

The Private Soldier as a Familiar Friend

By Eric Macfayden, late Trooper, Imperial Yeomanry

ONE of the first characteristics of the army to strike one is the strongly marked individuality of the different corps. It is like a big public school with its different houses, each with their easily recognisable features, peculiar to themselves. There is the long-suffering good nature of the line; the self-assertive pride of the Guards, almost always on its defence; the rather patronising superciliousness of the cavalry; the solid self-confidence of that most popular service known as the 'tillery; and the conceit of the engineer. The existence of these several types is continually forcing itself into notice. In another respect, too, there is a resemblance to a public school: in the kind of friendly enmity existing between the respective corps.

Such feuds and friendships are due to all sorts of interesting but often recondite origins; some to recent Aldershot alliances, some to quarrels far back in the past. But even when the beginnings are forgotten, regimental *esprit de corps* will not allow the feeling to die out. The other day I was travelling in a railway carriage with two old soldiers, who had not been two minutes in the same carriage before they found their respective regiments had lain next one another at Allahabad in 1883! At first they were as friendly as could be. But before long they neared a question of disputed right—about a race which was said by the one regiment to have been unfairly run. The one was as energetic in vindication of the winner, and the other as angry in condemnation, as though the race had been run the day before. When one of them left the carriage the other hurled vituperation at the retreating figure as it marched down the platform.

In hospital at Pretoria my bed was between those of a gunner with bad bronchitis, and a big Gordon recovering from dysentery. They fought across me continually for the honour of their regiments, and challenged each other at least daily to single combat—neither being able to rise

from their beds. Both had been in Ladysmith, and the allotment of credit for the various memorable exploits of the siege was usually the subject of disagreement.

"Seventeen hours under long Tom," begins the gunner.

"Seventeen hours in the clink," retorts the "Jock" (Highlander that is). "A weesh a had ma strength, laddie; a wad sune knock the breith out o' your blazin' batt'ry."

"Ay, there's a deal o' scrappin' in these 'ere 'Dargais,'" replies the gunner, "when a bloke's in bed, an' there ain't no chance of their bein' 'urt." (The "Dargais," I need hardly explain, are the Gordons.)

So the argument would go on. It would be varied sometimes, apropos of the playing of the Lincolns' band in the square outside, by a dispute as to the quality of the different regimental bands. As neither had ever heard the other's, there was room for infinite discussion, with little prospect of a settlement. One day I succeeded in proposing, as a *modus vivendi*, a decision in favour of the "Blue Hungarian." Neither side of the controversy having ever heard the name of this band, it was agreed, as a compromise, that perhaps it was the best in the world.

The relations between the Cameron Highlanders and Seaforth's (the former of whom boast that they have within three years circumnavigated Africa and fought hard in both north and south) have been strained ever since the Atbara. In this fight the Camerons were to have demolished the Dervish zareba and then let the Seaforths through their ranks. When the Seaforths came up they found the zareba demolished, but no Camerons were to be seen. They had gone through and done the rival regiment's work as well as their own!

One of my friends at Bloemfontein (though we did not know it at the time) had just earned the Victoria Cross. He narrated the incident in connection with which he won this distinction. But I only learned of his part in it months afterwards, when I saw

the award in the papers. Another struck me as being quite an artistic character. He could draw from memory pictures of Shakespeare's house at Stratford and make up verses of his own of a pathetic character. All of these he sang to one tune. He would divert himself in his leisure moments by circulating circumstantial rumours about the death or capture of De Wet, which would return to us after a few hours, embellished with handsome augmentations. He was also continually borrowing sixpences, which he spent on heaven knows what.

In his taste with regard to songs, Tommy is almost always sentimental, even morbid. He loves to "suck melancholy from a song as a weasel sucks eggs." Perhaps, for the time being, the most popular song in the army was one about the dying speech of a little drummer-boy; of which the refrain ran somewhat thus:

Oh break the news to mother,
She knows how well I love her;
But tell her not to wait for me
For I'm not coming home, &c.

Ballads such as "Oh, Valentine," and "Rosie O'Brady" were a good deal sung. When the song was humorous, the humour usually consisted in puns, or was of the kind associated with pantomimes. I remember one much-liked song of the kind:

What did I do? What did I do?
As soon as the boat began to fill
I turned around and I said to Bill:
"I'm a wonder, of that there is no doubt,
I'll simply bore a hole in the boat and let the water out."

But the really popular song was of a melancholy order, and set to a most lugubrious tune. A fair example is the one that begins:

Down in the deep they are sleeping,
Sleeping to wake no more.

Most of the men, especially married men, were a good deal homesick in hospital, where there is plenty of time to think of home. Some of them, when one got to know them, spoke most charmingly of their home affairs. One reservist whom I came to know well was in a state of perpetual

amazement at his own blessedness in having secured the "missus" he had.

He was a big, awkward Lancashire lad, very often in trouble. "I never could tell," he would say very humbly, "how she came to tek up wi' me—her bein' one o' that sort as keeps theirselves to theirselves." He cherished the dream of an Arcadia in which he kept a country butcher's shop, (with a cart of his own to drive round in with the meat,) and had a field behind his house in which the "missus" kept fowls. This man was in the 21st Lancers, and had been through the great charge of Omdurman.

Another, whom I knew as a person of considerable imaginative powers, and particularly fond of an appreciative audience, gave me a characteristic account of his courtship. He had apparently won his lady by his moving account of adventures in the Tirah campaign:

She loved me for the dangers I had passed;
And I loved her that she did pity them.

I knew another man—a sergeant in a Scotch regiment who hailed from the Clyde—who positively wearied me with his praises of his young wife. "A'm tellin' ye she's a self-taught dressmaker! She has ae single sewing-machine that dis auchteen different stitches—mon, a couldna tell ye sae muckle as the names o' the half of them! Ay, and there is na a wumman in the married-quarters but comes to Mrs. — for receipts in cookery. An' she's ten years the younger o' me—for all a'm callin' her mither. Ay, and ye'll no be seein' the one out for a walk wi'out the ither. For where she canna go, I mauna; and where she mauna go, ye'll no be seein' the sergeant."

Some of the men, poor fellows, felt that they missed little enough by being away from home. I asked one reservist, a middle-aged man of fifteen years service, if his berth was being kept open for him while he was away. "Oh, yes," he answered, "my job's 'u'employed,' and they'll keep it open for me."

Tommy no doubt has his faults, though some of them are the almost inevitable effects upon certain characters of a life like that of the army. Perhaps the most general (though

goes and 'e sets off at what you might call a full gallop.

"Well the Colonel 'e was the 'are, and the eighteen mounted men, they was the 'ounds. They chases that Colonel till he was well out of sight; and we sees 'em both, next morning, jest about breakfast time. But the boys they was a sittin' up in the firin' line and a callin' out—'Ten shillin's reward for any one as will pro-dooce the Colonel of the —— Rigiment!'"

I was naturally interested in finding out the opinion of the rank and file of the regular army upon the value of the auxiliary forces. Of the Canadians, the Australians, and the South African Colonials, there was only one opinion—the highest. Of the home volunteers, opinions were mixed. Each regiment spoke well of its own volunteer service company; and such as knew the Imperial Yeomanry by personal experience, spoke well of them also. I never heard a man belonging to Lord Methuen's division, for which Lord Chesham's Yeomanry Brigade supplied all the cavalry they had; who did not praise the yeomanry. But many of the infantry in other divisions had never, at this time, acted with yeomanry, and these were reluctant at first to treat one as a man and a brother. The popularity of the service was militated against by the raising of such corps as the so-called "millionaire" or "kid-gloved" corps.

The Guards regiments came in for a good deal of unpopularity; but they, even in peace time, are disapproved of by the army as a whole; and the non-combatant services, as was natural, did not always receive fair-play. When a hospital orderly would complain of patients being unhandy or shiftless, the smart retort would probably be, "But then we're fighting sojers, you see." I once heard a sharp rebuke administered to an Army Service sergeant quartered at the base, who had been recounting with much spirit the adventures of a friend of his at the front. "Who's that a-talkin' so big?" asked a Tommy (who knew of course as well as the rest of us). "What, don't yer know 'im?" replied a confederate; "why 'e's a commissary duke, 'e is—a bloomin' non-com.; South African medal and Base-fontein bar."

The coinage Base-fontein I thought particularly good.

The Tommy's dialect is always peculiar and often picturesque. Most ordinary things have their special names, as though in a different tongue. Thus "scoff" is food, "rooty" bread, and "slingers" army rations, unaugmented. Many expressions disclose an Indian origin. Thus a "bandage-wallah" is a doctor, a "Bible-wallah" a chaplain, a "wobbly-wallah" a barber (wielder of the "wobbly" or shaving brush). Of the soldiers who have been in India almost all consider themselves accomplished Orientalists. Whenever we came across any coolies (of whom there are large numbers in South Africa), these linguists would display their prowess before their less-travelled friends; but the coolies, I confess, never appeared to be particularly responsive. I am informed, on good authority, that in India the ordinary Tommy's vocabulary usually consists of the monosyllable "j-ow," assisted by the suasion of a kick!

But without his resorting to eastern expressions Tommy's language is often an interesting study. The use of the perpetual epithet which Mr. Kipling usually, I think, represents by the milder expletive "bloomin'," is not of course confined to the army. But I have heard there niceties and developments in its use which could scarcely I think have grown up elsewhere. I remember lying on my back one very hot day with my eyes closed. A friend sat by me eating a large bun purchased for a penny. He amused himself by indolently plucking out the rare currants and flicking them at my face. For some time, hoping the extravagant impulse might wear itself out, I lay quite still, simulating slumber. At last he planted one on the very end of my nose. Then I sat up, expostulatory.

This was, of course, the object at which he had aimed, and he greeted me with a delightful burst of idiom, "Hoo-bloomin'-ray, I thought you wasn't a-bloomin'-sleep." Surely this double instance of "tmesis" (for "hooray" and "asleep") should be a treasure for the grammarians.

Many of these men, though practically uneducated, had a real command of descrip-

not nearly so common, I believe, as a generation ago) is drunkenness. A good many of the men in hospital were suffering from ailments more or less directly traceable to alcoholism. I remember a doctor asking an old Indian soldier with a very bad liver, whether he was not a rather heavy drinker. The man gave a grudging acknowledgment, that "he might be fond of a drop." "A drop!" replied the doctor; "buckets, my man, buckets!"

Another man put the reason for the prevalence of enteric and similar diseases among the troops in a rather new light. Discussing the matter with me one day, he remarked: "You see, this is such an unhealthy country—a man has to drink so much water. Now, when I'm at home, if I'm a-going to drink a glass of water, I sez afore I does it: 'Now, I'm a-goin' to give my in'ards a surprise.'" This struck me as a novel form of "grace before water."

Tommy upon his officers is always interesting. I found that many officers receive a degree of admiration, and even of affection, which almost amounts to hero-worship. I was sitting alone one day in the recreation tent at Bloemfontein when a man strolled in whose acquaintance I afterwards cultivated. I found him to be a Scotsman, though in a London regiment, and no more demonstrative than most of his countrymen. But as he entered the tent, his eye fell on a print of Sir R. Buller pinned up on the wall. Instinctively he sprang up to attention and saluted!

He turned round immediately and saw me sitting in a corner. He blushed at once and began to exculpate himself. But the action had been almost involuntary, and the emotion which had prompted it had been genuine.

I believe there can be little doubt that General Buller was the idol of the South African Field Force. I thought it significant that, though I spoke of him to many men who had been through Ladysmith, I never found one who had a word to say against "old Buller." And yet, if any one had the right to do so, they had. The universal opinion was that it was astonishing he should ever have got in, even in the end.

The feeling of hopelessness, which yet never affected the dogged determination of the Ladysmith garrison, was well illustrated by a story told me by one of the 5th Lancers. A man coming into a tent towards the end of the siege, sat down, and remarked:

"They say as Buller 'll be in to-morrow."

"Silly fool—chuck 'im out," was the curt response, and some one arose and ousted the man of hope. Then one of the others began:

"Wot's the use of a bloke talkin' like that; we'll all be skeletings before Buller gets in."

"Silly fool—chuck 'im out," again came the reply, and the man of despair was also expelled.

At the same time, Tommy is exceedingly bitter in condemnation of a certain class of officers. He is angrily contemptuous of young and thoughtless officers who get their men into "tight corners!" Numbers of men in the ranks know more about fighting than most lieutenants and many captains; and they are not sparing in their criticisms amongst each other. Indeed, I have heard officers even of high rank accused, not merely of being deficient in tactical skill, but even of not being overburdened with ordinary pluck. I give the following story in the words of the man whom I heard relate it, not suggesting, of course, that it is a true story, but merely as an instance of the kind of criticism not uncommon in the ranks just now.

"Oh, you was a talkin' of 'ow the cavalry was in the firin' line at Nauwpoort Nek, or was it Karree Sidin'? Never mind, 'cos this 'ere didn't 'appen at Nauwpoort Nek, nor at Karree Sidin' neither, what I'm a goin' to tell you of. Well we was in the firin' line we was, and the old . . . Rigiment a layin' to the right of us. Extreme right of them was eighteen mounted men and the Colonel of the — on a 'orse. Them was all the geegees we had.

"Well sudden-like a Morser bullet comes a wizzin' past the ol' Colonel's ear, and 'is 'orse, a thinkin' I suppose as 'e orter carry a message to the gin'ral wheels to right about. It wasn't the Colonel's fault of course; no one didn't say as it was. 'Owever round 'e

tive language. I recollect an infantryman describing a charge in which he took part (it was at Van Wyk's Vlei), and in which he received a bad thigh wound. After describing the rush very graphically he ended up: "So there we was, at about two 'undred. We seen 'em on January 6, in the general assault, and then we'd walked five months without even 'avin' a look at one of 'em; and we thinks we be goin' to git it into 'em again, an' our blood was up, I can tell yer, and we was 'ollering like 'ell-cats. It was then as I got a Morser in my thigh, and down I comes on my nose, like as if I was 'it with a sledge-ammer, back o' the neck, an' I tries to up an' I couldn't, but I was that 'eated, I keeps a schreechin' like a bag-pipes." I never met a soldier who spoke quite the sublimated slang of Mr. Kipling; but this man came fairly near it.

In connection with his story, I may note that I never saw, nor heard of a case of a man hit in front, who threw up his arms and fell backwards, as they do in pictures. I questioned a number of men of considerable experience, but all agreed with me that it was universal to fall on one's face.

Making the acquaintance of these men was one of the few alleviations of hospital life, which was about as dull, otherwise, as could well be imagined. Each morning there was the doctor's visit, with the eternal question, "Well, my men, how are you to-day?" and the equally certain answer, "Oh! pretty well, thank you, sir." This grew so monotonous that I remember one man, on the usual question being put to him, breaking out in his native tongue, "Och, brawly,

and thank ye for speirin'!" From the doctor's look, he must, I think, have supposed the man to be reviling him, and contemplated having him put under arrest.

In our tent at Bloemfontein we attempted to make the time pass quicker by undertaking the responsibility of keeping up a perpetual game of four-handed bezique. The six of us took turns, and "kept the pot boiling," with occasional pauses for meals, from reveillé till lights out. We used to sit round a bed, mildly elated by "royal marriages" and "sequences," and steadily reducing our stock of tobacco. Sometimes for a day or more we would be dependent for a light on a chance and charitable passer by.

One night I went to the door of our tent rather late, and was at once attracted by an unusual object straight before me. I went up to it and found it to be the figure of a man, turned upside down, and apparently fixed so in an everlasting station! I turned the figure over and found it to be a friend of mine, in the regiment endearingly known as the "Dubs" (the Dublin Fusiliers that is). "Why what's wrong with you Mike?" I asked. "Ugh," he replied; "doctor he sez, 'ye're not looking yerself to-day, Mike;' so I sez, 'neither am I feeling it docthor,' sez I. 'So what is the matter wid ye then,' sez he. 'Ugh, sorr,' sez I, 'I think it's the monothony that's preyin' on me vitals.' 'Why,' sez he, 'go and shtand on yer head, man,' sez he, 'that's all you 're needing.' So I thried it, and I felt such an improvement in me ginerall health, that I'm just continuiing the motion."

