

CHRISTMAS AT THE FRONT.

A Reminiscence of Christmas at Modder River.



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BUYING PROVISIONS.



CHRISTMAS at the front was, I take it, the thought uppermost in people's minds during the last few days of 1899—those who had husbands, sons, or other relatives engaged wondering what they were doing in the plains

and hills of South Africa, and picturing to themselves all sorts of extraordinary ways of celebrating the great family holiday; whilst those "at the front," including the writer, were wondering how those at home were spending Christmas, and wishing they were back to enjoy the good things that they themselves could not get.

At home it was cold; at Modder River it was hot, melting hot. As Christmas approached everybody was thinking how to make the most of and enjoy the comforts which had been sent out to the different regiments and batteries. The great difficulty was to get the goods up fast enough; for, be it remembered, there was a very long line of communications from Cape Town, and the only railway line was a single one, blocked

with military stores and troops all the way; so that many of us wondered whether we should ever get our puddings, etc., in time. But "Tommy," when once he makes up his mind to have a good time, is not deterred from his purpose, and it takes a tremendous lot of trouble to make him give up any object he has in view.

Modder River was a camp, and the troops were under canvas, so many men to each tent, and it was obviously impossible to celebrate the event with the customary decorations, such as are usual in barracks; but as that could not be, each tent declared it would go in on its own and abide by the consequences. The regimental canteens, or rather brigade canteens, of which there were, so far as I know, only about two, drove a roaring trade, so that a few days before Christmas Day they were nearly empty, and, as a matter of fact, "cleaned out" of some articles. The other canteens, or rather stores—there were four in all, private concerns—had a terrible task to supply Thomas Atkins with what he required. Before each store tent was a long string of men in different styles of dress or khaki—men

with bronzed, dusty faces, clothes full of wrinkles, trousers baggy at the knees, some with puttees, some without, all with helmets or smasher hats. Some of the men turned the back of their head-gear to the front, to protect the eyes; others had their hat-brims turned down all round, and these were the most comfortable. As a rule, when two men went the round of the canteens or stores for their tent they would take a tent- or peg-bag with them as their market basket. It was the duty of these two men to get the different luxuries available, no matter the price asked by the storekeeper, who, with the help of one or two perspiring "whites" and a couple or so of "boys" (blacks), was supplying the wants of a dozen or so of men, all shouting their orders at once. Potatoes were at a discount; as soon as a barrel came in it disappeared at once. Bacon, again, was a luxury which was difficult to obtain. It ought to be explained that these were extras that the men had to buy themselves. Meat and bread were supplied every day in camp to the companies in the early morning by the regimental quartermaster.

Christmas to most of us who were at Modder will for ever be associated with sand, dust, and flies.

To start with the sand. Most of us know what sand is, what it can do, and how uncomfortable it can make us; but then that's ordinary sand. Only those who for two or three months were stationed at Modder River and De Aar know what sand *really* is, what it really can do, and to what depths of misery and contemplation of suicide it can lead a man. Not many knew when they were moving on to Modder that it was a very sandy place; and when, about five miles from it, we came upon thick sand, all said, "Oh, it will be all right the other side, there's plenty of fairly good veldt there." But few realised that every freshly-arrived battalion of infantry or cavalry regiment would cut up the ground to the extent they did. And when a breeze came, so did the sand-storms. At first they were not of much importance; but as time wore on and more troops arrived, so did the dust-storms increase in volume, until at last they were

unbearable; and those who had business on hand which took them out, and were caught in one, had a miserable time, as it filled one's nose, eyes, mouth, got into the clothes, everything; and directly your tent was reached, lo and behold, a general smother of dust over every article you possessed.

Christmas Day was about the very worst the men had. Everything pointed to a fine day—bright sunshine and very hot. The plum-puddings had arrived, so had our various presents—cigarettes, tobacco, socks, etc.—and everybody was going about after church parade, which was held early in the morning, shaking hands with himself, going to have a thundering good time, never noticing some rather ominous though small clouds making their appearance above the horizon. Over by Magersfontein, where the Boers under Cronje were sullenly lying watching us, everything seemed fair. The great kopje



THE SING-SONG.

smiled down upon us. The outposts far away were sweltering under their blanket shelters in the trenches, only the sentries were awake and alert, wondering when the relief was coming round, to give them a chance of getting away from the sun and joining the others under their shelters. The fires were going in the field ovens, and the regimental cooks were hard at work cooking for all they were worth, tent and company orderlies were running about getting things ready for the dinner, yet nobody noticed that those clouds

ber, and also papers on the wall. No good. Your marmalade, jam, meat—everything was covered thickly with them; in fact, you ate flies with your food, and it was a relief when night came.

Most of the regiments in camp got up some kind of amusement during their stay, which frequently took the form of "Sing-songs." Some were on a very large scale indeed. I remember one, devised and arranged by the quartermaster of the 1st Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (the old 91st), which was, I



BRINGING IN THE WOOD FOR THE BONFIRE UNDER ARMED ESCORT.

were getting bigger and bigger, blacker and blacker; they only noticed that the wind was slightly rising. What of that? "Oh, it will be all right, old chap. What the blazes are you bothering about?—Have a drink. Come on, old 'un—how's them 'taters?—that meat getting on?—All right, sergeant. Mind that there pudding, mate. What the——?" Bang! It was upon us, all round us, all over us. Modder River camp was enveloped in a black-brown mantle of dust so thick that it was impossible to see anything a dozen yards off. Result: Christmas dinner off for that day, and men scrambling out of their tents looking worried and angry.

Flies again were the next torment of our lives. It did not matter in the least what you did to get rid of them. Their numbers never diminished. We put patent fly-catchers down, warranted to catch and kill any num-

think, the largest, and certainly the most successful, of many that I have been to. It took place outside the 91st's camp, close to the regimental machine-gun lines, and was illuminated by an enormous bonfire, the materials for which had been cut and carted from the banks of the Modder some little way off, and brought in under an armed escort—it was not always too safe for small parties to go out in a westerly direction from the camp. The bonfire, with two casks and a plank to lay across them for the performers to stand on, formed our stock-in-trade to start with. The performers were not difficult to get, as amongst so many men the best were well known. Some one or two of the officers took a turn, but as a rule it was the rank and file that provided the entertainment. The Army Service Corps and the Royal Army Medical Corps produced some excellent comic vocal.

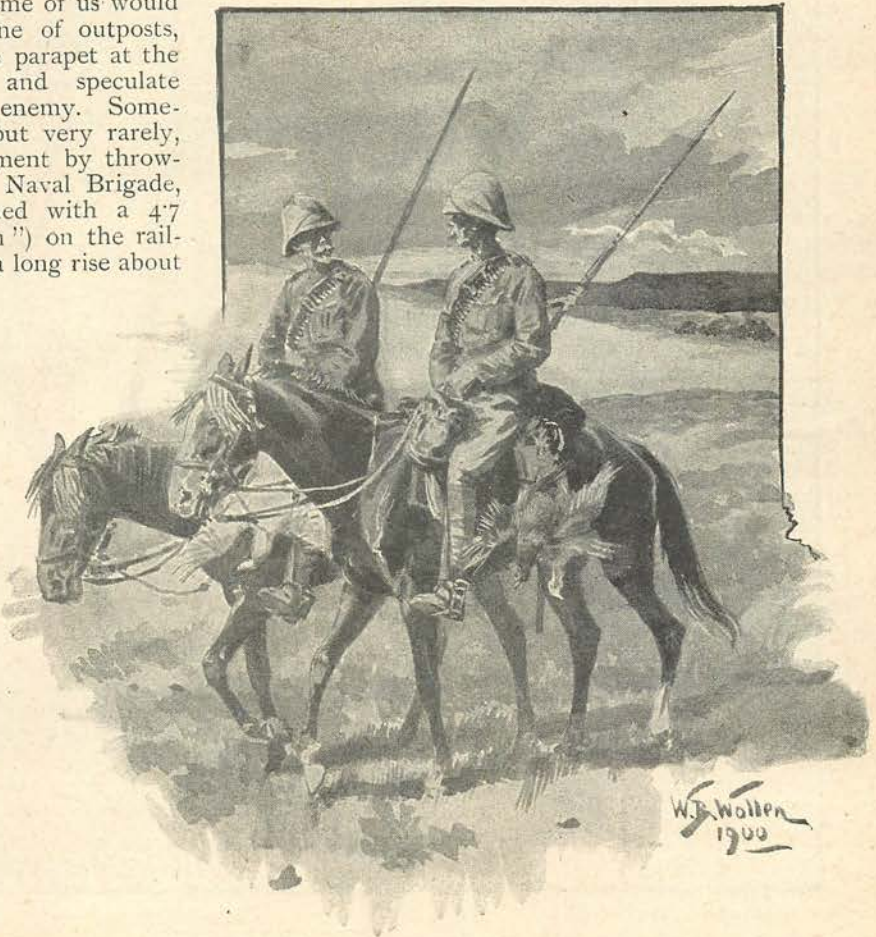
ists and reciters. The songs were good. What the ordinary soldier likes, and sets him drumming and stamping with his feet, is a really sound and swinging chorus tune; and the man on the cask, knowing that, gave it to the crowd of fighters with a will. It was a picturesque sight; the light from the fire, a black figure silhouetted against it, standing on a cask, often gesticulating wildly, and the crowd of men all round, stolidly smoking, and waiting for the chorus to begin; whilst away in the distance we knew that the Boer outposts were watching us.

We had very little excitement during Christmas time, and men wondered how long we should be lying idle, doing nothing, hearing nothing, not knowing for certain what was going on elsewhere. Sometimes a patrol would come in, the proud and fortunate captors of a couple or so of Boer fowls, which were duly consigned to the cooking pot with the usual ceremonies. At other times some of us would ride up to the line of outposts, and look over the parapet at the Boer positions, and speculate wildly about the enemy. Sometimes he would, but very rarely, supply the excitement by throwing shells at the Naval Brigade, who were stationed with a 4.7 ("Joe Chamberlain") on the railway at the top of a long rise about 6,000 yards from Magersfontein.

Football was a source of amusement in the afternoon, but where the fun came in, with a hot sun pouring down upon the players, was a puzzle. The all-prevailing sand was a hindrance to good play, as often a man would miss his kick owing to the clouds of dust kicked up by the nimble-footed players. On one occasion the Boers tried to spoil the harmony of the meeting by

dropping two or three shells in our neighbourhood, but they were too far off to do any harm. The incident only took Tommy's attention off the game for a few seconds, with a few pithy remarks upon the Boer shooting. Every morning and evening, for some considerable time during our uneventful stay, the naval guns would fire off a few rounds at the Boers, and men would climb up on to waggons, and pause at their work to watch our shells bursting on the Magersfontein kopjes—a little white ball in the air if it was shrapnel, a huge column of brown dirt thrown up if it was lyddite or common shell. Anyway, it amused us, and I'm afraid did not do the Boers much damage.

Taking it all round, Christmas was uneventful with us. Our dinners were spoilt, and the only person who might have kept us sometimes busily employed—the enemy—did not, or would not, show a leg.



'CAPTORS OF A COUPLE OR SO OF BOER FOWLS.'