislator; 'I can believe none of this new fangled nonsense. Many a time returning to my home on the veldt, have I thought over these things. I have watched for hours in the moonlight to see whether the kopje near my homestead really did move, but it is always there—always in the same place. And as for the sun, did not Joshua bid it stand still? Against arguments of this kind reason avails not, yet I ventured to ask how the sun managed to get under the foundations of the earth every night so as to be in his place in the morning. This difficulty had never presented itself, and the only reply, uttered with unswerving conviction, was, 'Well, I do not believe this nonsense, and Oom Paul does not believe it.'

'Should you suffer from malarial fever contracted in the marshy country, the Dutch pastor, who has heard nothing of latest researches into the mosquito virus, and is sublimely unconscious of his own case, will console you with the warning that it is a Divine punishment for having left the land of their birth. Persistence in the ways of his fathers is a strong characteristic of the Boer. Except in the Free State where a few farmers have outraged public opinion and flown in the face of Providence by introducing machinery, the method of cultivating the soil is that of Syria and Palestine. Corn is still trodden, and the law is 'Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn.' But the ox that presumes to think himself worthy

of his reward is beaten unmercifully. Thus is the letter of the Law of Moses observed. There is nothing the Boer is not capable of doing with a good conscience. He will beat a Kaffir to death, yet will never believe that the native is not his loyal and devoted friend. At this moment when every Kaffir in the land is eager to murder his white oppressor, the Boer imagines that he has only to say the word, and Basutos, Swazi, Matabele, Zulu, and all black tribes would fall upon and destroy his enemies. This confidence in his destiny and consciences of superiority over every created thing would be sublime were it not ridiculous.'

'As a family man, the Boer's reputation would justify him in becoming a candidate for the Dunmow Flitch. Surly and suspicious in manner, heavy and uncouth in his ways, shy and reserved among strangers you may win him to a gruff cordiality, if you are a husband and father, and care to listen to the details of his domestic life. But although the Boer certainly cherishes with affection his wife and children, he treats them according to Oriental rather than European ideas. The women always stand until the men are seated, and are not served until the wants of their lords and masters are satisfied, I am describing the customs of the farmer who lives on the veldt, and has no acquaintance with western manners. Such a man is little removed from a state of barbarism, and his surroundings are often as squalid as those of a Kaffir. Despite this patriarchal rule, the woman has great influence over her man and is credited with having on more than one occasion screwed his courage up to the fighting point. The Boer woman is not a beauty, notwithstanding the care with which she preserves her complexion from the sun. Her ambition like that of the fish wives at Scheveningen, is to become as fat as an ox, though, unlike the Dutch wife, she is not an example of scrupulous cleanliness. The Boer is not hospitable. He resents the presence of strangers, and, being too lazy to cultivate more than is necessary for the immediate wants of his family, he has nothing to spare for uninvited guests.'

'I have endeavored to point out some of the most striking characteristics of these people, who have cast a malign spell over civilization and progress in South Africa. There is a higher type of Boer, who is comparatively clean in person and almost European in thought and habit. He may be as corrupt and sly—'slim' is the word they use—as his detractors make out, yet he is less objectionable than the semi-barbarous fanatic on the veldt. His sense of honor may not be keen, and his disregard for the truth may indicate a low moral standard. But his capacity for mischief is modified by the European environment with which he surrounds himself. Where he is a decided majority, his dispositions are arrogant, and overbearing, but he is easily cowed by the display of physical force. The Boer of the farm and the veldt as well as of the border towns, is less amenable to reason. His phenomenal ignorance, his monumental conceit, his unconquerable hatred of the British, make him a tyrant. It would astound many who have been loud in denouncing war if they could realize, from personal observation or experience the nature of the Boer tyranny. So subtle and far reaching are its effects, that in many districts on British soil our fellow countrymen pass their lives in subjection. They are compelled to endure slights and to swallow insults that would have long since driven a less patient people to civil war. The Boer is firmly convinced that the British are a race of cowards. Not all the eloquence of Mr. Gladstone could persuade him that the color of the British flag is not white, or that the independence of the Transvaal was not won by arms at Langs Nek and Majuba.'

Many cable despatches have come from Ladysmith since war began, but they have not been allowed to tell us what things were really like in the town. At last the mail brings matter more than a month old, but, unlike so many of the cables despatches, it contains news. Writing on Oct. 11 the Chronicle's correspondent says:

'Ladysmith breathes freely today, but a

week ago she seemed likely to become another Lucknow. Of line battalions only the Liverpools were here, besides two batteries of field artillery, some of the Eighteenth Hussars, and the Fifth Lancers. If Kruger or Joubert had then allowed the Boers encamped on the Free State border to have their own way, no one can say what might have happened. Our force would have been outnumbered at least four to one, and probably more. In event of disaster the Boers would have seized an immense quantity of military stores accumulated in the camp and at the railway station. What is worse, they would have isolated the still smaller force lately thrown forward to Dundee, so as to break the strong defensive position of the Biggarsberg, which cuts off the north of Natal and can only be traversed by three difficult passes. Dundee was just as much threatened from the east frontier beyond the Buffalo River, where the Transvaal Boers of the Utrecht and Vryheid have been mustered in strong force for nearly a fortnight now. With our two advanced posts 'lepped up' (the phrase is a little clumsy here), our stores lost and our reputation among the Dutch and native populations entirely ruined, the campaign would have begun badly. For the Boer it was a fine strategic opportunity, and they were perfectly aware of that. But 'the Old Man,' as they affectionately call the President, had his own prudent reasons for refusing it. 'Let the enemy fire first,' he says, like the famous Frenchman, and so far he has been able to hold the most ardent of the encamped burghers in check. 'If he should not be able!' we kept saying. We still say it morning and evening, but the pinch of the danger is passed.'

For additional troops came in to wait for the beginning of war. What kind of time they are having now may be imagined from this description of Ladysmith, early in October. 'It has an evil reputation,' says the correspondent. 'Last year the troops here were prostrated with enteric. There is a little fever and a good deal of dysentery even now among the regulars. The stream by the camp is condemned, and all water is supplied in tiny rations from pumps. The main permanent camp is built of corrugated iron, practically the sole building material in South Africa, and quite universal for roofs, so that the country has few architectural features to boast of. The cavalry are quartered in tin huts, but the Liverpools, Devons, Gordons and Volunteers have pitched their own tents, and a terrible time they are having of it. Dust is the curse of the place. We remember the Long Valley as an Arcadian dell. Veterans of the Sudan recall the black sandstorms with regretful sighs. The thin red dust comes everywhere, and never stops. It blinds your eyes, it stops your nose, it scorches your throat till the invariable shilling for a little glass of any liquid seems cheap as dirt. It turns the whitest shirt brown in half an hour, it creeps into the works of your watch. It lies in a layer mixed with flies on the top of your rations. The white ants eat away the flaps of the tents, and the men wake up covered with dust, like children in a hayfield. Even mules die of it in convulsions. It was in this land that the ostrich developed its world-renowned digestive powers, and no wonder.'

'The camp stands on a barren plain, nearly two miles northwest of the town—if we may so call the one straight road of stores and tin-roofed bungalows. Low flat-topped hills surround it, bare and rocky. The frontier, marked by a barbed wire fence across the summit of Van Reenen's Pass, must be nearly forty miles from Ladysmith, but from the cliffs above it the little British camp can be seen like a toy through this clear African air, and Boer sentries watch it all day, ready to signal the least movement of its troops, betrayed by the dust. Their own main force is distributed in camps along the hills well beyond the nine mile limit ordained by the Convention.'

'Meanwhile refugees from the Free State are constantly passing through. Every resident is liable to be commandeered, and forty-eight hours counts as residence. The few British who remain have had all their horses, carts and supplies

taken. Most are set to serve the ambulance. A few will be sent to watch Basutoland. But very nearly all of them have abandoned their property and risked the escape to Natal, slipping down the railway under bales or built up in the luggage vans like nuns in a brick wall. In one case the Boers commandeered three wool trucks on the frontier. Those trucks were shunted on to a siding for the night, and in the morning the wool looked strangely shrunken somehow. Yet it was not wool that had been taken out and smuggled through by the next train. For Scot helps Scots, and it is Scots who work the railway. It pays to be a Scot out here. I have only met one Irishman and he was unhappy.'

'But for the grotesque side of refugee unhappiness, one should see the native train which comes down every night from Newcastle way, and disappears toward Maritzburg and safety. Native workers of every kind—servants, laborers, miners—are throwing up their places and rushing toward the sea. The few who can speak English say, 'Too plenty bomb-bom!' as sufficient explanation of their panic. The Government has now fitted the open trucks with cross-seats and side bars for their convenience, and so, hardly visible in the darkness, the black crowd rolls up to the platform. Instantly black hands with pinkish palms are thrust through all the bars, as in a monkey house. Black heads jabber and click with excitement. White teeth suddenly appear from nowhere. It is for bread and tin meats they clamor and they are willing to pay. But a loaf costs a shilling. Everything costs a shilling here, unless it costs half-a-crown; and Natal grows fat on war. A shilling for a bit of bread!—What is the good of Christianity? So the dusky hands are withdrawn, and the poor Zulu with untutored maw goes starving on. But if any still doubt our primitive ancestry, let them hear that Zulu's outcries of pain or watch the fortunate man who has really got a loaf, and gripping it with both hands, gnaws it in his corner (turning his eyes to right and left with fear.'

USES OF THE TELEPHONE.

Some Refinements of Practice as Noted by a Visitor in the City.

'I don't suppose this is new to you,' said a visitor to New York, 'but it was to me, and I thought it was pretty good. I had occasion to call on a man connected with a big concern occupying offices in a tall downtown building. I went into this building and went up, kiting, a good way in an elevator, and then got off and went to the man's office.'

'In the first room I found a clerk sitting at a desk, who asked me who I wanted to see, and when I told him he didn't get up and go and find out and come back and let me know, but he just spoke into a telephone that stood on his desk, and in about three seconds he looked up and said that I'd find Mr. So-and-so in such a room, indicating the door; and he was there all right, and the clerk in the outer hall ascertained that fact, and that he was disengaged, all in less than half a minute by telephone. I thought that was pretty fine. It was a saving of time for everybody, and with this sort of an arrangement one man could tend to it all, and stay right there in the office, ready to receive everybody that came in, too.'

'Now, I don't know anything about it, but I venture to say that a part of that telephone outfit was a switchboard somewhere about that clerk's desk, so that not only was it possible to telephone from the other office but that a man in any of the offices could telephone to a man in any other by means of this switchboard. Suppose the head of the concern, for instance, or any member of it, wanted to consult with some body belonging to it who is in another room. He doesn't get up and go over there; nor does he send over or up or down to have the other man come and see him; he just speaks into or at the telephone that stands on his desk, and says: 'Give me Mr. To-and-so.' That's to the clerk in the outer office, you understand, the man that I saw; and he just connects the wires, these two men sit right where they are at their own desks in their own offices, and talk just as they would if they were standing side by side.'

'Certainly one of the most wonderful time saving contrivances is the telephone.'