

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES.

Sir,—I venture to ask your permission for space for some remarks on the extraordinary reply given last night by the Under-Secretary of State for War, or, rather, put into his mouth, in answer to a question by Captain Norton on the omission to send a hospital ship to Alexandria for the benefit of the sick and wounded of the British division which took part in the Omdurman campaign.

Par. 780 of the Regulations for Army Medical Services, 1896, runs as follows:—

“Each division of an army corps will, when considered necessary, have a hospital ship (with steam power) capable of making up 200 beds, or 250 on an emergency.”

A British division took the field, no hospital ship was given to it, and Mr. Wyndham now gives us the reasons. I may say that the explanation of the withholding of this authorized extra hospital accommodation has been looked forward to with the deepest interest, not merely by those who have lost, in Cairo or Alexandria, their relatives, whether these were either officers, non-commissioned officers, or private soldiers, but by every one who, either from personal observation or inquiry, or both, is aware of the scandalous state of things which existed, with respect to the care and treatment of the sick of the British division at Cairo and Alexandria, from the middle of September to the end of October. But first to Mr. Wyndham's statements, which seem to me to be self-condemnatory. On June 27 the principal medical officer in Egypt, presumably Surgeon-General W. Taylor, applied to the general officer commanding the army of occupation, Lieutenant-General Sir F. Grenfell, for a hospital ship. As both these officers were at the time in London, the War Office received the application at once. And it would have shown professional incapacity on the part of the principal medical officer, if he had not realized the urgent necessity for a hospital ship; for he knew it was certain that the dire enteric fever would lay its deadly hold on the British force; he knew the limited hospital accommodation existing at Cairo and Alexandria, and he also knew the insalubrious character of the military hospitals at these places. Naturally his first thought was to obtain the hospital ship to lessen the dangers arising from these circumstances combined. Sir Francis Grenfell appears not to have shared the apprehensions entertained by Surgeon-General Taylor, for, according to the answer, he said that he would defer his official application until he considered the hospital ship necessary; and it was not until September 14, 11 days after Omdurman, when the sick of a British division “saturated with enteric” (to use a phrase supplied to me by a medical officer) began to pour into Cairo from the front that Sir Francis appears to have realized the terrible situation and to have telegraphed home for the ship, and then it was “too late.”

I do not, Sir, question the truth of Mr. Wyndham's statement, but I distinctly say that according to reliable information in my possession it does not contain the whole truth. In saying this I decline to avail myself of the cover of a *nom de plume*; I sign this letter with my own name. Knowing Sir Francis as I do, it is incredible to me that, unless opposition had been encountered in London, he would have deferred pressing the sending of the hospital ship. If he acted as Mr. Wyndham leads us to believe he did, there rests on his shoulders a very grave responsibility.

In the latter part of October I was at Alexandria; I came in contact with many medical and other officers; among all there was a strong feeling of indignation at the insufficiency of the medical arrangements; there was no reticence on the matter, and the refusal of the hospital ship, with its staff of medical officers and attendance, was a frequent subject for denunciation. An officer in high position informed me that the ship had been refused on the ground of “expense.” I heard nothing of the “too late” plea. I returned to England early in November, and at first found an equal absence of reticence, but since then mouths seem somewhat closed. It was in England I first heard of the “too late” reply; but I was soon enabled to reconcile the apparently opposing statements; and unless I am grossly deceived, I find that the first application, that of June 27, was opposed, and fatally successfully, on its first appearance before the Horse Guards Staff, on the ground of “unnecessary expense”; and it was the despairing subsequent effort to obtain it, that of September 14, which was met by the “too late” refusal, of which more presently. I may here recall the fact that at the banquet to the Sirdar the Prime Minister of this great and wealthy country put in the foreground, for the first, and I hope the last, time in our military annals, the credit due for the economical character of the expedition. It had been not only a great military success, but a great commercial success, £300,000 under the estimate. Possibly the Horse Guards official who first gave to Surgeon-General Taylor's original application the wrong term was influenced by this “shopkeeping” idea. I repeat, therefore, that to the best of my belief the real cause of the absence of the hospital ship was a miserable wish for economy.

And now to the “too late” plea. According to Mr.