

Extracted from “My Reminiscences of the Anglo-Boer War”, by General Ben Viljoen, 1902

Chapters XLVII (end) and XLVIII. Source: Project Gutenberg¹

After a very cheerless and discomfoting voyage, we dropped anchor on the 24th of February in St. Helena Harbour. "The Rock" rose out of the ocean, bare and rugged, and imprisonment upon it offered a gloomy prospect. No animal was visible, and foliage was wanting, I never saw a less attractive place than Jamestown, the port at which we landed. The houses seemed to be tumbling over one another in a "kloof." We were all gloomily impressed, and somebody near me said, "This will be our living graves." I answered, "No wonder that Napoleon broke his heart upon this God-forsaken rock." I must confess that the feeling grew upon us that we were to be treated as ordinary criminals, since only murderers and dangerous people are banished to such places to be forgotten by mankind.

An English officer came to me and asked what I thought of the Island. My feelings got the better of me, and I replied—"It seems a suitable place for England's felons, but it is very spiteful of England to deport here men whose only crime has been to fight for their country. It would have been much more merciful to have killed us at once than to make us drag out an existence in a manner so dreary."

We were soon taken ashore by boats to Jamestown, and there learned to our great disgust that we were all to be put in quarantine for bubonic plague, and to be isolated at Lemon Valley, a valley in which I afterwards found that lemons were conspicuous by their absence. No greenery was to be seen in this desolate place. While our debarkation was proceeding one of the boats capsized, but, happily, everybody escaped with nothing worse than a ducking.

Quarantine regulations were enforced for six days at Lemon Valley. The accommodation was very inadequate, and our culinary utensils, though not primitive, were very bad, the food being such as might have been the portion of criminals.

Luckily for us a British Censor named Baron von Ahlenfeldt, and a doctor named Casey had accompanied us, and owing to their instrumentality we were allowed better food and treatment. At the end of our detention in the quarantine camp some of our number were removed to Broadbottom Camp, while the others were quartered at Deadwood Camp. Lieutenant Bathurst, who now assumed the position of our custodian, was a good prototype of friend Ellet at Durban, and he was at pains to treat us as felons rather than as prisoners-of-war.

In order to reach Broadbottom Camp we had to ascend a remarkably rocky cliff named "Jacob's Ladder," the face of which was cut into a multitudinous series of steps. Having reached the summit we found a pleasing view of the Island opened before us. We now discovered that St. Helena was not the totally-barren rock we had at first been led to suppose.

¹ Obtained by David Pryce, 2017

Patches of trees and greenery met our gaze, and in the midst of a carefully-cultivated plantation we espied a beautiful house, the habitation of the Governor of the Island. On our way we encountered a party of our fellow-prisoners, who, having been guilty of insubordination, were being taken to the dreary fort at High Knoll for punishment. Amongst these unfortunates we recognised several friends, but were not permitted to talk to them.

At sundown our destination was reached at Broadbottom Camp, which is situated under High Peak. Before us stretched a large space enclosed by four encirclements of barbed wire containing the tents and houses which formed the temporary homes of the prisoners-of-war. Sentries were posted at every hundred paces. There were 2,000 prisoners stationed here, and as they wandered aimlessly round they forcibly reminded me of the Israelites in exile.

On entering the camp I was received by the commandant, Colonel Wright, a typical Briton, who made no pleasant impression upon me. I shall not be querulous, although the Colonel very bluntly notified to me that he had no instructions but to treat me in the same manner as the ordinary prisoners, and added that as my name had appeared in the list of Boer officers who were sentenced to banishment, he doubted whether I was entitled even to the treatment accorded to the ordinary prisoners-of-war. However, a tent was erected for me, and I and my companions in adversity were given beds and culinary utensils. My bed consisted of two khaki blankets and a waterproof sheet, and my kitchen utensils comprised a pot, a washing basin, a pail, two enamelled plates, two large mugs, and a spoon. This is a complete inventory of the articles with which I was provided. I and the prisoners who had accompanied me had not tasted food throughout the whole day, and we would have gone supperless to bed had it not been that some compassionate brother prisoners ministered to our inner needs by providing us with some bully beef and bread, which, though but a frugal meal, was very welcome to us.

Camp life of the kind I now experienced was wearisome indeed. There was nothing to do, and we tried to while away the time by singing psalms and songs. At night the camp and its environments were rendered almost as bright as day by the glaring light of huge naphtha flares and by large search-lights which played round, making attempts at escape hopeless. It appeared to me that the search-lights were continually being turned in my direction, and I can assure you that I wished these glaring abominations at Hades. The buzzing and roaring noise given forth by the naphtha lamps, the monotonous chanting of the prisoners, the perpetual "All's well" of the sentries, and the intermingling notes of the bugle calls suffused the air with their distracting sounds and made me feel as if my head were in a maelstrom. The bugler was so amiable a person that he always made it a point of standing close to my tent when launching forth to the world his shrieking calls. Happily I became acclimatised to my distasteful surroundings, or I fear I should have soon graduated as a patient for a lunatic asylum.

I unhappily became at an early date acquainted with Colonel Price, commanding the troops on the Island. I shall never forget his demeanour towards me, for from the first his attitude was arrogant, cruel, and generally unbearable. He refused me parole, and declined to give me a pass beyond the confines of the camp. The unreasonableness of this hard treatment will be seen when it is remembered that not the slightest possibility of escape from the Island existed. The close confinement began to play havoc with my health, and I was in the fair way to the hospital, when a friendly doctor intervened and restored me to health once more. The rigid discipline and the stern regulations that were enforced can only be likened to what is experienced in monastic life. The "red-tape" curse prevailed everywhere.

Subsequently Colonel Price modified his tone towards me and allowed me parole. He was also gracious enough to permit me and some companions to occupy a little house 400 paces from the camp. This was a very agreeable change, for now we were no longer subjected to the harsh treatment of the "Tommies." Our little residence rejoiced in the pleasantly-floral name of the "Myrtle Grove," and was rented by us from an old coloured lady who vigorously insisted upon the punctual payment of the rent, and drew our special attention to the fact that plucking pears in the garden was strictly prohibited.

We had been told that the "Myrtle Grove" was haunted by ghosts, but the ghosts, if any there were, must have been pro-Boers, since they never disturbed us. But though we had no ghostly visitors we certainly had some of another kind. The house was perfectly infested by particularly large and bold rats. These thieving rodents, not satisfied with robbing our larder, had the audacity to sup off our fingers and ears while we were asleep. We waged vigorous war against the vermin, and after considerable difficulty managed to get the residence exclusively to ourselves. With the addition of some furniture, with which Colonel Wright was good enough to provide us, we made our house so comfortable that we felt ourselves almost in a position to invite the Governor to dinner.

Our landlady, Mrs. Joshua, was the proud possessor of several donkeys, which were turned loose in our garden, and a large number of fowls. I may say that Mrs. Joshua was very ill-advised in keeping her fowls so near our house, for our cook, who had been trained in commando, was unable to resist the temptation of appropriating eggs. It did not, however, take our landlady long to find out what was happening, and we were informed that it was very much more Christianlike to purchase eggs. We took the hint, and adopted as far as we could Christianlike methods, though we found it extremely difficult to subscribe to all the principles of Christianity practised by the Islanders.

We whiled away the time by taking daily walks, and, by making excursions to the house at Longwood tenanted by Napoleon Bonaparte for six and a half years, and to the grave where his remains were interred for 19 years. I noticed that both places were being preserved and kept in order by the French Government. We used to sit by the little fountain, where the great French warrior so frequently sat, and read. We were permitted to drink a glass of water from this historical spring.

At Deadwood Camp 4,000 of my compatriots were confined. Some had been there for over two years, and I could not help admiring their discipline. It is not for me to criticise the entirely unnecessary restrictions to which these unfortunate prisoners were subjected, but I will point out that the severity practised towards helpless prisoners by armed soldiers created feelings of great bitterness. It was a stupid policy to pursue and perhaps fateful.

The military authorities were entirely unacquainted with the character and mannerisms of the Boers, and were advised in this connection by so-called "Cape" or "English" Afrikanders, who bear an ineradicable hatred to the Boers, and who always did their utmost to cause the prisoners to be treated with humiliation and contempt. Happily a number of English officers whom I met on the Island saw that we were not so black as we had been painted. Most of the officers who acted as our custodians here had come direct from England and knew nothing of South Africa. One of these gentlemen confessed to me that when he left London for St. Helena he had a sort of idea that he was to be placed in charge of a troop of wild barbarians, and that he had been quite agreeably disappointed. He declared, indeed, that he had found that the Afrikander in some respects was superior to men of his own nation.

It was undoubtedly a sad error for England to send officers to look after us, who, not having had any experience of South African warfare, were entirely ignorant of our idiosyncrasies and manners. The result of placing these inexperienced men as our guards was that one misunderstanding followed upon another, and that unnecessarily rigorous regulations were promulgated to preserve discipline and order. This treatment had the effect of nourishing within our bosoms hatred and bitterness.

Not being desirous of having to undergo incarceration with my insubordinate fellow-prisoners at High Knoll Fort, I carefully refrained from being unruly, and practised an orderly and amiable demeanour.

On one occasion I ventured to approach Colonel Price with a view to obtaining some amelioration in our treatment, and some remission of the rigorous regulations meted out to us. After keeping me waiting half an hour he came out of his office to meet me, but instead of extending a greeting he stared at me with ill-concealed amazement, probably expecting that I should jump up and salute him. I, however, merely rose and nodded, and enquired if I had the honour of addressing Colonel Price. He answered stiffly, "Yes, what do you want?" It was greatly disconcerting to be thus unceremoniously and discourteously greeted, and having explained my mission, I withdrew and took care to fight shy of this arrogant soldier in future.

I may say that our little party at "Myrtle Grove" was a few weeks later augmented by the arrival of Vaal Piet Uys and Landdrost T. Kelly.

We had in the meantime improved our acquaintance with Colonel Wright, who always treated us with cordiality and kindness, and allowed us frequently the privilege of spending pleasant afternoons at his house. Mrs. Wright was a charming hostess, and did everything in her power to lessen the feeling of humiliation with which we regarded our sad plight.

I should perhaps mention that St. Helena boasts of some elegant society. A few years before our confinement the Zulu chief, Dinizulu, was banished within the rocky bounds of this island prison. This son of Cain had during his detention here been invited to all the fashionable parties and dances, and had been honoured with an invitation to the Governor's house. He was fêted at dinners and public festivities—but of course it must be remembered that Dinizulu was a kaffir and we were only Boers. Fancy, my Afrikander brothers, a self-respecting English young lady consenting to dance with this uncivilised kaffir! Imagine, they allowed him to dine at the same table, and to drive in the same carriage with them! I do not know how this information strikes my readers, but I must say that when the Governor of the Island, an elderly gentleman named Sterndale, with 35 years of the Indian Civil Service behind him, informed me that such had been the case, I was rendered speechless.

I would not have it supposed, however, that we prisoners had any special ambition to attend balls and dinners, for we were not in the mood for festivities, and even had we desired we could hardly with propriety have appeared at these elegant boards and gatherings dressed in our shabby apparel.

A number of the prisoners received permission from the authorities to pursue the various crafts and employments with which they were conversant, at the small daily wage of between sixpence and a shilling. This pay was a ridiculously small remuneration for the large amount of work which the men executed. A great diversity of trades were represented by us

prisoners. One was a mason, another a farmer, a third an apothecary, while a fourth was a goldsmith, and so far did we go that one man was appointed caterer for the St. Helena Club.

Months had now passed since I had been first brought a captive to this island prison, and it approached the middle of May. Persistent though rather vague reports about Peace continually reached us, but owing to the strictness of the censors, who had an exaggerated idea of their duties, any news from outside came to our anxious ears in very small pieces, and gave us a very meagre idea of what was happening in South Africa and other places outside. That we were all praying earnestly for Peace needs no telling, especially if I may mention that some of my comrades had been incarcerated on the island for two years and eight months. I cannot adequately tell how wearisome their long exile was to them.

Just before I was liberated from confinement, our old antagonists, the 3rd Battalion of "Buffs," under Colonel Brinckman, were detailed to the Island. This regiment had seen two years of active service in South Africa, and they were, therefore, soldiers who did not hold their enemies in contempt.

I do not feel at this time, in view of the present tension of affairs, able to pursue my account further; but if encouraged by a sympathetic public to supplement this effort by a more detailed description of my imprisonment at St. Helena, I may in the near future again seek their indulgence.