

THE SWOOPER.

An Appropriate Nickname Given Commandant Christian De Wet.

Exciting Railway Trip from Pretoria Through the Free State to Cape Town.

Journey Begun in Open Coal Trucks — A Complete Surprise — Slow in Cutting the Wires — Like a Rat in a Hole.

(From H. S. White, the Sun's Special War Correspondent with the Canadian Mounted Rifles in South Africa.)

KROONSTAD, June 24.—Commandant Christian De Wet, the distinguished and successful of all the Boer generals—has earned for himself a very appropriate nickname: De Wet, "the Swooper." On our side we have our "Forward" French, our "Bulldog" Buller, our "Bravo" Baden-Powell, but to none of them are there nicknames so appropriate as is the "Swooper" to the enterprising Mr. De Wet. In front, or flank, or rear of our victorious armies, he "swoops" wherever he sees a weak point—capturing convoys, taking prisoners, blowing up bridges, and so forth.

A JOURNEY OF INCIDENT.

The war being practically over, from the view of the newspaper man, I, with a number of other correspondents, left Pretoria last Wednesday, the 20th, to travel by train to Cape Town. Our experiences, so far, justify, I think, the assertion that for variety and excitement, railway travelling at present in the Orange River Colony is quite unexcelled.

We began the journey unpromisingly in open coal trucks; and on the first day did no more than thirty miles before we were side-tracked for the night at Elandsfontein, near which captured several hundred Derbyshire militiamen, burning two months' mails and 20,000 overcoats; he has swooped at Zand River, killing men, and smashing up the railway; and two days ago he swooped at Honing Spruit, making himself particularly objectionable to the Canadians, including your humble servant, by your special correspondent with the Canadian Mounted Rifles.

The blowing up of the bridge over the sluit to the north of us, the despatch of the message to Kroonstad, the appearance of the first shrapnel shell over the camp to the south of us; the sending out of our men to make hurried trenches—all this takes long to narrate, but in occurrence had only occupied fifteen or twenty minutes, when a single mounted man, bearing a white flag, was seen rapidly approaching our position.

It was the usual Boer trick—ostensibly a summons to surrender, really an excuse for one of their men to get a close view of our number and our position. Colonel Bullock went out to meet him as far as he could get on foot, and turned him back smartly with the shortest and abruptest refusal.

Every one knew, then, what was coming, and while the bearer of the white flag was cantering quickly back to his comrades, all of us looked around for the best cover obtainable. Meanwhile, rapidly along the railway from the north we saw a trolley—a hand-car—coming along right into the arms of our enemies. Not a shot had been fired yet, and the railway men on the trolley coming down to start their picnic of danger. It was impossible for us to warn them of it. In a few moments it was all over. As they neared the blown-up bridge they were greeted with a volley from the Boers, and every one of the four men on the trolley fell wounded. One, a poor inefficient Kafir, was killed; the others, in their maimed condition, were taken prisoners.

Then came our turn. Whizz! through the cold air of the early morning came the first bullet. Everybody immediately rushed for his chosen cover. Everybody but the brave Colonel Bullock, who calmly remained walking about the platform, giving his orders, first to the men at the north end, then back again to the men at the south end of the station.

A COMPLETE SURPRISE.

Some time in the night, or early on Friday morning, while every one on the train was peacefully slumbering, we reached Honing Spruit. At first break of dawn we were all up, and out on the platform of the little station, the soldiers taking a look round at the new quarters, and we watching them preparing to disembark. On either side of the platform stood the usual low galvanized iron station buildings—waiting and refreshment rooms, ticket and telegraph offices, walls and roofs, all made of a single sheeting of corrugated iron—no more obstacle to a Mauser bullet than a piece of paper. By the side of the station, close at hand on the east side, was a private cottage similarly constructed. North and south, intersecting from horizon to horizon, the bare, almost level wold ran the narrow road-bed of the railway. To the north, some three or four miles distant, winding around from east to west, was a long depression, at the bottom of which ran the spruit that gave the station its name.

Nobody had yet had breakfast, though some of the men had already got their little fires started, and their camp kettles were suddenly the word went round that the Boers were coming. Correspondents and officers gathered in a little group at the north end of the platform, and swept the horizon with their field glasses. Yes, there sure enough, coming full tilt over the ridge on the north side of the spruit, and to the east of the railway, was a party of mounted men—our old, familiar enemy, for certain. Down they came at a smart canter, making straight for the little railway bridge that crossed the spruit. Were they going to attack us? The answer came almost immediately in a loud explosion, followed by a big cloud of white smoke from the direction of the bridge. They had blown up the railway and cut us off from the north.

Then we knew what to expect. Colonel Bullock rushed to the telegraph office, and immediately the word flashed to the south that we were attacked in force, and must have help. Back came the welcome reply from Kroonstad—only 21 miles distant—"Message received and understood!" Ten minutes later the wires were cut and Kroonstad could tell us no more. It was a strange oversight on the part of such a wily enemy to show their intention so plainly before they cut us off from relief. To those of us who knew the Boer best it appeared to be incredible, and we were far more inclined to believe that he had tapped the wire and had himself sent back the misleading reply. If that were so, we were, indeed, lost; but we hoped that for once Mr. Boer had not been quite so smart as he might have been.

A PRETTY WARM TIME.

Meanwhile, Colonel Bullock was making his preparations for resistance. From their fires and their camp kettles the men were ordered quickly to the north and to the south of the station with picks and shovels to make what rough trenches they could before the attack began. Ten, fifteen minutes elapsed before the blowing up of the railway bridge, when bang! went a covert into the air to the south of us. Now we were cut off from either side, and our train had to stay where it was, at any rate.

SHELLED BY THE ENEMY.

Inside the house we found others shelled after—commies as well as the Australian correspondent. There was a fire burning on a large open hearth and we eagerly stood close up to it warming our shivering limbs. We were just discussing—somehow dubiously—the effectiveness of our shelter from Mauser bullets when, boom! from the Australian correspondent. There was a fire burning on a large open hearth and we eagerly stood close up to it warming our shivering limbs. We were just discussing—somehow dubiously—the effectiveness of our shelter from Mauser bullets when, boom! from the Australian correspondent.

RELIEF FROM KROONSTAD AT LAST!

Rifles and guns of the Boers were now quite silent, and we all crowded out of the house to see what had really happened. Yes! there they were—the Boers—horsemen and gunners off at the top of their speed towards the northwest! Loader and loader grew, and before it was dark we had the satisfaction of standing out in the open and watching the retreating Boers, with our shells dropping among them.

AN ALL-DAY SIEGE.

From 7 o'clock in the morning until nearly dark in the afternoon our brave hundred men lay there, with their useless old Martins helplessly against the Mausers and the shrapnel of the enemy. At nearly 4 o'clock, when we had begun to despair of help from Kroonstad, suddenly the enemy's fire ceased.

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hopeless, we sheltered ourselves as best we could in or out of our trenches. Gradually the Boers crept around our position, and nearer and nearer drew the crackle-crackle of their Mausers, while both their guns grew more active and more deadly. Several soldiers crowded into our room, and a few took possession of the trenches which some of us had temporarily vacated. They began to curse, their luck, foreseeing nothing but a surrender for the second time. Then we counted up the hours that must elapse before help could arrive from Kroonstad, twenty-one miles distant, or before darkness would come to stop the Boers' fire. We wondered whether they would keep us correspondents prisoners, if they took us, or whether they would not, more probably commander everything we possessed, and turn us adrift. Our Hollander friend guaranteed to us his intercession, and meanwhile he stuck so religiously to the bottom of his trench I felt satisfied I would survive to plead for my comrades. One of the soldiers shouted: "I've got it. It's a—bullet, I s'pose." He limped into the middle of the room; and we ripped up his trousers with a knife; while he amplified his first remark by adding that he had dropped light through my leg—and I've got on colored drawers—I've got on colored drawers!" The colored drawers were there all right, and under them the two neat little holes, one on each side of his thigh, when the bullet had passed in and out. With a loud yell dressing we soon made him quite comfortable, and then sat down to await our own turns. The shells began to fall thicker, and nearer than ever to our building, when presently, crack! came another bullet clean through the middle of our room, and again missing everybody. It was too much for one of the correspondents, who had been turned out of his trench, and he made a frantic jump for the chimney, up which he promptly disappeared. Then, in muffled tones, we heard his familiar voice exclaiming: "Well, never thought I'd come to this—climbing up a chimney like a sweep!"

Serious as our situation was, we could not help laughing. Outside, the men were of course in a worse plight than we were. We could see some through the windows, and some places quite exposed on the bare flat ground. Presently two sprang to their feet, and began to rush towards our house. We heard the crackle of the rifles as the Boers potted at them, and before they had run a hundred yards one of them fell with a few feet of them, fortunately without bursting. Immediately both fell flat upon the ground, and at first we thought they were hit. Following them was a little fox-terrier, who seemed to think this was all a bit of fun for his own special amusement. He staggered, he stumped, and he licked the faces. They were not hit, and soon they rose again, and made one more dash for cover. One carried an overcoat and as he ran he held it over his head, as if to protect it from the bullets. Their legs were swayed in rather minute they were out of sight of the Boer riflemen, and comparatively safe.

THE BULLETS BEGAN TO WHIZZ over our heads from our right. That made our trench no longer tenable, and everyone began to dash about looking for better cover. I made for the lee side of the long line of empty trucks, lying flat on my belly beside the wheels. Ewan came dashing after me, and as he crossed the few yards between the trench and the trucks, a bullet struck the ground under his feet and sent him sprawling. We correspondents represented nearly every part of the Empire, and soon lying, bellies downwards, along the rail under the trucks, were unhappy quill-drivers from Australia, New Zealand, from England, and from Holland, as well as from Canada. There we lay, till again it became too hot. The bullets went through the sides of the trucks and between the iron wheels the open spaces were far too large, and too numerous for our peace of mind. It was evident that another rapid and strategic move was imperative. On the west side of the railway, and only about a hundred yards from us, was a long row of corrugated iron buildings. So far the Boers were firing only from the north and the east; therefore these buildings looked very inviting. The intervening open space of a hundred yards was what made us pause and consider. The bullets were whizzing pretty thickly over that space, and none of us were practiced sprinters. Ping! went a bullet against the iron wheel next to me. As far as I was concerned, that settled it. Waiting for a slight lull in the incessant crackle-crackle of the Mausers up the line, I rose on my feet and raised a dash for it. It was the best hundred yard sprint that I have done since I left college. Mr. New Zealander came next. He is younger than I am, and he did perhaps even better. But Ewan—I never recall that day that he was a regular professional sprinter. He is older than either the New Zealander or me, but he beat us both hollow.

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lucky methods of so many of our superior officers. The circumstances of this attack on our little force at Honing Spruit are worthy of considerable consideration. Some funny deductions might be drawn from them.

OUR MOUNTED MEN'S EXPERIENCE. Before we were attacked, as I have said, the Boers attacked the camp on the railway about a mile and a half to the south of us. In this camp, besides the two companies of the Shropshires, were fifty men of our own Mounted Rifles. They all belonged to D Squadron, and were under the command of Captain Davidson; the only other officer with them was Lieutenant Inglis.

At breakfast, as was their custom, a Cossack Post, consisting of a party of twelve men under Lieutenant Inglis, left the camp to take up their position on the top of a sort of double-headed kopje about a mile away from the camp. Inglis had already posted some of his men on one of the summits of this kopje, and was about to take the rest on to the other summit, when, to his horror, he saw that it was already in the possession of a large party of the enemy, who immediately put their horses into a gallop, with the evident intention of cutting the Canadian Rifle's off from their camp. There was nothing, of course, to be done by our men but to get back to the shelter of their camp as quick as possible.

This they at once proceeded to do—hastily, of course, but in perfect order, and without the least display of panic. And yet never were men in a more critical and trying position. The Boers were—as they always are—well mounted, on horses that could easily outstrip the poor tired-out beasts that our men could scarcely urge into a canter. Escape seemed hardly possible; but never a thought of surrender entered the minds of our men as they rode steadily towards the camp, every now and then turning to reply to the fire of the pursuing Boers.

It was, of course, a foregone conclusion that some would never again reach camp alive. It was only a desperate chance that a few might escape, whose luck it would be to fall, and whose to remain unscathed, were the chances that soldiers must take in the lottery of war. Meanwhile, all did their best to have at least a life for a life from the enemy.

Before this desperate race for life was over many a Boer bullet had found our men. Stricken to death were Sergeant Pattison, Corporal Fred Morden, and Trooper Robert Kerr, while several hit, but not so badly but that, with grim determination, they could still stick to their saddles, were the railway bridge, when bang! went a covert into the air to the south of us. Now we were cut off from either side, and our train had to stay where it was, at any rate.

A REMARKABLE DUEL.

Meanwhile a duel of an almost melodramatic character was going on between two of our men—Trooper Waldy—"Old" Waldy, as he is affectionately called by his comrades—has had escapes before, though none, perhaps, quite so sensational as this one was to be. He has survived the horrors of the "Edmondson" and he fell in the Pomeranian on her arrival at Cape Town, and was so severely injured that he was unconscious for over a month; and now he had the problem to solve of how to escape from two Boers, who were steadily pursuing him at a distance of about a couple of hundred yards. The Boers' horses were comparatively fresh, while very soon Waldy made up his mind that if he was to escape at all he must depend upon himself and not upon his jaded horse, whom he could scarcely spur into the slowest of trots. Promptness of action was his only chance, and on the instant that he made up his mind that his horse could never save him, he dropped from the saddle to the ground