

Chapter 01.

My Capture and Subsequent Escape from the Boers

November 15th, 1899 was a day I would remember all my life because this was the day I lost my rights as a free man and became a prisoner of war, a fate worse than an unwanted marriage. As the African sun beat down upon me I cursed the flimsy forage cap perched on the side of my head, which did nothing to protect my face and neck from the blistering heat. A rifle butt hit me between the shoulders, forcing me back into the long line of prisoners as we marched north to Pretoria and captivity. I turned on the guard who had hit me, mentally noting his face for future reference. I would remember his face for its likeness to a baboon in the London Zoo. Family likeness is frequent among the Boers due to inbreeding. The same cannot be said of baboons. Baboons are, apparently, more selective in their breeding. The guard shoved his rifle into my face, daring me to retaliate.

“Keep going, Mr. Churchill,” one of the older troopers told me and pulled me back into line. “He wants you to fight so he has an excuse to shoot you.” Warily I kept going, moving up the line to be with the other captive officers. It would be undignified for an officer to be seen punching a baboon disguised as a Boer. I had an enormous blister on my right heel, which seemed to have its origins near my hatband and I was so thirsty that I could have drunk several gallons. ‘There’s no return in the war,’ Kipling had written, and he was right.

A state of war had existed between Great Britain and the Boer Republics since the middle of October and things had not gone well for the British. In fact the Boers, with

their well-known mobility and speed of movement, made fools of us. Our military philosophy was still slumbering back with the Charge of the Light Brigade and it was the Poor Bloody Infantrymen that would be made to suffer.

As I trudged my way into Boer captivity, I felt foolish too and it was entirely my own fault. I was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time due to my own bad judgment. I ground my teeth in despair and anger, reflecting on the reasons why I was being conducted under armed guard to a Boer prison camp and escorted by a pet baboon dressed in homespuns, veldschoen and a slouch hat.

The origins of the war in South Africa against the Boer people went back a long way. The British had previously suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Boers in 1881 at the Battle of Majuba Hill and we had crawled away to lick our wounds. This lull of eighteen years had allowed the Boers to maintain their independence from the British Crown in Africa for the time being, but they were no match for the scheming of Mr. Cecil Rhodes who was intent on the annexation of all Boer territories into the British Empire.

Cecil John Rhodes was a self-made millionaire and dreamer of Imperial expansion. He had one ingrained belief, a belief which was his blind spot, that of Anglo-Saxon supremacy throughout the world. And part of his current dream was to conquer the two independent Boer states, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. This he had to do before he could build his most cherished monument, the Cape to Cairo railway.

Quite naturally, the Boers objected to Rhodes' high handedness and prepared to defend themselves. But in the meanwhile, British citizens poured into the Boer territories to the gold and diamond diggings around Kimberley and Witwatersrand. The political problem caused by this influx of non-Boer people arose when the Boers refused to accord

them full civil rights including the right to vote. When President Kruger of the Transvaal was pressed on the subject of rights for non-Boer citizens, he remarked, "Their rights! Yes, they'll get their rights over my dead body. I will not hand my country over to strangers." Kruger had a habit of plain speaking.

The Boers were implacable about the franchise, fearing British domination at the ballot box. Though not the only cause for the Boer War, the denial of voting rights provided the British government with a popular excuse for war. And in Cecil Rhodes' eyes this was a just cause because it was British capital that financed the advanced mining technology to extract the gold and diamonds from the fields, doubling the Transvaal's revenue in a scant ten years.

British military presence in Southern Africa escalated through 1899, causing further irritation with the Boers, and finally war between Briton and Boer broke out on October 12.

It was with this background of the affairs in South Africa, and knowing that war was about to be declared, that I was offered the appointment of war correspondent for the *London Morning Post*. I did not hesitate, but embarked on the next steamer bound for the Cape, the *Dunnotar Castle*, on the 11th of October, and I arrived at Durban at the end of the month.

From Durban I travelled by rail to Pietermaritzburg, and from here I went to Estcourt, which was now the end of the line for passengers. The Boers had occupied Colenso Station, some distance away and there was a sort of no-mans-land between us. I immediately ran into an old friend, Captain Peter Haldane, and it was from him that I heard of the armoured train, a scheme to proceed further up the line through no-man's-

land and shell the Boers. On the night of November 14th, Haldane asked me if I would like to go on the armoured train and write my account of the raid for my newspaper. Of course, I made up my mind immediately and agreed to go with him without another thought.

Since arriving in the field, I had been fully occupied writing a report for my newspaper concerning a grand experiment of the Royal Engineers, aerial observation from hydrogen balloons. It had seemed a very good idea and one, which I could see, would have great possibilities for artillery spotting and intelligence. Unfortunately, the general officers we were saddled with in Africa must have suffered from hydrogen between their ears because they flatly refused to employ this new technology. Much good was possible if the Engineers had used trained observers who could employ cameras with long distance lenses. But the generals felt it was unsporting to peer down onto the enemy whom they regarded as a fox to be chased on horseback. I heard one officer say that it was tantamount to spying and in foxhunting one must not spy on the fox. It is simply not done! And so we were denied an undoubted source of intelligence, which could have outwitted the Boers by showing us their troop dispositions. England has a talent for giving birth to buffoons and then putting them in charge of the army or the church, often rewarding them for their failures with high rank.

I completed my report in time to go with Haldane and on the morning of November 15th, we set off with two companies of infantry and a six pounder gun, and ran forward in the train to Chieveley Station, a distance of about fourteen miles. We had taken some potted meats with us and a box of Fortnum and Mason wafer biscuits. Haldane had very sportingly put up enough champagne on ice to wash down this lunch al

fresco, when there was a loud bang from the engine. At this point we suddenly realized that we were surrounded by Boers. The whole valley was infested with Boers. There were Boers to the right of us; Boers to the left of us and I felt as exposed as our chaps did during the Charge of the Light Brigade. So the train was reversed and we ran back the way we had come with our tails between our legs.

We immediately came under fire from Boer artillery and two wagons of our train were hit and derailed, blocking the line. A running fight then ensued between the two sides and as the Boers were firing down at us from the surrounding hills, we sustained many casualties from a withering and accurate rifle fire.

At this point two Boer horsemen galloped forward, firing their rifles at me. I heard the zip and ricochet of bullets too close for my general health, but I was unarmed and could not give them the honour of battle. I turned and ran towards a plate layer's hut, about fifty yards distant. I could see plenty of cover just past the hut, there was a gorge of the Blue Krantz River, and here I hoped to swim across and avoid the enemy, making my way back to Chieveley on foot.

It was then that another Boer horseman emerged from the bush and covered me with his rifle. I was cut off. He had me in his sights, as his horse stood stock-still like an American cow pony. And as a Boer horse he obviously hated Englishmen. Reluctantly, I raised my hands and became a prisoner of war. My captor herded me at gunpoint into a nearby quarry and I joined several of my comrades who had met a similar fate.

As a war correspondent I had no right to take part in the fighting and so my involvement in the armoured train incident put me in danger of being shot out of hand. I was entirely too young to die and I was glad when I found out that my captors felt the

same way. The Boers are humane people and eventually they reconciled things in their minds by not shooting me, but holding me as a prisoner instead. I was therefore marched under escort sixty miles to the nearest Boer railhead at Elandsplaagte, there to continue my journey by train and into captivity in Pretoria.

In this fashion I entered into a most melancholy period of my life and I was marched off to imprisonment. I found myself among several other men who had been captured by the Boers during the opening stages of the war, suffering all the frustrations of captivity.

Since my capture by the Boers on November 15, 1899, I had been held in the State Model School, Pretoria. During this whole time I had planned to escape. I had spent close to four weeks in the darkest despair. The war was proceeding on its own course and I was in Pretoria kicking up my heels and unable to do anything about it except pray for an escape opportunity. There is nothing worse than being kept away from the action when your friends are fighting and often giving up their lives. In my case life was literally passing me by when I should have been in the thick of the war, reporting each battle and doing my job of war correspondent. I was confined with the same men who had been with me on the armoured train together with other prisoners taken as the war progressed. Unless we did something to rejoin our friends, we were in for a long spell in chokey.

Escape was constantly on our minds and we walked about the compound all day examining the guards and security systems, intent on finding the weak link in the prison fence and dreaming all the time of escape. We were not closely scrutinized and our jailers were not at all strict with us, which we thought awfully decent of them. In fact, we had

the impression that they were downright lax, not capable of guarding hundreds of men desperate to regain their freedom.

The prison was a hastily improvised affair, simply a group of huts within the school grounds and the whole complex surrounded by barbed wire. Men of the South African Republican Police – the ZARPs – patrolled the perimeter 24 hours a day. We could see that an escape from this prison was not physically difficult, but any escaped prisoner of war will tell you that the perils really lie beyond the wire, when you are a stranger in a hostile country, many hundreds of miles from home.

In my case I was still dressed in the khaki tunic and breeches of a war correspondent with a cavalry forage cap on my head, whereas the Boers wore shapeless homespun tweeds with a large felt hat. On their feet they wore veldschoen of home-cured leather, not the polished cavalry boots of the British officer. In this environment it was obvious that I would stick out like the proverbial sore thumb and all the more so because I did not speak Afrikaans and had no intention of doing so.

A letter from my dear mother, Jenny Jerome Churchill, still burned in my tunic pocket next to my heart. Her words were full of admonishment and as searing as the African sun. She wrote, “You seem to have no real purpose in life, Winston, and don’t realize that for a man life means work, and hard work if you mean to succeed.” I longed for hard work, and I protested her words, and I swore an oath to myself that if I were delivered from this pestilential hole I would devote the rest of my life to labor in one form or another, even if it meant going into politics.

Success through hard work would completely elude me while remaining a guest of the Boers, and so I was determined to escape rather than rot in prison for the duration

of the war. On the night of December the 12th I squeezed through the wire, partially concealed by an iron lavatory building. The Zarps who patrolled this stretch of the wire were busy talking and smoking with their backs to me. Breathlessly I stood in the shadows unable to believe that I had not set off some kind of electric alarm. But I congratulated myself too soon. The wire by the lavatory building was newly strung and taut. As I slid along, one of my tunic buttons – standard brass infantry buttons – caught on the wire. I was hung there by a button and at the same time my feet slipped from under me as my boots buried themselves into freshly turned earth.

Button and wire decided to part company as I sank further, which caused a musical twang of wire like a piano tuner trying to achieve the note of G natural in the lowest register. The noise was loud, I can only say that, but it was followed by several other twanging noises of the fresh wire as it settled itself down and made itself at home with its new posts. The Zarps thought nothing of it and I started to breathe again. They were still smoking and talking, with their backs to me. Unhurriedly, I walked away from them, but all the time expecting to receive a Mauser bullet between my shoulder blades.

I could still hear the Zarps talking as they patrolled, when suddenly the wire started to shake violently. This section of the wire was hung at intervals with tin cans containing small pebbles. When the wire was shaken the cans and pebbles gave a loud alarm. Something had set the alarm off and was about to betray my position, which I felt unfair.

I threw myself to the ground, hoping that Mother Earth would swallow me and keep me concealed from the Zarps. I heard shouts in Afrikaans from the guard tents and

then an answering shout from a position not more than ten feet from me. There were electric searchlights within the compound and suddenly one was turned in my direction.

My heart stopped as the light swept across the wire. It stopped just short of where I lay, coming to rest on one of the Zarp sentries hastily closing the flaps of his breeches. His companion, a gaudily bedecked lady of the night hours was also adjusting her attire. I had almost stumbled onto an assignation of a commercial nature and all but stepped on the actors in *flagrante delicto*.

“Een hond was gegen det wire pissen,” the Zarp sentry shouted, nervously, I thought. (I later learned from an Afrikaans-speaking friend, that these words meant, ‘a dog has become entangled in the wire in the act of going through its devotions.’) I marveled at the Afrikaans classical economy of words!

The light was extinguished and the couple continued with their coupling, this time choosing a substantial wooden post as their means of support, *in extenso*, one might say. Taking advantage of this gap in security, I slipped across the road and into the shadows of the opposite building. I looked for some further concealment and stumbled on a rail line, a siding that served the warehouse district. Walking ahead on the rail bed, I soon emerged onto a wide street, apparently the commercial Centre of Pretoria.

There were few people abroad on the streets that night. Those I encountered went about their own business without a word. Turning a corner from the main thoroughfare, I was determined to find a livery stable and obtain a horse by fair means or foul. When I was captured, I had a little over 75 pounds sterling about my person and the Boers, quite sportingly, had allowed me to retain it. With a horse, I figured I could make a brave

attempt at covering the 300 miles from Pretoria to Delagoa Bay in Portuguese East Africa and thence by ship from the port of Laurengo Marques back to the Cape.

But this was not to be. Every stable had its armed guards, tall, lean, weather beaten men whose only objective in life seemed to be the killing of Englishmen in general and English war correspondents in particular. It then occurred to me that by far the best means of escape would be via the Delagoa Bay Railway, directly to the port of Laurengo Marques in Portuguese East, rather than by horse over treacherous roads. But again, my plans were thwarted. The railway station was heavily guarded, as were the shunting yards where trains were assembled and loaded with coal or copper ore for shipment to Delagoa Bay.

In desperation I sat down in the street with my back to the wall. I had a flask of single malt whisky next to my mother's letter in my tunic pocket and this became my moral support, a hefty dram doing wonders for my courage. I have since become a life-long devotee of whisky and any other dignified spirit I can lay my hands on. Fine brandy became my sword and buckler in the darkest hours and I make no apology for it.

Night had fallen and a cool breeze blew in from the veldt. A shooting star traversed the African sky and I felt Providence might soon take a hand in my escape. As soon as this thought occurred to me, the hair on the back of my head bristled and I heard a light shuffling along the wall where I was crouched. Suspecting some wild beast had come in from the veldt, I prepared to sell my life dearly, although I was weapon-less apart from the whiskey flask and a small pocketknife suitable only for paring my toenails. And I did not feel inclined to risk the loss of good single malt by wielding the bottle as a club and battering some unknown and ferocious animal over the skull.

“ ‘ere, Mate,” a low, vulgar voice hissed close to me. “Are you that there newspaper bloke? The one they call Churchill?” A round face loomed at me through the darkness, a face without distinction or beauty, somewhat dissipated and vile, which spoke of the stews and rat infested pubs of London. The face was joined by another, a humorless face, a face versed in depravity, long, with a large nose, curved like a beak and eyes set too close together for comfort. I stood up from my crouching position by the wall. Better to die standing up like a man than stretched out in the dust like a dog.

“Who the Dickens are you?” I barked at them, fully prepared to give them the old Harrow one-two. They ignored my question.

The two faces emerged from their background and I could see that both were mounted on bodies of equally unsavory bearing. I had encountered similar low individuals during my time in India, poor relatives, time-expired men who lived on the charity of others. These two were the types who would sell their own mothers for a couple of quid and thought themselves above the law in so doing. They looked the criminal type and I fully suspected that they had been chucked out of a county regiment for theft or even worse, failure to pay their bookmaker.

“ ‘e must be an English orficer,” the tall beaky looking felon said, his Adam’s apple moving up and down in his scrawny throat. “You can tell by ‘is chin. ‘e ain’t got one.” He laughed at his own joke. “‘e’s that there war correspondent what was captured by the Boers only last month and stuffed in the Nick.” They both stared at me, no doubt wondering how much they could sell me for, back to the Boers. I was beside myself with anger at the thought of a British officer having to parley and beg for his freedom from

two chancers like these. War was no longer an occupation for gentlemen but had descended to the level of the prize ring with Jem Mace as the bare knuckle contender.

“You’ve made it a lot easier for us, Mate,” the short, fat one said, cleaning his teeth with a matchstick and wiping the residue onto his cuff. I could see now that both men were dressed in rough tweeds with the African wide-awake hat and country leather veldschouen on their feet. Both were unarmed, apart from hefty looking knives sheathed at their belts. The remainder of their possessions seemed to be rolled up in a filthy blanket which they wore across one shoulder, again Boer fashion.

“Who the blazes are you?” I asked, yet again, still shocked by the confrontation with this miserable pair. “What are you doing in Pretoria dressed up like Boer farmers? I’ll have you arrested for consorting with the enemy.” In retrospect this seemed an idle threat because there were no British troops in sight for miles and I would never hand anybody, not even my worst enemy, over to the Military Field Police.

They both looked hurt to the quick. “We was sent by the Old Bulldogger,” the little fat one informed me. “So we took a steamer up to Portogoose country and then rode inland until we got to Pretoria.”

The tall one then took up the narrative. “Yus. We followed the old trek road, all the way from Portogoose East. It’s nobut a step. I’ve got a Veeder cyclometer and we fink it’s abaht free ‘undred miles, as near as dammit is to swearin’.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.” I said, loftily. “A Veeder cyclometer? Perhaps it’s some new fangled gadget the cavalry are using to groom their horses,” I added, sarcastically, and then chuckled at my own wit. Humour would be

totally lost on these two; they probably had brains like prison oatmeal, grey, cold and lumpy.

My sarcasm was lost on them. “We’d better get you off the street, Mate,” the little fat one said, affecting a confidential tone. “We’re staying at Diamond Lil’s place and we’ll get you in from the back stairs and ‘hide you.”

I was still unconvinced. “Who is the Old Bulldogger? If you are referring to General Sir Redvers Buller in this fashion then you both have an infernal cheek.” Surely, these two ruffians could not be employed by Her Majesty. But war makes strange allies and Redvers Buller was always a strong supporter of military intelligence. Although the term ‘military intelligence’ could be construed as a contradiction in terms, it was a surprising fact considering what a dull fellow the General was. But then, he had attended Eton, not Harrow, so I suppose he could be forgiven for his dullness.

The two miscreants led me through a maze of back alleys in Pretoria’s poorest quarter. I had my doubts that they were lodged any place but an opulent choice of chambers. But the name, Diamond Lil, gave me hope and conjured up an establishment of the most moral and upright character. I doubted this lodging house had any connection with the virginal Diamond Lil of Kimberley, a lady of the highest breeding and with whom I had more than a nodding acquaintance. Cecil Rhodes himself had introduced us during a levee and I found this charming woman to be most accomplished. Moreover, she was devoted to good works, in particular for the well being of the diggers who worked in the diamond mines. She was as mindful of the diggers’ Christian guidance as Florence Nightingale was towards the nursing of wounded soldiers in the Crimea.

I was, therefore, somewhat disturbed to learn that an impostor ran a similar establishment in Pretoria. That the impostor could only be a pale facsimile of the original Diamond Lil, I had no doubt. But beggars cannot be choosers or, in my case, escaped prisoners had very little choice but to lump it.

“We’ll ‘ave to get ‘omer orf to the Old Bulldogger,” the little fat one said, in a hoarse stage whisper, suitable only for the lower classes of music hall in the Empire’s capital. “Bulldogger’ll get the message sometime in the mornin’.” He pronounced the word morning, “morn-or-horn-or-in’,” a silly attempt at humour, which only convinced me further that I was in the hands of some very low characters indeed.

“What, or who is ‘omer?” I asked, frustrated by their low dialect. I remember the words of Mr. Somervell, my English master at Harrow, who taught dunces like me to write English, parsing fair. He would seize on a poorly constructed sentence, holding it aloft like a week-old kipper and state in his quiet and cultured way, “Gentlemen, this is the sort of English sentence up with which I will not put.” I was now saddled with two idiots up with which I apparently had to endure. They ignored my question.

All was dark and quiet as we approached the yard behind the lodging house. The outbuildings were small, and the taller of these two chancers explained that these were not stables, just a shed for bicycles and the ‘usual offices; a ten ‘oler wiv roses rahnd the door.’ A ten holer sounded frightfully chummy, but an English public school had taught me not to be too sensitive in such matters.

Unseen, we slipped through the back door of this hostelry and I found myself in a room of unknown genre. The room was in darkness, but a faint glow came from the cook

stove, which was banked for overnight. I could hear a kettle singing quietly on the stove, and the sound of wheezing, like that of a dying gun horse.

The little fat one struck a match and I was faced by an enormous being of mixed race, a 'person' of at least twenty-five stones, give or take an ounce or two. I was unsure whether this creature was male or female until the tall one spoke. " 'ow's fings, Lil?" he asked.

"Owright!" 'ow's your fings?" the 'person' answered. The mystery was solved. I realized I had been brought into the presence of Diamond Lil, of the Pretoria peerage. I shuddered at the sight of her - all the more so when this immense pail of lard heaved herself from the chair and seized my hand by way of welcome. I was immediately overcome by an attack of emotion, bordering on nausea, as I perceived this creature wobbling like butterscotch junket at a garden party. Lil opened her arms and made as if to embrace me.

"Charmed, I'm sure," I warbled, on the verge of hysteria, as I desperately looked for an avenue of escape. "Are you by any chance related to the Hampshire Diamantes?" I asked, in desperation.

Chapter 02

Diamond Lil

Breathlessly I backed away, only to come to a full stop against a walnut tallboy. On either side were oak settles and I was trapped between two species of lumber. There was no escape; I was forced to suffer her attentions. Patriotically I steeled myself to look at the ceiling and think of England.

“Ow, yer right welcome ‘ere, yer Ludship,” she wheezed pathetically, seizing my right cheek in the thumb and forefinger of her free hand and squeezing the daylights out of it. “Don’t you fret, yer Ludship. Diamond Lil’ll see yer froo. Never fear, Dear, Lil’s ‘ere!”

I had but little idea what ‘seeing yer froo’ might entail. I only hoped it would not be too painful or embarrassing or, for that matter, insanitary. “I’m sure I’m safe in your capable hands, Miss Diamond,” I ventured, hoping against hope that she would not lay her filthy paws on me and spoil the fit of my tunic, only recently purchased from Allkit’s in the Strand.

During this frightful interview I was attended by the little fat fellow, who had illuminated the room by means of an ill-tempered oil lamp, which spluttered and expectorated in all directions. It was, I supposed, the kitchen of this establishment. I had never seen a kitchen before, having never been below stairs in my father’s house. Such was the domain of the servants and no gentleman was allowed there. This room was far from clean. In fact it was so foul I wondered if its filth was the normal thing in food preparation rooms. A dirty wood stove radiated some warmth, and the furniture,

including a rough stinkwood table, was covered by unwashed dishes, which in turn were covered by a layer of flies, rising in a cloud when the fat companion lit another lamp. The wick flickered and smoked until he swore rather scenically at it and lowered the lamp glass. The little fat fellow produced a large bottle of Cape brandy through some sleight of hand and then deftly drew the cork like a waiter at the Astoria. Rummaging about the table he unearthed some filthy looking tumblers and poured out hefty dollops of liquor into each. He raised his glass to Diamond Lil.

“ere’s to the girl what lives on the ‘ill,” the little fat fellow said, by way of a toast.

“She won’t, but ‘er sister will,” Diamond Lil enjoined, and they both cackled fit to bust a gun horse’s girth. Indeed I thought we might be in danger of some conflagration because they both seemed to be inflated with a sort of active gas, the type most frequently used in the flatulent arts.

I shivered at the prospect, closed my eyes and swallowed the brandy in one gulp, an achievement which served me well for the rest of my life, and which most likely prevented me from catching the collywobbles and Bombay belly at the same time.

We were joined by the tall one, carrying a plump looking pigeon. I assumed this bird might be my supper and was disappointed when the fat one introduced the bird as ‘omer. “Fastest carrier pigeon we got,” the fat one said.

Diamond Lil brought out slips of rice paper and a mapping pen and Indian ink. Clearly the agent in charge, she proceeded to write out the following message in a cryptic, educated hand. ‘Scribbler flown. In home coop. Wheelmen/Scribbler riding to sea.’ She signed the message ‘Venus’. I wondered at the capacity of the military mind to

assign a code name of such a truly misguided nature. The term ‘military intelligence’ was one of unexplained mystery to me and has remained so over the years. Critics of the term ‘military intelligence’ have frequently referred to it as an oxymoron, but I prefer to remain charitable and simply call the phrase misguided.

The tall one rolled the message into a tiny silver tube and attached it to the bird’s leg. “Orf yer go, ‘omer,” he said, releasing the pigeon through the kitchen window. “Orf yer go to the Old Bulldogger.”

It struck me that a carrier pigeon was a rather unsure way of sending military messages, although it had been done for centuries. What of the new techniques such as Morse code carried through a number of media? We had signal lamps such as the Begbie and heliographs based on mirrors and the sun’s rays, all subject to the weather and visibility. In my brief time in Africa I had seen no evidence that wireless was employed by either side, although by the end of the war a wireless message had crossed the Atlantic. It seemed a dereliction of duty that the British Army had not considered such an invention for communication between troops. As it turned out, there were serious losses of communication between commanders and fighting soldiers, which led to disaster after disaster.

I put this to the startled trio in the kitchen. The thought of sending messages through the ether without the aid of wings or wires startled them so much that they were forced to find First Aid in the use of brandy.

There was silence for several seconds. The only sound was the inevitable soft fall of embers in the stove. The tall one poured himself a hefty dollop of brandy. We were three dollops ahead of him, and to be perfectly honest I was feeling more at home each

minute and I wondered if we should propose another toast to the girl on the hill: if not personally to her, then to her sister.

“ere’s to sweet’earts and wives,” the tall one toasted.

“May they never meet,” I endorsed. It was an old and frequently used toast in junior officers’ circles and I was glad that the other ranks reflected the same dignities as we did, rough dignities though they were. Military courtesies such as these were strictly observed in the British Army at that time and we were, as a consequence, always referred to as The Old Contemptibles.

Diamond Lil let out a screech of enjoyment at this sally on my part. “You’re a bit of a card, yer Ludship,” she wheezed and I thought she might conceivably cough herself to death if we were in luck. “I’ll bet you’re a right one wiv them fine ladies up at Government ‘ouse. Them’s wot goes all la-di-da in front of the common folk.”

“Strictly in a recreational sense,” I answered. She shrieked again and I wondered what I’d said that was so funny.

I had never thought of myself as a ladies man or a wit, but under the influence of the Cape brandy in hefty dollops, I could see that this Diamond Lil was a perceptive person and a possible goer under field service conditions. Obviously she had a brain within her twenty-five stones of jelly, even though it might be cut off from the rest of her. She put me in mind of the ‘Boneless Wonder’, a carnival side show I had seen as a boy and which impressed me immensely. My father, Lord Randolph Churchill, said that the Boneless Wonder impressed him too, but reminded him very much of some Liberals seated on the opposition benches in the House of Lords. At the time, his wit was far above my head; I was only seven at the time. But years later I saw the subtlety of his

words, doubly so when I sat on the Government benches in the Commons, listening to the spineless oratory from the Labour members across the House, whilst debating the Irish Bill.

By this time Diamond Lil had wound up the phonograph and commenced dancing with the little fat fellow. They performed a rather silly dance, one which I had never seen before, but which I had heard about, called ‘Knees Up Mother Brown.’ In its finer form I imagined this dance could be full of energy and agility – especially if performed by a troupe of Dervishes in full battle order and in establishments which catered to the lower classes. It consisted of several questionable gymnastic movements. Repetitiously raising the knees to the chest, all the time accompanied by a verse, ‘Knees up Muvver Brahn// When you go to Town...’ etcetera. As a military two step it might have passed for some sort of physical training, especially if performed by the Rifle Corps, but as a dance it failed miserably, unable to compete with such splendid ballroom gyrations as the ‘Gay Gordons’ or the ‘Lancers’.

I consoled myself with more Cape brandy, poured freehand and without the counsel of a shot glass. Feeling more in a festive mood, I offered to teach Lil a modern dance, which I had seen in Cuba, called the Tango. The Tango is an extreme example of popular dance that doubles as a form of drama. It must tell a story, with its measures calling for advance and retreat, with frequent uses of physical jerks in the interim. The exponents of the Tango who I had seen in Cuba were lean and lithe, whereas Lil was corpulent and adipose. Dancing the Tango with her, therefore, took all the skill of an ostler maneuvering a dray horse into the shafts of a brewer’s wagon.

These proceedings were necessarily helped by more and more dollops of Cape brandy, and soon I began to deteriorate around the edges. At this juncture, I was rescued by the little fat fellow who wished to try his grubby hand at the Tango. He took over as Lil's partner while I consoled myself with the bottle; not a difficult thing to do.

The sight of these two bodies cavorting like jellied swine left me nauseated and I thought they might resort to the flatulent arts as an encore. I suddenly sought fresh air and stumbled out into the yard. The tall one quickly followed.

“Not finking of takin’ orf on yer own are yer, sah.” he asked me, in an urban whine. I ignored him, drinking in the night air and gazing up at the African sky. It was the last I remember of that night. The tension of the day and the physical exhaustion, perhaps aided by the dollops of Cape brandy and the exercise of teaching Lil the Tango, made my head spin and I collapsed onto the stoep outside the kitchen door. I dreamed I was at the Regimental Ball, teaching bowls of raspberry blancmange how to dance the ‘Knees Up Mother Brown’, and serving the Colonel and Adjutant large dollops of Cape brandy. Strangely my dear mother was at the ball and danced the Tango most beautifully with me.

When I came to, my body was racked with pain and stiffness. I made as if to move, only to find that the stiffness was in my side where it came in contact with one level of the wooden stoep, whereas my head resided above me, and my feet were at a lower level. My ribs, therefore, formed the fulcrum upon which my whole body had balanced during the entire night. The pain seemed mainly in my head and I had the raw Cape brandy to blame for that. But at least some kind soul had covered me with a horse

blanket during the night, although there was still a strong odour of horse upon it accompanied by livestock of a wriggling and squirming nature.

Clinging to a newel post, I managed to pull myself painfully to my feet. The morning had scarcely broken and the last stars were fading in the sky. Mist swirled around the yard, concealing my two rescuers of the night before, who were conversing in an animated argument of a tiresome technical nature.

“ ‘e’s gonna ride the Columbia,” I could hear the little fat fellow’s pig-like speech.

“ ‘e don’t want no Yankee bike. Let ‘im ride the B.S.A. It’s a better bike for the veldt,” opined the tall fellow.

There seemed some technical impasse between the two and I had no wish to interfere, even if I had understood what they were talking about. “ ‘is mum’s an American,” the fat one said. “An’ she comes from Rochester – I read abaht it in the Tatler. An’ that’s where the Columbia bikes come from – Rochester. So, ‘e aint riding no B.S.A. British Small Arms my foot. More like a Bloody Sore Arse! ‘e’s riding the Columbia and there aint no argument.”

This spirited altercation seemed to come from a low shed, which came and went before my eyes as the mist ebbed and flowed across the yard. Reluctantly I relinquished my post at the newel and picked my way across the yard in the general direction of this building. As I struggled through the door I could see that I had entered a kind of workshop and that its neatness was in total contrast to the slovenly kitchen of the main hostelry.

“Odds bodikins and buckets of blood,” I moaned, the workshop spinning in front of my eyes.

“G’mawnin’ yer Ludship,” the tall one said, pulling himself up to attention.

The other one also snapped to some semblance of military posture, the fat chins apparently supported by hydrogen gas and rippling in response to sudden movement.

“Likewise, yer Ludship,” the fat chins endorsed.

“ ‘ow’s yer ‘ead,” my fat friend asked, without any regard to rank. “What a case you turned aht to be,” he continued confidentially. “Lil thinks you’re gonna marry ‘er. I wouldn’t be in your shoes, Mate.” And he winked at his tall companion.

“Buckets of blood,” I repeated. “For heaven’s sake stop the room revolving.”

“What you need is a drop of the old dog’s ‘air,” the tall one said, taking a bottle from the shelf and pouring me half-a-gill of some amber fluid into a wooden cup. I was relieved to see it was a patent preparation called ‘Soyer’s Nectar’ and not Cape brandy, although it smelled more like horse liniment which had matured beyond its best time. I knocked the dog’s hair back and soon began to feel better, though remaining quite delicate.

“Thank you,” I said. “Most kind of you, I’m sure.” At least the room now stood still of its own accord.

My first impressions were confirmed as I looked round the workshop. The neatness and cleanliness of this establishment bore mute testimony to professionalism. Just whose professionalism I did not know at that time. There were about twenty bicycles of several makes in purpose-built racks. Special tools and spare parts were stored along the walls in metal clips, while two work benches stood in the middle. There was also a jig

for aligning wheels and another to hold a complete bicycle while a mechanic made judicial adjustments. Spare tires hung from hooks and sets of wheels were racked along the opposite wall. Moreover, every bicycle appeared to be perfectly maintained and oiled as if they were for sale in a London bicycle shop.

I had bicycled frequently in England and enjoyed the sport immensely. My dear mother was also an ardent bicyclist, especially when on vacation in Paris. She was among the first of the more adventurous ladies of fashion to bicycle through the Bois de Boulogne wearing long, black bloomers. This was viewed as extremely risqué at that time, in 1895, when most ladies wore ‘bicyclettes’, a type of divided skirt which was more in keeping with propriety. It was the fad among lady cyclists in Paris to wear gold and jeweled anklets showing beneath their bloomers or skirts, and to complete this fashionable ensemble, a short Eton jacket was worn over the bosom held together with two brass buttons. Naturally, my mother followed this fashion regime to the letter.

I bicycled many times with my mother in England and France and she was always my soul of inspiration. She was the strongest of women, a writer in her own rights and a woman of her time, one who was not afraid of speaking her opinions on a number of topics. Secretly, I think I was a little in love with her. Some of my proudest moments were when riding with her in Paris, me in my simple tweed knickers and Norfolk jacket and my mother in her haute couture of the bicycle.

The little fat one wheeled a machine towards me. It was a Columbia, brand spanking new, with a rack and touring bags. I was suddenly struck by a violent series of misgivings: such serious misgivings that the world began to revolve on its axis again. I felt dizzy, urgently requiring another draft of Soyer’s Nectar. Surely this pair of

miscreants did not expect me to escape by riding a bicycle 300 miles to Portuguese East Africa? Surely not?

“You’re not expecting me to ride this thing all the way to the sea?” I asked, by way of objection, horror rising from my stomach in spite of the Soyer’s Nectar.

“Piece o’ cake,” the fat one advised me, his layers of excess tissue wobbling in the dawn breeze like a hot air balloon with mutiny on its mind.

“Yus, piece o’ cake,” the tall one confirmed, his eyes perpetuating that revolting squint. I was convinced that one eye revolved in a clockwise direction and the other going anti clockwise, but only when I was feeling poorly. Under the proper circumstances I thought he would have one red eye and the other green.

Apparently they did expect me to bicycle all the way, and were prepared to ride with me because they wheeled out their own machines and propped them alongside the Columbia. The tall fellow had a Rudge Whitworth, a worthy and proven wheel, and the short one stood beside a Hercules, well known for its strength and character. They came to attention and announced themselves. “I’m Apollo,” the fat one said – more military intelligence. “I’m Hermes,” the tall one said, “an’ we knows all abaht bicycles.”

“An’ we’re both troopers wiv Cecil’s Chisellers,” the fat one explained. “We was wiv Teddy Roosevelt’s RoughRiders a couple o’ wars ago, but we got seconded by the Old Sergeant Major. ‘e said we would be doin’ a far, far better fīng.”

I found this whole montage of technology under the auspices of two common soldiers to be quite overwhelming. Both fellows seemed the take-charge type, not the usual ranker one sees. They seemed to be capable of turning their hands to just about anything and I wondered if they knew anything about taking photographs. Just before

sailing for the Cape on the Dunnotar Castle, I had very seriously considered the use of a motion picture machine to record all my impressions and reports. This arrangement would have been a double-barreled benefit to me: as a method of earning my living through a type of visual journalism, and as a publicity method for keeping myself in front of the public in the event that I would later run for office. My ideas were just ahead of the times due to the size and weight of the machinery. We did have a mutograph or cinematograph on board ship, which took crude movie pictures of not very important things. The equipment was huge, and its innards were full of whirring, electrical sounds, quite frightening, I thought.

When I arrived at the Cape, I found that the American Biograph Company had made arrangements to photograph the war in moving pictures and show them to the public as a news service in their Biograph Theaters. With this sort of well-organized competition I would have lost my financial shirt and with it any future in politics.

At this time a loud clatter of metal upon metal came from the kitchen door, followed by a screech from Diamond Lil. "Brekfuss's ready."

The thought of eating anything produced by that jade of jellied junk from her filthy kitchen caused me fresh waves of nausea. I pleaded sickness, a state of delicate stomach, a severe head pain, a sudden onset of bubonic plague, an unseasonal attack of housemaid's knee. But my two companions of the early hours forced me towards the house. In fact they almost frog marched me there.

"You've gotta 'ave a good brekfuss," the fat one advised. "We 'ave ter ride fifty miles aht ter Witbank an' we dunno 'ow many Boers we'll meet wiv on the way."

“Yus,” the tall one confirmed. “An’ you promised to marry Diamond Lil last night, an’ now we’ll ‘ave ter call ‘er ‘yer Ledyship’. You’ve gorn an’ torn it, you ‘ave, Mate.” He winked at his co-conspirator.

“Odds bodikins and buckets of blood,” I pleaded, weakly. “Let me die in the dawn’s early light. I don’t want John Brown to molder there in utter loneliness.”

Chapter 03

We Leave Pretoria

The thought of an unwanted marriage, coerced by drink, and waking to such a shocking state of affairs, brought me to a near state of hysteria. I hoped I had not escaped one prison to a life of enforced matrimony, a prison-like state of its own.

It seemed I had rather ‘gorn and torn it’, as the tall one so lucidly expressed my current condition. But I put my best foot forward as I walked across the stoep to the kitchen door. At the first sight of Lil, I nearly bolted on the spot. She had clothed herself in a tattered ballroom gown and fixed some sort of paste hairpiece across her filthy scalp like a cardboard coronet. The thought of becoming betrothed to such an odious creature, let alone waking up each morning by her side, caused me further distress and I lurched back into the yard, there to vomit with unaccustomed ferocity.

“There, there, me old Mate,” the fat one comforted me quietly. “Bowl o’ Lil’s porridge wiv brahn sugar an’ arf a dozen fried eggs an’ you’ll be a brand new bloke.” I didn’t really want to be a ‘brand new bloke’, but if I was to be reincarnated in a new image then I hoped I would come back as anything but a Liberal.

The tall one had already entered the house for his portion of ‘scoff’, a tiresome word much used by the common soldiers of that time and one that they applied to any form of comestible, provided they could sink they dentures in it. I was assisted by the fat one who I found unexplainably strong as he lifted me onto the stoep and through the door, back to Lil’s merciless ministrations.

“ ‘ello, my Lovely,” Lil screamed at me like a Whitechapel vulture. “C’mon make yoursel’ at ‘ome. Put yer feet up darlin’ there’s a good boy an’ Lil’ll git yer a nice cuppa coffee.” She polished a dirty white mug on her hessian apron and poured black coffee for me. From a mysterious black bottle she laced the coffee, I suspected again with Soyer’s Nectar, because with the first gulp my head disappeared. I mean that my headache disappeared, but I am not entirely sure that my head itself did not have a temporary out of body experience flying around the room before coming to rest back on my shoulders.

“Thank you so much, Miss Diamond,” I said, hoping the two troopers were mistaken about an offer of marriage to this wobbly old woman. Such a liaison would have proved disastrous for my later career in politics. And how could I continue with my life in its present state under these circumstances? Lil had never been presented at Court.

From that day forth, and because I have been faced with a lifetime of distasteful tasks, and some as distasteful as dealing with Diamond Lil, I became a believer in strong drink, and brandy in particular. Sometimes I have taken to whiskey, purely for its sporting qualities, you understand, and I have been a lifelong supporter of the wines from the Champagne region of France. But brandy has been my mainstay. I might, therefore, say that I had been driven to drink, but it was never a journey about which I could complain.

The porridge was lumpy, but nothing that an English public school education had not prepared me for. But if the ‘stir’ was reasonable, it took all my courage to swallow the six hard fried eggs. These were anything but succulent, having a quality about them more in keeping with India rubber. I am reasonably sure that one of these eggs actually winked at me from the plate.

“There, now,” my betrothed screamed softly in my ear, “ ‘e’s adoin a bit of awright.” I suppose I was, having also swallowed a half-pint of ‘the hair of the jackal that bit me’, although it would have been more humane to the jackal if I had died there and then on the African veldt.

“Get rid o’ them there duds, yer Ludship,” the tall one ordered me, and threw a bundle of old clothing in my general direction. “You’re in luck. ‘er Leddyship picked aht the best from ‘er slops, she did.” By slops I assumed that Lil kept some sort of second hand togs emporium and sold the outfits of English gentlemen on the open market. If that were the case then we would shortly see extremely well dressed Boers swaggering about Pretoria. I could only hope that they might be taken as escaped British officers and shot out of hand by their own side.

“You cannot make me change my clothes in public,” I offered, weakly.

I was embarrassed. Expecting me to strip in front of two common soldiers was bad enough, but in front of a woman – in broad daylight, or what passed for daylight in Lil’s kitchen, was another. “No need ter be shy, my lovely,” Lil screamed. And she laid her rough hands on my body, peeling my garments from me including my cavalry boots. In seconds I stood there in my nether wear, a set of long cotton drawers purchased from Gieves and Company in Pall Mall and designed to support Christianity to the fullest.

“Oo. Look at ‘im,” she screamed. “ ‘e looks just like a virgin on the verge.” And she collapsed in a paroxysm of wheezes, which was only relieved by an early morning dollop of Cape brandy from the bottle she kept conveniently in the fireplace nook.

Since my capture, I had grown a beard, not a very good one, but sufficient to pass me off as a scruffy individual. My beard was not a choice. The Boers had confiscated our

kit and personal effects such as razors, which were not allowed. I suppose they thought we might cut through the barbed wire if we were equipped with Sheffield steel.

With the assistance of the two miscreants and Lil's fussing about my body, I was soon dressed in an ancient suit of homespun tweed. They crammed a ruin of a bush hat upon my head and rough veldtschoen on my feet to replace the fine cavalry boots I had bought from Lotus in Leicester Square. The only vestige of civilization about my costume was a waistcoat of gentlemanly cut, but one that had seen much service, and a long history of soup stains, mustard blotches and what looked suspiciously like Worcestershire sauce. Consequently, I soon smelled as gamey as my two companions of the early hours. Looking in the mirror I was shocked to see a ruffian staring back at me, and when this apparition moved I was further shocked to realize it was me and that I had been transformed into a Boer yokel.

Lil handed each of us a canvas bag of biltong and rusks, trail fodder guaranteed to constipate an irregular elephant. With our rolled blankets and long capes, we looked like any other 'skellums' you might see in Pretoria, just come in from the country and hanging about in the streets and around the stables. There were dozens of these idle Boers in Pretoria who belonged to no particular commando, but spent their days in mischief with no civil authority over them. Indeed, the Boers were not used to authority, as we knew it, preferring to handle their own disputes and arguments in their own way.

"You'll 'ave a good start, I'm thinking," my ill betrothed sniffed and snuffled like a heartbroken aardvark, and I knew the parting would be emotional and full of such sweet sorrow - on her part, only. At this point, Lil retrieved a sheet of paper from her apron pocket. She obviously had some spies at the telegraph office because she had the text of a

wire from the Boer Information Service to the English language newspapers, the message consisting of two items:

’Though Mr. Winston Churchill’s escape was cleverly executed, there is little chance of his being able to cross the border into Portuguese East Africa.’

‘It is reported that Mr. Winston Churchill has been recaptured at the border railway station of Koomati Poort.’

It was this second piece of mis-intelligence that gave me heart, so much so, that I seized Lil by the shoulders and kissed her heartily on the lips. “Goodbye and my heartfelt thanks for your kindness and hospitality, Miss Diamond” I said, hoping I could avoid a scene. Her response was immediate. Like a gorilla crushing an ant she enveloped me in her arms and pinned me to her bosoms. I felt as if I was in the clutches of Jem Mace, the English bare-knuckle champion. In such an embrace, I fainted away and only came to when they forced a teaspoonful of brandy between my teeth. I was covered with breathless kisses perfumed with brandy fumes and it took the combined efforts of my two troopers to tear me from her clutches and run me outside into the yard.

“Farewell, my lovely,” Lil called plaintively, amid gallons of tears and a substance resembling mucous. I never saw her again, just her adieus as she waved a filthy pocket-handkerchief from the stoep. On second thoughts I think she was waving a pair of dirty bloomers.

As we crossed the yard, as quickly as we decently could, and amid wails of grief from Lil, my ill betrothed, I suddenly remembered that these two mounted idiots expected me to ride a bicycle not a wiry Boer pony. I started to protest, but they had my

machine loaded with the food, water canteen and cavalry cape, and any other hardware they thought necessary for a journey of 300 miles to Delagoa Bay.

With a last pathetic wail from the stoep, we mounted and rode through the yard gates, out into the back streets of Pretoria. Freedom was only a bicycle ride away, or so I thought.

Early morning in Pretoria was a busy time. From the surrounding countryside poured farmers and their families for the sort of market day seen during peacetime. Indeed, there seemed very little indication of war. The streets were jammed with carts and wagons; horses and bullocks congested the streets even more, and the occasional horseless carriage exploded its way through this whole sea of Boer humanity. Behind both sides of the main street were large wagon parks where people lived when they visited Pretoria for market day.

It was difficult to believe we were in the enemy's capital, but we were careful to avoid any armed commandos riding into town on military business. We were not in fear of them, but we thought it wise to avoid them. However, we could not say the same of the Zarps, the South African Police. My experience of them in the prisoner of war camp had led me to the conclusion that they were a nasty lot. Fortunately they were easy to spot with their khaki breeches and black tunics.

As we rode our bicycles towards the outskirts of town the two miscreants started an argument between themselves. This I found disturbing because they shouted at each other in Cockney English, quite ignoring the fact that everyone else spoke Cape Dutch or Afrikaans, to give it the official name. I had already decided in my mind to use both men's code names, that their real names were obviously a matter of secrecy. The little fat

one, Apollo, was berating the tall, thin one, Hermes. “You’re such a know-it-all. You fink you know everyfink, but you know nuffink. You’re abaht as smart as the barber’s cat, an’ ‘e weren’t smart enuff ter keep ‘is tail aht the mouse trap.

To my amazement the Boers completely ignored this tirade. Although I had attended some of the low class music halls in the stews of London, I found it very difficult to understand their speech. The tall one, Hermes, whom the fat Apollo had called a know-it-all, then took up the argument. “I tell you, the Sturmey-Archer free speed is a sight better’n that Froggie fink, the Simplex. ‘ow yer gonna pedal that fink in Africa where there’s so much dust you’ll clog the ‘ole fink up in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.”

Some technical harangue then followed in which both the fat Apollo and the thin Hermes hurled insults at each other, both ignoring his opponent’s arguments. It sounded just like question period in the House of Commons. The fear I had was to be arrested by the Zarps. Perhaps not fear of arrest on a charge of spying, or on a charge of escaping, but arrest on a charge of disturbing the Peace of the Boer Republic by yelling in Cockney English.

“I do wish you’d shut up, the pair of you,” I hissed, hoping I would get the seriousness of our position across to them.

We rode on; both Apollo and Hermes plunged into a silent state of armed neutrality for a while. It was some time since I had ridden a bicycle, but the knack of staying on the beast soon returned. Suddenly the town limits were reached and we rode into the open veldt and left the hustle and bustle of the Boer capital behind us.

These two had cunningly steered our way out through the north side and through a small nek overlooking the railway. Although the road was narrow and little more than a

cart track, in places it was steep and I soon perspired freely, my breath puffing from my lungs as my heart pounded in my chest.

The road was unsurfaced once we left the town limits. We were riding on a narrow track worn down to bare rock by generations of carts and wagons. The iron tires of these vehicles had formed deep ruts into which our bicycle wheels with their pneumatic tires rode in a rather wobbly fashion. It took all our skill to keep our machines upright and still ride at a reasonable pace. After a few miles this trek road widened and the going was much smoother. The countryside was made up of long, rolling hills. We would steadily climb one hill, free wheel down the slope and then climb the next hill. This went on for miles.

The heat of the day was wearying. Many times I had to sip from my water canteen strapped to the handlebars. The rough tweed of my Boer clothing was not the stuff of the respectable cycling outfits sold by the Cyclists' Touring Club from their Craven Hill premises. The shapeless homespun suit had developed a will of its own, the jacket riding up my back and the trousers cutting me in the most intimate of places. The waistcoat was also an inconvenient garment and in a fit of despair I shed both jacket and waistcoat, tying them to my carrier with a bit of string. With sleeves rolled up I continued my ride after the troopers. I may have looked like an errand boy going the rounds, but at least I was comfortable, although I don't think I could have gained entry to the Army and Navy Club in such attire.

Unable to keep up with the steady pace of the two bicycle troopers, I was forced to drop back until I got my second wind. Eventually Apollo circled and rode back, seizing the crupper of my saddle and propelling me forward until we had topped the next

rise. "I reckon you're doin' a bit of all right, Guvnor," he said. I was grateful, but ashamed of myself for not being able to keep up with these two miserable specimens of manhood. He made no remark about my dress and the fact that I was riding in shirt-sleeves. The heat did not affect either trooper; they just rode on, mile after mile, but I must say they smelled a little stronger as the sun moved further towards its zenith.

The reader will understand my revulsion for these two if I give a better physical description of them: Apollo was at least four stones too heavy for his height, which I estimated to be not over five feet three inches. His eyes were quite bloodshot, and he had a most frightful squint, boss eyed I believe the vulgar term to be, which made him look like a corpulent rock hydrax. His face was unshaven and he sported a tangled set of Dundreary whiskers. Atop his head, although partially concealed by the Boer hat he wore, was a thatch of unkempt and unwashed hair; altogether his appearance reminded me of an overstuffed scarecrow, but one which spoke in a dialect of atrocious English.

Hermes, on the other hand, had a blotchy face and bulging eyes like a pneumatic toad. His nose was enormous, hooked like an osprey's beak, but here the image of fierceness ceased because his weak mouth and non-existent chin made him look idiotic. But for all that his eyes betrayed a cunning streak, set as they were, far too close together. Like his companion of the early hours, he was unkempt with unruly hair and a beard reaching the upper part of his chest.

I was at a loss as to why Sir Redvers Buller (the Old Bulldogger, in the parlance of these two dreadful creatures) would send idiots like these behind enemy lines and entrust them with a highly delicate mission. I pondered this as we rode along – they had

moderated their pace, which I thought sporting of them – and concluded, that their physical appearances and bearing made them a perfect blend with the landscape.

Although the popular image of the Boers on commando is one of tall, whipcord men, there were many sub normal beings in the Republic, the result of inbreeding, cousin with cousin – and worse, I am told. Both troopers, therefore, fitted this sub normal category. In later life, and in another time, and another war, they would have been classified as untermensch, and seconded to a labour battalion, or simply ‘liquidated’.

My reveries were rudely interrupted by Apollo giving me instructions. “ ‘ere. You’ll ‘ave ter give up all this ‘ere la-di-da stuff like wot you talk. The Boers know an English orficer when they ‘ear ‘im. An’ you sound like you ‘ave a mouth full of gob stoppers. You’ll ‘ave ter talk proper like us. They fink we talk an old Kaffir taal, like wot they speak the other side of the Draakensberg. There’s plenty of them old ‘takhaars’ up that way and nobody understands ‘em. They don’t even understand ‘emselves.” And he collapsed into a terrible laugh, which sounded like a camel mating with a hyena on top of an anthill.

It took a while before he recovered and then he told me what a ‘takhaar’ was. “They calls ‘em takhaars ‘cos their muvvers stick a puddin’ basin on top of their ‘eads and cut their ‘air round the rim. They look like a lot o’ bacon bonses, they do.” I’m not sure if I entirely understood, so I thought it best to ignore him.

“I really don’t think I can possibly change my speech,” I assured them both. “The habits of a lifetime are too heavy to cast off.” I saw no good reason to betray the cultured tones of Harrow, or the nonchalant accents of the officers’ mess. Such a betrayal would destroy the very foundations of civilization.

Hermes suggested the following. “If yer can’t talk proper, like us, then don’t say nuffink!” I shuddered at the double negative, but thought it wise not to comment, and anyway I was out of breath again. “Just act like an idiot,” he advised me. “That shouldn’t be too difficult, considering you ‘ave ter be an idiot before they makes yer an officer.”

I bristled at that, but I was unable to answer because I had not a single breath left in my body. The two troopers looked at each other. “Fall aht for a spit an’ a draw,” Apollo ordered, and we seated ourselves on rocks beside the road. They both lit old briar pipes with blackened bowls. The tobacco smoke curled up like a blue funeral pyre and I longed for a cigar.

“Nah then,” Hermes murmured, “Let’s ‘ave a little early tiffin, just ter keep our strenf up.” We opened our bags of biltong and rusks. Apollo started a small fire and boiled tea water in his billy can. While biltong and rusks do not make the greatest of picnics, they are sustaining, and a mug of black tea soon had me restored.

I was surprised at the lack of wildlife as we rode across the veldt. I had imagined we would run into herds of elephants, prides of lions and bushbuck by the bucketful. But the only animals I had seen were the occasional mouse crossing the road and a few dassies scrambling through a rock cutting. I had heard that southern Africa swarmed with troops of baboons and I had a great urge to see them in their natural state. I once attended a Rugby match between Guy’s and the London Hospital at which the spectators, made up of several hundred students from both medical schools, acted as if they had just emerged from the jungle. I concluded that medical students and baboons had much in common.

This disappointment I put to the two troopers by way of conversation. “You ain’t goin’ ter see no bleedin’ lions, not wiv the racket we’re makin’ wiv our bikes.” Hermes

said. “They’re dead scared o’ you. Wot cher fink we’re runnin’ ‘ere? A bleedin’ zoo?” I suppose that put me in my place and I was determined not to ask any more questions.

“Ready ter push on then?” Apollo asked me, as Hermes rolled up the tiffin things. “Yer doin’ a bit of awright, Guvnor, even if yer are an officer.” And he slapped me jovially on the back. I was honoured that my efforts met with his approval!

“We wants ter git close ter Witbank, come nightfall,” Apollo told me, confidentially. “We don’t ‘ave ter go into the tahn, just as far as an old kaffir kraal on the outskirts. Witbank’s only a dorp of a place, mostly railway there. So we can bunk in one of the rondavels and slip froo tahn before the sun burns its bleedin’ eyeballs aht.” Once again, he gave this demonic laugh. I interpreted the statement about the sun burning its eyeballs out to mean, by dawn’s early light.

But when I mounted the bicycle again my body was shot through with pain. More embarrassing was the soreness I felt in the saddle area; rawness and chafing I had never experienced from any cavalry saddle. Moaning incoherently, I followed in their wheel treads, gradually limbering up as they dictated that steady, mile eating pace.

Rounding a corner in the track we ran slap bang into six mounted ruffians, sunburnt and lean, with bandoleers of ammunition across their shoulders, and business-like Mauser repeating rifles held against the hip. My heart sank.

“Goiemore, Meneeren. Hoe gaan dit?” the Boer leader spat at us, as he reined in his horse, almost riding us down in the process. “Waarvandaan kom jou?” he asked meaningfully, covering us with his Mauser. His fellow ruffians also swung their rifles in our faces. To run was impossible because they were strung out across the road. I was in despair. My escape was over and I was a prisoner again.

