
How We Escaped from Pretoria

Haldane James Aylmer

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CAPTAIN HALDANE, D.S.O.

HOW WE ESCAPED FROM
PRETORIA

BY

CAPTAIN AYLMER HALDANE, D.S.O.

2ND BATT. GORDON HIGHLANDERS

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
EDINBURGH AND LONDON
MDCCC

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN 'BLACKWOOD'S MAGAZINE'

N O T E.

AS those of my readers who chanced to see the brief accounts of our escape from Pretoria which have appeared in the English and other papers may possibly observe some slight discrepancy between those narratives and the one in the following pages, I take this opportunity of explaining the cause thereof.

In the press account I was unable to take the public entirely into my confidence, since on the night of the seventh day after leaving Pretoria we met with very material assistance from our own countrymen, the fact of which could in no way be disclosed without placing the lives and property of those who unhesitatingly risked both in the most imminent peril.

Until the war approached a successful termination I could not give a full and complete account of our adventures, and at the same time tender our heartfelt thanks to those without whose timely aid we should have had the greatest difficulty in reaching the Portuguese frontier.

LADYSMITH, *May* 1900.

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HOW WE ESCAPED FROM PRETORIA.

I.

CHIEVELEY TO PRETORIA.

“The most unkindest cut of all.”

AFTER the fight of the 21st October at Elandslaagte I was sent to Pietermaritzburg together with other wounded, there to be cared for and made fit to resume my place at the front. But during the last days of October and the first of November events rapidly developed; and Ladysmith becoming surrounded by the Boer main army, I found myself cut off from my regiment, which formed part of the beleaguered garrison. As soon as I could walk I obtained permission to proceed to Estcourt, the farthest point north held by the relieving force, whence I hoped to have an opportunity of passing through the Boer lines with despatches and so rejoin my regiment. At Estcourt I was attached for duty to the 2nd battalion of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, one of those battalions which had taken part in the dashing capture of Talana Hill and the retreat to Lady-

smith, whence it had been sent to Colenso and later to its present quarters.

Several days passed unbroken by any event worth recording. Day after day, generally at the same hour, the armoured train, or (as it was named by the men in camp) "Wilson's death-trap," used to press forth unattended beyond the line of outposts, heralding, by agonised gasps and puffs, and clouds of smoke and steam, its advent to the far-sighted, long-hearing Boer. Daily, too, did it return in safety to the siding whence it had sallied forth at daybreak on its fruitless mission. How relieved the occupants looked when they climbed over its plated sides and congratulated themselves that their turn to form the freight of this moribund engine of war would not come round again for at least some days!

Mine, alas! arrived on the 15th of November.

On the preceding day there had been an alarm in camp. Corps stood to their arms and forthwith occupied the various defences and localities that they were detailed to hold. That night I received orders to reconnoitre on the following day with the armoured train.

I am not going to recount the events of that day, which already have been portrayed by an abler pen than mine. I will take up the tale at the point where I became a captive in the hands of the Boers—for it is my purpose in these pages to treat mainly of my captivity and escape, not to launch into matters to which full justice already has been done.

The morning of my capture—which took place at 8.50 A.M. after defending the armoured train for an hour and a half—was raw and damp: mist hung heavily on the surrounding hills, and a small drizzling rain, which

from time to time exerted itself until it attained to the magnitude of a shower, rapidly penetrated our garments, and added to the misery and discomfort of our unenviable position. Our escort politely begged us not to hurry, saying that there was lots of time, and that although they were unable themselves to spare us either food or clothing, we should find on reaching Pretoria all we required—nay, even that there we should be provided with the usual games with which the British officer delights to exercise himself. From their description, all that could delight the heart of man or prisoner awaited us in the Boer capital. No doubt they meant kindly, very kindly; but no promised land, no vista of untold delight, as seen through our eyes at that moment, could have made one's pulse beat even a shade faster. Some deep and dreary dungeon, or, still more so, an *oubliette*, seemed consonant with my feelings.

Meanwhile, trudging along the muddy veldt road, we came upon a number of Boers who were cleaning their rifles after being engaged with us, and with them was a party of Staats Artillery officers. With one of the latter, the officer in command, who was neatly dressed in cord coat and breeches, faced with blue, I had some conversation. He began by asking me why we had not surrendered at once, and congratulating us on the defence of the train, but lamenting that his guns had not been better laid, in which case, according to his reckoning, our shrift would have been a short one. He added that his three heavy guns had each fired an average of thirty rounds, and that (as we well knew) he had employed a Vickers-Maxim gun against us, a machine which has since received the *sobriquet* of "Pom-pom." Passing

on from here, we were ushered into the midst of the camp of a large commando, where Churchill's papers were examined, and taken to General Joubert, whom, I regret to say, we were not allowed to see; and great excitement was displayed on its becoming known that the real live son of a lord was amongst the prisoners. It was plain to me now that we were in the thick of a strong force which was on its way southwards. According to my own computation, I should have put down the numbers seen as from 3000 to 4000 men; but the Boers themselves stated that there were 6500.

The country about here is not interesting, although it was destined to become so ere a month had passed, and we ourselves were not in a mood to appreciate the beauties of nature, more especially as the inner man was beginning to cry out that he was being neglected.

Somewhat weary after a tramp of sixteen miles, and further fatigued by the exhausting experience of the morning, we at length came within sight of the village of Colenso. It presented every appearance of some unusual condition of affairs,—windows smashed, doors unhinged, furniture and crockery scattered broadcast over the grass-grown streets—in short, every indication of a hostile occupation.

Night was now falling, and we were hurried on to a large goods-shed contiguous to the main platform of the insignificant railway-station. We were directed to accept this as our lodging for the night, and expectations were held out that shortly an ox would be killed, and we should have our share of what promised to be a somewhat tough and untoothsome meal. This promise was not long in the fulfilment. The beast of burden was

slain, and almost as soon as the proverbial Indian dâk-bungalow chicken finds its way from the compound to the pot, we were busily engaged in cooking scraps of meat on sticks held over a fire, and looking forward to enjoying what are called in the East *kababs*. The wind was blowing, and the rain falling, as we crouched round the wood fires, each and all intent on the rapid preparation of our frugal meal. The warmth of the burning sticks and the discomfort of burnt fingers rapidly did their share in appeasing our hunger, and we betook ourselves to our temporary prison, where, selecting a corner apart from the men, we made a bed by spreading on the concrete floor the contents of some compressed forage bales. Burying ourselves in the short dry hay, we huddled close together, endeavouring thereby to retain such warmth as still remained in our weary limbs.

The building in which we were congregated contained but one door and a small skylight in the corrugated iron roof. A glance round on first entering it had raised hopes of a possible escape during the night, which as regards climatic conditions was singularly favourable; but though, when I look back on this lost chance, it seems like child's play compared with the difficulties which later opportunities presented, to our weary bodies and fagged-out brains it appeared to offer little chance of success, and we were only too glad to procrastinate, and to console ourselves with the thought that on the night of the morrow we should be within range of the guns of Ladysmith, and possibly in a far better position to give our captors the slip.

Having for the time dissolved the committee on ways and means of evasion, we turned our thoughts towards