

Nursing in South Africa during the Boer War.*

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Reading, as a young girl, a most interesting account of Miss Florence Nightingale's noble work during the Crimean War, I became filled with the desire to become an army nursing sister and go to the front. England being happily at peace, and I much under age, I was obliged to moderate my ardour. But with the main hope still uppermost, a few years afterwards I entered the training-school for nurses attached to Bellevue Hospital, New York. Fourteen years later—viz., October, 1899—I received my appointment, with three other nurses, to go out with the Canadian contingent then called to active service in South Africa, thus realising my early aspirations.

Upon our arrival at Cape Town we found our troops had orders to proceed up country immediately. We reported to the principal medical officer, making every effort to be allowed to accompany them to the front; but this we were told was impossible, as no nursing sisters could be accommodated in the field hospitals. So with very disconsolate feelings we saw our countrymen entrain without us, and came to realise at that early date what served us in good stead later, viz., that we too were soldiers, to do as we were told and go where we were sent. Later in the day we received orders to proceed to Wynberg for duty in the large base hospital there, called No. 1 General. These general hospitals, of which there were thirteen or more, were most complete. They were, as a rule, under canvas, and contained from 600 to 1,000 beds. They left England with a staff of surgeons, sisters, trained orderlies, &c., and a full equipment of everything needful, including the comfortable blue flannel hospital kit that "Tommy Atkins" wears during convalescence.

No. 1 General was placed at Wynberg Barracks, and numbered about 1,000 beds. No. 2 was pitched under canvas, also at Wynberg; and No. 3 at Rondebosch, about six miles away, close to Mr. Cecil Rhodes's beautiful place, "Groot Schuur." Pitched beside No. 3 was the private hospital sent out by the Duke of Portland, and the two numbered over 700 beds. The private hospitals were almost ideal in their equipment, having every comfort for the patients, beautifully-appointed operating tents, X-ray apparatus, &c. There were four large general hospitals at the Cape, besides the Portland, a convalescent hospital for officers at Claremont, two large rest camps, and two hospitals for the Boer prisoners at Greenpoint and Simons Town, for many months all these places being full. At

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Wynberg we found our services greatly needed, the wounded from Graspan and Belmont having recently been brought down in large numbers. A few days after our arrival a large convoy brought in the wounded from Magersfontein and Modder River, when all my empty beds were filled with the men of the Highland Brigade, which suffered so severely in these engagements. The arrival of this convoy was a most pitiful sight, many of the men being stretcher cases, shot through thigh, foot, or spine. What struck one most was the wonderful pluck of these poor fellows, who had jolted over the rough veldt in ambulances and then endured the long train journey, also the utter self-forgetfulness of everyone else—surgeons, sisters and orderlies—all of whom worked on regardless of time or hunger until everyone was as comfortable as they could be made.

Tommy made the least of all his woes. A drink first; then, after his wounds had been attended to, "a bit of tobacco" for a smoke, and a piece of paper to "send a line so that they won't be scared at home," were invariably the first requirements.

During this early period, with the exception of sunstroke and rheumatism, almost all the cases were surgical, and operations would continue all day long after the arrival of a fresh convoy. The X-rays were, of course, very valuable in locating bullets, and saved Tommy many a probe. I have not yet heard the statistics of the wounded, but from my own experience should judge that the percentage of successful surgical results is very high. I have seen ghastly shell and explosive bullet wounds, which one would think must surely end in septicæmia, make perfect recoveries, while head cases, spine cases, &c., sometimes made seemingly miraculous cures. One saw oftentimes such wonderful escapes. I had a patient—a corporal of the West Yorks., mentioned for a distinguished service medal—who had been shot through the jaw, the bullet glancing up sideways, passing through the eye (without the slightest injury to the sight), and coming out of the rim of his helmet; another, shot like Achilles in the heel, the bullet lodging in the heel of the boot, making a delightful souvenir; one which passed through both legs, escaping the bone, and hanging, a prisoner, under the skin of the left leg; while another passed through a man's arm and found a resting place in the purse inside his haversack; others flattened against blessed medals worn round the neck, and watches in the tunic pocket, by this means escaping the lungs or heart. After a month spent in the huts at Wynberg, we went under canvas at Rondebosch, experiencing the adventures of camp life and the power of an African midsummer sun, together with sand storms, rain-storms, and sometimes a too intimate acquaintance with scorpions and snakes.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)