

The Inglenook.

The Romance of Jimmy O'Dowd.

BY DAVID LYALL.

It may be, nay, it is more than likely, that those who have followed me so far on my way in this strange and troubled land have been depressed by its needless gloom. But when a man is present at four stiff battles in one week, when the reality of war is pressed home to him at the mouth of the rifle and the point of the bayonet, he is not much inclined to levity, especially when he is by nature a man of peace. And yet a hundred times in that week, which for incident and event might have been half a lifetime, the smile and the laugh were side by side with the hot moisture in the eyes and the lump in the throat. Even on the black day of Magerfontein the queer side of things often presented itself, making warp and woof less lurid than it must otherwise have been. My notebook is full of the queer sayings of the men with whom I lived and moved and had my being—the rough and ready chaps in the fighting ranks who do not pause to adorn their words or gild their pills. When there is serious business in hand they are all there with faces grimly set towards the enemy, but when off duty there is a great deal of fun and frolic, which makes camp life one of the best possible places on which to study human nature in the rough. Certainly during that week we of Methuen's flying column had not had much leisure to enjoy ourselves. Fighting and forced marches had been the order of the day and night; it was after Magerfontein that we had a few days' rest, and were permitted to spend Christmas with all the hilarity possible to the occasion and the surroundings. I was awakened at the usual unearthly hour by my soldier servant, Jimmy O'Dowd, and it is the romance of Jimmy O'Dowd I am going to tell. Of course Jimmy was an Irishman, as his name proclaims, but though he was born at Shorncliffe, and had never been out of it till his regiment was ordered South, his brogue was as rich and mellifluous as if he had started fresh from the wilds of Connemara, and had never even acquired the mild polish of the Curragh Camp. I may as well say here at once that Jimmy was one of the scapegraces of the regiment, and had not been recommended to me by the Colonel. In fact when he saw Jimmy brushing my second-best khaki at the tent door one evening he looked at him with a queer smile, and when Jimmy was out of hearing, he said frankly, "How did you ever come by that rascal, Mr. Lyall? I can find you a better servant."

"Impossible, sir," I replied cheerily; "I like Jimmy immensely, in fact I couldn't do without him."

"But he doesn't know the meaning of truth," said the Colonel in a puzzled voice, "and you'll need to count your studs every night. I wouldn't trust him myself with a bath towel."

"I've missed nothing, and I started with the assumption that he would be truthful and honest, Colonel," I answered, "and upon my word he is, so far as I've gone. I like to see his face round the canvas of a morning. His grin is enough to banish a dozen night mares."

"Every man to his taste," said the Colonel; "and I grant you that the rascal has a lamb-like smile; but he is a rascal all the same."

"Give a dog a bad name and hang him," I said, and the Colonel with a nod passed on. It was only when he was safely out of sight that Jimmy re-appeared, and then I saw that his face wore a distinctly anxious look.

"Shur, sor, an' the Colonel has been spakin' agin me. I feel it in me bones."

"He only said you were a rascal, Jimmy, and a stranger to the truth, but I told him you had turned over a new leaf."

Jimmy's face instantly brightened. Not his most partial friend could accuse Jimmy of good looks, and yet there was something particularly winning about his queer broad face; perhaps it was the pathos of his Irish eyes.

"Then, you won't go back on me, sor? I loike yez; it wad break me heart to get the sack."

"I daresay you would recover, Jimmy," I said serenely. "Now tell me how you are going to celebrate Christmas to-morrow, writing to your sweetheart, eh?"

"I ain't got wan, at least, not serious. Av coorse there's always little colleens that warm the heart av a bhoys everywhere, but none av thim are thinkin' on Jimmy O'Dowd."

Here he heaved a great sigh and suddenly looked at me with an odd twinkle in his eye.

"If yez shan't want me to-morra night, sor, I'll be goin' out to supper just after I've seen yez go comfortable in to mess."

"That's all right. I suppose it's a regimental supper; who's asked you?"

"No, it's no sich thing," said Jimmy; and after folding up my poor stained and battered suit as tenderly as if it had been the finest broadcloth he stood at attention, and eyed me for a moment in steady silence.

"Well, Jimmy, what is it? You've got something on your conscience, out with it."

"Not on me conscience exactly, sor, but on me heart," he said, and fumbling in the pocket of his tunic he produced a small piece of paper from an envelope. "That's me invitation, sor, for eight o'clock to-morra evenin'; all fair an' square, isn't it? An' she's a purty colleen."

The note, quite evidently written in a disguised hand, was dated from Helder's Farm. It was very short, and simply said that Mr. O'Dowd would be very welcome at Helder's Farm at such an hour, and bore the signature, Anna Helder.

"Where did you get this, Jimmy?" I asked suspiciously. I knew Helder's Farm, and had heard that there were some Boer women in it, but I had not yet walked round that way, it being distant about a mile and a half from the camp.

"It was sint to me, sor, by a spalpeen from the farm. You see, sor, I've been round that way tryin' to buy up some poultry an' milk, all fair an' square, av coorse," said Jimmy, virtuously, "an' I've had spache wid the colleen. Her father an' brother is fightin' under Cronje, an' she's managin' the place; it's only a poor bit av a place after all, an' they don't get much av a livin' Av

coorse a lot av the bhoys 'ave been smellin' round Helder's Farm, but they can't get spach av her, an it makes thim mad that I have. When they knows as I've got this, as they will to-morra, they'll go clane out av their sines."

"I don't believe Miss Helder wrote this Jimmy. It's a disguised hand. I'm afraid they're going to play some trick on you."

"Let thim thry," said Jimmy, philosophically; "they'll find O'Dowd eal to the occasion, so to speak. Here's the watter, sor, if watter it can be called. Ach! when I think av the sinful waste at home, 'ow they'll think nothin' av wastin' a whole cartful on a bit av dusty dirty road, I don't feel like sayin' me prayers. If it's dust they're agin let 'em come out 'ere, where there's nothin' else. Now look at this tint, bedad, it's all dust an' nothin' else."

Jimmy spoke the bare, unadorned truth. It lay thick everywhere—a faint, evil powder, which could seek into the very marrow of one's bones. We smelt it, felt it, ate and digested it at every meal; it was engrafted in our skins, the universal legacy we might take with us gratis from the land that had cost us so much.

"I've to go on picquet to-night, sor, nine sharp, but I think iverythin's roight, so good evenin' to yez, at present."

So saying, O'Dowd took his lean, lithe, nimble form, and broad, cheerful face out of my sight. I saw little of him next day, for the men were feasting for Christmas, and were partly relieved of their duties. He turned up to see to my things just before mess, and I was glad to see that he was quite sober, which he would not have been except for that invitation to Helder's Farm. I had not the faintest doubt in my mind but that he was being played a trick on, but knowing an Irishman can generally wriggle out of a tight place, I dismissed him from my thoughts. I had no temptation to remember him at the mess-table, where there was so much pathos mingling with our fun. There was only one toast offered, and I never saw one drunk so quickly or in such conspicuous silence. The toast was, "The dear ones at home," and even before our Colonel tried, and failed to add a word to it there was a lump in every man's throat, and it was an immense relief when one of the fellows cleared his voice and began to sing a comic song. There was not a man among us who did not bless him in his heart and we cheered him to the echo. After that we had a jolly hour. Song and story followed quickly on each other; it seemed to be every man's object to leave no space for the inevitable sadness of such a Christmas feast. I wondered as I undressed in my tent what had become of O'Dowd, and whether I should see his friendly face and the shaving water arrive with its customary punctuality at six o'clock. I was dreaming of Adam Fairweather's school when something awoke me, and feeling cold, I drew my blanket up to my neck. Then I saw Jimmy in the grey light, and he came solicitous to the side of my bed.

"Yez seem a bit onaisy, sor," said he; "I suppose the cratur flowed like wather, only cleaner, last night."

"So you're there, Jimmy, sound of limb and well as ever. Well, how did you enjoy your evening with Miss Helder?"

Jimmy grinned. What depths were in that grin! It was comprehensive enough to take in all the emotions.

"I was wrong then. It was a bona fide affair, was it, you rascal?"

"Faith it was, an' it wasn't, sor. She