

The Story of My Early Life - XVIII

Churchill Captured by a Boer Who Became a Great Leader in W.W.I

Almost Had Train Freed When Blow Fell

By SIR WINSTON S. CHURCHILL. I formed the opinion that it would be possible, using the engine as a ram, to pull and push the two wrecked trucks of the armoured train clear of the line, and consequently that escape for the whole force was possible.

I was very lucky in the hour that followed not to be hit. It was necessary for me to be almost continuously moving up and down the train or standing in the open, telling the engine-driver what to do. The first thing was to detach the truck which was half off the rails from the one completely so.

The heat and excitement of the work were such as to absorb me completely. I remember thinking that it was like working in front of an iron target at a rifle range at which men were continually firing. We struggled for 70 minutes among these clanging, rending iron boxes, amid the repeated explosions of shells and the ceaseless hammering of bullets.

Above all things we had to be careful not to throw the engine off the line. But at last, as the artillery firing steadily increased and the second gun came into action from the opposite flank, I decided to run a great risk.

But our three remaining trucks were 50 yards away, still the wrong side of the obstruction, which had fallen back into its original place after the engine had passed. What were we to do?

Director



Miss Sara S. Lewis, field director for Seven-College Conference, who will be in Salem soon.

NOTES ON THE NEWS



"I suppose if we're replaced by atomic energy we can always find work in circuits."

A Prisoner at Pretoria



The author is shown here as a prisoner of the Boers at Pretoria, South Africa, during the Boer war.

Haldane. He accepted the plan. He ordered his men to climb out of their steel pen and try to push it towards the engine. The plan was sound enough, but it broke down under the force of circumstances.

We then agreed that the engine should go slowly back along the line with all the wounded, who were now numerous, and that the Dublin and Durban men should retreat on foot, sheltering themselves behind the engine which would go at a foot's pace.

At last I forced the engine-driver to stop altogether, but before I could get the engine stopped we were already 300 yards away from our infantry. Close at hand was the bridge across the Blue Krantz River, a considerable span.

I turned again and ran back towards the engine, the two Boers firing as I ran. Their bullets, sucking in right and left, seemed to miss only by inches. We were in a small cutting with banks about six feet high on either side.

Another glance at the two figures; one was now kneeling to aim. Movement seemed the only chance. Again I darted forward; again two soft kisses sucked in the air but nothing struck me.

Outside the cutting was a tiny depression. I crouched in this, struggling to get my breath again. About 200 yards away was the rocky gorge of the Blue Krantz River; there was plenty of cover there. I determined to make a dash for the river. I rose to my feet.

Suddenly on the other side of the railway, separated from me by the rails and two uncultured wire fences, I saw a horseman galloping furiously, a tall, dark figure, holding his rifle in his right hand. He pulled up his horse almost in its own length and shaking the rifle at me shouted a loud command. We were 40 yards apart.

That morning I had taken with me, correspondent status notwithstanding.

standing my Mauser pistol. I ordered my men to climb out of their steel pen and try to push it towards the engine. The plan was sound enough, but it broke down under the force of circumstances.

The animal stood stock still, as did he, and so did I. I looked towards the plate-layer's hut. The Boer continued to look along his sights. I thought there was absolutely no chance of escape. If he fired he would surely hit me.

Such is the episode of the armoured train and the story of my capture on November 15, 1899. It was not until three years later, when the Boer generals visited England, that I was introduced at a private luncheon to their leader, General Botha.

Few men that I have known have interested me more than Louis Botha, the father of his country. Botha always felt he had a special call upon my attention. His unerring instinct warned him of the approach of the great struggle.

Chance and romance continued to weave our fortunes together in a strange way. On the 20th or 21st of July, 1914, midway in the week of crisis which preceded the world explosion, I was walking away from the House of Commons after question time and met in palace yard one of the South African ministers, Mr. de Graaf, a very able Dutchman whom I had known for a long time.

That night De Graaf telegraphed to Botha saying "Churchill thinks war certain and Great Britain involved" or words to that effect. Botha was away from the seat of government; General Smuts was acting in his stead at Pretoria. The telegram was laid before Smuts. He repeated the telegram to the absent prime minister in the northern Transvaal. It reached General Botha many hours later, but it reached in time.

The next morning he was to embark for his return journey to Cape Town on board a German ship. But for this telegram, so he afterwards told me, he would have been actually at sea on a German vessel when war was declared. One cannot measure the veils which might have come upon South Africa had such a disaster taken place. Instantly on receiving the message General Botha cancelled all his plans and returned by special train to Pretoria, which he reached before the outbreak and in time.

His grand evasions in the war, the risks he ran, the steadfast courage which he showed, the

great command he exercised over his people, the brilliant manner in which he over-ran German South-West Africa, his rugged animated counsels at the meetings of the Imperial War Cabinet in 1917, his statesmanship and noble bearing at the victory in the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919—all these are matters of history.

(Next: Churchill escapes from Pretoria prison camp.)

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