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***IN THE SHADOW
OF DEATH***

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In the Shadow of Death

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Several excellent works have already been written about the Anglo-Boer War of the beginning of the twentieth century; but the field of operations was so extensive, the duration of the war so long, and the leaders, on the Boer side, were necessarily so independent of one another in the operations that were conducted with one common aim, that something of interest may well remain to be said. We have not here chronicled our experiences and adventures in the form of a diary, but have rather grouped together events and observations. We write as Boers, frankly regretting the loss of that independence for which we took the field; but also as those who wish to give no offence to any honourable opponent. Our aim has been to do equal justice to both sides in the war; to unite and reconcile, not to separate and embitter, two Christian peoples destined to live together in one land.

"In the Shadow of Death" is a title the reader will hardly consider inappropriate by the time he reaches the end of this little book. Outnumbered on the battlefield, often exposed to the enemy's fire, and one of us wounded and laid low on a bed of intense suffering, and then charged before a Military Court with the greatest of crimes, we did not dare to hope that we should live to write these pages.

And here let our cordial thanks be given to Advocate F.G. Gardiner for his inestimable services in the hour of need, and for kindly submitting to us the "papers" bearing on the trial.

P.H. KRITZINGER.
R.D. MCDONALD.

"In the Shadow of Death."

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CHAPTER I.

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ANTECEDENTS.

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The child is father to the man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

Wordsworth.

A few preliminary pages of personal history I offer to those who followed me either in thought or deed during the Anglo-Boer War.

My ancestors were Germans; my grandfather was born in the South. About the year 1820 he, along with two brothers, bade farewell to the land of his nativity and emigrated to South Africa. They found a home for themselves in the neighbourhood of Port Elizabeth, and there they settled as farmers. Two of the brothers married women of Dutch extraction; one died a bachelor. A small village, Humansdorp, situated near to Port Elizabeth, was the birth-place of my father. There he spent the greater part of his life. He, too, married a Dutch lady; and we children adopted the language of our mother, and spoke Dutch rather than German.

My father took an active part in several of the early Kaffir Wars, and rendered assistance to the Colonial forces in subjugating the native tribes in the Eastern Province of the

Cape Colony. With rapt attention and enthusiasm we children would listen to him as he told the tale of those early native wars. I then thought that there was nothing so sublime and glorious as war. My imagination was inflamed, and I longed intensely to participate in such exciting adventures. My experience of recent years has corrected my views. I think differently now. Peace is better than war. War is brutal and damnable. It is indeed "hell let loose."

On the 20th of April, 1870, the arrival of a little Kritzinger was announced on the farm Wildeman's-Kraal, Port Elizabeth District. That little fellow happened to be myself. I do not recollect much of the days of my youth—save that I was of a very lively disposition, with a fondness for all sorts of fun, and often of mischief, which landed me occasionally in great trouble. My parents obeyed the injunctions of Holy Writ in diligently applying the rod when they thought it necessary. As a child, I could but dimly understand, and scarcely believe, that love was at the root of every chastisement.

At the age of five I met with a serious accident. While gathering shells on the beach at Port Elizabeth, the receding waves drew me seaward with irresistible power. But for the pluck and courage of my little playfellow, a lassie of some twelve summers, I was lost. She came to the rescue. I was saved at the last moment: a few seconds more and I must have perished in the deep.

In 1882 my parents, leaving Cape Colony in search of a new home in the Orange Free State, settled down in the district of Ladybrand. It was, however, decided that I should remain behind with an uncle. This uncle was my godfather,

and had promised to provide for my education. Having no children, he made me his adopted son. However excellent these arrangements might be, I resolved that I too should go to the Orange Free State. I succeeded in persuading my brother, who had charge of the waggons, to let me follow him on horseback under cover of darkness. I left my uncle's home alone and at dusk on the third evening after my brother's departure. How I felt, and in what condition I was, after riding thirty-five miles on the bare back of a horse, I shall not describe. My parents, who had gone ahead of the waggons, were not a little astonished, and yet they were not angry, at the unexpected appearance of the boy that was left behind.

On my arrival in the Free State it so happened that there was then a dispute as to headship between two Barolong chiefs. This quarrel called forth the intervention of the Free State Government. The burghers were commanded in the event of resistance on the part of the native chiefs; and I, though a mere boy, at once offered my services to the nearest Field Cornet. He declined to accept them on the score that I was too young. Like David, I was loth to go back home. I borrowed an old gun, got a horse, and off I stole to the Boer commando. The dispute was amicably settled. Some thirty Barolongs, however, offered resistance. Most eagerly I thus fired my first shot upon a human being. I did not know then that it would not be the last; that I should live to hear the mountains and hills of South Africa reverberate with the sound of exploding shells, that the whizz of bullets would assail my ears like the humming of bees; that a bullet would penetrate my own lungs, leaving me a mass of

bleeding clay on the battle-field. I did not know that South Africa's plains would yet be drenched with the blood of Boer and Briton until the very rivers ran crimson.

At the early age of seventeen I left the parental roof to earn for myself an independent living. I went to the district of Rouxville, where I occupied a farm situated on the Basutoland border. Several of the Basuto chiefs I got to know well. They allowed me to purchase all I desired from their subjects. Occupied thus with my private affairs while years sped by, I unconsciously drifted on to the disastrous war.

My mind was never absorbed nor disturbed by the many political controversies and problems of South Africa, not that I was indifferent to the welfare of my people and country, for, once war was declared by the leaders, my services were ready. I attached myself to the Rouxville Commando, under Commandant J. Olivier, as a private burgher. When Prinsloo surrendered, late in 1900, I was appointed Assistant-Commandant over that portion of the Rouxville Commando which had refused to lay down arms on Prinsloo's authority. This was my first commission in the Boer Army. On more than one occasion I had been requested to accept appointments; but, realising the great responsibility involved in leadership, I preferred to fight as a private. But events pushed onward; and on the 26th of August, 1900, when Commandant Olivier made an unsuccessful attack on Winburg, which resulted in his capture, I was elected in his stead, and so became Commandant of the Rouxville Commando.

On December 16th, 1900, carrying out instructions of General De Wet, I crossed the Orange River at a point near Odendaal's Stroom, with about 270 burghers. General De Wet was to follow me, but he was prevented. The enemy, determined to drive me back or effect my capture, concentrated numerous forces on my small commando. For months I was dreadfully harassed, and had no rest day or night. But I was resolved neither to retrace my steps nor to capitulate. How I escaped from time to time I now tell. The Cape Colonist Boers began to come in, and my forces increased rather than decreased. The burghers I had at my disposal I subdivided into smaller commandos, to give employment to the enemy, so that they could not concentrate all their forces on me. Thus, as the Colonists rose in arms, the commandos began to multiply more and more, until it was impossible for the British forces to expel the invaders from the Cape Colony.

At the beginning of August, 1901, General French once more fixed his attention on me. I was hard pressed by large forces, and had to fall back on the Orange Free State, where I then operated till the 15th of December. Again, and now for the last time, I forded the Orange River at midnight, and set foot on British territory. The following day I was wounded while crossing the railway line near Hanover Road. For about a month I was laid up in the British hospital at Naauwpoort, whence I was removed to Graaf Reinet gaol, and there I was confined as a criminal until the 10th of March, 1902, when after a five days' trial for murder I was acquitted. After my acquittal I was advanced to the honour (?) of P.O.W.

(Prisoner of War), and so remained till the cessation of hostilities.



CHAPTER II.

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DARK DAYS.

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Oft expectation fails, and most oft there where
most it promises.

Shakespeare.

Up to the 27th February, 1900, the Republican arms were on the whole successful. The Boers fought well and many a brilliant victory crowned their efforts, and encouraged them to continue their struggle for freedom. True, they had to sacrifice many noble lives, but that was a sacrifice they were prepared to make for their country. Fortune smiled on them; as yet they had met with no very serious reverses. Magersfontein, Stormberg, Colenso, Spion Kop, were so many offerings of scarce vanquished Boers to the veiled Goddess Liberty. But towards the end of February, 1900, clouds gathered over the Republics. The tide of fortune was turned; disaster after disaster courted the Boer forces; blow after blow struck them with bewildering force. Then came the news of Cronje's capture. No sooner had we crossed the Orange River during the retreat from Stormberg than we learnt that stunning news of the disaster at Paardeberg on the 27th of February—the anniversary of Amajuba. Cronje captured—the General in whom we had placed such implicit confidence and on whom we relied for the future! Cronje

captured—the man who had successfully checked the advance of the English forces on Kimberley at Magersfontein; the hero of many a battle; the man who knew no fear! His men captured—the flower and pick of the Boer forces, with all their guns, and brave Major Albrecht as well!

Many a burgher who up to that fatal day had fought hopefully and courageously lost hope and courage then. Some, we regret to say, were so disconsolate that they renounced their faith in that Supreme Being in whose hands are the destinies of nations. Their reliance on their country's God ended with Cronje's capture, as though their deliverance depended solely upon him. This, however, does not appear so strange when one recollects that the Boers could not afford to lose so many of their best men at a time when all were precious for their country's safety. As to the siege itself, we, not having been in it, cannot enter into its details. One of the besieged, who, in spite of a terrific bombardment and repeated attacks by the enemy, kept a diary of the events of each day, gives this striking description on the 10th and last day:

"Bombardment heavier than usual. The burghers are recalcitrant and in consequence the General's authority wanes rapidly. There is hardly any food, the remaining bags of biscuits are yellow from the lyddite fumes, so is everything, damp and yellow. The stench of the decomposed horses and oxen is awful. The water of the rivers is putrid with carrion. A party of men caught three stray sheep early on the morning of the 10th. In haste they killed them and started to skin them desperately; but they

had half done when a lyddite shell bursting close to them turned the mutton yellow with its fumes and it had to be abandoned reluctantly. The sufferings of the wounded are heartrending. Little children huddled together in bomb-proof excavations are restless, hungry and crying. The women are adding their sobs to the plaintive exhortations of the wounded. All the time the shelling never abates. The arena of the defenders is veneered. Nearly every man, woman and child is lyddite-stained. The muddy stream is yellow. The night was an awful one. For two days the men are without food, but worse still are the pestiferous air, the loathsome water, and the suffering of the wounded. It is too much for flesh and blood. The morning of the 27th February saw the first white flag hoisted by a Boer general. It was a woeful sight when 3600 Boers, undisciplined peasants, reluctantly threw down their rifles among the wreck of the shells and ambled past the English lines. They had withstood the onslaught of 80,000 British troops with modern death-dealing implements of war, and, towards the end of the siege, about 1000 guns were brought to bear upon them."

How far this disaster can be attributed to General Cronje is difficult to say. The following considerations may, however, throw some light on its causes.

During the early part of the war we hardly realised the great value and necessity of good scouting. It was only after General Cronje and his men had fallen into the hands of the enemy that a regular scouting corps was organised and placed under the control of the brave Danie Therou.

Lord Roberts's forces were almost on Cronje's laager before they were perceived, and unfortunately they were

even then entirely under-estimated and consequently thought light of. Flushed by the victory at Magersfontein, the General did not contemplate the possibility of such a bitter reverse. He was going to strike another hard blow at the enemy—he did strike it, but at too great a cost. Had he realised his position the first or second day after the siege was begun, he might still have escaped. The convoy would have been captured, but the men would have been saved. The old gentleman was determined to hold all, and consequently lost all.

So far the General deserves censure and is accountable for the disaster which had such a far-reaching and bad moral effect on the rest of the burghers. The only sweet drop contained in the bitter cup extended to us was the fact that Cronje and his burghers surrendered *as men*, and not as *cowards*. Once surrounded and brought to bay they resisted every attack with admirable fortitude and valour. Surrounded along the banks of the Modder River, at a spot where they had no cover at all, exposed to a terrific cannonade and charged by thousands of the enemy from time to time, these farmers fearlessly repelled every onslaught. It was one thing to surround them, another thing to capture them. They were not to be taken with cold hands. The enemy, especially the Canadians, had to pay a great price before the white flag announced Cronje's unconditional surrender.

During the siege attempts were made by General De Wet to relieve Cronje, but none succeeded. Several of the relieving forces, including the pick of the Winburg Commando with Commandant Theunissen, were themselves

surrounded and captured in trying to break through the lines of the besiegers.

To intensify the gloom, Ladysmith, which was daily expected to fall, was relieved on the day of Cronje's surrender. For certain reasons the late Commandant-General P. Joubert had evacuated the positions round Ladysmith and retreated to the Biggar's Range. General Louis Botha, who was engaging Buller's relieving forces at Colenso, was then also compelled to retreat.

After Cronje's capture the way to Bloemfontein and Pretoria lay open. The Boers made one more stand at Abraham's Kraal, where the enemy suffered heavily, but carried the day by their overwhelming numbers. After the British occupied Bloemfontein the Transvaal burghers became reluctant to offer battle in the Free State, on the ground that there were no positions from which they could successfully check the ever-advancing foe. Many of the Free Staters were discouraged and hopeless; but rest renewed their strength and zeal, and they shortly returned to the struggles.

The second disaster which befell the two Republics was the ignominious and cowardly surrender of Prinsloo, which took place on the 1st of August, 1900. For various reasons this surrender was more keenly felt by the Boers than that of Cronje. The one, though he might have blundered, nevertheless acted the part of a brave, though obstinate, man; the other that of a coward.

Some six weeks after the occupation of Bloemfontein the British troops resumed their northward march, and so quickly did they advance, almost day and night, that

Pretoria was soon occupied. What this rapid movement meant, we could not quite understand. Did Lord Roberts think that the occupation of Pretoria would terminate hostilities? The British forces in their swift march to the Transvaal capital left Free State burghers behind them as they advanced. These men rallied again under General De Wet and seriously threatened the English line of communications, capturing seven hundred of the British at Roode Wal.

Large forces under Hector MacDonald and Bruce Hamilton recrossed the Vaal in order to crush the Free Staters. Then Prinsloo surrendered. Having accompanied the commandos that surrendered under him, we will relate the story of that most sad incident of the War.

On the occupation of Bethlehem by the British in the beginning of July, 1900, the Boer commandos, under General De Wet, retreated to the Wittebergen, a mountain range to the south-east of Bethlehem, forming a semi-circle round Fouriesburg, a small village on the Basutoland border. This range, with its towering peaks and steep slopes, formed an impregnable stronghold. The burghers thought that, once behind those heaven-high mountains, with all the passes in their possession, with abundant war supplies, and all the necessaries of life, they would resist successfully every attack. The camps were pitched at the base of the mountains. The burghers began at once to make turf-bulwarks for the guns, and trenches for themselves, in the various passes.

General De Wet, who did not seem quite at ease in this enclosure or kraal, for such it was, organised the

Bethlehem-Heilbron burghers into a commando 2500 strong and left with these in the direction of Heilbron. General Roux from Senekal was instructed to organise another commando, 1000 or 1200 strong, and advance with that in the direction of Bloemfontein. For some reason or other, General Roux's departure was delayed, and so he with all his men fell into Prinsloo's meshes.

On Monday, 23rd July, the enemy made a general attack on all the Boer positions, except Naauwpoort Pass. These attacks, though very determined, were unsuccessful. From sunrise to sunset the firing never ceased. The burghers in Slabberts Nek, where we happened to be, were subjected to a dreadful cannon fire. This pass was guarded by Captain Smith with two Krupp guns and Lieutenant Carlblom with a pom-pom. Upon these guns the English directed two Howitzers and six Armstrongs. Here, just before sunset, the gallant Captain Rautenbagh was blown to pieces by a lyddite shell, which exploded in front of him.

Thus repulsed by day, the enemy succeeded in scaling the heights to the left of the Boers at Slabberts Nek by an unguarded footpath during the night. As soon as the crimson light of a July dawn had exposed the frost-covered ridges, the dark overcoats on the left of the Boer positions revealed the unwelcome fact that the enemy had gained their object of the day before, and had outflanked the Boers.

Not only at Slabberts Nek, but also at Reliefs Nek the Boers were outflanked the same night. At the latter pass a number of Highlanders had occupied the rocky heights during the stillness of the night, so that when the Boer pickets discovered them the next morning they found the

enemy commanding a position higher than their own, which they forthwith abandoned. The enemy, now in possession of two mountain passes, forced the Boers to evacuate all the other passes, by threatening an attack on our rear and surrounding us. So on Tuesday morning, at about 9 A.M., the commandos quitted the mountains and fell back on Fouriesburg.

Our situation was becoming hourly more and more embarrassing. There was just one thing to be done, and that was to move as quickly as possible all along the base of the mountain range, and to seize a pass called Naauwpoort Nek farther northwards. That pass was not yet occupied by the enemy, and there it was possible to secure a safe exit; and higher up the mountain range, at the farm of Salmon Raads, was another pass which could be reached in due time.

If Prinsloo had, in his heart, desired to save his commandos, he could have done so easily. But no sooner had we left the mountains than we noticed that strange whispers were passed from man to man; we heard it said that a further prolongation of the war was absolutely useless; that many of the officers and burghers were tired of it, and would like to go home. In short, we saw what was coming, and anticipated the surrender.

When the commandos arrived at Naauwpoort Pass they found their exit cut off there by the enemy. Instead of hastening on to the next pass, the officers held a council of war to discuss the situation, or, more correctly, to deliberate on a surrender. The meeting lasted almost all night. Some of the officers were deadly opposed to a surrender; others—and they were the majority—were in favour of it. Nothing,

however, was decided at that meeting, for a Hoofd Commandant had first to be elected before any steps could be taken.

A second meeting of officers for the purpose of electing a Chief Commandant was next held. In that meeting Prinsloo was elected Chief Commandant, but, as not all the officers were present, some of them being still in the positions, it was beforehand agreed that the man elected by that meeting should have no authority before the votes of the absent officers were taken, and when their votes came in it was found that General Roux, and not Prinsloo, was elected.

The latter, however, entered into negotiations with the enemy before this question as to whom was to be Chief Commandant was settled. He first asked for an armistice, which was refused. Then he asked for terms, to which General Hunter replied: "Unconditional surrender is demanded." Prinsloo, well aware that the burghers would not surrender unconditionally, pleaded and insisted on terms.

At this juncture Vilonel, the deserter, who had been sentenced for five years' imprisonment for high treason, but who was, unfortunately, released, appeared on the scene. He came from the British lines, met Prinsloo, and officiated as intermediary between Generals Hunter and Prinsloo. Something in the shape of terms was drawn up, but these terms, if tested and analysed, amounted to unconditional surrender. As soon as Prinsloo was in possession of these conditions, he forwarded a report to the different commandants that he had been successful in obtaining good terms from the English, and that they must evacuate

their positions so as to arrange for a surrender. This report was sent on to Commandant Potgieter of Smithfield with instructions to forward it to the next commandant.

General Roux, on learning of Prinsloo's doings, at once dispatched a report to the different commandos notifying to them that Prinsloo had no right to negotiate with the enemy, to ask for or accept terms for a surrender. Also, that the burghers must on no account abandon their positions. He, so the report ran, would personally go to protest against the illegal surrender. The General went, but did not return. Why he went himself, and did not send one of his adjutants with a written protest, seems still very strange to us. He was warned not to go. General Fourie's last words to him were: "Good-bye, General; I greet you, never to see you again in the Boer ranks." He did not heed the warning, and so we lost one of our bravest and best leaders.

Unfortunately, General Roux's report fell into the hands of Commandant Potgieter, who, siding with Prinsloo on the question of a surrender, had it destroyed whilst Prinsloo's was forwarded. This settled the whole affair. The positions were evacuated, and in part occupied by the enemy. Still, at the eleventh hour, there was a possibility of escape. The long trail of waggons would have been captured, but most, if not all, the burghers could have found their way out. But no, they were to be duped by a set of unscrupulous officers. They were told they could get all they desired, except their independence. All could go home, each would get a horse-saddle and bridle, their private property would not be confiscated, and they would be allowed to follow their agricultural and pastoral pursuits undisturbed. And the poor

officers—well for them that there were no extenuating terms, no mercy. So, at least, said Commandant Polly de Villiers, of the Ficksburg Commando. He, when posing as a martyr, announced these conditions to the burghers, who, after such long separation from their families, found it impossible to withstand such charming terms. Sorrowfully were they disillusioned after they had laid down their arms.

To make the surrender a complete success, all sorts of rumours were freely circulated. The burghers were told that all who did not surrender would be shot as rebels when captured, that the pass, higher up the mountains, was guarded by twenty-five lyddite guns, so that every exit was cut off by the enemy. When these reports were brought to bear on men already depressed and discouraged it did not require great pressure to effect their surrender. Still, if these men had not been misled, if they had known that Ceylon and India would be the final destination of many of them, they never would have surrendered, and very few of them would have been captured there and then. All this they found out when it was too late.

These unfortunate burghers we do not wish to criticise too severely. The officers were to blame. Many of them certainly fell into the hands of the enemy through no fault of their own. There were, however, some who were only too ready to lay down their arms, and these were the majority. They did not act the part of men; for they deserted shamefully those who still struggled bravely for freedom. Nor am I willing to judge these. Let conscience speak to such as these.

Some officers, animated by a truer love of their country, protested strongly against such an illegal and shameful surrender. One of these, General Olivier of the Rouxville Commando, called his burghers together and told them plainly what he thought. He warned them not to place too much credence in British promises, and promised that those who would follow him he would lead out safely. Of his whole commando—about four hundred strong—scarcely seventy followed him. The others surrendered.

Besides attending to his men, General Olivier also took charge of most of the Boer guns, which were to have formed no mean part of the booty, for Prinsloo had promised the British some thirteen guns, one pom-pom, and a few maxims with all their ammunition. In the pass at Salmon Raads, General Hector MacDonald met Olivier with the guns. He at once ordered him to go no farther, as he was a surrendered man. Olivier tarried as long as it pleased him, and then proceeded, taking the guns along with him.

Of all the Boer forces concentrated in the Wittebergen, only about six hundred did not surrender. To secure these also every means were resorted to. No fewer than three times were messengers sent to them with reports from the enemy. At first we were courteously invited to return and surrender. To prove to us the validity of the surrender, all the papers bearing on the negotiation from first to last were forwarded to us. The excellent conditions granted to the surrendered burghers were also transmitted to us. In these conditions we observed that the surrendered burghers would each be provided with a horse to ride to their destination, which would be Winburg, till further orders. We

saw also that they would be kept as prisoners-of-war until the war was over, which meant, though they did not suspect it then, two years longer. Their private property was to be respected. How the last condition was violated is well known.

Olivier and his men were, however, not to be easily ensnared. He politely rejected the proffered terms, stating at the same time that Prinsloo's surrender was illegal. A few days later, and lo! in the distance we beheld another flag-of-truce, a second report. The polite request had failed, intimidation must now be tried—that might succeed better. We were admonished urgently to come back at once, and surrender without further delay. Failing that, we must not expect to receive such generous and lenient treatment as would be extended to those surrendered already. All our goods would be confiscated, etc.

On receiving this report, Olivier sent back the somewhat curt and abrupt reply: "That if the British wanted his rifle they would have to capture him as a man, for he would not surrender like an old woman. And he would receive no more white flags on this matter." Consequently the third messenger was sent back without being interviewed.

So much for the Prinsloo disaster. It was a sad one for those still struggling against overwhelming odds. Many a heart beat low, and many a sigh was heaved. That was an "unkind cut," which wounded the hearts of thousands. Many a one, even of those who stood to the last day, never recovered from the effects of that shock. They fought bravely, and did their duty towards their country, but hope for an ultimate victory was dead within them.