

A Christmas Dinner in Pretoria Jail.

"A merry Christmas to you, sonny," said Coochy cheerily to Briggs of the South African Horse as the British prisoners in Pretoria filed out from service.

"Hm!" said Briggs, "this is the queerest sort of place to spend merry Christmas in. When we talked at the beginning of the war about spending Christmas in Pretoria, we little thought this would be the way we were going to spend it."

The Christmas service was held in the large corrugated, iron-roofed building in which the leaders of the Jameson raid had been confined. The old clergyman had a difficult task in preaching to that congregation a comforting sermon on the subject of "Peace, Goodwill toward Men," yet it was difficult on that quiet morning to realize that the congregation was in the prison of a capital of a country in the throes of a desperate war. Between the hymns in the stillness of the crowded room the soft sound of the convent bells from outside the prison walls reminded them of the church-bells at home in Merrie England sounding across the frosted snow.

When the clergyman had struggled through his task the best he could, his heterogeneous congregation filed out through the respective groups of cells on the three sides of the quadrangular yard. Before each block of cells there was about twenty yards of space marked out on the ground where they might take exercise, but beyond which they were not allowed to go. There was a curious variety of men among these prisoners; about half of them were dressed in khaki with putties or gaiters on their legs and wearing forage caps or soft hats turned up at one side, some of them decorated with black feathers; a couple of them had been with Baden-Powell in the siege of Mafeking and had been taken prisoners at the capture of an armoured train; one of the very first engagements of the war. Others had come in more recently, having been captured at the Tugela while serving with Buller's force. There were a couple of broad-shouldered, strapping Colonials, who had acted as guides for that unfortunate force which was compelled to surrender on Black Monday at Nicholson's Nek. There were about fifteen civilians, imprisoned for various reasons; one of them an American citizen who had served on the *Keersarge* in her fight with the *Alabama*, and whose "public opinion" of the American consul, for taking no notice of his repeated letters, was a thing worth hearing as a specimen of picturesque and forcible English.

The most interesting-looking figure among the civilians was a stout little gentleman, a wealthy farmer and Justice of the Peace from Northern Natal, who was known among his companions as the Cockatoo. He was a very fat little man with an extremely red face, an aquiline nose like the beak of a bird, and white, stubby hair that stood upright all over his head. One day he had asked one of his fellow-prisoners, Coochy, the war correspondent, to cut his hair, as it was getting too long. There was no looking-glass in the prison, which the amateur barber took advantage of by cutting his hair quite close on either side, leaving a comb-like ridge standing right down the centre that gave him an irresistible resemblance to a cockatoo. For want of a looking-glass he could not appreciate the effect of it himself, but even the stout, stolid old jailer Duplessis shook with laughter at the extraordinary figure he presented when answering his name at roll-call time.

Most of the private soldiers captured at various engagements were confined in a prison camp on the racecourse, and most of the officers were incarcerated in a schoolhouse in the town which had been converted into a temporary prison for them. Those who were confined in the Pretoria jail were nearly all Colonials, natives of Johannesburg and different parts of the Transvaal, who the Boers considered should have fought on their side rather than on the British, and whom they therefore treated with greater severity.

The diet of those in the jail consisted of, for breakfast, chunks of dry bread, mealie pap, i.e., stirabout made out of Indian meal and cold water; for dinner, coarse boiled beef, the water in which it was boiled being supplied as soup, and dry bread; for supper, mealie pap and dry bread again, the same as for breakfast. The mealie pap, however wholesome as an article of diet, was anything but agreeable. It tasted like a mixture of sawdust

before them but mealie pap and boiled trek oxen. Needless to say that as dinner hour approached there were lips moist with luscious anticipation and appetites made all the more keen by the consciousness of an indefinitely long time before they might have the chance of getting at decent meal again. For breakfast the next morning they would be obliged to fall back on the comfort of cold water, mealie pap and dry bread.

Sharp on time that great Christmas dinner was seen being handed in through the small door of the prison gate in stacks of tin-covered plates; like piles of card counters they were brought around by the warders, and, ye gods! what a delicious, savory steam escaped on the removal of

he did not know that this was the last meal that his customers in the prison were to get from him, or perhaps he did and was determined if it was to be the last it should be a good one.

With uncertain vistas of mealie pap and cold water diet stretching away before them, they began for the fiftieth time to discuss plans of escape. Various schemes had been considered, but there was only one which, although bold and hazardous, commended itself as at all practicable. About half-past seven every evening the prisoners were all paraded in the yard, to answer the roll-call. The jailer, Duplessis, the head warder and two or three others were usually there at that time. Just inside the gate of the yard was a guard-house in which there would be at that time probably one or two other warders lounging. In the guard-house there were revolvers for all the warders, excepting those who would possibly be wearing them at the time. There was a telephone in the guard-room, but as the prison was practically shut up immediately after roll-call, there were not likely to be any visitors from outside. The train left for the Portuguese frontier every evening at ten o'clock, and the station was just close to the prison. The plan suggested was that, at a given signal, a certain number should seize and pinion the jailer, head warder and those who were immediately close to them. A number of others were to make a dash for the guard-house, which was only about fifteen yards away, and seize whoever should be there. Once they were overpowered, they were to be locked into the cells and gagged.

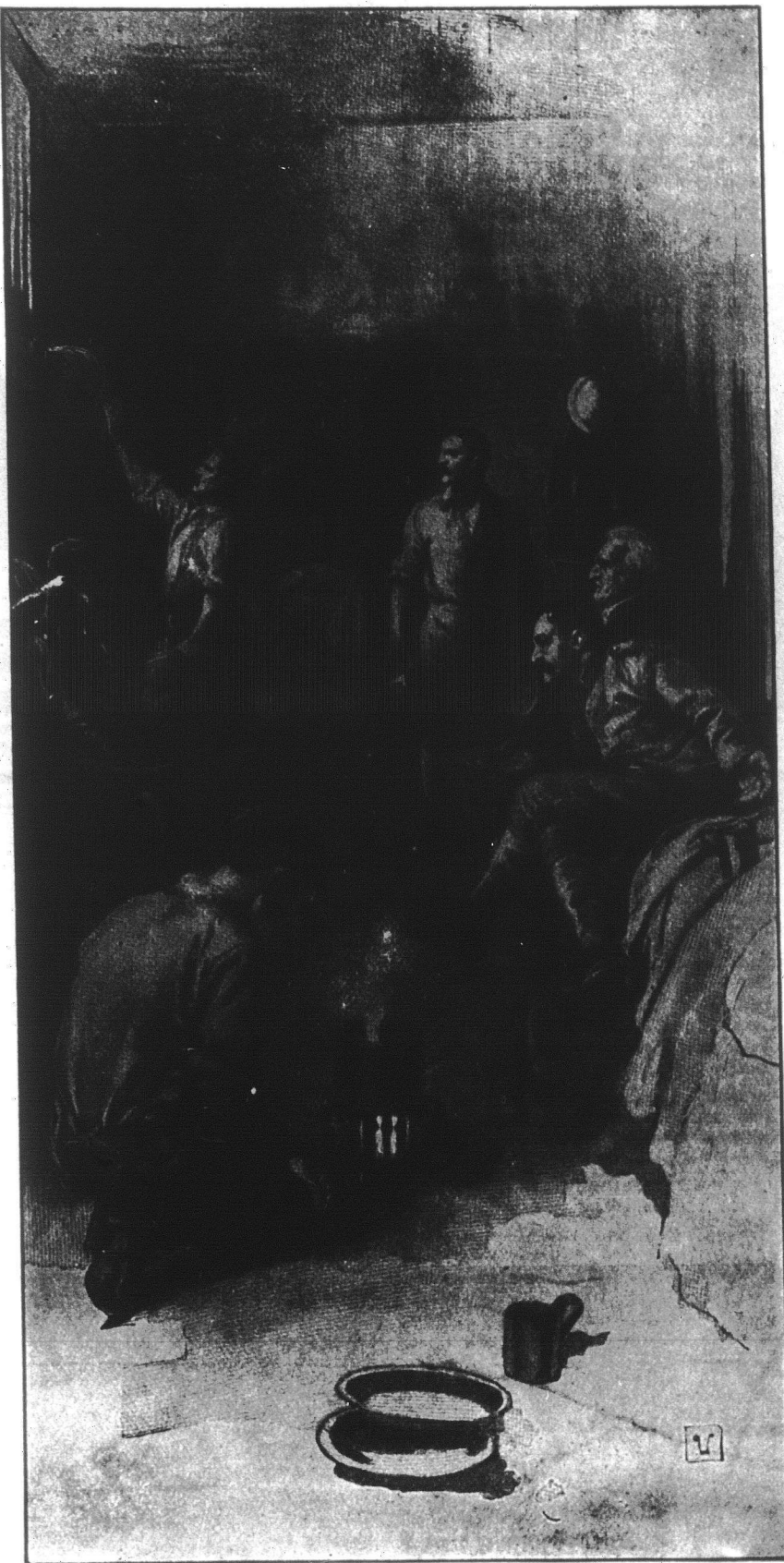
Then the problem was how suspicion was not to be excited for the two hours and a quarter which remained before it would be time to go for the train. There were several of the Colonial troopers who could speak Dutch, so any telephone messages that might come could be answered. There was no chance of anybody visiting the jail at that hour, but if anybody did he would have to enter through the small door in the big gate and could easily be attended to, quietly and expeditiously, without any alarm being raised.

It probably would be almost quite dark when, at about fifteen minutes to ten, the prisoners were to leave the jail; they would then have about ten revolvers and ammunition and about an equal number of carbines, three axes and some knob-kerris used by the Kaffir policemen. Morrison, the guide—a powerful, athletic fellow, who had a reputation over half South Africa as a pugilist—his brother, and a couple of troopers from Mafeking were told off to hold up the engine-driver and stoker on the engine. As these were known to be Scotchmen kept in the employ of the Boers, it was quite possible that a little pressure would turn them into willing accomplices, and get the train started at full speed. A couple of men were to smash the telegraph instruments in the office, while the main body of the prisoners were to deal with any armed burghers who might be starting on the train.

The line was guarded at various points, such as the bridges and viaducts, by Boer sentries, and there would also probably be armed burghers at the stations, which they would run through without stopping, but these would be helpless to give the alarm if the telegraph lines were cut.

The hour for muster arrived, and the bell sounded. As little Briggs said, "The bell that summons us to heaven or to hell." Morrison led away and the rest filed out after him. He seemed to pause for a second on the threshold, which was noticed by those behind him, but the explanation was only discovered by each one as he emerged into the yard. There were Duplessis and half a dozen warders, all standing in a row, and every one of them wearing his revolver. But that was not the worst of it: about a dozen Zaps or Transvaal policemen armed with carbines were crowded into the guard-room. The roll was called without any comment from Duplessis.

To the party who had discussed and planned the attempted escape in the afternoon after their Christmas dinner it was now clearly obvious what had happened, and an alarm given by little Briggs who had jumped up on the bed and looked through the bars of the passage now found its explanation in the probability of a Boer spy in the corridor. So sullenly they filed back, to finish the gloomiest Christmas on record.



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and putty, and, after being partaken of, seemed to lie just as lightly on the stomach. Those who had any money to do so were allowed to send out to the neighbouring hotel for meals and various supplies. None, however, had brought much money into jail with them, and by this time what they had was nearly exhausted; in fact there were only two or three that had anything left and these had now put their united resources together in order to supply the best they could get in the way of a Christmas dinner for the crowd. They had burned their ships as far as food was concerned; after this Christmas dinner there would be nothing

the covers! There was corned beef, not the lean trek-ox beef, but red and brown streaks of succulency hemmed with yellow fat, and there was cabbage, white and hot, and turkey, veritable turkey, and, filling the last compartment of stacks of each plate, was a great fat slab of plum-pudding, brown and rich and dark with fruit and covered with sauce which the Cockatoo averred, as he smacked his lips, actually had a flavor of rum, and there seemed to be a Christmas feeling of generosity in the helpings given by that hotel-keeper or his vrouw. There was no skimping or cheeseparing about them; they were "generously good." Perhaps