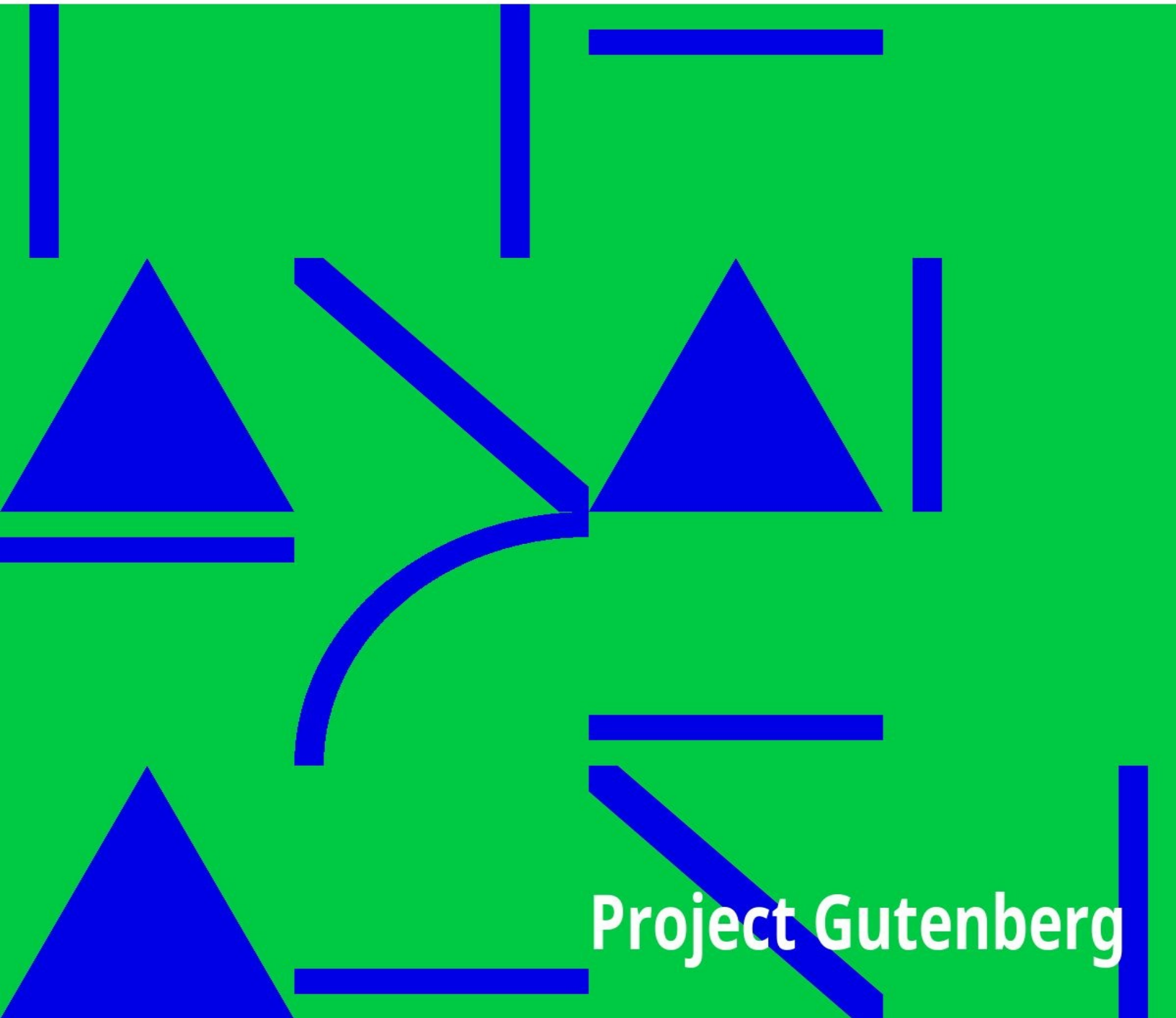
The Amateur Army

Patrick MacGill



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THE AMATEUR ARMY

BY PATRICK MACGILL

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

CHILDREN OF THE DEAD END

THE RAT-PIT

RIFLEMAN PATRICK MACGILLRIFLEMAN PATRICK MACGILL

THE AMATEUR ARMY

BY

PATRICK MACGILL

AUTHOR OF

"CHILDREN OF THE DEAD END"

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PREFACE

I am one of the million or more male residents of the United Kingdom, who a year ago had no special yearning towards military life, but who joined the army after war was declared. At Chelsea I found myself a unit of the 2nd London Irish Battalion, afterwards I was drilled into shape at the White City and training was concluded at St. Albans, where I was drafted into the 1st Battalion. In my spare time I wrote several articles dealing with the life of the soldier from the stage of raw "rooky" to that of finished fighter. These I now publish in book form, and trust that they may interest men who have joined the colours or who intend to take up the profession of arms and become members of the great brotherhood of fighters.

PATRICK MACGILL.

"The London Irish,"
British Expeditionary Force,
March 25th, 1915.

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THE AMATEUR ARMY

CHAPTER I

I Enlist and am Billeted

What the psychological processes were that led to my enlisting in "Kitchener's Army" need not be inquired into. Few men could explain why they enlisted, and if they attempted they might only prove that they had done as a politician said the electorate does, the right thing from the wrong motive. There is a story told of an incident that occurred in Flanders, which shows clearly the view held in certain quarters. The Honourable Artillery Company were relieving some regulars in the trenches when the following dialogue ensued between a typical Tommy Atkins and an H.A.C. private:

T.A.: "Oo are you?"

H.A.C.: "We're the H.A.C."

T.A.: "Gentlemen, ain't yer?"

H.A.C.: "Oh well, in a way I suppose—"

T.A.: "'Ow many are there of yer?"

H.A.C.: "About eight hundred."

T.A.: "An' they say yer volunteered!"

H.A.C.: "Yes, we did."

T.A.: (With conviction as he gathers together his kit). "Blimey, yer must be mad!"

For curiosity's sake I asked some of my mates to give me their reasons for enlisting. One particular friend of mine, a good-humoured Cockney, grinned sheepishly as he replied confidentially, "Well, matey, I done it to get away from my old gal's jore—now you've got it!" Another recruit, a pale, intelligent youth, who knew Nietzsche by heart, glanced at me coldly as he answered, "I enlisted because I am an Englishman." Other replies were equally unilluminating and I desisted, remembering that the Germans despise us because we are devoid of

military enthusiasm.

The step once taken, however, we all set to work to discover how we might become soldiers with a minimum of exertion and inconvenience to ourselves. During the process I learned many things, among others that I was a unit in the most democratic army in history; where Oxford undergraduate and farm labourer, Cockney and peer's son lost their identity and their caste in a vast war machine. I learned that Tommy Atkins, no matter from what class he is recruited, is immortal, and that we British are one of the most military nations in the world. I have learned to love my new life, obey my officers, and depend upon my rifle; for I am Rifleman Patrick MacGill of the Irish Rifles, where rumour has it that the Colonel and I are the only two *real* Irishmen in the battalion. It should be remembered that a unit of a rifle regiment is known as rifleman, not private; we like the term rifleman, and feel justly indignant when a wrong appellation plays skittles with our rank.

The earlier stages of our training took place at Chelsea and the White City, where untiring instructors strove to convince us that we were about the most futile lot of "rookies" that it had ever been their misfortune to encounter. It was not until we were unceremoniously dumped amidst the peaceful inhabitants of a city that slumbers in the shadow of an ancient cathedral that I felt I was in reality a soldier.

Here we were to learn that there is no novelty so great for the newly enlisted soldier as that of being billeted, in the process of which he finds himself left upon an unfamiliar door-step like somebody else's washing. He is the instrument by which the War Office disproves that "an Englishman's home is his castle." He has the law behind him; but nothing else—save his own capacity for making friends with his victims.

If the equanimity of English householders who are about to have soldiers billeted upon them is a test of patriotism, there may well be some doubts about the patriotic spirit of the English middle class in the present crisis. The poor people welcome to their homes soldiers who in most cases belong to the same strata of society as themselves; and, besides, ninepence a night as billet-fee is not to be laughed at. The upper class can easily bear the momentary inconvenience of Tommy's company; the method of procedure of the very rich in regard to billeting seldom varies—a room, stripped of all its furniture, fitted with beds and pictures, usually of a religious nature, is given up for the soldiers' benefit. The

lady of the house, gifted with that familiar ease which the very rich can assume towards the poor at a pinch—especially a pinch like the present, when "all petty class differences are forgotten in the midst of the national crisis"—may come and talk to her guests now and again, tell them that they are fine fellows, and give them a treat to light up the heavy hours that follow a long day's drill in full marching order. But the middle class, aloof and austere in its own seclusion, limited in means and apartment space, cannot easily afford the time and care needed for the housing of soldiers. State commands cannot be gainsaid, however, and Tommy must be housed and fed in the country which he will shortly go out and defend in the trenches of France or Flanders.

The number of men assigned to a house depends in a great measure on the discretion of the householder and the temper of the billeting officer. A gruff reply or a caustic remark from the former sometimes offends; often the officer is in a hurry, and at such a time disproportionate assortment is generally the result. A billeting officer has told me that fifty per cent. of the householders whom he has approached show manifest hostility to the housing of soldiers. But the military authorities have a way of dealing with these people. On one occasion an officer asked a citizen, an elderly man full of paunch and English dignity, how many soldiers could he keep in his house. "Well, it's like this—," the man began.

"Have you any room to spare here?" demanded the officer.

"None, except on the mat," was the caustic answer.

"Two on the mat, then," snapped the officer, and a pair of tittering Tommies were left at the door.

Matronly English dignity suffered on another occasion when a sergeant inquired of a middle-aged woman as to the number of men she could billet in her house.

"None," she replied. "I have no way of keeping soldiers."

"What about that apartment there?" asked the N.C.O. pointing to the drawing-room.

"But they'll destroy everything in the room," stammered the woman.

"Clear the room then."

"But they'll have to pass through the hall to get in, and there are so many valuable things on the walls—"

"You've got a large window in the drawing-room," said the officer; "remove that, and the men will not have to pass through the hall. I'll let you off lightly, and leave only two."

"But I cannot keep two."

"Then I'll leave four," was the reply, and four were left.

Sadder than this, even, was the plight of the lady and gentleman at St. Albans who told the officer that their four children were just recovering from an attack of whooping cough. The officer, being a wise man and anxious about the welfare of those under his care, fled precipitately. Later he learned that there had been no whooping cough in the house; in fact, the people who caused him to beat such a hasty retreat were childless. He felt annoyed and discomfited; but about a week following his first visit he called again at the house, this time followed by six men.

"These fellows are just recovering from whooping cough," he told the householder; "they had it bad. We didn't know what to do with them, but, seeing that you've had whooping cough here, I feel it's the only place where it will be safe to billet them." And he left them there.

But happenings like these were more frequent at the commencement of the war than now. Civilians, even those of the conventional middle class, are beginning to understand that single men in billets, to paraphrase Kipling slightly, are remarkably like themselves.

With us, rations are served out daily at our billets; our landladies do the cooking, and mine, an adept at the culinary art, can transform a basin of flour and a lump of raw beef into a dish that would make an epicurean mouth water. Even though food is badly cooked in the billet, it has a superior flavour, which is never given it in the boilers controlled by the company cook. Army stew has rather a notorious reputation, as witness the inspired words of a regimental poet—one of the 1st Surrey Rifles—in a pæan of praise to his colonel:

"Long may the colonel with us bide,
His shadow ne'er grow thinner.

(It would, though, if he ever tried
Some Army stew for dinner.)"

Billeting has gained for the soldier many friends, and towns that have become accustomed to his presence look sadly forward to the day when he will leave them for the front, where no kind landlady will be at hand to transform raw beef and potatoes into beef pudding or potato pie. The working classes in particular view the future with misgiving. The bond of sympathy between soldier and workers is stronger than that between soldier and any other class of citizen. The houses and manners of the well-to-do daunt most Tommies. "In their houses we feel out of it somehow," they say. "There's nothin' we can talk about with the swells, and 'arf the time they be askin' us about things that's no concern of theirs at all."

Most toilers who have no friends or relations preparing for war have kinsmen already in the trenches—or on the roll of honour. And feelings stronger than those of friendship now unite thousands of soldiers to the young girls of the houses in which they are billeted. For even in the modern age, that now seems to voice the ultimate expression of man's culture and advance in terrorism and destruction, love and war, vital as the passion of ancient story, go hand in hand up to the trenches and the threat of death.

CHAPTER II

RATIONS AND SICK PARADE

It has been said that an army moves upon its stomach, and, as if in confirmation of this, the soldier is exhorted in an official pamphlet "Never to start on a march with an empty stomach." To a hungry rifleman the question of his rations is a matter of vital importance. For the first few weeks our food was cooked up and served out on the parade ground, or in the various gutter-fringed sheds standing in the vicinity of our headquarters. The men were discontented with the rations, and rumour had it that the troops stationed in a neighbouring village rioted and hundreds had been placed under arrest.

Sometimes a haunch of roast beef was doled out almost raw, and potatoes were generally boiled into pulp; these when served up looked like lumps of wet putty. Two potatoes, unwashed and embossed with particles of gravel, were allowed to each man; all could help themselves by sticking their fingers into the doughy substance and lifting out a handful, which they placed along with the raw "roast" on the lid of their mess-tin. This constituted dinner, but often rations were doled out so badly that several men only got half the necessary allowance for their meals.

Tea was seldom sufficiently sweetened, and the men had to pay for milk. After a time we became accustomed to the Epsom Salts that a kindly War Office, solicitous for our well-being, caused to be added, and some of us may go to our graves insisting on Epsom Salts with tea. The feeding ground being in many cases a great distance from the fire, the tea was cold by the time it arrived at the men's quarters. Those who could afford it, took their food elsewhere: the restaurants in the vicinity did a roaring trade, and several new ones were opened. A petition was written; the men signed it, and decided to send it to the colonel; but the N.C.O.'s stepped in and destroyed the document. "You'll not do much good at the front," they told us, "if you are grumbling already."

A week followed the destruction of the petition, and then appeared the following in Battalion Orders: "From to-morrow until further orders, rations will be issued at the men's billets." This announcement caused no little sensation, aroused a great deal of comment, and created a profound feeling of satisfaction in the battalion. Thenceforth rations were served out at the billets, and the

householders were ordered to do the cooking. My landlady was delighted. "Not half feeding you; that's a game," she said. "And you going to fight for your country! But wait till you see the dishes I'll make out of the rations when they come."

The rations came. In the early morning a barrow piled with eatables was dragged through our street, and the "ration fatigue" party, full of the novelty of a new job, yelled in chorus, "Bring out your dead, ladies; rations are 'ere!"

"What have you got?" asked my landlady, going to the door. "What are you supposed to leave for the men? Nothing's too good for them that's going to fight for their country."

"Dead rats," said the ration-corporal with a grin.

"Don't be funny. What are my men to get?"

"Each man a pound of fresh meat, one and a half pounds of bread, two taters, two ounces of sugar, and an ounce of tea and three ounces of cheese. And, besides this, every feller gets a tin of jam once in four days."

This looks well on paper, but pot and plate make a difference in the proposition. Army cheese runs to rind rapidly, and a pound of beef is often easily bitten to the bone: sometimes, in fact, it is all bone and gristle, and the ravages of cooking minimise its bulk in a disheartening way. One and a half pound of bread is more than the third of a big loaf, but minus butter it makes a featureless repast. Breakfast and tea without butter and milk does not always make a dainty meal.

Even the distribution of rations leaves much to be desired; the fatigue party, well-intentioned and sympathetic though it be, often finds itself short of provisions. This may in many cases be due to unequal distribution; an ounce of beef too much to each of sixteen men leaves the seventeenth short of meat. This may easily happen, as the ration party has never any means of weighing the food: it is nearly always served out by guesswork. But sometimes the landladies help in the distribution by bringing out scales and weighing the provisions. One lady in our street always weighed the men's rations, and saw that those under her care got the exact allowance. Never would she take any more than her due, and never less. But a few days ago, when weighing sugar and tea, a blast of wind upset the scales, and a second allowance met with a similar fate. Sugar and tea littered the pavement, and finally the woman supplied her soldiers from the

household stores. She now leaves the work of distribution in the hands of the ration party, and takes what is given to her without grumbling.

The soldiers' last meal is generally served out about five o'clock in the afternoon, sometimes earlier; and a stretch of fourteen hours intervenes between then and breakfast. About nine o'clock in the evening those who cannot afford to pay for extras feel their waist-belts slacken, and go supperless to bed. And tea is not a very substantial meal; the rations served out for the day have decreased in bulk, bread has wasted to microscopic proportions, and the cheese has diminished sadly in size. A regimental song, pent with soldierly woes, bitterly bemoans the drawbacks of Tommy's tea:

"Bread and cheese for breakfast,
For dinner Army stew,
But when it comes to tea-time
There's dough and rind for you,
So you and me
Won't wait for tea—
We're jolly big fools if we do."

But those who do not live in billets, and whose worldly wealth fails to exceed a shilling a day, must be content with Army rations, with the tea tasting of coom, and seldom sweetened, with the pebble-studded putty potato coated in clay, with the cheese that runs to rind at last parade, and, above all, with the knowledge that they are merely inconvenienced at home so that they may endure the better abroad.

There is another school of theorists that states that an army moves, not upon its stomach, but upon its feet, the care of which is of vital importance. This, too, finds confirmation in the official pamphlet, which tells the soldier to "Remember that a dirty foot is an unsound foot. See that feet are washed if no other part of the body is," etc.

My right foot had troubled me for days; a pain settled in the arch of the instep, and caused me intense agony when resuming the march after a short halt; at night I would suddenly awake from sleep to experience the sensation of being stabbed by innumerable pins in ankle and toes. Marching in future, I felt, would be a monstrous futility, and I decided that my case was one for the medical officer.

Sick parade is not restricted by any dress order; the sore-footed may wear slippers; the sore-headed, Balaclava helmets; puttees can be discarded; mufflers and comforters may be used. "The sick rabble" is the name given by the men to the crowd that waits outside the door of the M.O.'s room at eight in the morning. And every morning brings its quota of ailing soldiers; some seriously ill, some slightly, and a few (as may be expected out of a thousand men of all sorts and conditions) who have imaginary or feigned diseases that will so often save "slackers" from a hard day's marching. The aim and ambition of these latter seem to be to do as little hard work as possible; some of them attend sick parade on an average once a week, and generally obtain exemption from a day's work. To obtain this they resort to several ruses; headaches and rheumatic pains are difficult to detect, and the doctor must depend on the private's word; a quick pulse and heightened temperature is engendered by a brisk run, and this is often a means towards a favourable medical verdict—that is, when "favourable" means a suspension of duties.

At a quarter to eight I stood with ten others in front of the M.O.'s door, on which a white card with the blue-lettered "No Smoking" stood out in bold relief. The morning was bitterly cold, and a sharp, penetrating wind splashed with rain swept round our ears, and chilled our hands and faces. One of the waiting queue had a sharp cough and spat blood; all this was due, he told us, to a day's divisional field exercise, when he had to lie for hours on the wet ground firing "blanks" at a "dummy" enemy. Another sick soldier, a youth of nineteen, straight as a lance and lithe as a poplar, suffered from ulcer in the throat. "I had the same thing before," he remarked in a thin, hoarse voice, "but I got over it somehow. This time it'll maybe the hospital. I don't know."

An orderly corporal filled in admission forms and handed them to us; each form containing the sick man's regimental number, name, religion, age, and length of military service, in addition to several other minor details having no reference at all to the matter in hand. These forms were again handed over to another orderly corporal, who stood smoking a cigarette under the blue-lettered notice pinned to the door.

The boy with the sore throat was sitting in a chair in the room when I entered, the doctor bending over him. "Would you like a holiday?" the M.O. asked in a kindly voice.

"Where to, sir?"

"A couple of days in hospital would leave you all right, my man," the M.O. continued, "and it would be a splendid rest."

"I don't want a rest," answered the youth. "Maybe I'll be better in the morning, sir."

The doctor thought for a moment, then:

"All right, report to-morrow again," he said. "You're a brave boy. Some, who are not the least ill, whine till one is sick—what's the matter with you?"

"Sore foot, sir," I said, seeing the M.O.'s eyes fixed on me.

"Off with your boot, then."

I took off my boot, placed my foot on a chair, and had it inspected.

"What's wrong with it?"

"I don't know, sir. It pains me when marching, and sometimes—"

"Have you ever heard that Napoleon said an army marches on its stomach?"

"Yes, sir, when the feet of the army is all right," I answered.

"Quite true," he replied. "No doubt you've sprained one of yours; just wash it well in warm water, rub it well, and have a day or two resting. That will leave you all right. Your boots are good?"

"Yes, sir."

"They don't pinch or—what's wrong with you?" He was speaking to the next man.

"I don't know, sir."

"Don't know? You don't know why you're here. What brought you here?"

"Rheumatic pains, I think, sir," was the answer. "Last night I 'ad an orful night. Couldn't sleep. I think it was the wet as done it. Lyin' out on the grass last field day—"

"How many times have you been here before?"

"Well, sir, the last time was when—"

"How many times?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Was it rheumatic pains last time?"

"No sir, it was jaw-ache—toothache, I mean."

"I'll put you on light duties for the day," said the M.O. And the rheumatic one and I went out together.

"That's wot they do to a man that's sick," said the rheumatic one when we got outside. "Me that couldn't sleep last night, and now it's light duties. I know what light duties are. You are to go into the orderly room and wash all the dishes: then you go and run messages, then you 'old the orficer's horse and then maybe when you're worryin' your own bit of grub they come and bundle you out to sweep up the orficers' mess, or run an errand for the 'ead cook and bottle-washer. Light duties ain't arf a job. I'm blowed if marchin' in full kit ain't ten times better, and I'm going to grease to the battalion parade."

Fifteen minutes later I met him leaving his billet, his haversack on the wrong side, his cartridge pouches open, the bolt of his gun unfastened; his whole general appearance was a discredit to his battalion and a disgrace to the Army. I helped to make him presentable as he bellowed his woes into my ear. "No bloomin' grub this mornin'," he said. "Left my breakfast till I'd come back, and 'aven't no time for it now. Anyway I'm going out on the march; no light duties for me. I know what they are." He was still protesting against the hardships of things as he swung out of sight round the corner of the street. Afterwards I heard that he got three days C.B. for disobeying the orders of the M.O.

Save for minor ailments and accident, my battalion is practically immune from sickness; colds come and go as a matter of course, sprains and cuts claim momentary attention, but otherwise the health of the battalion is perfect. "We're too healthy to be out of the trenches," a company humorist has remarked, and the company and battalion agrees with him.

CHAPTER III

Pickets and Special Leave

One of the first things we had to learn was that our ancient cathedral town has its bounds and limits for the legions of the lads in khaki. Beyond a certain line, the two-mile boundary, we dare not venture alone without written permission, and we can only pass the limit in a body when led by a commissioned officer.

The whole world, with the exception of the space enclosed by this narrow circle, is closed to the footsteps of Tommy; he cannot now visit his sweetheart, his sweetheart must come and visit him. The housemaid from Hammersmith and the typist from Tottenham have to come to their beaux in billets, and as most of the men in our town are single, and nearly all have sweethearts, it is estimated that five or six thousand maidens blush to hear the old, old story within the two-mile limit every week-end.

Once only every month is a soldier allowed week-end leave, and then he has permission to be absent from his billet between the hours of 3 p.m. on Saturday and 10 p.m. on Sunday. His pass states that during this time he is not liable to be arrested for desertion. Some men use one pass for quite a long period, and alter the dates to suit every occasion.

One Sunday, when returning from week-end leave, I travelled from London by train. My compartment was crowded with men of my division, and only one-half of these had true passes; one, who was an adept calligraphist, wrote his own pass, and made a counterfeit signature of the superior who should have signed the form of leave. Another had altered the dates of an early pass so cleverly that it was difficult to detect the erasure, and a number of men had no passes whatsoever. These boasted of having travelled to London every week-end, and they had never been caught napping.

Passes were generally inspected at the station preceding the one to which we were bound. My travelling companions were well aware of this, and made preparations to combat the difficulty in front; two crawled under the seats, and two more went up on the racks, where they lay quiet as mice, stretched out at full length and covered over with several khaki overcoats. One man, a brisk Cockney, who would not deign to roost or crawl, took up his position as far

away as possible from the platform window.

"Grease the paper along as quick as you know 'ow and keep the picket jorin' till I'm safe," he remarked as the train stopped and a figure in khaki fumbled with the door handle.

"Would you mind me lookin' at passes, mateys?" demanded the picket, entering the compartment. The man by the door produced his pass, the one he had written and signed himself; and when it passed inspection he slyly slipped it behind the back of the man next him, and in the space of three seconds the brisk Cockney had the forged permit of leave to show to the inspector. The men under the seat and on the racks were not detected.

Every station in our town and its vicinity has a cordon of pickets, the Sunday farewell kisses of sweethearts are never witnessed by the platform porter, as the lovers in khaki are never allowed to see their loves off by train, and week-end adieux always take place at the station entrance. Some time ago the pickets allowed the men to see their sweethearts off, but as many youths abused the privilege and took train to London when they got on the platform, these kind actions have now become merely a pleasing memory.

Pickets seem to crop up everywhere; on one bus ride to London, a journey of twenty miles, I have been asked to show my pass three times, and on a return journey by train I have had to produce the written permit on five occasions. But some units of our divisions soar above these petty inconveniences, as do two brothers who motor home every Sunday when church parade comes to an end.

When these two leave church after divine service, a car waits them at the nearest street corner, and they slip into it, don trilby hats and civilian overcoats, and sweep outside the restricted area at a haste that causes the slow-witted country policeman to puzzle over the speed of the car and forget its number while groping for his pocket-book.

It has always been a pleasure to me to follow for hours the winding country roads looking out for fresh scenes and new adventures. The life of the roadside dwellers, the folk who live in little stone houses and show two flower-pots and a birdcage in their windows, has a strange fascination for me. When I took up my abode here and got my first free Sunday afternoon, I shook military discipline aside for a moment and set out on one of my rambles.

There comes a moment on a journey when something sweet, something irresistible and charming as wine raised to thirsty lips, wells up in the traveller's being. I have never striven to analyse this feeling or study the moment when it comes, and that feeling has been often mine. Now I know the moment it floods the soul of the traveller. It is at the end of the second mile, when the limbs warm to their work and the lungs fill with the fresh country air. At such a moment, when a man naturally forgets restraint to which he has only been accustomed for a short while, I met the picket for the first time. He told me to turn—and I went back. But it was not in my heart to like that picket, and I shall never like him while he stands there, sentry of the two-mile limit; an ogre denying me entrance into the wide world that lies beyond.

There is one thing, however, before which the picket is impotent—a pass. It is like a free pardon to a convict; it opens to him the whole world—that is for the period it covers. The two most difficult things in military life are to obtain permit of absence from billets, and the struggle against the natural impulse to overstay the limit of leave. There are times when soldiers experience an intense longing to see their own homes, firesides, and friends, and in moments like these it takes a stiff fight to overcome the desire to go away, if only for a little while, to their native haunts. Only once in five weeks may a man obtain a week-end pass—if he is lucky. To the soldier, luck is merely another word for skill.

With us, the rifleman who scores six successive "bulls" at six hundred yards on the open range has been lucky; if he speaks nicely to the quartermaster and obtains the best pair of boots in the stores, he has been lucky; if by mistake he is given double rations by the fatigue party he is lucky; but if the same man, sweating over his rifle in a carnival of "wash-outs," or, weary of blistered feet and empty stomach, asks for sympathy because his rifle was sighted too low or because he lost his dinner while waiting on boot-parade, we explain that his woes are due to a caper of chance—that he has been unlucky. To obtain a pass at any time a man must be lucky; obtaining one when he desires it most is a thing heard of now and again, and getting a pass and not being able to use it is of common occurrence. Now, when I applied for special leave I was more than a little lucky.

It was necessary that I should attend to business in London, and I set about making application for a permit of leave. I intended to apply for a pass dating from 6 p.m. of a Friday evening to 10 p.m. of the following Sunday. On Wednesday morning I spoke to a corporal of my company.

"If you want leave, see the platoon sergeant," he told me. The platoon sergeant, who was in a bad temper, spoke harshly when I approached him. "No business of mine!" he said; "the company clerk will look into the matter."

But I had no success with the company clerk; the leave which I desired was a special one, and that did not come under his jurisdiction. "The orderly sergeant knows more about this business than I do. Go to him about it," he said.

By Wednesday evening I spoke to the orderly sergeant, who looked puzzled for a moment. "Come with me to the lieutenant," he said. "He'll know more about this matter than I do, and he'll see into it. But it will be difficult to get special leave, you know; they don't like to give it."

"Why?" I asked.

"Why?" he repeated; "what the devil does it matter to you? You're paid here to do what you're told, not to ask questions."

The lieutenant was courteous and civil. "I can't do anything in the matter," he said. "The orderly sergeant will take you to the company officer, Captain ——, and he'll maybe do something for you."

"If you're lucky," said the sergeant in a low whisper. About eight o'clock in the evening I paraded in the long, dimly-lighted passage that leads to our company orderly-room, and there I had to wait two hours while the captain was conducting affairs of some kind or another inside. When the door was opened I was ordered inside.

"Quick march! Left turn! Halt!" ordered the sergeant as I crossed the threshold, and presently I found myself face to face with our company commander, who was sitting by a desk with a pile of papers before him.

"What is it?" he asked, fixing a pair of stern eyes on me, and I explained my business with all possible despatch.

"Of course you understand that everything is now subservient to your military duties; they take premier place in your new life," said the officer. "But I'll see what I can do. By myself I am of little help. However, you can write out a pass telling the length of time you require off duty, and I'll lay it before the proper authorities."

I wrote out the "special pass," which ran as follows:

"Rifleman —— has permission to be absent from his quarters from 6 p.m. (date) to 10 p.m. (date), for the purpose of proceeding to London."

I came in from a long march on Thursday evening to find the pass signed, stamped, and ready. On the following night I could go to London, and I spent the evening 'phoning, wiring, and writing to town, arranging matters for the day ahead. Also, I asked some friends to have dinner with me at seven o'clock on Friday night.

Next day we had divisional exercise, which is usually a lengthy affair. In the morning I approached the officer and asked if I might be allowed off parade, seeing I had to set out for London at six o'clock in the evening.

"Oh! we shall be back early," I was told, "back about three or thereabouts."

The day was very interesting; the whole division, thousands of men, numberless horses, a regiment of artillery, and all baggage and munition for military use took up position in battle formation. In front lay an imaginary army, and we had to cross a river to come into contact with it. Engineers, under cover of the artillery, built pontoon bridges for our crossing; on the whole an intensely interesting and novel experience. So interesting indeed that I lost all count of time, and only came to consciousness of the clock and remembrance of friends making ready for dinner when some one remarked that the hour of four had passed, and that we were still five miles from home.

I got to my billet at six; there I flung off my pack, threw down my rifle, and in frenzied haste consulted a railway timetable. A slow train was due to leave our town at five minutes to seven. I arranged my papers, made a brief review of matters which would come before me later, and with muddy boots and heavy heart I arrived at the station at seven minutes to seven and took the slow train for London.

When I told the story of my adventures at dinner a soldier friend remarked: "You've been more than a little lucky in getting away at all. I was very unlucky when I applied—"

But his story was a long one, and I have forgotten it.

CHAPTER IV

Officers and Rifles

As I have said, I have learned among other things to obey my officers and depend upon my rifle. At first the junior officers appeared to me only as immaculate young men in tailor-made tunics and well-creased trousers, wearing swords and wrist-watches, and full of a healthy belief in their own importance. My mates are apt to consider them as being somewhat vain, and no Tommy dares fail to salute the young commissioned officers when he meets them out with their young ladies on the public streets. For myself, I have a great respect for them and their work; day and night they are at their toil; when parade comes to an end, and the battalion is dismissed for the day, the officers, who have done ten or twelve hours' of field exercise, turn to their desks and company accounts, and time and again the Last Post sees them busy over ledgers, pamphlets, and plans.

Accurate and precise in every detail, they know the outs and ins of platoon and company drill, and can handle scores and hundreds of men with the ease and despatch of artists born to their work. Where have these officers, fresh youngsters with budding moustaches and white, delicate hands, learned all about frontage, file, flank, and formation, alignment, echelon, incline, and interval? Words of direction and command come so readily from their lips that I was almost tempted to believe that they had learned as easily as they taught, that their skill in giving orders could only be equalled by the ease with which I supposed they had mastered the details of their work. Later I came to know of the difficulty that confronts the young men, raw from the Officers' Training Corps, when they take up their preliminary duties as commanders of trained soldiers. No "rooky" fresh to the ranks is the butt of so many jokes and such biting sarcasm as the young officer is subjected to when he takes his place as a leader of men.

Soon after my arrival in our town a score of young lieutenants came to our parade ground, accompanied by two commanders, a keen-eyed adjutant, brisk as a bell, and a white-haired colonel with very thin legs, and putties which seemed to have been glued on to his shins. The young gentlemen were destined for various regiments, and most of them were fresh and spotless in their new uniforms. Some wore Glengarry bonnets, kilts, and sporrans, some the black

ribbons of Wales; one, whose hat-badge proclaimed the Dublin Fusilier, was conspicuous by the eyeglass he wore, and others were still arrayed in civilian garb, the uniform of city and office life. Several units of my battalion were taken off to drill in company with the strange officers. I was one of the chosen.

The young men took us in hand, acting in turn as corporals, platoon sergeants, and company commanders. The gentleman with the eyeglass had charge of my platoon, and from the start he cast surreptitious glances at a little red brochure which he held in his hand, and mumbled words as if trying to commit something to memory.

"Get to your places," the adjutant yelled to the officers. "Hurry up! Don't stand there gaping as if you're going to snap at flies. We've got to do some work. There's no hay for those who don't work. Come on, Weary, and drill your men; you with the eyeglass, I mean! I want you to put the company through some close column movements."

The man with the eyeglass took up his position, and issued some order, but his voice was so low that the men nearest him could not hear the command.

"Shout!" yelled the adjutant. "Don't mumble like a flapper who has just got her first kiss. It's not allowed on parade."

The order was repeated, and the voice raised a little.

"Louder, louder!" yelled the adjutant. Then with fine irony: "These men are very interested in what you've got to tell them.... I don't think."

Eyeglass essayed another attempt, but stopped in the midst of his words, frozen into mute helplessness by the look of the adjutant.

"For heaven's sake, try and speak up," the adjutant said. "If you don't talk like a man, these fellows won't salute you when they meet you in the street with your young lady. On second thoughts, you had better go back and take up the job of platoon sergeant. Come on, Glengarry, and try and trumpet an order."

Glengarry, so-called from his bonnet, a sturdy youth with sloping shoulders, took up his post nervously.

"A close column forming column of fours," he cried in a shrill treble, quoting the

cautionary part of his command. "Advance in fours from the right; form fours—right!"

"Form fours—where?" roared the adjutant.

"Left," came the answer.

"Left, your grandmother! You were right at first. Did you not know that you were right?... Where's Eyeglass, the platoon sergeant, now? Who's pinched him?"

This unfortunate officer had dropped his eyeglass, and was now groping for it on the muddy ground, one of my mates helping him in the search.

Other officers took up the job of company commander in turn, and all suffered. One, who was a dapper little fellow, speedily earned the nickname of "Tailor's Dummy;" another, when giving a platoon the wrong direction in dressing, was told to be careful, and not shove the regiment over. A third, a Welshman, with the black ribbons, got angry with a section for some slight mistake made by two of its number, and was told to be careful and not annoy the men. He had only got them on appro'.

Spick and span in their new uniforms, they came to drill daily on our parade ground. Slowly the change took place. They were "rookies" no longer, and the adjutant's sarcasm was a thing of the past. Commands were pronounced distinctly and firmly; the officers were trained men, ready to lead a company of soldiers anywhere and to do anything.

No man who has trained with the new armies can be lacking in respect for the indefatigable N.C.O., upon whom the brunt of the work has fallen. With picturesque scorn and sarcasm he has formed huge armies out of the rawest of raw material, and all in a space of less than half a year. His methods are sometimes strange and his temper short; yet he achieves his end in the shortest time possible. He is for ever correcting the same mistakes and rebuking the same stupidity, and the wonder is, not that he loses his temper, but that he should ever be able to preserve it. He understands men, and approaches them in an idiom that is likely to produce the best results.

"Every man of you has friends of some sort," said the musketry instructor, as we formed up in front of him on the parade ground, gripping with nervous eagerness

the rifles which had just been served out from the quartermaster's stores. We were recruits, raw "rookies," green to the grind, and chafing under discipline. "And some sort of friends it would be as well as if you never met them," the instructor continued. "They'd play you false the minute they'd get your back turned. But you've a friend now that will always stand by you and play you fair. Just give him a chance, and he'll maybe see you out of many a tight corner. Now, who is this friend I'm talking about?" he asked, turning to a youth who was leaning on his rifle. "Come, Weary, and tell me."

"The rifle," was the answer.

"The crutch?"

"No, the rifle."

"I see that, boy, I see that! But, damn it, don't make a crutch of it. You're a soldier now, my man, and not a crippled one yet."

Thus was the rifle introduced to us. We had long waited for its coming, and dreamt of cross-guns, the insignia of a crack shot's proficiency, while we waited. And with the rifle came romance, and the element of responsibility. We were henceforward fighting men, numbered units, it was true, with numbered weapons, but for all that, fighters—men trained to the trade and licensed to the profession.

Our new friend was rather a troublesome individual to begin with. In rising to the slope he had the trick of breaking free and falling on the muddy barrack square. A muddy rifle gets rusty, and brings its owner into trouble, and a severe penalty is considered meet for the man who comes on parade with a rusty rifle. Bringing the friend from the slope to the order was a difficult process for us recruits at the start the back-sight tore at the fingers, and bleeding hands often testified to the unnatural instinct of the rebellious weapon. But the unkindest kick of all was given when the slack novice fired the first shot, and the heel of the butt slipped upwards and struck the jaw. Then was learnt the first real lesson. The rifle kicks with the heel and aims for the jaw. Control your friend, humour him; keep him well in hand and beware his fling.

I was unlucky in my first rifle practice on the miniature range, and out of my first five shots I did not hit the target once. The instructor lay by my side on the waterproof ground-sheet (the day was a wet one, and the range was muddy) and

lectured me between misses on the peculiarities of my weapon and the cultivation of a steady eye.

"Keep the beggar under control," he said. "You've got to coax him, and not use force. Pull the trigger easily, as though you loved it, and hold the butt affectionate-like against the shoulder. It's an easy matter to shoot as you're shooting now. There's shooting and shooting, and you've got to shoot straight. If you don't you're no dashed good! Give me the rifle, you're not aiming at the bull, man, you're aiming at the locality where the bull is grazing."

He took my rifle, slid a cartridge into the breech, and coaxed the trigger lovingly towards him. Three times he fired, then we went together to look at the target. Not a bullet fired by him had struck it. The instructor glared down the barrel of the gun, made some nasty remarks about deflection, and went back to yell at an orderly corporal.

"What the dickens did you take this here for?" he cried. "It's a blooming wash-out,[1] and was never any good. Old as an unpaid bill and worn bell-mouth it is, and nobody can fire with it."

On a new rifle being obtained I passed the preliminary test, and a rather repentant instructor remarked that it might be possible to make a soldier of me some day.

Since then my fellow-soldiers and I have had almost unlimited rifle practice, on miniature and open ranges, at bull and disappearing targets, in field firing at distances from 100 to 600 yards. On a field exceeding 600 yards it is almost impossible to hit a point the size of an ordinary bull; fire then must be directed towards a position. Field or volley firing is very interesting. Once my company took train to Dunstable and advanced on an imaginary enemy that occupied the wastes of the Chiltern Hills. Practice commenced by firing at little squares of iron standing upright in a row about 200 yards off in front of our line. These represented heads and shoulders of men rising over the trenches to take aim at us as we advanced. In extended order we came to our position, 200 yards distant from the front trenches. At the sound of the officer's whistle, we sank to the ground, facing our front, fixed our sights, and loaded. A second whistle was blown; we fired "three rounds rapid" at the foe. The aiming was very accurate; little spurts of earth danced up and around the targets, and every iron disc fell. The "searching ground," the locality struck by bullets, scarcely measured a

dozen paces from front to rear, thus showing that there was very little erratic firing.

"That's some shooting!" my Jersey friend remarked. "If the discs were Germans!"

"They might shoot back," someone said, "and then we mightn't take as cool an aim."

We are trained to the rifle; it is always with us, on parade, on march, on bivouac, and recently, when going through a dental examination, we carried our weapons of war into the medical officer's room. As befits units of a rifle regiment, we have got accustomed to our gun, and now, as fully trained men, we have established the necessary unity between hand and eye, and can load and unload our weapon with butt-plate stiff to shoulder and eye steady on target while the operation is in progress. In fact, our rifle comes to hand as easy as a walking-stick. We shall be sorry to lose it when the war is over, and no doubt we shall feel lonely without it.

Footnote 1: (return)

"Wash-out" is a term used by the men when their firing is so wide of the mark that it fails to hit any spot on the card. The men apply it indiscriminately to anything in the nature of a failure.

CHAPTER V

THE COFFEE-SHOP AND WANKIN

What the pump is to the villager, so the coffee-shop is to the soldier of the New Army. Here the men crowd nightly and live over again the incidents of the day. Our particular coffee-shop is situated in our corner of the town; our men patronise it; there are three assistants, plump, merry girls, and three of our men have fallen in love with them; in short, it is our very own restaurant, opened when we came here, and adapted to our needs; the waitresses wear our hat-badges, sing our songs, and make us welcome when we cross the door to take up our usual chairs and yarn over the cosy tables. The Jersey youth with the blue eyes, the Oxford man, who speaks of things that humble waitresses do not understand, the company drummer, the platoon sergeants, and the Cockney who vows that water is spoilt in making every cup of coffee he drinks, all come here, and all love the place.

I have come to like the place and do most of my writing there, catching snatches of conversation and reminiscence as they float across to me.

"I wasn't meanin' to 'urt ole Ginger Nobby nohow, but the muck I throwed took 'im dead on the jor. 'Wot's yer gime?' 'e 'ollers at me. 'Wot's my gime?' I says back to 'im. 'Nuffin', if ye want ter know!' I says. 'I was just shyin' at squidges.'"

Thus spoke the bright-eyed Cockney at the table next me, gazing regretfully at his empty coffee-cup and cutting away a fringe of rag-nails from his finger with a clasp-knife. The time was eight o'clock of the evening, and the youth was recounting an adventure which he had had in the morning when throwing mud at sparrows on the parade ground. A lump of clay had struck a red-haired non-commissioned officer on the jaw, and the officer became angry. The above was the Cockney version of the story. One of my friends, an army unit with the Oxford drawl, was voluble on another subject.

"Russian writers have had a great effect on our literature," he said, deep in a favourite topic. "They have stripped bare the soul of man with a realism that shrivels up our civilisation and proves—Two coffees, please."

A tall, well-set waitress, with several rings on her fingers, took the order as gravely as if she were performing some religious function; then she turned to the

Cockney.

"Cup of cawfee, birdie!" he cried, leaning over the table and trying to grip her hand. "Not like the last, mind; it was good water spoilt. I'll never come in 'ere again."

"So you say!" said the girl, moving out of his way and laughing loudly.

"Strike me balmy if I do!"

"Where'll yer go then?"

"Round the corner, of course," was the answer. "There's another bird there—and cawfee! It's some stuff too, not like 'ere."

"All right; don't come in again if yer don't want ter."

The Cockney got his second cup of coffee and pronounced it inferior to the first; then looked at an evening paper which Oxford handed to him, and studied a photograph of a battleship on the front page.

"Can't stand these 'ere papers," he said, after a moment, as he got to his feet and lit a cigarette. "Nuffink but war in them always; I'm sick readin' about war! I saw your bit in one a couple of nights ago," he said, turning to me.

"What did you think of it?" I asked, anxious to hear his opinion on an article dealing with the life of his own regiment.

"Nuffink much," he answered, honestly and frankly. "Everything you say is about things we all know; who wants to 'ear about them? D'ye get paid for writin' that?"

One of his mates, a youth named Bill, who came in at that moment, overheard the remark.

"Paid! Of course 'e gets paid," said the newcomer. "Bet you he gets 'arf a crown for every time 'e writes for the paper."

All sorts and conditions of soldiers drift into the place and discuss various matters over coffee and mince pies; they are men of all classes, who had been as

far apart as the poles in civil life, and are now knit together in the common brotherhood of war. Caste and estate seem to have been forgotten; all are engaged in a common business, full of similar risks, and rewarded by a similar wage.

In one corner of the room a game of cards was in progress, some soldiers were reading, and a few writing letters. Now and again a song was heard, and a score of voices joined in the chorus. The scene was one of indescribable gaiety; the temperament of the assembly was like a hearty laugh, infectious and healthy. Now and then a discussion took place, and towards the close of the evening hot words were exchanged between Bill and his friend, the bright-eyed Cockney.

"I'll give old Ginger Nobby what for one day!" said the latter.

"Will you? I don't think!"

"Bet yer a bob I will!"

"You'd lose it."

"Would I?"

"Straight you would!"

"Strike me pink if I would!"

"You know nothin' of what you're sayin'."

"Don't I?"

"Git!"

"Shut!"

In the coffee-shop Wankin is invariably the centre of an interested group. As the company scapegrace and black sheep of the battalion he occupies in his mates' eyes a position of considerable importance. His repartees are famous, and none knows better than he how to score off an unpopular officer or N.C.O. He has the distinction also of having spent more days in the guard-room than any other man in the battalion.

On the occasion when identity discs were being served out to the men and a momentary stir pervaded the battalion, it was Wankin who first became involved in trouble.

He employed the disc string to fasten the water-bottle of the man on his left to the haversack of the man on his right, and the colour-sergeant, livid with rage, vowed to chasten him by confining him eternally to barracks. But the undaunted company scapegrace was not to be beaten. Fastening the identity disc on his left eye he fixed a stern look on the sergeant.

"My deah fellah," he drawled out, imitating the voice of the company lieutenant who wears an eyeglass, "your remarks are uncalled for, really. By Jove! one would think that a scrap of string was a gold bracelet or a diamond necklace. I could buy the disc and the string for a bloomin' 'apenny."

"You'll pay dearly for it this time," said the colour with fine irony. "Three days C.B.[2] your muckin' about'll cost you." And before Wankin could reply the sergeant was reporting the matter to the captain.

Wankin is eternally in trouble, although his agility in dodging pickets and his skill in making a week's C.B. a veritable holiday are the talk of the regiment. All the officers know him, and many of them who have been victims of his smart repartee fear him more than they care to acknowledge. The subaltern with the eyeglass is a bad route-marcher, and Wankin once remarked in an audible whisper that the officer had learned his company drill with a drove of haltered pack-horses, and the officer bears the name of "Pack-horse" ever since.

On another occasion the major suffered when a battalion kit inspection took place early one December morning. Wankin had sold his spare pair of boots, the pair that is always kept on top of the kit-bag; but when the major inspected Wankin's kit the boots were there, newly polished and freed from the most microscopic speck of dust. Someone tittered during the inspection, then another, and the major smelt a rat. He lifted Wankin's kit-bag in his hand and found Wankin's feet tucked under it—Wankin's feet in stockinged soles. The major was justly indignant. "One step to the front, left turn," he roared. "March in front of every rank in the battalion and see what you think of it!"

With stockinged feet, cold, but still wearing an inscrutable smile of impudence, Wankin paraded in front of a thousand grinning faces and in due course got back

to his kit and beside the sarcastic major.

"What do you think of it?" asked the latter.

"I don't think much of it, sir," Wankin replied. "It's the dirtiest regiment I ever inspected."

Wankin was sometimes unlucky; fortune refused to favour him when he took up the work of picket on the road between St. Albans and London. No unit of his regiment is supposed to go more than two miles beyond St. Albans without a written permit, and guards are placed at different points of the two-mile radius to intercept the regimental rakes whose feet are inclined to roving. Wankin learned that the London road was not to be guarded on a certain Sunday. The regiment was to parade for a long route-march, and all units were to be in attendance. Wankin pondered over things for a moment, girt on his belt and sword and took up his position on the London road within a hundred yards of a wayside public-house. At this tavern a traveller from St. Albans may obtain a drink on a Sabbath day.

Soldiers, like most mortals, are sometimes dry and like to drink; Wankin was often dry and Wankin had seldom much money to spend. The first soldier who came out from the town wanted to get to the tavern.

"Can't pass here!" the mock-picket told him.

"But I'm dry and I've a cold that catches me awful in the throat."

"Them colds are dangerous," Wankin remarked in a contemplative voice, tinged with compassion. "Used to have them bad myself an' I feel one coming on. I think gin, same as they have in the trenches, is the stuff to put a cold away. But I'm on the rocks."

"If you'll let me through I'll stand on my hands."

"It's risky," said Wankin, then in a brave burst of bravado he said, "Damn it all! I'll let you go by. It's hard to stew dry so near the bar!" An hour later the young man set off towards home, and on his way he met two of his comrades-in-arms on the road.

"Going to —— pub?" he inquired.

"Going to see that no one does go near it," was the answer. "Picket duty for the rest of the day, we are."

"But Wankin—"

"What?"

The young man explained, and shortly afterwards Wankin went to headquarters under an armed escort. Three days later I saw his head sticking out through the guard-room window, and at that time I had not heard of the London road escapade.

"Here on account of drink?" I asked him.

"You fool," he roared at me. "Do you think I mistook this damned place for the canteen?"

I like Wankin and most of his mates like him. We feel that when detention, barrack confinement and English taverns will be things of yesterday, Wankin will make a good and trustworthy friend in the trenches.

Footnote 2: (return)

Confinement to Barracks.

CHAPTER VI

THE NIGHT SIDE OF SOLDIERING

There are three things in military life which make a great appeal to me; the rifle's reply to the pull of the trigger-finger, the gossip of soldiers in the crowded canteen, and the onward movement of a thousand men in full marching order with arms at the trail. And at no time is this so impressive as at night when with rifles held in a horizontal position by the side, the arm hanging easily from the shoulder, we march at attention in complete silence. Not a word is spoken by anyone save officers, little is heard but the dull crunch of boots on the gravel and the rustle of trenching-tool handles as they rub against trousers or haversack. Seen from a flank at the rear, the moving battalion, bending round the curve or straining to a hill, looks like the plesiosaur of the picture shown in the act of dragging its cumbrous length along. The silence is full of mystery, the gigantic mass, of which you form so minute a unit, is entirely voiceless, a dumb thing without a tongue, brooding, as it were, over some eternal sorrow or ancient wrong to which it cannot give expression. Marching thus at night, a battalion is doubly impressive. The silent monster is full of restrained power; resolute in its onward sweep, impervious to danger, it looks a menacing engine of destruction, steady to its goal, and certain of its mission.

A march like this fell to our lot once every fortnight. At seven in the evening, loaded with full pack, bayonet, haversack, ground-sheet, water-bottle, overcoat, and rifle, we would take our way from the town out into the open country. The night varied in temper—sometimes it rained; again, it froze and chilled the ears and finger-tips; and once we marched with the full moon over us, lighting up the whole county—the fields, the woods, the lighted villages, the snug farmhouses, and the grey roads by which the long line of khaki-clad soldiers went on their way. That night was one to be remembered.

We went off from the parade ground, a thousand strong, along the sloping road that sweeps down the hill on which our town is built. Giggling girls watched us depart—they are ever there when the soldiers are on the move—old gentlemen and ladies wished us luck as we passed, but never a head of a thousand heads turned to the left or right, never a tongue replied to the cheery greetings; we were marching at attention, with arms at the trail.

The sky stood high, splashed with stars, and the moon, pinched and anæmic, hung above like a whitish speck of smoke that had curled into a ball. Marching at the rear, I could see the long brown line curving round a corner ahead, the butt-plates of the rifles sparkling brightly, the white trenching-tool handles shaking backward and forward at every move of the men.

"March easy!"

Half an hour had passed, and we were now in the open country. At the word of command rifles were slung over the shoulders, and the battalion found voice, first in brisk conversation and exchange of witticisms, then in shouting and song. We have escaped from the tyranny of "Tipperary," none of us sing it now, but that doggerel is replaced by other music-hall abominations which are at present in the full glory of their rocket-reign. A parody of a hymn, "Toiling on," is also popular, and my Jersey mate gave it full vent on the left.

"Lager beer! lager beer!
There's a lager beer saloon across the way.
Lager bee-ee-eer!
Is there any lager beer to give away."

Although the goddess of music forgot me in the making, I found myself roaring out the chorus for all I was worth along with my Jersey friend.

"You're singing some!" he remarked, sarcastically, when the chorus came to an end. "But, no wonder! This night would make a brass monkey sing. It's grand to be alive!"

Every battalion has its marching songs. One of the favourites with us was written by a certain rifleman in "C" Company, sung to the air of "Off to Philadelphia in the Morning." It runs:

"It is said by our commanders that in trenches out by Flanders
There is work to do both trying and exciting,
And the men who man the trenches, they are England's men and French's
Where the legions of the khaki-clad are fighting.
Though bearing up so gaily they are waiting for us daily,
For the fury of the foemen makes them nervous,
But the foe may look for trouble when we charge them at the double,
We, the London Irish out on active service.

Chorus.

"With our rifles on our shoulder, sure there's no one could be bolder,
And we'll double out to France when we get warnin'
And we'll not stop long for trifles, we're the London Irish Rifles,
When we go to fight the Germans in the mornin'.

"An' the girls: oh it will grieve them when we take the train and leave them,
Oh! what tears the dears will weep when we are moving,
But it's just the old, old story, on the path that leads to Glory,
Sure we cannot halt for long to do our loving.
They'll see us with emotion all departing o'er the ocean,
And every maid a-weepin' for her lover;
'Good-bye' we'll hear them callin', while so many tears are fallin'
That they'd almost swamp the boat that takes us over.

Chorus.

"With our rifles," etc.

Our colonel sang this song at a concert, thus showing the democratic nature of the New Army, where a colonel sings the songs written in the ranks of his own battalion.

At the ten minutes' halt which succeeded the first hour's march, my Jersey friend spoke to me again. "Aren't there stars!" he said, turning his face to the heavens and gripping his rifle tightly as if for support. His wide open eyes seemed to have grown in size, and were full of an expression I had never seen in them before. "I like the stars," he remarked, "they're so wonderful. And to think that men are killing each other now, this very minute!" He clanked the butt of his gun on the ground and toyed with the handle of his sword.

Hour after hour passed by; under the light of the moon the country looked beautiful; every pond showed a brilliant face to the heavens, light mists seemed to hover over every farmhouse and cottage; light winds swept through the telegraph wires; only the woods looked dark, and there the trees seemed to be hugging the darkness around them.

On our way back a sharp shower, charged with a penetrating cold, fell. The waterproof ground-sheets were unrolled, and we tied them over our shoulders.

When the rain passed, the water falling in drops from our equipment glittered so brightly that it put the polished swords and brilliant rifle butt-plates to shame.

We stole into the town at midnight, when nearly all the inhabitants were abed. With arms at the trail, we marched along, throwing off company after company, at the streets where they billeted. The battalion dwindled down slowly; my party came to a halt, and the order "Dismiss!" was given, and we went to our billets. The Jersey youth came with me to my doorstep.

""Twas a grand march!" he remarked.

"Fine," I replied.

"I can't help looking at the stars!" he said as he moved off. "There are a lot to-night. And to think—" He hesitated, with the words trembling on his tongue, realising that he was going to repeat himself. "Anyway, there's some stars," he said in a low voice. "Good night!"

There is a peculiar glamour about all night work. The importance of night manœuvring was emphasised in the South African War, and we had ample opportunities of becoming accustomed to the darkness. On one occasion at about nine o'clock we swung out from the town with our regimental pipe-band playing to pursue some night operations. So far the men did not know what task had been assigned to them.

"We've got to do to-night's work as quiet as a growing mushroom," someone whispered to me, as we took our way off the road and lined up in the field that, stretching out in front and flanks, lost itself in formless mistiness under the loom of the encircling hedgerows. Here and there in the distance trees stand up gaunt and bare, holding out their leafless branches as if in supplication to the grey sky; a slight whisper of wind moaned along the ground and died away in the darkness.

Our officer, speaking in a low voice, gave instructions. "The enemy is advancing to attack us in great force," he explained, "and our scouts have located him some six miles away from here. We have now found that it is inadvisable to march on any farther, as our reinforcements are not very strong and have been delayed to rear. Therefore we have decided to take up our present position as a suitable ground for operations and entrenching ourselves in—ready to give battle. Everything now must be done very quickly. Our lives will, perhaps, depend at

some early date on the quickness with which we can hide ourselves from the foe. So; dig your trench as quickly as possible, as quickly, in fact, as if your life depended on it. Work must be done in absolute silence; no smoking is allowed, no lighting of matches, no talk.

"A word about orders. Commands are not to be shouted, but will be passed along from man to man, and none must speak above his breath. The passing of messages along in this manner is very difficult; words get lost, and unnecessary words are added in transit. But I hope you'll make a success of the job. Now we'll see how quickly we can get hidden!"

A "screen" of scouts (one man to every fifty yards of frontage) took up its place in line a furlong ahead. A hundred paces to rear of the "screen" the officers marked out the position of the trenches, placing soldiers as markers on the imaginary alignment. In front lay a clear field of fire, a deadly area for an enemy advancing to the attack.

We took off our equipment, hafted the entrenching tools which we always carry, and bent to our work in the wet clay. The night was close and foggy, the smell of the damp earth and the awakening spring verdure filled our nostrils. In the distance was heard the rumbling of trains, the jolting of wagons along the country road, the barking of dogs, and clear and musical through all these sounds came the song of a mavis or merle from the near hedgerows.

In the course of ten minutes we were sweating at our work, and several units of the party took off their tunics. One hapless individual got into trouble immediately. His shirt was not regulation colour, it was spotlessly white and visible at a hundred yards. A whispered order from the officer on the left faltered along the line of diggers.

"Man with white shirt, put on his tunic!"

The order was obeyed in haste, the white disappeared rapidly as the arms of the culprit slid into sleeves, and the covering tunic hid his wrong from the eyes of man.

The night wore on. Now and again a clock in the town struck out the time with a dull, weary clang that died away in the darkness. On both sides I could see stretching out, like some gigantic and knotted rope, the row of bent workers, the voiceless toilers, busy with their labours. Picks rose into the air, remained poised

a moment, then sank to tear the sluggish earth and pull it apart. The clay was thrown out to front and rear, and scattered evenly, so that the natural contour of the ground might show no signs of man's interference. And even as we worked the section commanders stole up and down behind us, urging the men to make as little sound as possible—our safety depended on our silence. But pick and shovel, like the rifle, will sing at their toil, and insistent and continuous, as if in threat, they rasped out the almost incoherent song of labour.

A man beside me suddenly laid down his shovel and battled with a cough that strove to break free and riot in the darkness. I could see his face go purple, his eyes stare out as if endeavouring to burst from their sockets. Presently he was victor, and as he bent to his shovel again I heard him whisper huskily, "'Twas a stiff go, that; it almost floored me."

Thrown from tongue to tongue as a ball is thrown in play, a message from the captain on the flank hurried along the living line. "Close in on the left," was the order, and we hastened to obey. Trenching tools were unhafted and returned to their carriers, equipments were donned again, belts tightened, and shoulder-straps buttoned. Singly, in pairs, and in files we hurried back to the point of assembly, to find a very angry captain awaiting us.

"I am very disappointed with to-night's work," he said. "I sent five messages out; two of them died on the way; a third reached its destination, but in such a muddled condition that it was impossible to recognise it as the one sent off. The order to cease work was the only one that seemed to hurry along. Out at the front, where all orders are passed along the trenches in this manner, it is of the utmost importance that every word is repeated distinctly, and that no order miscarries. Even out there, it is found very difficult to send messages along."

The captain paused for a moment; then told a story. "It is said that an officer at the front gave out the following message to the men in the trenches: 'In the wood on the right a party of German cavalry,' and when the message travelled half a mile it had changed to: 'German Navy defeated in the North Sea.' We don't know how much truth there is in the story, but I hope we will not make a mistake like that out there."

Lagging men were still stealing in as we took up our places in columns of fours. A clock struck out the hour of twelve, and the bird in the hedgerow was still singing as we marched out to the roadway, and followed our merry pipers home

to town.

CHAPTER VII

Divisional Exercise and Mimic Warfare

Divisional exercise is a great game of make-believe. All sorts of liberties are taken, the clock is put forward or back at the command of the general, a great enemy army is created in the twinkling of an eye, day is turned into night and a regular game of topsy-turvydom indulged in. On the occasion of which I write the whole division was out. The time was nine o'clock in the forenoon, and an imaginary forced march was nearly completed, and an imaginary day was at an end. We were being hurried up as reinforcements to the main army, which was in touch with the enemy ahead and an engagement was developing. Our battalion came to a halt on the roadway, closing in to the left in order to give full play to the field telephone service in process of being laid.

Our officers went out in front to seek a position for a bivouac; the doctor accompanied them to examine the place chosen, see to the water supply, the drainage, and sanitation. In addition to this, our commanders had to find the battalion a resting-ground easy to defend and of merit as a tactical position.

At ten o'clock we lay down, battalion after battalion, just as we halted: equipment on, our packs unloosened but shoved up under our heads, and our rifles by our sides, muzzles towards the enemy. One word of command would bring twenty thousand men from their beds, ready in an instant, rifles loaded, bayonets at hips, quick to the route and ready for battle. We would rise, as we slept, in full marching order, and the space of a moment would find us hurrying, fully armed, into battle, with the sleep of night still heavy in our eyes.

For miles around the soldiers lay down, each in his place and every place occupied. Hardly a word was spoken; commands were whispered, and our officers crept round explaining the work ahead. Two miles in front the enemy was assembled in great strength on a river, and by dawn, if all went well, we would enter the firing line. At present we had to lie still; no man was to move about, and sentries with fixed bayonets were stationed at front, flank, and rear, ready to give the alarm at the first sign of danger.

Behind us were the kitchen, horse-lines, and latrines. The position of these varies as the wind changes, and it is imperative that unhealthy odours are not blown

across the bivouac. The battalion lay in two parallel squares, with a gangway, blocked up with baggage and various necessaries, between. On these squares no refuse was to be thrown down; the ground had to be kept clean; papers, scraps of meat, and pieces of bread, if not eaten, had to be buried.

Even as we lay, and while the officers were explaining the work in hand, the artillery took up its stand on several wooded knolls that rose behind us. What a splendid sight, the artillery going into action! Heavy guns, an endless line of them, swept over the greensward and rattled into place. Six horses strained at each gun, which was accompanied by two ammunition wagons with six horses to each wagon. How many horses! How many guns! Out of nowhere in particular they came, and disappeared as if behind a curtain barely four hundred yards away. Thirty minutes afterwards I fancied as I looked in their direction that I could see black, ominous muzzles peering through the undergrowth. Probably I was mistaken. Anyhow, they were there, guarding us while we slept, our silent watchers!

About eleven o'clock an orderly stole in and spoke to the colonel, a hurried consultation in which all the officers took part was held, and the messenger departed. Again followed an interval of silence, only broken by the officers creeping round and giving us further information. The enemy was repulsed, they told us, and was now in retreat, but before moving off he had blown up all the bridges on the river. The artillery of our main army in front was shelling the fleeing foe, and our engineers had just set off to build three pontoon bridges, so that the now sleeping division could cross at dawn and follow the army in retreat.

Our dawn came at one o'clock in the afternoon; a whistle was blown somewhere near at hand, and the battalion sprang to life; every unit, with pack on back, cartridge pouches full, rifle at the order, was afoot and ready. Only two hours before had the engineers set out to build the bridges which the whole division, with its regiment after regiment, with its artillery, its guns, ammunition wagons and horses, its transport section, and vehicles of all descriptions, was now to cross. The landscape had changed utterly, the country was alive, and had found voice; the horse-lines were broken, and all the animals, from the colonel's charger to the humble pack horse, were on the move. The little squares, dotted brown, had taken on new shape, and were transformed into companies of moving men in khaki. We were out on the heels of the retreating foe.

Two hours' forced marching brought us to the river, a real one, with three pontoon bridges, newly built and held firm on flat-bottomed boats moored in mid-stream. We took our way across, and bent to the hill on the other side. Half-way up, in a narrow lane, a wagon got stuck in the front of our battalion, and we were forced to come to a halt for a moment. Looking back, I could see immediately behind three lines of men straining to the hill; farther back the same lines were crossing the bridges and, away in the far distance, pencilled brown on the ploughed fields, the three lines of khaki crawled along like long threads endlessly unwinding from some invisible ball. Now and again I could see the artillery coming into sight, only to disappear again over a wooded knoll or into an almost invisible hollow.

Thus the division, the apparently limitless lines of men, horses, and guns crawled on the track of the fleeing enemy. As we stood there, held in check by the wagon, and as I looked back at the thousands of soldiers in the rear, I felt indeed that I was a minute mite amongst the many. And then a second thought struck me. The whole mass of men around me was a small thing in relation to the numbers engaged in the great war. Even I, Rifleman Something or Another, No. So-and-so, bulked larger in the division as one of its units than the division did in the war as a unit of the Allied Forces.

Even more interesting than divisional exercises is the mimic warfare that is heralded by a notice in battalion orders such as the following: "The battalion will take part in brigade exercise to-day. Ten rounds of blank ammunition and haversack rations will be carried."

At eight o'clock in the morning whistles were blown at the bottom of the street in which my company is billeted, and the soldiers, rubbing the sleep from their eyes or munching the last mouthful of a hasty breakfast, came trooping out from the snug middle-class houses in which they are quartered. The morning was bitterly cold, and the falling rain splashed soberly on the pavement, every drop coming slowly to ground as if selecting a spot to rest on. The colour-sergeant, standing at the end of the street, whistle in hand, was in a nasty temper.

"Hurry up, you heavy-footed beggars," he yelled to the men. "The parade takes place to-day, not to-morrow! And you, what's wrong with your understandings?" he called to a man who came along wearing carpet slippers.

"My boots are bad, colour," is the answer. "I cannot march in them."

"And are you goin' to march in them drorin'-room abominations?" roared the sergeant. "Get your boots mended and grease out of it."

At roll-call three of the company were found to be absent; two were sick, and one who had been found guilty of using bad language to a N.C.O. was confined to the guard-room. Those who answered their names were served out with packets of blank ammunition, one packet per man, and each containing ten cartridges wrapped in brown paper and tied with a blue string.

The captain read the following instructions: "The enemy is reported to be in strong force on X hill, and Battalions A and B are ordered to dislodge him from that position. A will form first line of attack, B will send up reserves and supports as needed." The rifles were examined by our young lieutenant, after which inspection the company joined the battalion, and presently a thousand men with rifles on shoulder, bayonets and haversacks on left hip, and ammunition in pouches, were marching through the rain along the muddy streets, out into the open country.

The day promised to be an interesting one from my point of view; I had never taken part in a mimic battle before, and the day's work was to be in many ways similar to operations on the real field of battle. "Only nobody gets killed, of course," my mate told me. He had taken part in this kind of work before, and was wise in his superior knowledge.

"One-half of the brigade, two thousand men, is our enemy," he explained; "and we're going to fight them. The battalion that's helping us is on in front, and it will soon be fighting. When it's hard pressed we'll go up to help, for we're the supports. It won't be long till we hear the firing."

An hour's brisk march was followed by a halt, when we were ordered to draw well into the left of the road to let the company guns go by. Dark-nosed and cold, they wheeled past, the horses sweating as they strained at the carriage shafts; the drivers, by deft handling, pulling the steeds clear of the ruts; out in front they swung, and the battalion closed up and resumed its march behind.

The rain ceased and a cold sun shot feeble rays over the sullen December landscape. Again a halt was called; the brigadier-general, followed by two officers and several orderlies, galloped up, and a hurried consultation with our colonel took place. In a moment the battalion moved ahead only to come to a

dead stop again after ten minutes' slow marching, and find a company detailed off to guard the rear. The other companies, led by their officers, turned off the road and moved in sections across the newly furrowed and soggy fields. A level sweep of December England broken only by leafless hedgerows and wire fencing stretched out in front towards a wooded hillock, that stood up black against the sky-line two miles away. The enemy held this wood; we could hear his guns booming and now considered ourselves under shell fire. Each squad of sixteen men marched in the rear or on the flank of its neighbour; this method of progression minimises the dangers of bursting shrapnel, for a shell falling in the midst of one body of men and causing considerable damage will do no harm to the adjacent party.

Somewhere near us our gunners were answering the enemy's fire; but so well hidden were the guns that I could not locate them. We still crept slowly forward; section after section crawled across the black, ploughed fields, now rising up like giant caterpillars to the crest of a mound, and again dropping out of sight in the hollow land like corks on a comber. On our heels the ambulance corps followed with its stretchers, and in front the enemy was firing vigorously; over the belt of trees that lined the summit of the hillock little wisps of smoke could be seen rising and fading in the air.

Suddenly we came into line with our guns hidden in a deep narrow cart-track, their dark muzzles trained on the enemy, and the gunners, knee-deep in the mire of the lane, sweating at their work. "We're under covering fire now," our young lieutenant explained, as we trudged forward, lifting enormous masses of clay on our boots at every step. "One battalion is engaged already; hear the shots."

The rifles were barking on the left front; in a moment the reports from that quarter died away, and the right found voice. The men of the first line were in the trenches dug by us a fortnight earlier, and there they would remain, we knew, until their supports came to their aid. Already we passed several of them, who were detailed off on the anticipated casualty list in the morning. These wore white labels in their buttonholes, telling of the nature of their wounds. One label bore the words: "Shot in right shoulder; wound not dangerous." Another read: "Leg blown off," and a third ran: "Flesh wounds in arm and leg." These men would be taken into the care of the ambulance party when it arrived.

When within fifteen hundred yards of the enemy, the command for extended order advance was given, and the section spread out in one long line, fronting the

knoll, with five pace intervals between the men. We were now under rifle-fire, and all further movements forward were made in short sharp rushes, punctuated by halts, during which we lay flat on the ground, our bodies deep in the soft earth, and the rain, which again commenced to fall, wetting us to the skin.

Six hundred yards from the enemy's front we tumbled into the trenches already in possession of Battalion B, and I found myself ankle-deep in mire, beside a unit of another regiment who was enjoying a cigarette and blowing rings of smoke into the air. Although no enemy was visible we got the order to fire, and I discharged three rounds in rapid succession.

"Don't fire, you fool!" said the man who was blowing the smoke rings. "Them blanks dirty 'orrible, and when you've clean't the clay from your clothes t'night you'll not want to muck about with your rifle. There's a price for copper, and I always sell my cartridge cases. The first time I came out I fired, but never since."

Several rushes forward followed, and the penultimate hundred yards were covered with fixed bayonets. In this manner we were prepared for any surprise. The enemy replied fitfully to our fire, and we could now see several khaki-clad figures with white hat-bands—the differential symbols—moving backwards and forwards amidst the trees. Presently they disappeared as we worked nearer to their lines. We were now rushing forward, lying down to fire, rising and running only to drop down again and discharge another round. Within fifty yards of the coppice the order to charge was given. A yell, almost fiendish in its intensity, issued from a thousand throats; anticipation of the real work which is to be done some day, lent spirit to our rush. In an instant we were in the wood, smashing the branches with our bayonets, thrusting at imaginary enemies, roaring at the top of our voices, and capping a novel fight with a triumphant final.

And our enemies? Having finished their day's work they were now fifteen minutes' march ahead of us on the way back to their rest and rations.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GENERAL INSPECTION AND THE EVERLASTING WAITING

One of our greatest trials is the general inspection, which takes place every month, and once Lord Kitchener inspected the battalion, in company with the division quartered in our town. But that was before I joined. It involves much labour in the way of preparation. On one occasion, midnight the night before, a Friday, found us still busy with our work. My cot-mate was in difficulties with his rifle—the cloth of the pull-through stuck in the barrel, and he could not move it, although he broke a bamboo cane and bent a poker in the attempt. "It's a case for the armoury," he remarked gloomily. "What a nuisance that ramrods are done away with! We've been at it since eight o'clock, and getting along A1. Now that beastly pull-through!"

What an evening's work! On the day following the brigadier-general was to inspect us, and we had to appear on parade spick and span, with rifles spotless, and every article of our equipment in good order. Packs were washed and hung over the rim of the table by our billet fire, web-belts were cleaned, and every speck of mud and grease removed. Our packs, when dry, were loaded with overcoat, mess-tin, housewife, razor, towel, etc., and packed tightly and squarely, showing no crease at side or bulge at corner. Ground-sheets were neatly rolled and fastened on top of pack, no overlapping was allowed; rifles were oiled and polished from muzzle to butt-plate, and swords rubbed with emery paper until not a single speck of rust remained.

Saturday morning found us trim and tidy on the parade ground. An outsider would hardly dream that we were the men who had ploughed through the muddy countryside and sunk to the knees in the furrowed fields daily since the wet week began. Where was the clay that had caked brown on our khaki, the rust that spoilt the lustre of our swords, and the fringes that the wire fences tore on our tunics? All gone; soap and water, a brush, needle and thread, and a scrap of emery paper had worked the miracle. We stood easy awaiting the arrival of the general; platoons sized from flanks to centres (namely, the tallest men stood at the flanks, and the khaki lines dwindled in stature towards the small men in the middle), and company officers at front and rear. The officers saw that everything was correct, that no lace-ends showed from under the puttees, that no lace-eye

lay idle, and that laces were not crossed over the boots. Each man had shaved and got his hair cut, his hat set straight on his head, and the regimental badge in proper position over the idle chin-strap. Pocket-flaps and tunics were buttoned, water-bottles and haversacks hung straight, the tops of the latter in line with the bayonet rings, and entrenching tool handles were scrubbed clean—my mate and I had spent much soap on ours the night before.

One of our officers gave us instructions as to how we had to behave during the inspection, more especially when we were under the direct gaze of the general.

"Not a movement," he told us. "Every eyelash must be still. If the general asks me your name and I make a mistake and say you are Smith instead of Brown, your real name, you're not to say a word. You are Brown for the time being. If he speaks to you, you're to answer: 'Sir,' and 'Sir' only to every question. If you're asked what was your age last birthday, 'Sir' is to be the only answer. Is that clear to every man?"

It was, indeed, clear, surprisingly clear; but we wondered at the command, which was new to us. To answer in this fashion appeared strange to us; we thought (the right to think is not denied to a soldier) it a funny method of satisfying a general's curiosity.

He came, a tall, well-set man, with stern eyebrows and a heavy moustache, curled upwards after the manner of an Emperor whom we heartily dislike, attended by a slim brigade major, who wore a rather large eyeglass, and made several entries in his notebook, as he followed on the heels of the superior inspecting the battalion.

We stood, every unit of us, sphinx-like, immovable, facing our front and resigned to our position. To an onlooker it might seem as if we were frozen there —our fingers glued on to our rifles and our feet firm to the earth at an angle of forty-five degrees. I stood near the rear, and could see the still platoons in front, not a hat moved, not a boot shifted. The general broke the spell when he was passing me.

"Another button. There were forty-seven the last time," he said, and the man with the eyeglass made an entry in the notebook. Through an oversight, I had helped to lower the prestige of the battalion: a pocket flap of my tunic was unbuttoned.

Kit inspection was a business apart; the general picked out several soldiers haphazard and ordered their packs to be opened for an examination of the contents—spoons, shirts, socks, and the various necessaries which dismounted men in full marching order must carry on their persons were inspected carefully. A full pack is judged best by its contents, and nearly all packs passed muster. One man was unlucky: his mate was chosen for kit inspection, but this hapless individual came out minus a toothbrush and comb, and the friend in need took his place in the freshly-formed ranks. Here, the helper found that his own kit was inefficient, he had forgotten to put in a pair of socks. That afternoon he had to do two hours' extra drill.

Perhaps an even greater trial than Divisional Inspection was that of waiting orders when we were the victims of camp rumours. But this was as nothing to the false alarms. There is some doggerel known to the men which runs:

"We're off to the front," said the colonel,
    as he placed us in the train,
"And we went at dawn from the station,
    and at night came back again."

For months we had drilled and drilled, all earnest in our labours and filled with enthusiasm for our new profession, and daily we await the order to leave for foreign parts. Where are we going to when we leave England? France, Egypt, or India? Rumour had it yesterday that we would go to Egypt; to-day my mate, the blue-eyed Jersey youth, heard from a friend, who heard it from a colour-sergeant, that we are going out to India, where we will be kept as guardians of the King's Empire for a matter of four years. Ever since I joined the Army it has been the same: reports name a new destination for my battalion daily.

Afterwards we had to go and help the remarkable Russians who passed through England on the way to France; but when the Russians faded from the ken of vision and the Press Bureau denied their very existence, it was immediately reported that we had been drilled into shape in order to demolish De Wet and all his South African rebels. De Wet was captured and is now under military control, and still we waited orders to move from the comfortable billets and crowded streets of our town. Dry eyes would see us depart, mocking children would bid us sarcastic farewells, the kindly landladies and their fair daughters would laugh when we bade adieu and moved away to some destination unknown. We had already taken our farewell three times, and on each occasion

we have come back again to our billets before the day that saw our departure came to an end.

The heart of every man thrilled with excitement when the announcement was made for the first time, one weary evening when we had just completed a ten-hour divisional field exercise. Our officer read it from a typewritten sheet, and the announcement was as follows:

> "All men in the battalion must stand under arms until further orders. No soldier is to leave his billet; boots are not to be taken off, and best marching pairs are to be worn. Every unit of the company who lacks any part of the necessary equipment must immediately report at quartermaster's stores, where all wants will be supplied. Identity discs to be worn, swords must be cleaned and polished, and twenty-four hours' haversack rations are to be carried. The battalion has to entrain for some unknown destination when called upon."

The news spread through the town: the division was going to move! On the morrow we would be sailing for France, in a fortnight we would be in Berlin! Our landladies met us at the doors as we came in, looks of entreaty on their faces and tears in their eyes. The hour had come; we were going to leave them. And the landladies' daughters? One, a buxom wench of eighteen, kissed the Jersey youth in sight of the whole battalion, but nobody took any notice of the unusual incident. All were busy with their own thoughts, and eager for the new adventures before them.

I did not go to sleep that night; booted and dressed I lay on the hearthrug in front of the fire, and waited for the call. About four o'clock in the morning a whistle was blown outside on the street; I got to my feet, put on my equipment, fastened the buckles of my haversack, bade adieu to my friends of the billet who had risen from bed to see me off, and joined my company.

Five or six regiments were already on the move; transport wagons, driven by khaki-clad drivers with rifles slung over their shoulders, lumbered through the dimly-lighted thoroughfares; ammunition vans stood at every street corner; guns rattled along drawn by straining horses, the sweat steaming from the animals' flanks and withers; an ambulance party sped through the greyness of the foggy morning, accompanied by a Red Cross lorry piled high with chests and stretcher poles, and soldiers in files and fours, in companies and columns, were in

movement everywhere—their legions seemed countless and endless.

Ammunition was given out from the powder magazine; each man was handed 150 rounds of ball cartridge—a goodly weight to carry on a long day's march! With our ammunition we were now properly equipped and ready for any emergency. Each individual carried on his person in addition to rifle, bayonet (sword is the military name for the latter weapon) and ball cartridge, a blanket and waterproof sheet, an overcoat, a water-bottle, an entrenching tool and handle, as well as several other lighter necessaries, such as shirts, socks, a knife, fork, and spoon, razor, soap, and towel.

At eight o'clock, when the wintry dawn was breaking and the fog lifting, we entered the station. Hundreds of the inhabitants of the town came to see us off and cheer us on the long way to Tipperary: and Tipperary meant Berlin. One of the inhabitants, a kindly woman who is loved by the soldiers of my company, to whom she is very good, came to the station as we were leaving, and presented a pair of mittens to each of fifty men.

The train started on its journey, puffed a feeble cloud of smoke into the air, and suddenly came to a dead stop. Heads appeared at the windows, and voices inquired if the engine-driver had taken the wrong turning on the road to Berlin. The train shunted back into the station, and we all went back to our billets again, but not before our officers informed us that we had done the work of entraining very smartly, and when the real call did come we would lose no time on the journey to an unknown destination.

Later we had two further lessons in entraining, and we came to fear that when the summons did come dry eyes would watch us depart and sarcastic jibes make heavy our leave-taking. Indeed, some of the inhabitants of our town hinted that we should never leave the place until the local undertakers make a profit on our exit. So much for their gentle sarcasm! But well they knew that one day in the near future it would suddenly occur to our commanders to take us with them in the train to Berlin.

CHAPTER IX

Ready to Go—The Battalion Moves

Rumour had been busy for days; the whole division was about to move, so every one stated, except our officers, and official information was not forthcoming.

"You are going between midnight and five o'clock to-morrow morning," announced my landlord positively. He is a coal-merchant by trade.

"How do you know?" I inquired.

"Because I can't get any coal to-morrow—line's bunged up for the troops."

"No, he'll be going on Tuesday," said his wife, whose kindliness and splendid cooking I should miss greatly.

"Is that so?" I asked, feigning an interest which I did not feel. A sore toe eclipsed all other matters for the time being.

"The ration men have served out enough for two days, and it doesn't stand to reason that they're going to waste anything," the little lady continued with sarcastic emphasis on the last two words.

Parades went on as usual; the usual rations were doled out to billets and the usual grumbling went on in the ranks. We were weary of false alarms, waiting orders, and eternal parades. Some of us had been training for fully six months, others had joined the Army when war broke out, and we were still secure in England. "Why have we joined?" the men asked. "Is it to line the streets when the troops come home? We are a balmy regiment."

One evening, Thursday to be exact, the battalion orders were interesting. One item ran as follows: "All fees due to billets will be paid up to Friday night. If any other billet expenses are incurred by battalion the same will be paid on application to the War Office." Friday evening found more explicit expression of our future movements in orders. The following items appeared: "Mess tin covers will be issued to-morrow. No white handkerchiefs are to be taken by the battalion overseas. All deficiencies in kit must be reported to-morrow morning. Bayonets will be sharpened. Any soldiers who have not yet received a copy of

the New Testament can have same on application at the Town Hall 6 p.m. on Saturday.

"Where are we going?" we asked one another. Some answered saying that we were to help in the sack of Constantinople, others suggested Egypt, but all felt that we were going off to France at no very distant date. Was not this feeling plausible when we took into account a boot parade of the day before and how we were ordered to wear two pairs of socks when trying on the boots? Two pairs of socks suggested the trenches and cold, certainly not the sun-dried gutters of Constantinople, or the burning sands of Egypt.

Saturday saw an excited battalion mustered in front of the quartermaster's stores drawing out boots, mess-tin covers, blankets, ground-sheets, entrenching tools, identity discs, new belts, water-bottles, pack-straps, trousers, tunics and the hundred and one other things required by the soldier on active service. In addition to the usual requisites, every unit received a cholera belt (they are more particular over this article of attire than over any other), two pairs of pants, a singlet and a cake of soap. The latter looked tallowy and nobody took it further than the billet; the pants were woollen, very warm and made in Canada. This reminds me of an amusing episode which took place last general inspection. While standing easy, before the brigadier-general made his appearance, the men compared razors and found that eighty per cent. of them had been made in Germany. But these were bought by the soldiers before war started. At least all affirmed that this was so.

Saturday was a long parade; some soldiers were drawing necessaries at midnight, and no ten-o'-clock-to-billets order was enforced that night. I drew my boots at eleven o'clock, and then the streets were crowded with our men, and merry and sad with sightseers and friends. Wives and sweethearts had come to take a last farewell of husbands and lovers, and were making the most of the last lingering moments in good wishes and tears.

Sunday.—No church parade; and all men stood under arms in the streets. The officers had taken off all the trumpery of war, the swords which they never learned to use, the sparkling hat-badges and the dainty wrist-watches. They now appeared in web equipment, similar to that worn by the men, and carried rifles. Dressed thus an officer will not make a special target for the sniper and is not conspicuous by his uniform.

Our captain made the announcement in a quiet voice, the announcement which had been waited for so long. "To-morrow we proceed overseas," he said. "On behalf of the colonel I've to thank you all for the way in which you have done your work up to the present, and I am certain that when we get out yonder," he raised his arm and his gesture might indicate any point of the compass, "you'll all do your work with the spirit and determination which you have shown up till now."

This was the announcement. The men received it gleefully and a hubbub of conversation broke out in the ranks. "We're going at last"; "I thought when I joined that I'd be off next morning"; "What price a free journey to Berlin!"; "It'll be some great sport!" Such were the remarks that were bandied to and fro. But some were silent, feeling, no doubt, that the serious work ahead was not the subject for idle chatter.

A little leaflet entitled "Rules for the Preservation of Health on Field Service," was given to each man, and I am at liberty to give a few quotations.

"Remember that disease attacks you from outside; it is your duty to keep it outside."

"Don't drink unboiled water if you can get boiled water."

"Never start on a march with an empty stomach."

"Remember that a dirty foot is an unsound foot. See that feet are washed if no other part of the body is. Socks should be taken off at the end of the march, be flattened out and well shaken. Put on a clean pair if possible, if not, put the left sock on the right foot, and vice versa."

"Remember, on arrival in camp, *food before fatigues*."

"Always rig up some kind of shelter at night for the head, if for no other part of the body."

At twelve noon on Monday the whistles blew at the bottom of the street and we all turned out in full marching order with packs, haversacks, rifles and swords. I heard the transport wagons clattering on the pavement, the merry laughter of the drivers, the noise of men falling into place and above all the voice of the sergeant-major issuing orders.

Yet this, like other days, was a "wash-out." All day we waited for orders to move, twice we paraded in full marching kit, eager for the command to entrain; but it was not forthcoming. Another day had to be spent in billets under strict instructions not to move from our quarters. The orders were posted up as usual at all street corners, a plan which is adopted for the convenience of units billeted a great distance from headquarters, and the typewritten orders had an air of momentous finality:

The battalion moves to-morrow.

Parade will be at 4.30 a.m.

Entraining and detraining and embarking must be done in absolute silence.

I rose from bed at three and set about to prepare breakfast, while my cot-mate busied himself with our equipment, putting everything into shape, buckling belts and flaps, burnishing bayonets and oiling the bolts of the rifles. Twenty-four hours' rations were stored away in our haversacks all ready, the good landlady had been at work stewing and frying meat and cooking dainty scones up to twelve o'clock the night before.

When breakfast, a good hearty meal of tea, buttered toast, fried bacon and tomatoes, was over, we went out to our places. The morning was chilly, a cold wind splashed with hail swept along the streets and whirled round the corners, causing the tails of our great coats to beat sharply against our legs. It was still very dark, only a few street-lamps were lighted and these glimmered doubtfully as if ashamed of being noticed. Men in full marching order stamped out from every billet, took their way to the main street, where the transport wagons, wheels against kerbstones, horses in shafts, and drivers at reins, stood in mathematical order, and from there on to the parade ground where sergeants, with book in one hand and electric torch in the other, were preparing to call the roll.

Ammunition was served out, one hundred and twenty rounds to each man, and this was placed in the cartridge pouches, rifles were inspected and identity discs examined by torch-light. This finished, we were allowed to stand easy and use ground-sheets for a shelter from the biting hail. Our blankets were already gone. The transport wagons had disappeared and with them our field-bags. I suppose they will await us in —— but I anticipate, and at present all we know is that our

regiment is bound for some destination unknown where, when we arrive, we shall have to wear two pairs of socks at our work.

We stood by till eight o'clock. The day had cleared and the sun was shining brightly when we marched off to the station, through streets lined with people, thoughtful men who seemed to be very sad, women who wept and children who chattered and sang "Tipperary."

Three trains stood in the sidings by the station. Places were allotted to the men, eight occupied each compartment, non-commissioned officers occupied a special carriage, the officers travelled first-class.

Soon we were hurrying through England to a place unknown. Most of my comrades were merry and a little sentimental; they sang music-hall songs that told of home. There were seven with me in my compartment, the Jersey youth, whom I saw kissing a weeping sweetheart in the cold hours of the early day; Mervin, my cot-mate, who always cleaned the rifles while I cooked breakfast in the morning; Bill, the Cockney youth who never is so happy as when getting the best of an argument in the coffee-shop of which I have already spoken, and the Oxford man. The other three were almost complete strangers to me, they have just been drafted into our regiment; one was very fat and reminded me of a Dickens character in *Pickwick Papers*; another who soon fell asleep, his head warm in a Balaclava helmet, was a tall, strapping youth with large muscular hands, which betoken manual labour, and the last was a slightly-built boy with a budding moustache which seemed to have been waxed at one end. We noticed this, and the fat soldier said that the wax had melted from the few lonely hairs on the other side of the lip.

Stations whirled by, Mervin leant out of the window to read their names, but was never successful. Cigarettes were smoked, the carriage was full of tobacco fumes and the floor littered with "fag-ends." Rifles were lying on the racks, four in each side, and caps, papers and equipment piled on top of them. The Jersey youth made a remark:

"Where are we going to?" he asked. "France I suppose, isn't it?"

"Maybe Egypt," someone answered.

"With two pairs of socks to one boot!" Mervin muttered in sarcastic tones; and almost immediately fell asleep. He had been a great traveller and knows many

countries. His age is about forty, but he owns to twenty-seven, and in his youth he was educated for the church. "But the job was not one for me," he says, "and I threw it up." He looks forward to the life of a soldier in the field.

Our train journey neared the end. Bill was at the window and said that we were in sight of our destination. All were up and fumbling with their equipment; and one, the University man, hoped that the night would be a good one for sailing to France.

If we are bound for France we shall be there to-morrow.

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