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LECTURE ON "EXPERIENCES IN SOUTH AFRICA DURING THE WAR." By the Rev. W. H. FRAZER, D.D., late Acting Chaplain to the Forces.

LAST year my friend Professor Hull asked me to give an account of my experiences, or some of them. We were then on the very tip-toe of expectation—the war was existing, and we know how our pulses throbbed day by day with regard to news from the seat of war. That state of things happily has discontinued. "Grim visaged war hath smoothed his wrinkled front," and now we are about to reap the benefit—benefit even from a terrible war; and I feel that although the subject may be somewhat tame, owing to the many books that have been written upon it, still there are hearts to whom the experiences that they have had in doing their little duty for others' sake are very dear, and which they treasure most thoroughly and will never part with while they live.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, although I am asked to speak about the war in South Africa, I claim that my experiences of the front commenced at home. I was Acting Chaplain in Woolwich. I had previously been at Aldershot. A quarter of a century ago I commenced my work with the soldiers, and I was brought face to face with the front on the occasion of a first batch of 164 invalided men sent to the Herbert Hospital for care and ministrations. One's heart naturally throbbed with sympathy on this first appearance of these gallant heroes, who had fought and bled for their country, and I remember how anxiously I wended my way up the hill, and thought how I might speak words showing my sympathy with their sorrows, their sadnesses and sufferings; but I was astonished to find, when I got into their midst, that I was about the only saddened soul there. I found they were all joyous and happy, and then, after experience amongst them, visiting them and talking with them, I came to the conclusion that it was a remarkable fact in human history, that those lads who were brought from the humble positions they had been taken from to fight, and who had fallen, and were mutilated for life, were nevertheless proud of their positions, and one grumbling word did I never hear from the mouth of any with regard to his misfortunes. [Hear! hear!] It was a glorious fact—it was an opening up of my own mind to many a revelation of the deep things hidden within the hearts of men, no matter what their grade might be in life. The war fever was abroad and I caught it, and said to

myself, "I must go and see more of this business—I must go and see what has made these men what they are." I applied to the War Office to be permitted to go out, and was immediately sent. When it was announced to my friends at Woolwich, officers said, "What a lucky fellow you are," everyone appeared to wish (even though they had wives and families) to get out to the war, and it was a great cause of thankfulness to me that I had succeeded in getting out. During my services I had four trips—two out and two back. I need not go into any of those details with regard to sea-faring life that we note down in our diaries—that has nothing to do with our subject. There are just one or two incidents that I will touch upon. One was, seeing a whale get a good thrashing from a thrasher. I had travelled a good deal about the world, and I had but once seen a thrasher attack a whale.

Another one was, that those boys—those heroic souls that belong to our country and make our hopes satisfactory and firm with regard to it, sung merrily on those evenings on board, when concerts were given, and I marked this, that those whom we would call uncultured youths, full of ignorance, sang their songs with charming beauty, that went to the heart. Our officers would have a concert, too, but "Tommy" beat them hollow. We went from Southampton to Queenstown, and I was glad to tread the ground there, where I had been many years ago, and from thence we sailed to Las Palmas and St. Helena. St. Helena especially is well worthy of notice, and full of memories and history. Then we made our way to Table Bay, when I beheld a sight that I was assured, and I believe, had been until then unequalled in this world, with its 18 or 20 giant troop-ships all clustered there, to carry to and fro hundreds of thousands of men and weighty munitions of war.

When I got ashore at Capetown I had to report myself to some superior officer. He was very nice, but he was rough in his manner, and gave it to me hot. The next day he was good enough to ask me to forgive him. "It was that unfortunate temper of his," he said, "that Irish temper." I said, "Nothing of the sort. Irishmen have the best of tempers, especially when they are educated and cultured men;" but I was bound to forgive him, and I did.

I was next, to my great surprise and regret, ordered home in charge of troops. I often think of the pleasure of those journeys, and how our soldiers valued the services of religion, and it was a pleasure to me to go back again even for that very purpose. I had opportunities during my stay in Cape Town of

visiting the camps and holding services in them, visiting the Boer and English hospitals, and holding services in them also. On my way home I found that the men were suffering from a great want, namely, of literature—something for them to read. The discomfort and unhealthiness of my cabin caused me to complain bitterly on arrival at the War Office, and to the owners of the ship. I was just a week at home, and off again on another ship. Having found the great want that was experienced of literature for “Tommy Atkins,” I put a few letters in the newspapers, begging for some papers, books, and magazines. This happened on a Monday. I asked to have them on Tuesday evening in Southampton, as our ship would sail on Wednesday morning. When I got to Southampton, to my great surprise, I found there was an immense quantity of literature, up-to-date—two waggons full. I had thought I might get a good bundle that I could lay aside and open at my leisure, but found that two waggons from the Post Office had come, and I found also another waggon from the railway; so there was a good supply this time, and it was pleasant for me to read a few of the pretty letters that some of those kind people wrote. Many of them thought that I was sure to meet their relatives, and I was to say to each one of them what they wished. It was very natural, but I was afraid I could not be in so many places at the same time, and I gave it up; but of course I did put a notice in the papers thanking those who had contributed. Then I got into Cape Town, and reported myself, and I was asked to join the 19th Brigade in the north-east of the Transvaal. The commander was then chasing De Wet. I said I would catch him if I could.

On advice, however, I withdrew my name and ardour to go to the front to chase De Wet. I was then asked to go to De Aar, a station where I should not be lying on the veldt all night with but a blanket to cover me; so I went there. The only thing that struck me on the way up country was what is called the Karoo Bush. It is a beautiful country around Cape Town for about one hundred miles out, where the Karoo country commences, and if you have not been there, you may wish to know what it is like. The Karoo Bush is a shrub on which all cattle, horses, sheep, and goats are fed—a small bush from 6 inches high to about 18 inches. It covers the whole of the ground. But it is a desolate country, and passing through in winter, we find the shrubs turned quite black, and the country looking horrid. I saw it first when it was the very worst time of the year. It was not so bad afterwards, when the bushes

bloomed. As you go on you see very few houses. The truth is, every Dutchman and every Boer when he gets into a farmstead is never so happy as when he can look round and see no other human habitation. He wishes to be monarch of all he surveys. It is a peculiar sentiment, but it is there. When I got up to De Aar, I was ordered to extend my labours. There were not many soldiers in De Aar, and it was so quiet that I thought there would be there nothing of the war worth seeing; but it turned out afterwards to be one of the hottest spots of the whole campaigning ground.

My duties were extended from De Aar up to Orange River and Modder River, and afterwards to Jacobsdall in the Orange River Colony. The two first stations are in Cape Colony, and I was put on orders to visit those places every week if possible and give to them as many Sundays as I could. Then I saw before me a great opportunity of learning a good deal that I wished to know. The first thing I learnt was to run along the line of country which a little time before Lord Methuen had followed, showing all the battle fields that were his—at which he fought and conquered—Belmont, Graspan, Enslin, Modder River, and Magersfontein. I made my way up as far as Mafeking. The most interesting place I came to was Magersfontein, six miles across the veldt from the Modder River Station.

I was deeply interested, having read in the newspapers the accounts of that rather unhappy battle. It was there that General Wauchope fell. It was there that the Highland Brigade met with so much loss; and I was glad to see it, because on reading the news that comes from the press, and all those worthy gentlemen who supply us with information in the way of news, you never get a true idea till you go, as I did, to the spot. I found there at a glance how it was that such things happened as they did in that battle, and how it failed. There is a line of entrenched kopjes, and two miles off is the Modder River, and coming out of the end of the kopjes there is an unknown level trench on the level veldt running across to the Modder River. It was a night attack, the troops arrived early before the morning light, and unhappily, not having scouted, they knew nothing whatever about that trench. They were working to get round the kopjes to outflank the Boers, and I saw there 308 dead Boer horses. Our troops were overcome, and had to do what the Highlander ever bravely avoids—they had to retreat in haste. They were fine young fellows leading as the 42nd ever does; but disaster awaited them; all the officers of the corps being shot down, save three, one of them, young Grant,

fought about seven hours, and what I am smiling at, is the frequent regrets that he expressed to me that he had not been wounded. We all know how General Wauchope and others were blamed. There is no war without little and great mishaps. It is absurd for people to say it is a disaster here and a disaster there: it is not a disaster, but an incident of war. By the way, I should have told you of those patient loyal men at the Woolwich Hospital. I will tell you why I talk so highly of them: they came from the Colenso fight, where they were beaten badly, from Spion Kop and Magersfontein. Those men who had suffered so much were the fellows that never grumbled in the slightest, and every man of them that fought under Buller, though defeated, spoke loudly in his praise.

Well, we came to Modder River and Magersfontein, and then I went to Paardeberg; there I saw the deep river banks that are described, with holes in which they found shelter. You know that General Cronje and between 4,000 and 5,000 men surrendered on that occasion. I afterwards saw them in St. Helena, and thought that a much better place for them. I took some good snapshots of Paardeberg and all those battle-fields, Belmont, Graspan, Modder River, Kimberley; and all the way up to Mafeking I picked up all kinds of curios; they are now on my walls, and people come and look at them, and would like to take some of them away; I have always to keep a sharp look out when my friends come to my rooms. I have a large quantity of cartridges from that trench that opposed the Highland Brigade at Magersfontein. I have some remains of the wire fencing that balked them as they came up to this flat and fatal trench. I intended to have got a curio which I picked up from one of the horses that were dead behind a kopje. A lady thought how nice it would be to get one of those horses' hoofs and take it home, and get it mounted as an ink pot. I saw one almost severed from the leg, and I wrenched it off, and walked away with it; when the atmosphere became very unpleasant. I said, "Be a man now, and face it—stick to it, and don't give it up," but I had to give it up, and I ran as fast as I could, and left it. I felt that it would be better to be a coward for a minute, than a dead man for the remainder of my life. At Paardeberg I was more successful in collecting curios. I got a large number of Boer stirrups, and the nurses at the hospitals liked to have curios from Paardeberg. I asked, "Would you care to have a stirrup?" "Oh! yes, should be delighted," and I gave to several of them a stirrup.

I came on to Mafeking; it was after the siege had been

raised; it was well worth seeing. There again was a battlefield, or the place where a great military struggle was carried on, and that unfortified flat town was left with 600 brave men to defend it against from 6,000 to 9,000 Boers under Cronje. I have a good many curios from there, and many pieces of very large guns, which also are coveted by my friends.

I found one very strange thing there, viz., that the very man who was thought so much of (and they did marvellous things in defending that town), I found very unpopular with the inhabitants, I refer to Baden-Powell. Several men who came from there only the other day, said they were astonished to find the feeling that existed there against him. They said the great favourite there was one of his staff officers, and the reason of his unpopularity was, their having "short commons" for so long a time. Having got south from Mafeking, after a little I went on my weekly excursions. I had to go about 300 miles every week. I held services at four different stations, commencing them sometimes at 5.30 a.m. This was not my choice, but what the men and their officers liked. At times the men would be in the trenches all night, and come thence at the first opportunity to worship God. On one of those occasions a terrible disaster overtook the men who were encamped at Jacobsdall, when they were surrounded and butchered.

I have been taught by my experience in South Africa, that the Boers have a great regard for clergymen, therefore I preferred a Cape cart to an armed escort, which provoked sniping. I met Mr. De Waal, of the Cape Parliament, whose name constantly appears in the papers as the Secretary of the Africander Bond, and I was very glad to meet him. He is an intelligent man, and spoke English well. He is a Hollander, and lived for many years in the United States. He spoke of English rule as the most glorious that subjects could live under. He spoke of his own people—that they are truly religious. But I said, "What about white flags to allure the British soldier into houses and other traps to have them shot down?" He said, "I am not going to defend everything they do, but you will find they have every respect for clergymen," and so I found it.

The most remarkable thing I found about our young soldiers was this—they had no fear of death. They had never grumbled over any hardship they had to endure—there was never any complaint, and I could not believe that men could

be got, in this wide world to care so little for life as they did when called on in parties to draw the enemies' fire. All they wanted to do was their duty, and to be thorough men, and they were. I had to go many miles, and had risks to run every day, and the conviction came on myself when fear was utterly banished. There would be in travelling by rail, risk of their blowing up the line or the train. We were frequently attended by armour trains going in front pioneering other trains. There was an important battle fought by these trains, and I came in at the end of it. The Boers were making a dash down into Cape Colony under De Wet and Stein. Plumer had fought them first at Sandrift, and for two or three days across the country. An armour train happened to come in sight of them, and knew nothing about the events that had been going on. We wired for more armour trains to come, and about 10 p.m., when all had arrived, there was an explosion, showing that the line was blown up. We had to wait until the morning to investigate, before we could move trains. When the light did come, the Boer forces of several thousands had crossed the line, but all their wagons, thirty-four of them, they had to leave behind, and we got them. However, in fifteen minutes our men had another rail down and trains were passing over it. One train had two twelve-pounders. They fought and turned over some of the Boers as they fled. We however had to be contented with their thirty-four wagons, and some Cape carts and one maxim. Their red-cross waggon was found full of ammunition.

When I visited the hospitals I found the behaviour and tender-heartedness of our "Tommys" amazing; they were ever ready to assist the nurses or their brothers in warfare. They were as kind and as tender as women. (Applause.) It is a pleasure to me to be able to testify to this; and as to the medical officers, no more splendid behaviour and great devotion could be expected of them, their nurses, and staffs.

Scotsmen are proverbially clannish, I found that out in hospital experience. A Scotch doctor said to one of his countrymen, "Well, mon, I am glad you have come here, because I can always be kind to you. You have only to ask me for anything you want, and I will get it." "Well, doctor, it is very good of you," said the man, "I will just ask a trifle, and that is, can you get me a glass of whisky?" "Oh!" said the doctor, "I am so sorry, because we have run short of whisky. We have only a short supply, and none is given except to those patients for whom it is ordered; but as soon as a fresh supply comes in, I will

not forget you." "You are a good doctor," said the man. "Is there anything else I can do for you?" said the doctor. "Well, if you would come in and talk with me like this two or three times a day, and sit where you are now, I should be glad, because your breath is so nice and comforting." There is an implication here.

A little incident occurred to me when I was going my rounds once. A staff officer at Orange River said, "Can you baptize a Boer baby? There is a loyal Boer and his wife who want to have their baby baptized." I replied, "Certainly; you keep the train here and I will do it." "Oh! your train will be all right," said he, "they don't care a button about stopping a train here for half an hour or an hour." It did not perturb them. They travel at a pace of 12 or 13 miles an hour. I baptized the baby; but what surprised me was that when I asked for the name, the Boer father said, "Victoria." The Queen had been dead about a fortnight, and so I baptized the child with that name. I afterwards thought it a great pity that I did not suggest that the name should have been made to apply to both King and Queen, and that it should have been given the name of Victoria Edwardina.

Looking at the experience I had of the war, and remembering the heroic acts and splendid behaviour of our men, it is a terrible thing to think that any men who, for the love of country, for love of their flag and their King, endured so much, should be allowed to want, to hunger, or to beg; but it is so, not that our Government wishes it, but the Government cannot be everywhere. There are other men—very different altogether—men in petty positions that turn that position to make grand fellows of themselves. They do a deal of harm, and I have seen much of it. I have seen the very best type of men of the line and our militiamen, but there is a great difference between the volunteer officer and the militia officer and linesmen—a wonderful difference. It takes more than a monthly training each year to make good officers. There are also, it struck me, great failings and wrong doing in various ways in the Army. I know of men, for instance, at the present time, who tell me that they have not received their pay, and cannot get it. I know of many cases of that kind. I know a clergyman who cannot get his pay and claims. They tell him he has received all his claims in South Africa; yet he has necessarily and largely spent his own money in performing his duties at the front, and these fellows obstinately refuse to pay him, or to produce the documents pertaining to his claims. I know of a

case of a major in a volunteer corps who could not get his claims paid. His solicitor wrote to Mr. Brodrick, our War Minister, and said, "If you do not pay me this money, I will issue a writ." That was to expose the case, for he could not get judgment on a writ against the Crown; and within 48 hours that money was paid. The other day a clergyman's brother, who had fought in the ranks, told me he could not get his pay, and could not get even a free passage home. There are a good many things of that kind that I might go into and give particulars of, but it would take too much time. I may in another form; for instance, I could give you one point about my own sending in a claim for £37 for lodging allowance. When I came to be paid I was given but £30. I said, "My claim is just £37, and you have a receipt for this amount. What about this receipt?" He said, "I do not know anything about it, that is all you can get." That is how they transacted business at the Cape. Those men ride rough-shod over a gentleman and man of intelligence, and do things that would soon be set right in a police or county court in this country. I do not think of anything further to say, beyond a few words concerning natural objects in Cape Colony. The Karoo country contains herds of spring-buck, ostriches, locusts, and flies. The flies are the greatest pest there, and the most dangerous one; for where they appear, enteric disease spreads with wonderful rapidity. Then there are those extraordinary dust-storms, which commence like a whirlwind. I have been a little distance from them, and have seen the whirling of the wind and the gathering up of the dust—forming a column of great height, which moves along, still gyrating, for a couple of miles, and then it dissipates and disappears. These storms form in full force in an instant, when everyone, when the wind is heard, rushes to close doors and windows (which are ever open in the summer), to keep out the dust-storm. Where I lived mostly I found the climate healthy. It was declared to be climatically the most severe situation in the whole of South African camping ground: that is in De Aar. The summer is extremely hot; but still I had splendid health. It was 106 or 107 degrees in the shade every day for five or six hours, but in my tent it was from 113 to 118; so I could never go into my tent during the day. I got, all through, most excellent health, and the only suffering I had to endure was four or five days of fever and ague.

I have read some of the best books on this subject, and I have observed that the incident I referred to of the battle of the six armoured trains is not referred to by De Wet, who is

credited with the outrage of sjamboking a well known major in one of our cavalry regiments, because he remonstrated with him concerning his cruel treatment of some of our men whom he had made prisoners.

I will not delay you further, but will merely thank you for the attention you have given me. [Applause.]

DISCUSSION.

Mr. MARTIN ROUSE.—I would ask the lecturer a question or two, as no one seems to come forward ; whether, in the first place, he believes there is any truth in the charges that were made, especially abroad, regarding the treatment of women and children in the concentration camps.

Dr. FRAZER.—It is a most important question, and I must willingly testify that the shadow of a word to support those charges I have never heard uttered against one of our men. I do not believe that you could find one individual, unworthy of himself as an Englishman, as being party to such crimes as were charged against them. I have watched keenly, and I have asked others who have had opportunities as widespread there as mine, and they have never found a shadow of foundation for it. [Applause.]

Mr. MARTIN ROUSE.—I would ask the lecturer whether he saw much of the work of the South African General Mission, in which I am particularly interested ; as to whether they went to the front and worked amongst the men, and so on. I should like him to tell us, if he can, some of his experiences, if it is not too late, of the cheer and comfort that he has been able to give to dying men, and his account of any change that has come over the heart and life of men through his own ministry.

Dr. FRAZER.—Oh yes ; God uses humble beings towards great ends. He knows how much good has been done. I know that it was very satisfactory, the experience that I had in my ministry. With regard to the natives, the missionaries go in amongst them. I had no opportunity of forming an opinion, but this I do know, that the Bishop of Grahamstown spoke to me most approvingly of a service he had attended of Kaffirs close to my station. Unfortunately every Sunday when they met for worship I could not attend.

He said, more reverence in the house of God he never experienced. He declared that many of those people put ours to shame in their realization of the Divine Presence in their lives, and the reverence and holy fear evidenced in their worship. I am very hopeful about it, and I see in every way a great future for South Africa—commercial future and spiritual future. I am persuaded that the work has begun well and that it will go on. [Applause.]

The CHAIRMAN.—Dr. Frazer has done very good work in bringing before us the army at this time. At one period the army was regarded as entirely distinct from the people; but that time has rather passed over; now the army is more in touch with the rest of the population. Dr. Frazer has mentioned the good conduct and feeling of the soldiers, and I think that is very important to remember, and I think it will be found that the conduct of the soldiers has had a great deal to do with the happy settling down that has gone on. There is no ill feeling, as far as I know, between English soldiers; on the contrary, there has always been kindness and good feeling shown when they are in hospital or at any other time they have met. What is that due to? Very much, I believe, to the spread of the Gospel in the army. Now, as we know, many efforts are made, and soldiers are not all the dissolute, idle and corrupt people one was accustomed to think about; but their whole tone is better, and some are earnest Christian men. I remember a colonel in the "Black Watch" telling me that he thought that there was no place where a Christian man could be so useful as in the army. I know of the Soldiers' Christian Association, which is very largely developed in the army, and all of us can help a very great work in the army by praying for them, by coming into touch with them, and remembering them and looking after them on furlough; by speaking kindly to them, and helping them so that they may be more and more brought out in the future.

We all join in thanking the lecturer for the information he has given us this afternoon. [Applause.]

Dr. FRAZER.—I only wish once more to assure you of the great pleasure it has given me to come here and to tell you these few experiences. [Applause.]

The meeting then terminated.