

Among the Boers in a Prison Camp

(Originally Published 1903)

TIMMIE and I were sorry that we couldn't remain a longer time among the beautiful scenery about Kandy; but it was a great privilege for us to be allowed to make the trip at all, and we didn't want to overstay our leave. We told Sidney Webster and the Eddy boys that we didn't want them to leave because we did; but they refused to stay without us, and we all went back together to Colombo. As usual, Timmie and I were sorry to return to the transport, but we received the friendly greetings of Mr. Casey and the sailors, and these always caused us to be more contented with our lot. Mr. Casey had been on the ship so much of the time since we arrived at Colombo that we insisted that he go ashore on the afternoon of our return. He went at three o'clock and was back in time for supper at half-past five. "There's no pleasure for me among them heathen," he said. "I'd sooner be on the ship here among white people. -I've made my last trip ashore before we leave, so if you boys have anything to do, you needn't hesitate about goin', if the old man is willin'."

We had some very important plans for the next day, and in order to let the " old man " know that we were paying some attention to duty, we remained on board all that afternoon and night. We insisted on Mr. Casey taking a good sleep, for we wanted to be away for about eighteen hours the next day. Sidney had told us about the camp for Boer prisoners of war at **Diyatalawa**, some miles up the railway, and it was planned that we boys should all visit the place and see what the Boers are really like at close range.

Timmie and I asked Captain Linder for our leave before we went to bed at night, and as he had been having a good time ashore; he gave his permission without asking any questions as to where we were going. So at six in the morning, after each of us had secured some refreshing sleep, we went ashore, and met the other boys at the Galle race Hotel about seven o'clock. We were Sidney Webster's guests at breakfast, and during the meal we laid out our day's campaign. "No visitors are allowed at the **Diyatalawa** camp," said Sidney, "but right after breakfast we'll call on his Excellency, the Governor, and ask his permission to go within the guard lines. He's a fine man, and as he knows me, I think he'll give it. We can start for the camp at nine-thirty and have all day for our sightseeing there. I have been wanting to go up there myself for some time. I have never seen any of the Boers, and would like to know what they're like.

With the Governor of Ceylon

We all five called at Queen's House to see Sir West Ridgeway, the Governor of Ceylon, and his Excellency's secretary looked us over with astonishment when we stated our errand. "Just send up my card," said Sidney, " and say that I have four American friends along with me." Then, while we awaited an answer, we had explained to us the importance of the man we were about to see. Sidney said that he had been suggested as British High Commissioner to South Africa, and that if he had been sent the war there would perhaps have been over before now. "He understands the Boers better than almost any other English states-man, and he's done a lot to bring about good feeling between the authorities here and the prisoners at **Diyatalawa**."

His Excellency received us in his office, and we weren't the least embarrassed in his presence. He had us sit down, and then devoted his attention to us American boys. He noticed the uniforms Timmie and I were wearing, and when he asked concerning them, we explained that we were masters-at-arms from the transport in the harbor. He plied us with questions about America and what was going on in the Philippines, and after we had conversed this way about

fifteen minutes, Sidney announced that we had come for permission to visit the Boers at **Diyatalawa**. Sir West Ridgeway laughed. "Well," he said, "you Americans usually get what you go after, and I suppose I may as well grant you the permission forthwith. But you must promise not to stir any of the prisoners up to revolt by your seditious language." We told him we didn't think our visit would have any such effect, and then, since we had accomplished the object of our call, we said "good-bye." We were all deeply impressed with the fine personality of this Colonial Governor, and we thought it only natural that Ceylon should be wonderfully prosperous under his administration.

We reached the railway station in time for the nine-thirty train, and we reached the camp at **Diyatalawa** shortly before noon. We had heard that there were more than five thousand prisoners interned here, and we were curious to know what means the British had adopted to keep so many in one place without putting them in cells. We discovered that the entire area of the camp is surrounded by a wire fence ten feet in height, and several feet distant from the first barrier there is erected another exactly similar. Between the two is a perfect net-work of barbed wire, stretched back and forth until it would be quite impossible for any person to get through. We supposed that this wonderful entanglement would be quite sufficient to prevent escapes, but the British evidently do not regard it so. The ground within the first fence is covered with insulated wire, and every time a prisoner approaches the barrier an alarm is rung in the nearest guard-huts and the soldiers are at his heels. These guard-huts are stationed at frequent intervals around the camp, and the elaborate arrangement of fences makes but few soldiers necessary to guard the thousands of prisoners.

Five Thousand Boers in Camp

Diyatalawa seemed to be an ideal location for such a camp. The ground is high above sea-level, there is always a breeze stirring, and the climate generally is free from fevers and ague. The British War Office could find no better place for the location of prison-camps than Ceylon, and **Diyatalawa** is one of the most healthful districts on the island.

Our note from the Governor gained us ready admittance to the enclosure, and during our stay we were shown around by two British lieutenants, who did everything possible to make us enjoy the visit. Our little party was divided in its sympathies. Kenneth and Timmie were known as rabid pro-Boers, while Sidney and Howard were equally strong in favor of the British. I tried to be neutral. "I admire the British soldiers," said Kenneth to our guides, "and you've put up a good fight against the Boers, but I don't think the war should ever have been started in the first place." Then Timmie gave vent to some of his opinions, and Howard and Sidney began to present their side of the question. It was all amusing to me, but the British officers suggested that it would be better not to discuss the subject while we were within the camp. "If you're going to talk about the war," they said, "we shan't be able to allow you to speak to the Boers at all." Of course we were anxious to talk with the prisoners, so the boys discontinued their argument.

We found the Boers comfortably provided with food and shelter. They are housed in large huts constructed of wood, and having roofs of galvanized iron to keep out the rains and the rays of the tropical sun. The roofs are covered with cocoanut leaves, so that the iron doesn't get heated during the middle of the day. In each hut we saw beds for about forty prisoners. They were ranged along the wall on either side, and over each was a shelf on which the prisoner kept his books and *other small belongings. Under the bed was his clothes-chest and the tin plate and knife and fork with which he ate at table. They were eating dinner at the time we began our rounds. Some of them had their tables in the huts where they slept, but more had spread their meal under some shady tree in the open air. They are furnished with the raw materials, and each hut is sup-posed to prepare its own food. If one man develops into a good cook, he is

some-times hired by the others to occupy that position all the time.

Some of the prisoners arrived in Ceylon with a considerable sum of money in their possession, and others are permitted to earn it by doing odd jobs of work about the camp. Nearly all of them are able to buy extra food when they want it, though we thought what they were given by the British was very good. They had even better fare than falls to the lot of Tommy Atkins, for they had jam for their bread, and that is a luxury which Tommie gets only on special occasions. They all appeared happy and contented, and those with whom we spoke had no complaint to make of the treatment they received. All this was rather disappointing to Timmie, who had expected to find the poor Boers on the verge of starvation.

A Prison Town

The camp resembled a busy town, as we went about it from one hut to another. The structures are so arranged as to form streets, and these were named after famous places in the Transvaal. There was Ladysmith Street, Majuba Hill and Spion Kop, and there were other thoroughfares called after most of the well-known Boer generals. We found no lack of shops in the strange town, although most of the supplies were sent out daily from Colombo. Some of the prisoners had started into business for themselves on a small scale, and were saving money against the time when they might be permitted to return to their families in South Africa. We saw one enterprising fellow who had constructed an oven out of clay which he dug in the camp, and he was baking a kind of Dutch cake, which he sold at a penny each. He was doing a thriving business, for cakes are in demand with the prisoners as an extra to their regular bill of fare. Another man had a notion store, where he sold souvenir postcards, writing-paper and other articles which are needed for carrying on home correspondence. He sold small ivory elephants, too, beside shellwork and Singalese jewelry. All these things are sent by the prisoners to the wife, sister, or sweetheart who was left behind in the Transvaal.

We came across three young fellows in a rickety tent, who had formed a partnership for mending shoes. The British authorities will furnish only so many pairs in a given time, and when these are worn out the Boers are very glad to pay something for having them repaired. The most prosperous shops we saw were those where groceries and canned goods were sold. The inhabitants of **Diyatalawa** enjoy such luxuries as canned fruit and vegetables, and will spend a lot of money to obtain them. We saw some American canned meats on the shelves of these stores, and a certain brand of American baked beans was among the favorite delicacies in the camp.

Amusements of the Prisoners

Those prisoners who were not employed in any way seemed to have no difficulty in putting in their time to advantage. There is a good-sized library of Dutch books in one of the huts, and the camp is well-supplied with illustrated papers,—some of them several years old. They had numerous sports, in which they engaged with much interest. They had a bowling alley which they had built, and the sound of the balls and pins could be heard all over the camp. Quoits is the favorite game, and one of our guides said that he had counted no less than thirty games in progress at one time. We visited a large structure called the Recreation Hut, which is used for a variety of purposes. It is used during the day as a gymnasium and reading-room. There were several punching-bags in evidence, and the number of boxing-gloves seemed to show that boxing is held in high favor among the Boers. At night religious services are sometimes held in the hut, and on other occasions addresses are delivered by some of the most popular among the prisoners. We observed at one end of the large room a stage, and when we inquired why it was necessary to have scenery there, we were told that amateur theatrical performances are given and that there are frequent concerts by the musical colony in the camp. The curtain of the

stage was a remarkable affair, showing a painting of the battle of Magersfontein. The British soldiers were seen to be in full retreat, and I asked the British officers how it happened that such a picture was exhibited in a prison camp. "It was painted by one of the Boers," came the reply, "and we could see no good end which would be gained by ordering it down. That is a picture of the battle from their stand-point, and the painting will not have any effect on the result of the war."

We were told that the Boers have a cricket-team which is first-class, and as a special favor they were allowed to play against the crack English team of the island at Colombo. The English won, but the Boers played the best game they had seen for many months. At the time of our visit other matches were being arranged, and the authorities appeared quite willing to permit the team to leave camp, trusting to their honor that they would not abuse their liberty to plan an escape.

There were many famous men among the prisoners at **Diyatalawa** camp. We had the privilege of shaking hands with General Joubert, General Olivier and a number of other high officers. They were dignified in their bearing, and we couldn't help being impressed with their personalities. They are treated with great respect by the other prisoners, and are accommodated by the British in special huts. They are frequently allowed out on parole, and we noticed that when the generals walked down Ladysmith Street every hat was raised in salute. We also met a son and a nephew of ex-President Kruger and a brother of ex-President Steyn. They were not different in appearance from the other Boers, and could speak but little English.

Youthful Martyrs

We boys were greatly interested in the younger prisoners. Some of them were not more than fifteen and sixteen years old, and we felt very sorry that they should have been taken so far away from their homes. Of course they were captured while fighting against the British and it was within the rules of war to send them to Ceylon as prisoners, but we couldn't help wishing that they were at home with their mothers. Some had been taken while fighting side by side with their fathers, so they were not altogether without parental care at **Diyatalawa**. Most of these young fellows could speak good English, and we had some pleasant conversations together. They expressed no desire that the war might be ended quickly in favor of the British, and all seemed willing to spend the rest of their lives at **Diyatalawa**, rather than have-General DeWet surrender. We hadn't talked with many of them before we were convinced that these Boers are really among the bravest people in the world.

The hours passed rapidly as we went from one hut to another about the camp, and darkness was at hand almost before we knew it. We knew it would be necessary to return to Colombo on this evening if we didn't want to remain until the following night, so we said farewell to the lieutenants who had so kindly acted as guides, and made our way to the station. "I felt almost as if I had been in the Transvaal," said Kenneth, and this sentiment expressed the feelings of us all. We had spent a day with Boers who had been really fighting in South Africa, and would no longer be obliged to depend upon newspaper descriptions for our idea of the Boer character. We were all agreed even Sidney and Howard, that they were deserving of respect for their earnest struggle and conviction of mind, even if we did believe their philosophy wrong. Seeing a people is worth about a thousand times reading about them, and we carried away from **Diyatalawa** some impressions which will remain with us always.

We reached Colombo shortly before eleven o'clock that night, and Timmie and I were back on the transport in time to stand our night-watch. Good Mr. Casey was on hand to welcome us, as usual, and he said that if we were sleepy he would be quite willing to stay up in our stead. Of course we were exhausted after several days of continual sightseeing, but we couldn't accept

such an offer from him. "Why," said Timmie, "I couldn't sleep a wink if I thought that dear old man was sitting up in my place."

I went to my bunk to sleep until three in the morning, and Timmie was to stand watch until then. All that was necessary for him to do was to be on hand in a case of emergency. There was no officer on the bridge while we were in port, so he didn't have to say "All's well below, sir," at the end of every hour.

[Orange River Colony to Ceylon 10/18/01](#)
[Ceylon](#)