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Fatality

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Abstract

My very dear Aunt Margaret

How long it has been since my January letters! How many times I have tried in vain to send but one or two lines assuring you that I remain well in body and certainly determined, despite the dejected exhaustion last described. Wounds and diseases however are no respecters of war or its fortunes. While the past week has given us many reasons to rejoice, our hospital work has been if anything more consuming, especially since a particularly violent form of dysentery closed its grip on the camp.

ELLEKE BOEHMER

Fatality

Intombi Field Hospital,
Ladysmith
Saturday 3 March 1900

My very dear Aunt Margaret

How long it has been since my January letters! How many times I have tried in vain to send but one or two lines assuring you that I remain well in body and certainly determined, despite the dejected exhaustion last described. Wounds and diseases however are no respecters of war or its fortunes. While the past week has given us many reasons to rejoice, our hospital work has been if anything more consuming, especially since a particularly violent form of dysentery closed its grip on the camp.

Yes, the siege is lifted. Celebratory fireworks have not ceased to explode every night in the streets. You will doubtless have heard the news almost as soon as we did, for Ladysmith has widely been seen as the keystone of the Republican resistance. Queen Victoria herself telegraphed congratulations to the town.

Even as I write revelry roars from the mess tent. Our daily rations still consist of no more than a tin of preserved mutton and biscuits, however a store of Jameson's whisky from the Ladysmith Headquarters, hoarded for this purpose, has been liberally distributed among the men, reaching even Intombi camp.

Several officers are wearing bits of shredded Union Jack in their buttonholes. Worn thin by sunlight, the Ladysmith HQ flag was pulled down and torn in the general excitement. It is a contradictory symbol, affecting me in ways of which I do not dare openly speak.

The first sign of relief (if so it can be called) was the almost imperceptible presence of movement in the suffocating stillness of the land. The day – the 28th – began cloudy. Under the dense light the rolling downs to the south seemed even more dramatically than usual to present themselves as a strange dreamscape. The pearly pinks and blues outlined in dark shadow, the whole ineffably peaceful. And yet across these same hills General Redvers (or 'Reverse'!) Buller had for days been invisibly leapfrogging his men and guns, with shattering consequences for the Boers.

Less than a week ago the warring sides went so far as to declare a half-day armistice to collect their mutilated dead and wounded from the hills. It was the first time in history that white men smashed up by explosives had been left out overnight horribly to die. So says our camp commandant, who served also in the Crimea. What a darkling thought it is that this war which so balefully opens the new century will set the pattern for hostilities between man and man for years to come. Entrenchment, concentrated gunfire, the 'efficient' heaping up of horrors.

'Retreat, retreat!' The exultant cry came from the direction of the big gun's hill. And, sure enough, when I ran up Outlook Kop it was clearly visible. Across the still hot hills where for so many weeks they had lain unseen, the Boers in great dark clusters were riding away to the north, moving with incredible speed. Alongside them curved the shimmering white serpent of their canvas-backed supply wagons, here and there bogged down in a nullah, but still steadily, relentlessly, driving on and away. It was like an accelerated but utterly silent great trek, these stalwart commandos still looking powerful, impressive, and free, or at least freely escaping, even in defeat.

As I gazed out I almost felt the tears come. I was not in any sense as moved when about five hours later, after a violent thunderstorm, two tired-looking squadrons of British infantry came splashing down the road that runs by the camp, and passed into Ladysmith with the fading light.

And yet it would have been difficult to ignore the electrical transport of relief running through the liberated town. After almost 120 days of near-starvation people were delirious with joy. Off-duty I was able to join the throngs cheering on the pavements. For a few hours creed and colour were forgotten as Zulus shook hands with English officers, and gaunt and convalescent garrison soldiers embraced their fit but battle-worn fellows. Indian, Irish, Xhosa, German civilians; cattle-rustlers, nurses, nuns, court reporters, storekeepers, housewives, any number of people, smiled and laughed together. The now nearly famous hotelier Mr Gruber distributed, in fun, platters of siege-fare. Cubed and very dry horse-steak, going cheap.

Friday 16 March 1900

Dear Aunt, there I broke off, called to the sick bed of an elderly Italian lady from the town. She had been subsisting for some weeks on puddings of face powder. She has I am glad to say recovered. But is one of the few.

We transport our cartloads of dead to nearby battlefields where trenches not yet filled with fatalities are used as mass graves.

Though there is little opportunity for reflection, thoughts on the war still wring my mind. Truth to tell, I have been so very involved with these

thoughts that sleep, even when I do lie down, is elusive. At times it is the faces of the wounded distorted by their pain, I cannot forget these faces. At other times it is smells, the oozing fluids of the dying. I feel their stickiness between my fingers.

I find some relief walking through the camp in the cool of night but dread to think this may draw comment. A doctor has prescribed chloroform, a few drops each evening. At least it blots my memory with short snatches of dreamless sleep.

My last letter expressed (ill-advisedly as you will hear) a growing sympathy for the Boers alongside troubled questions about the use of force to resist force. Having now seen more of the ghastly progress of the war, my doubts, I can say with certainty, have been utterly vanquished.

What has been cruelly and improperly wrenched away can only be won back with force: this I have now accepted, though with pain. Even considering the desperately unequal spread of men and arms that marks this war, retaliation is required of the downtrodden, the inequality itself demands it. As regards our situation here, it is already noteworthy that the British generals are asking questions about their apparent ineptitude over so many months at breaking the Boer siege.

Yes: what has been taken with force can only be won back with force, however horribly. Where a free people are hit as the Irish and the Boers have been hit, all they can do is hit back cunningly, and with impact if possible. The English understand no other language but that of the sword and the gun, and will have their reply.

If you see fit to use these lines at a Transvaal Committee meeting or in an article I would not object. I am no Irish brigadier, yet reports from the front line can help varnish a speech or sauce a resolution, as we know.

It seems that there are no depths to which Chamberlain will not stoop. Every day this week displaced farm folk, white and black, have crept into the camp, frightened at reports of British farm-burnings and evictions elsewhere in the country. These are no mere rumours. A family arrived from over the Free State mountains three days ago. The last they had seen of their farm was a column of smoke and flame against the evening sky, and a group of British soldiers driving their herd of cattle before them.

There was also the poignant tale brought by a young African-looking woman bizarrely attired in a Boer hat and tweed breeches who stumbled through our gates yesterday. She had walked for two days and nights from a farm in the Dundee district, in fear of her life and that of the child she says she is carrying. Severely dehydrated, she crept blindly into the bed we made her and woke late this morning, still croaky and a little distracted.

It appears that British troops (Buller's advance guard I suspect) battered their way into the homestead where she worked, demanding food and horses. The soldiers, she said (in surprisingly good sing-song English), spent several hours pitching the household goods into the yard, and

carting off candlesticks and metal plate.

The scene she described could not but remind me of the evictions inflicted upon our own Irish peasants in the West. Those magic lantern slides that were beamed onto the outdoor screen as part of the December protests. The old mother on a blanket on the ground. The family bed and the kitchen-dresser standing in the rain.

The soldiers in this girl's case were more interested in looting than in torching the farm, but even so she was understandably frightened. She was thinking of the child, 'the small soldier' she curiously says. She feared the British would discover that the farm had been supplying Boer troops with food since their invasion in the spring.

And not only this. On certain nights her 'master' had given accommodation to soldiers on the Boer side. Foreign soldiers with a song in their voice, she said. I knew at once she meant Irishmen. Brigaders. And one brigadier in particular, whose speech she has mimicked. Whose name she now bears. This African woman. Talking here in my tent an hour ago she called herself 'Dollie Macken'.

And her **man**, I asked carefully, using the Boer word for husband, what of him? Had he escaped north? Was he safe? He's a hero, she said curtly, of course he was safe. He'd ridden away into the hills with the retreating Boers but he'd fight his way back, smiling, to her. There was the happy smile he tossed over his shoulder, most brightly so when mounting his horse to ride into battle. She says she kept his smile 'tight' in her mind as she journeyed over battlefields still soft with the dead.

A piece of good news I can report is that the orphaned baby who slept beside me a month ago was sent out to nurse in a nearby Zulu village, and is thriving. On depressed afternoons I have gone over to see him. The people receive me impassively but with good will.

Due to the vigilance of the censor, our January letters may well have been held up by the war office in Durban, so the Belfast nurse Brid O'Donnell hears. If this is true, they will eventually I trust be returned to us. I intend to keep them (and if the situation continues this letter also) as a record to show you once I am back home. The Red Cross say, to my great relief, that they keep volunteers' families informed of their loved-ones' well-being.

I have given 'Dollie Macken' the small wooden supplies chest, your present, as well as a few pieces of my clothing. Please do not mind this. She arrived here with nothing. She plans to fill the chest with knitted goods for her baby.

Yours, with a full heart
Kathleen