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Current Topics

AT HOME AND ABROAD.

BROTHER
AGAINST
BROTHER.

FAMINE is bad enough in its way—'death's undress of skin and bone,' as somebody has called it. But there are features in civil wars, and in some wars that are not particularly 'civil,' than are more heartless than famine. For

instance: the slaughter of friend by friend and of brother by brother. We have already recorded in these columns the spectacle of many Englishmen 'drawing a bead' for the Transvaal on their countrymen who are fighting on the British side. (From a recent American exchange we learn that the Irishmen who have shouldered the Mauser are almost to a man Irish-Americans naturalised in the Transvaal.) Here is a scrap from a recent letter of a South African volunteer who is at the front: 'I and Gordon stood up to the Dutch fire. Gordon was hit. I looked and saw it was Bodenstein from Johannesburg who fired. I raised my rifle at 70 yards and shot him dead between the eyes.' A Wexford priest at the Cape gives us the following further painful bit of local family history: 'Two sisters and their families live near me, the one married to a Transvaal official, the other to a lieutenant volunteer on the British side. Letters and money come to support the families from both camps.' Such cases are plentiful in South Africa just now. Imagination can easily fill in the rest of the picture. An old German proverb has it that 'broken friendship may be soldered, but never made sound.'

One of the most deadly instances of the hostile encounter of fellow-countrymen in war took place when General Meagher's famous Irish brigade stormed St. Mary's Heights at Fredericksburg during the great American Civil War. The great stone wall on the Heights was strongly held by the Georgia Irish under Colonel Robert McMillan. When Meagher's gallant fellows were seen advancing from the town, their countrymen on the Heights recognised them by their flag and the green badge in their caps. John Francis Maguire tells how a thrill of feeling and murmurs of pity and prayer passed through the men that lined the rampart. 'God! what a pity!' said some. 'We're in for it,' said others. 'By heavens, here are Meagher's fellows!' was the exclamation of others still. Then the order of Colonel McMillan rang out over the murmur of voices: 'It's Greek to Greek to-day, boys. Give them hell!' 'And they did,' says Maguire; 'for that deadly fusillade was a genuine *feu d'enfer*'—a veritable hell-fire. Six times Meagher's men—fighting for the Union—stormed the hill in the face of that withering fire at short range. It was a rush to certain death. The storming party were cut to pieces. The Adjutant-General of General Hancock's staff was looking on. So was General Longstreet. So were many others. And round about men grounded muskets to watch the deadly brothers' struggle between Celt and Celt. Said the Adjutant-General afterwards: 'I looked with my field-glass, and I looked for a long time before I was certain of what I saw. I at first thought that the men of the Brigade had lain down to allow the showers of shot and shell to pass over them, for they lay in regular lines. I looked for some movement, some stir—a hand or foot in motion. But no. They were dead—dead every man of them: cut down like grass.' 'In these six desperate charges,' says Maguire, 'that Brigade was almost annihilated. Again and again they braved that hell-storm, and would have done so again and again. But of the 1200 that bore a green badge in their caps that morning, nearly a thousand of them lay on the bloody field, literally mown down in ranks. . . . "It was the admiration of the whole army." "Never was there anything superior to it." But General Longstreet's eulogium leaves nothing unexpressed: "It was the handsomest thing of the war." After the burial parties had done their melancholy task, an Irishman who helped to lay the thousand dead in their graves, said: 'It was a sad but glorious day for our country. It made us weep, but it made us proud.'

BULL-DOG
STRUGGLES.

THE annals of war probably furnish no other instance of a brigade leaving upon the field, after a series of dogged rushes, over 80 per cent of its men dead. The nearest approach which we can discover to such bull-dog tenacity and headlong daring occurred at what is commonly called the battle of Vionville during the German attack on Bazaine south-west of Metz on August 16, 1870. The most desperate fighting took place up the Gorze road, which was strongly held by French infantry and commanded by a half-battery of mitrailleuses that did frightful execution, turning Prussian men and horses into tangled piles of dead meat. The Eleventh (Prussian) Regiment began the series of wild rushes up this lead-swept road. It went into action 2000 strong—it had already been through a 'valley of death' at Spicheren. When evening came only 200 of the gallant fellows answered to their names. Nine out of every ten men were killed or wounded. Ligonier's British column was 14,000 strong when it tried to cut through the French centre at Fontenoy. In its forward and backward march it passed through a storm of artillery and musketry cross-fire in a cramped hollow-way and left over 4000 of its 14,000 men dead or wounded along the red track of its wild advance and stern and unhurried retreat. The Peninsular campaigns furnish many conspicuous samples of what Archibald Forbes terms the English, Scottish, and Irish soldiers' 'gluttony for punishment.' Thus, of the 10,000 dare-devil fellows whom Wellington sent to capture Badajoz, 3000 were 'laid out' 'before the torn old rag waved over the place.' At the battle of Salamanca (July 28, 1812) a British battalion went into action with 27 officers and 420 rank and file. Only 3 officers and 78 of the rank and file answered to their names when, after the long and murderous tussle, the roll was called—the rest lay dead or wounded on the field. This represented 80 per cent of casualties—a monstrous blood-tribute, in all reason. The famous Light Brigade lost 37 per cent of its men before its gallant remnant came back 'out of the valley of death, out from the mouth of hell' at Balaklava. In the Franco-German war the Gardeschutzen lost 46 per cent before Metz; the Westphalians (Sixteenth Infantry) 40 per cent during their fierce onsets at Mars-la-Tour on August 16, 1870. In the American Civil War the losses in individual commands were greater still. General Longstreet lost 50 per cent of his men in the sanguinary fight at Gaines' Mill on June 27, 1862; and in the following December General Hancock's casualties were equally great at Fredericksburg—one of the toughest and most dogged struggles of the whole war.

Other instances of heavy slaughter may be readily found in military history. Thus, at Austerlitz, in 1805, the Austrians (84,000 strong) lost 26,000 men, or 31 per cent. of those that went into action. The French losses at Sedan (30,000) in 1870 reached exactly the same percentage. The Prussians at Jena lost 27,000 men—39 per cent. of all that went into action. At Gettysburg, in 1863, the Confederate loss was exactly the same number of men, but the percentage of casualties was 40. The Russians lost 51,000 of their human fighting machines at Moscow—40 per cent. of all that had gone into action. The 20,000 British troops that fought at Talavera in 1800 left 30 per cent. of their number dead or wounded upon the field. At Albuera, eleven years later, the percentage of casualties was 48—3,900 out of a total strength of 8,200. At Inkerman, in 1854, the percentage was 31—2,357 men out of 7,464. At Modder River in the present South African campaign the percentage of casualties was only 7¼—475 killed and wounded out of a total force of 6,500 that had gone into action! The fighting qualities of Thomas Atkins have by no means deteriorated since the days of Albuera and Salamanca and Inkerman. He could undoubtedly have taken more punishment than he received at the Modder River and yet have held his grip upon the place or come off victorious. And as surely Lord Methuen's throat was in his mouth and his heart not in the right place when he described the Modder engagement as 'the bloodiest fighting of the century' and the Boer fire from across the turbid waters as 'so hellish that no troops could withstand it.'

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