

## War Nursing in South Africa, 1901.\*

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In writing of war nursing, I mean to keep to personal experience and to the work of our own nurses. I am sister in charge of a Nurses' Home in Kimberley, South Africa, and was in Kimberley during the siege, and for fourteen months after we were relieved.

One of our great trials during the early part of the siege was that our nurses had so little to do. The people who usually employ us had nearly all left the town before war was declared; our country cases we could not reach except through three nurses who were shut out; and the absence of evening amusements, the scarcity of aerated waters and wine, &c., the small quantity of meat during the hot weather, and the early going to bed, all made the town unusually healthy, until the food became so small in quantity and bad in quality that all felt more or less the worse for it. After Christmas there was a great strain upon all our resources. Every moment of my time was taken up in trying to spin out our wretched scraps of horse-flesh and our few ounces of milk in our own household, and I often had to send nurses to houses where food was so scarce I was terrified for them. If I gave them food when they came to the Home they would pocket it to take to the starving children where they were nursing, and the hospital was so full that many came to us who would not otherwise have thought of engaging a private nurse. At last, too, so many of the hospital-nurses were ill that we had to send all we could possibly spare to help there. Our brave district-nurses went about their work through all the bombardment as if nothing were going on. I cannot say how miserable I felt at seeing them go out in the morning while the awful roar, shriek overhead, and crash, like the crack of doom, were raging outside. By God's mercy none of them were injured, but their escapes were marvellous. Several of them were covered with the dust and *débris* of the explosions, and all narrowly missed death by the awful hundred-pounders. It was a matter of deep thankfulness to see each one come in safely from her round, although it was only to start off again in a few hours. That was true war nursing—through the shot and shell of the siege, half-starved themselves, ministering in the most hidden way among the wretched, starving people of the town with the greatest patience and simplest courage.

However, February 15th came at last, the army entered in triumph, and our brave commander, General Kekewich, was able to send his famous

telegram to the Queen—"By the help of God we have kept the flag flying."

But the triumphant march of the great army was followed by another march. In a few days over a thousand sick and wounded soldiers had been brought into the town. Lord Methuen sent to me, asking us to undertake the nursing of one big hall or school-room after another, turned hastily into a field hospital, until we had over 500 under our care. First were the Christian Brothers' Schools. I was asked to send one nurse there and one to Nazareth House, close by, on February 17th. The sisters, however, objected to more outside help in their own house than they got from orderlies, so they took in for weeks and weeks, greatly at their own expense and in the most generous way, thirty to forty of the slightly wounded, the worst wounds going, of course, very properly to the civil hospital, where every appliance was at hand.

Our two soon found enough to do at the Christian Brothers'. Imagine two handsome new school-rooms and one little class-room, with desks and school-books all lying about, and ambulances with forty wounded men in them at the door, bedsteads, stores, Red Cross comforts, mattresses, blankets, &c., all arriving at the same time, with only a tiny kitchen, and no arrangements whatever for cooking for more than half-a-dozen lay brothers. Our people worked like galley-slaves, and got the bedsteads up, the men to bed, and the wounds dressed and seen to by about 2 a.m. of the next day. In a few days all was order and peace. The little class-room was the nurses' room, with two small beds, a little table for meals, their two boxes, two chairs, and near the further wall piles of opened stores—cases of wine, brandy, cigars, Bovril, bandages, and all sorts of things. The wards were quite pretty, as neat and smart as they could be in the rush of work and incessant changing of patients, all being sent to the general hospitals at Wynberg from these field hospitals as soon as they could be moved. There were capital results, even when the wounded were replaced by typhoid and dysentery cases in a very bad condition.

The next place we undertook was the drill hall. Here three of our nurses, two of whom had been at work all the previous night with a little outside help, came in to find a fine hall, two or three side rooms, and dusty desolation. It was 2.30 p.m. before they got a thing in. At 8.30 p.m. they sent and asked me to come and see if all was right. There was room for 120, and the shops were still able to supply good bedsteads and mattresses, so the long rows of beds were all beautifully made, each one turned down ready to be occupied, with a clean shirt on the pillow, a clean towel at the head, and a gay-coloured blanket for a quilt. The De Beers Company had sent down a wire, so it was brilliantly lighted with electric light, and the flags and trophies

\* Read at the International Congress of Nurses, Buffalo.

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