

First Civilian Ever Awarded Famous Victoria Cross Medal

Written for The Western Home Monthly by Francis J. Dickie

LAST month the members of the American Club at Vancouver, Canada, made the one-legged soldier, shown in the accompanying photo, a life member to the club and also as a mark of their esteem presented him with the latest model of artificial limb. The soldier in question is Sergeant J. J. Farmer, on active service with the 11th Special Service company of Vancouver. For him Queen Victoria had a specially struck medal, known as the "Civilian's" Victoria Cross; and the Victoria Cross is the most coveted, most famous and hardest to win valor medal in the world.

And Farmer deserved it. G. A. Henty famous author of boys' adventure books dealing with war, at his best, never created a fiction hero half so interesting as Farmer. For thrilling experiences and daring exploits in war few men can equal this man's record. Like most heroes he is modest. But last week an intimate friend told his story at the American Club; and to-day such is the warm feeling between Uncle Sam's residents in Canada

his horse that gradually he saw he was drawing away from his pursuers. But suddenly when safety seemed assured his horse put its foot in a hole, and came down with a broken leg. Seeing escape now was impossible the despatch rider calmly brought out his despatches. Quickly in the face of the oncoming and now triumphant Arabs he committed as much of the despatches as he could to memory. Then tore the whole into tiniest pieces and scattered them onto the sand. He was roughly seized by the Arabs, bound and thrown across the back of a mule. A whole day the Arabs travelled with him to their camp, across a country that was a barren desert with no visible landmarks. From his knowledge of the language he learned as he rode that his fate would be death. But the Arabs made camp late that night, and everyone being tired, the killing of the Infidel was put off. In the night Farmer managed to work himself free from his bonds which had become slightly loosened on the long ride. With death on his heels at every move he crawled out of the tent from between two sleeping guards. Wriggling along he made the outskirts of the camp where the horses were picketed. Fortunately it was dark. Loosening one of the horses he climbed upon its back and rode out into the desert. He pushed his horse till it fell from exhaustion. Then went on on foot. Though the land was barren desert the despatch rider had a good sense of orientation, and, nearly dead from hunger, thirst and exhaustion finally reached Khartoum a week later, and delivered a verbal report of the despatches which had been entrusted to him.

In 1885 he went to Assouan and from there to an outpost station of the government railway far in the desert. One day he learned through a loyal native boy that Dervishes had a few hours before placed a large quantity of dynamite and other explosives on the track about five miles away. There was a heavily loaded troop train due past the point very soon, and only quickest action could save the lives of the hundreds of oncoming soldiers.

Farmer made a desperate race for the spot. The track was here laid across barren desert, and running under the terrible Egyptian sun Farmer was almost exhausted when he reached the spot. But he at once set to work carrying the scattered explosives off the track and removing them to a safe distance where no spark from a passing locomotive and chance-thrown thing from a train could touch them. The Dervishes had scattered a considerable quantity, and thinking their plan quite safe, and not wishing to be in the vicinity when the explosives went off had gone entirely away. Thus Farmer was uninterrupted in his work. But with still quite a lot to remove he heard the rumble of the approaching train, and worked faster. Fearing now to take the time to carry the last so far, he merely took it about twenty feet from the right-of-way. With the last of the explosive in his arms he cleared the track, but in his haste a few steps farther on a small stick of dynamite fell striking a piece of discarded railway metal (or so he thinks). The explosion following, small though it was in comparison to what would have been if all the collected material had gone off, shattered his right leg, broke all the ribs, caved in the side of his face and left him unconscious there on the desert. But the troop train was saved. It rushed by a few seconds later, but no one noted him. Forty-eight hours Farmer lay suffering untold agonies from his wounds, the heat and thirst. He was finally picked up by a reconnoitering party.

For this deed of bravery on top of his other exploits Farmer was recommended for the Victoria Cross by Sir Garnet Wolseley. Then, however, arose a difficulty. This famous valor medal, given only for most exceptional bravery, had also only been designed for men of the British army and navy, and Farmer was a civilian, though his heroic act had been performed in army service. When informed of the matter the Queen got over the difficulty by at once ordering that there be specially struck a silver cross, a Victoria Cross, but to carry the added

(Continued on Page 14)

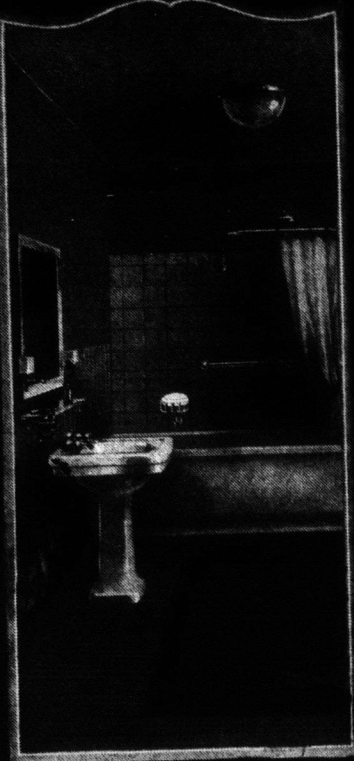


toward their Allies in the Dominion that they took the above method of expressing it.

As Rudyard Kipling knew India, Farmer knew Egypt from boyhood. When the famous campaign under Kitchener against the Arabs began in 1883, Farmer was a boy telegrapher. As a civilian who knew Arabic fluently, he was invaluable to the administration.

With Sir Valentine Baker he was at the front of Tokar, and carried back the news of it to Suakin at great personal danger. Later with six intelligence officers he helped map the country between Dongola and Khartoum. From Khartoum armed with despatches a short time afterwards he set off for the fort of Gadaref. But in the meantime the famous slave driver, Osman Dinga, had caused an insurrection. The fort was surrounded and in great danger. Disguised as an Arab, however, Farmer from his long knowledge of these people and the perfection with which he spoke the language, made his way through the lines of the slave driver's army. Under cover of the dark he delivered the despatches within the fort and came away again with answering ones for Khartoum. Then he made his way safely through the lines to where he had hidden his horse. The second day as he rode on his horse he was sighted by a hostile band of Arabs who gave chase. Farmer had a good horse, and a long start and he rode across the desert. So superior was

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