

## HOW PRESIDENT KRUGER'S ARSENAL AT JOHANNESBURG WAS DESTROYED.

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**I**N this narrative an English mining engineer tells the story of the famous Begbie explosion at Johannesburg. The destruction of this, the principal Boer arsenal, was a most serious affair to the Dutch during the South African War. After his escape, our author, with others, was accused of having planned the affair, and daily expected to be treated as a spy and shot. He writes:

On the outbreak of war between the British and the Boers in South Africa, in the October of 1899, I found myself in the capacity of mining engineer at the City and Suburban Mine, in Johannesburg, which can claim the distinction of being the largest mine in that town.

No sooner had war been declared than we received advice to close down the mine. This was subsequently done, and the property handed over to some Americans, officials who had been connected with the mine. No Britisher was allowed to remain in charge of any property during the war, and those who possessed any transferred it to non-combatant Europeans.

Naturally, excitement ran high. Recruiting stations were opened by the Dutch, and very soon the place presented the appearance of a military camp. The closing of the mine occupied the engineers some days, as it was desirable to remove certain delicate machinery from below the ground to the surface, dismantle some of the heavier engines, and enclose others so that no damage could come to them by falling debris.

During these operations we were frequently visited by secret service officers in the employ of the Transvaal Government. They took full notes of the property and the names of all who had been employed by the owners of the mine. All those of British nationality were given permits, enabling them to pass down the railway to Delagoa Bay and so leave the country. Not a few Britishers owning property in the town expressed a desire to remain behind. These were accordingly granted permission to do so. Believing that the war would not be a long affair—a delusion which, I fear, many of us shared at that time—I also approached the authorities and secured the necessary permission, and decided to stay in the town.

In a few weeks, however, it was clear that the Britisher was looked upon as an encumbrance and an individual who should be closely watched. The result of this was that many Englishmen cleared out, and within three months only a score or so were to be found in the city. As the weeks dragged on, and news arrived of the reverses which the British troops had suffered, it dawned upon me that I was tied up in Johannesburg for some time to come.

More than once I thought seriously of applying for a permit and making tracks to Delagoa Bay; but I knew that the moment the mine was opened I should be wanted, and this decided me to stay. But I could hardly afford to remain idle indefinitely, so sought work. This was not easy, as all mines were closed, many of the factories and business places, not to mention the hotels, restaurants, and places of amusement. The busiest place in Johannesburg at this time was the Begbie foundry or factory, and here I secured employment.

Little did I dream then of what this action was to cost me. I nearly lost my life in the famous Begbie explosion, was imprisoned and persecuted. As one who worked in the factory, who had a narrow escape from death through the terrible explosion, was in Johannesburg at the time, I think, possibly, I may be able to throw some light on this remarkable occurrence, for even to-day there is much discussion, particularly among the Boers, as to how the explosion occurred. There are thousands in South Africa to-day who will not hesitate to tell you that it was engineered by the British, and the fact that Sir Alfred, now Lord Milner, and Lord Roberts sent for me and demanded a detailed account of the catastrophe would indicate the importance they attached to the affair. Indeed, it is really not too much to say that the calamity had no little bearing on the course of the struggle, for it meant that for many weeks the Boer forces in the field were decidedly short of ammunition and shells, particularly the latter.

It should be explained, perhaps, that the foundry was in Anderson Street, on the outskirts of the city, towards Jeppeson Town. It occupied some four

acres of ground. It was under the management of the Creuzot firm, and it was here that the powder was manufactured and the shells filled for the Boer forces. It was Kruger's Woolwich Arsenal. It was at this place that the Boers concentrated their main supply of powder and shells, the weapons which were to have annihilated the English and drive them into the sea.

The foundry was surrounded by a tall pallisade, or fence, and guarded by sentries. Most of the officials were Dutch, but the principal engineers, the men upon whom the Boers relied, were of various European nationalities. Roughly speaking, there were between 400 and 500 employes. They included every race under the sun. Among the whites, the Italians predominated. The fact is, the authorities had no option but to call in alien labour, as their own men were wanted at the front.

Things dragged on till the April of 1900, and being tired of the manner in which my actions were being watched, and the suspicious manner in which all Britishers were regarded by the authorities, I decided to leave and clear out of the country. My work in the factory was most menial, and although I was continually approached for advice when it came to any engineering difficulty, it was clear that the Boers did not mean me to learn anything of their secrets, or to have a hand in anything which I might possibly use against them. I was also being continually cross questioned by their secret service officers, and most extraordinary accusations were made against me. One day I was accused of having hidden £5,000 worth of food stuff in the mine which I had closed down. Having had enough of this treatment I accordingly resigned, and made preparations for departure. It was on a Friday that I left the factory, and on the Monday I visited the bank in the town and drew £200 in gold. This sum I placed in a small bag with my brush and comb.

On the Tuesday afternoon, after I had wished my friends good-bye, I repaired to my room in the house where I was lodging, which stood opposite the factory, some 20 paces or so away. This house was kept by an Englishwoman, but her husband, a Boer, was in the employ of the secret service department, a fact which I did not learn till some time later. I was lying on my bed, which consisted of a heavy iron framework, and was situated in the front room on the ground floor. Suddenly, without the slightest warning, at 5.30 in the afternoon, there was a tremendously loud report, by far the loudest noise I have ever heard. I hardly know how to describe it. It was simply deafening. It was like a particularly loud peel of thunder going off close to one's ear. Then, in a flash, everything was confusion. Daylight appeared to be blotted out, the room appeared to sway, and for some minutes I was literally lost in oblivion.

When I came to I found myself under the bed, but unable to move. I had been thrown there by the force of the explosion. As I lay there, wondering what had happened, report followed report, but by no means so loud as the first. These were the shells exploding, and these gruesome noises continued for some minutes. It was an awful experience and a terrible predicament. I thought my last hour had come. I tried to move my legs, but couldn't. At last, after great exertion I managed to push some of the debris around me to one side with my hands. I could see a little and began gradually to recognise where I was and what had really occurred. The next task was to get out, but this was no easy matter, as I was literally buried alive under falling bricks and masonry. Twenty minutes or more elapsed before I finally succeeded in crawling out of my prison. I was covered with dust and dirt, my clothes were torn to ribbons, and I presented a sorry plight.

I then tried to grope my way out, as I had realised by this time that the house had fallen in, and all those that were in it when the explosion occurred were buried beneath it. I owed my life to the fact that I was thrown under the bed. The latter was piled up with bricks and stones, which the heavy iron frame prevented from reaching me. If this tremendous weight had reached me I should not now be alive to write this story. At last I managed to reach the street. Everywhere was confusion. People were running this way and that, military officials were dashing about and shouting orders. All round me were piles of debris, all that remained

of the dwellings that stood erect less than thirty minutes ago. Whole streets of houses had been demolished, some fine hotels, while the famous Boer arsenal had literally been blown to smithereens.

Fortunately, the majority of the workmen in the foundry were at tea when the explosion occurred, or the loss of life would have been tremendous. As it was some thirty of them were killed outright and fifty-four were badly injured. The greater number of these were Italians. Scores of persons in the town were also killed and injured and for days afterwards human remains were recovered from the ruins.

It has been declared in South Africa that this is the greatest explosion on record. This statement is probably an exaggeration, though some idea of the force of the explosion may be gauged when it is stated that the initial report was heard in Pretoria thirty-five miles distant. Dwellers in farm houses five, ten, and fifteen miles away were literally scared out of their lives. For days we heard accounts of miraculous escapes. A man riding his bicycle into Jeppeson Town one and a half miles away from the site of the foundry, had his cycle blown from under him. Curiously enough, he escaped with a few bruises. But to this day he has never been able to find that machine or any portion of it. The concussion was so great that all clocks and watches in the town were stopped, and windows five miles distant were shattered.

When I had somewhat recovered from the shock I went back to the ruins with the intention of hunting for my money. I found sentries had been posted round the spot and nothing would induce them to let me pass. Indeed, the fact that I had lost £200 in gold appeared to make them more suspicious of me than ever. That same day I was sent for by the military commander of the town and subjected to a long cross-examination. He hinted to me very plainly that he regarded it as a planned affair and that if I had no actual hand in it myself I knew the parties who were responsible or it.

When I assured him I knew nothing whatever about it, and that I thought it was the result of an accident, one of the foundry officials standing by his side, went so far as to say that a drive had been put in and a raise; in other words, a tunnel had been made and an outlet formed to aid the explosion. Here I must say I began to lose patience and declared that if on examination of the foundry a drive and raise were found I would forfeit my life and £1,000. But this wager was not accepted.

The result of my examination was that I was thrown into prison. Three others soon joined me, one of them being Mr. Begbie, jun. The indictment against us was quite an elaborate one and things certainly looked serious. We were first accused of high treason and murder, which was subsequently reduced to manslaughter. More than once we expected to be hauled before a court martial and condemned to be shot. The suspense and anxiety were most trying to the nerves. My companions told me how they watched me at night throw up my arms and shriek in my sleep. It was disordered nerves, as a result of the terrible ordeal. Exactly a month after the calamity occurred we were released, the charges, we were informed, having been withdrawn by the State Prosecutor.

Being then practically penniless I determined to make further search for the gold I had lost, but to accomplish this I had to approach the ruined house round the back way, and though for three days several companions and myself made a thorough search we never found a single gold piece. I subsequently learned that one British soldier unearthed five sovereigns at the spot.

Finding my efforts to recover my property fruitless I went down to Delagoa Bay and from there to Capetown. I had hardly landed an hour before I received a message that Lord Milner wanted to see me. He questioned me about the explosion and listened most attentively to all I had to say. He telegraphed to Lord Roberts, who was then up country with the army, and almost by return, came a message that I was to proceed at once to his camp. The great soldier received me very kindly, congratulated me on my miraculous escape, and admitted at once that he agreed with me that the explosion was the result of negligence. The men employed by the Boers were not competent, and, not recognising the deadly material which they were handling, they got too careless, and so resulted a calamity, by far the most serious that befell the Boers during the earlier part of the campaign. "And now," said Lord Roberts, at the close of the conversation, "you have been spending your time in Johannesburg doing little good, I want you now to superintend the management of our coal mines, which work I was naturally pleased to accept."