



AT THE FRONT.



BY FREDERIC VILLIERS.

(All Rights Reserved).

I.

MODDER RIVER, December 27.

WHEN I landed at Port Elizabeth I found that there were four separate commands about to take immediate action against the Boers. The column for the relief of Ladysmith was concentrating at Frere, in Natal; General Gatacre was confronting the Boers at Stormberg, near the Orange Free State; General French was approaching a point more westerly, and General Lord Methuen, with his Kimberley relief force, had scored several successes against the Boers—namely, at Grasspan, Belmont, and Modder River. Now, the question for me was: Which of these commands would be the most interesting to join, from a journalistic and artistic point of view? It took me but a moment to decide, and I came to the conclusion to share the adventures of Methuen's division. The relief of Kimberley, and the rescue from the clutches of the Boers of that great patriot and schemer for the honour and enlargement of the British Empire—Mr. Cecil Rhodes—would probably appeal more to the sentiment of the British and Colonial public than any of the other heroic phases of the war. There was also another and a most interesting reason why I should choose Methuen's column. The smart contingents of colonial troops from New Zealand, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland and Canada were either with that General's field force, or protecting his lines of communication; and here was an opportunity to see what our gallant brethren of the Antipodes and America were capable of. Luckily for me,

Colonel Fairholme, of the Royal Artillery, was commandant at Port Elizabeth, and it was owing to his courtesy that the necessary passes for the front were sent on from Capetown to De Aar Junction, where I found them awaiting me. While I was marking time in Port Elizabeth, I met two well-known military officers. One was the smart ubiquitous Major Stuart Wortley, who had just arrived from Italy and Spain, where he had been purchasing mules. Wortley is always a success, and fortune had favoured him even with mules, for out of several thousand animals the losses on the passage to the Cape were only ten. The Major was now hastening to join his regiment in Natal. Another remarkable identity passing through Port Elizabeth was the famous young engineer, Girouard, who now sported on his shoulder strap the star and crown of lieutenant-colonel. But a year ago he was simply "Mr. Girouard," of Nubian Desert fame. He had vacated his post of director of Egyptian railways for a time to give his valuable services to the Cape Government lines, acting under military regime.

Almost immediately on leaving the old Dutch port, one is confronted with the stern reality of war. All the important culverts and bridges on the way to De Aar are vigilantly guarded. The serviceable colonial volunteer corps, the Prince Alfred Guards, were watching the line as far as Naaupoort. At one of the bridges *en route*, where the Boers, a few days ago, had destroyed the permanent way, a Prince Alfred sentry was keenly surveying the plain beyond, with his rifle ready to hand. A notice board stood