

Bedridden and the Winter Offensive eBook

Bedridden and the Winter Offensive by W. W. Jacobs

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BEDRIDDEN

July 12, 1915.—Disquieting rumours to the effect that epidemic of Billetitis hitherto confined to the north of King's Road shows signs of spreading.

July 14.—Report that two Inns of Court men have been seen peeping over my gate.

July 16.—Informed that soldier of agreeable appearance and charming manners requests interview with me. Took a dose of Phospherine and went. Found composite photograph of French, Joffre, and Hindenburg waiting for me in the hall. Smiled (he did, I mean) and gave me the mutilated form of salute reserved for civilians. Introduced himself as Quartermaster-Sergeant Beddem, and stated that the Inns of Court O.T.C. was going under canvas next week. After which he gulped. Meantime could I take in a billet. Questioned as to what day the corps was going into camp said that he believed it was Monday, but was not quite sure—might possibly be Tuesday. Swallowed again and coughed a little. Accepted billet and felt completely re-warded by smile. Q.M.S. bade me good-bye, and then with the air of a man suddenly remembering something, asked me whether I could take two. Excused myself and interviewed my C.O. behind the dining-room door. Came back and accepted. Q.M.S. so overjoyed (apparently) that he fell over the scraper. Seemed to jog his memory. He paused, and gazing in absent fashion at the topmost rose on the climber in the porch, asked whether I could take three! Added hopefully that the third was only a boy. Excused myself. Heated debate with C.O. Subject: sheets. Returned with me to explain to the Q.M.S. He smiled. C.O. accepted at once, and, returning smile, expressed regret at size and position of bedrooms available. Q.M.S. went off swinging cane jauntily.

July 17.—Billets arrived. Spoke to them about next Monday and canvas. They seemed surprised. Strange how the military authorities decline to take men into their confidence merely because they are privates. Let them upstairs. They went (for first and last time) on tiptoe.

July 18.—Saw Q.M.S. Beddem in the town. Took shelter in the King's Arms.

Jug. 3.—Went to Cornwall.

Aug. 31.—Returned. Billets received me very hospitably.

Sept. 4.—Private Budd, electrical engineer, dissatisfied with appearance of bell-push in dining-room, altered it.

Sept. 5.—Bells out of order.

Sept. 6.—Private Merited, also an electrical engineer, helped Private Budd to repair bells.



Sept. 7.—Private Budd helped Private Merited to repair bells.

Sept. 8.—Privates Budd and Merited helped each other to repair bells.

Sept. 9.—Sent to local tradesman to put my bells in order.

Sept. 15.—Told that Q.M.S. Beddem wished to see me. Saw C.O. first. She thought he had possibly come to take some of the billets away. Q.M.S. met my approach with a smile that re-minded me vaguely of picture-postcards I had seen. Awfully sorry to trouble me, but Private Montease, just back from three weeks' holiday with bronchitis, was sleeping in the wood-shed on three planks and a tin-tack. Beamed at me and waited. Went and bought another bed-stead.



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Sept. 16.—Private Montease and a cough entered into residence.

Sept. 17, 11.45 p.m.—Maid came to bedroom-door with some cough lozenges which she asked me to take to the new billet. Took them. Private Montease thanked me, but said he didn't mind coughing. Said it was an heirloom; Montease cough, known in highest circles all over Scotland since time of Young Pretender.

Sept. 20.—Private Montease installed in easy-chair in dining-room with touch of bronchitis, looking up trains to Bournemouth.

Sept. 21.—Private Montease in bed all day. Cook anxious "to do her bit" rubbed his chest with home-made embrocation. Believe it is same stuff she rubs chests in hall with. Smells the same anyway.

Sept. 24.—Private Montease, complaining of slight rawness of chest, but otherwise well, returned to duty.

Oct. 5.—Cough worse again. Private Montease thinks that with care it may turn to bronchitis. Borrowed an A.B.C.

Oct. 6.—Private Montease relates uncanny experience. Woke up with feeling of suffocation to find an enormous black-currant and glycerine jujube wedged in his gullet. Never owned such a thing in his life. Seems to be unaware that he always sleeps with his mouth open.

Nov. 14.—Private Bowser, youngest and tallest of my billets, gazetted.

Nov. 15, 10.35 a.m.—Private Bowser in tip-top spirits said good-bye to us all.

10.45.—Told that Q.M.S. Beddem desired to see me. Capitulated. New billet, Private Early, armed to the teeth, turned up in the evening. Said that he was a Yorkshireman. Said that Yorkshire was the finest county in England, and Yorkshiremen the finest men in the world. Stood toying with his bayonet and waiting for contradiction.

Jan. 5, 1916.—Standing in the garden just after lunch was witness to startling phenomenon. Q.M.S. Beddem came towards front-gate with a smile so expansive that gate after first trembling violently on its hinges swung open of its own accord. Q.M.S., with smile (sad), said he was in trouble. Very old member of the Inns of Court, Private Keen, had re-joined, and he wanted a good billet for him. Would cheerfully give up his own bed, but it wasn't long enough. Not to be outdone in hospitality by my own gate accepted Private Keen. Q.M.S. digging hole in my path with toe of right boot, and for first and only time manifesting signs of nervousness, murmured that two life-long friends of Private Keen's had rejoined with him. Known as the Three Inseparables. Where they were to sleep, unless I——. Fled to house, and locking myself in top-attic watched Q.M.S. from window. He departed with bent head and swagger-cane reversed.



Jan 6.—Private Keen arrived. Turned out to be son of an old Chief of mine. Resolved not to visit the sins of the father on the head of a child six feet two high and broad in proportion.

Feb. 6.—Private Keen came home with a temperature.



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Feb. 7.—M.O. diagnosed influenza. Was afraid it would spread.

Feb. 8.—Warned the other four billets. They seemed amused. Pointed out that influenza had no terrors for men in No. 2 Company, who were doomed to weekly night-ops. under Major Carryon.

Feb. 9.—House strangely and pleasantly quiet. Went to see how Private Keen was progressing, and found the other four billets sitting in a row on his bed practising deep-breathing exercises.

Feb. 16.—Billets on night-ops. until late hour. Spoke in highest terms of Major Carryon's marching powers—also in other terms.

March 3.—Waited up until midnight for Private Merited, who had gone to Slough on his motor-bike.

March 4, 1.5 a.m.—Awakened by series of explosions from over-worked, or badly-worked, motor-bike. Put head out of window and threw key to Private Merited. He seemed excited. Said he had been chased all the way from Chesham by a pink rat with yellow spots. Advised him to go to bed. Set him an example.

1.10. a.m.—Heard somebody in the pantry. 2.10. a.m.—Heard Private Merited going upstairs to bed.

2.16 a.m.—Heard Private Merited still going upstairs to bed.

2.20-3.15. a.m.—Heard Private Merited getting to bed.

April 3, 12.30 a.m.—Town-hooter announced Zeppelins and excited soldier called up my billets from their beds to go and frighten them off. Pleasant to see superiority of billets over the hooter: that only emitted three blasts.

12.50 a.m.—Billets returned with exception of Private Merited, who was retained for sake of his motor-bike.

9 a.m.—On way to bath-room ran into Private Merited, who, looking very glum and sleepy, inquired whether I had a copy of the Exchange and Mart in the house.

10 p.m.—Overheard billets discussing whether it was worth while removing boots before going to bed until the Zeppelin scare was over. Joined in discussion.

May 2.—Rumours that the Inns of Court were going under canvas. Discredited them.

May 5.—Rumours grow stronger.



May 6.—Billets depressed. Begin to think perhaps there is something in rumours after all.

May 9.—All doubts removed. Tents begin to spring up with the suddenness of mushrooms in fields below Berkhamsted Place.

May 18, *liberation day*.—Bade a facetious good-bye to my billets; response lacking in bonhomie.

May 19.—House delightfully quiet. Presented caller of unkempt appearance at back-door with remains of pair of military boots, three empty shaving-stick tins, and a couple of partially bald tooth-brushes.

May 21.—In afternoon went round and looked at camp. Came home smiling, and went to favourite seat in garden to smoke. Discovered Private Early lying on it fast asleep. Went to study. Private Merited at table writing long and well-reasoned letter to his tailor. As he said he could never write properly with anybody else in the room, left him and went to bath-room. Door locked. Peevish but familiar voice, with a Scotch accent, asked me what I wanted; also complained of temperature of water.



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May 22.—After comparing notes with neighbours, feel deeply grateful to Q.M.S. Beddem for sending me the best six men in the corps.

July 15.—Feel glad to have been associated, however remotely and humbly, with a corps, the names of whose members appear on the Roll of Honour of every British regiment.

THE WINTER OFFENSIVE

N.B.—Having regard to the eccentricities of the Law of Libel it must be distinctly understood that the following does not refer to the distinguished officer, Lieut. Troup Horne, of the Inns of Court. Anybody trying to cause mischief between a civilian of eight stone and a soldier of seventeen by a statement to the contrary will hear from my solicitors.

Aug. 29, 1916.—We returned from the sea to find our house still our own, and the military still in undisputed possession of the remains of the grass in the fields of Berkhamsted Place. As in previous years, it was impossible to go in search of wild-flowers without stumbling over sleeping members of the Inns of Court; but war is war, and we grumble as little as possible.

Sept. 28.—Unpleasant rumours to the effect that several members of the Inns of Court had attributed cases of curvature of the spine to sleeping on ground that had been insufficiently rolled. Also that they had been heard to smack their lips and speak darkly of featherbeds. Respected neighbour of gloomy disposition said that if Pharaoh were still alive he could suggest an eleventh plague to him beside which frogs and flies were an afternoon's diversion.

Oct. 3.—Householders of Berkhamsted busy mending bedsteads broken by last year's billets, and buying patent taps for their beer-barrels.

Oct. 15.—Informed that a representative of the Army wished to see me. Instead of my old friend Q.M.S. Beddem, who generally returns to life at this time of year, found that it was an officer of magnificent presence and two pips. A fine figure of a man, with a great resemblance to the late lamented Bismarck, minus the moustache and the three hairs on the top of the head. Asked him to be seated. He selected a chair that was all arms and legs and no hips to speak of and crushed himself into it. After which he unfastened his belt and "swelled visibly afore my werry eyes." Said that his name was True Born and asked if it made any difference to me whether I had one officer or half-a-dozen men billeted on me. Said that he was the officer, and that as the rank-and-file were not allowed to pollute the same atmosphere, thought I should score. After a mental review of all I could remember of the Weights and Measures Table, accepted him. He bade a lingering farewell to the chair, and departed.



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Oct. 16.—Saw Q.M.S. Beddem on the other side of the road and gave him an absolutely new thrill by crossing to meet him. Asked diffidently—as diffidently as he could, that is—how many men my house would hold. Replied eight—or ten at a pinch. He gave me a surprised and beaming smile and whipped out a huge note-book. Informed him with as much regret as I could put into a voice not always under perfect control, that I had already got an officer. Q.M.S., favouring me with a look very appropriate to the Devil's Own, turned on his heel and set off in pursuit of a lady-billetee, pulling up short on the threshold of the baby-linen shop in which she took refuge. Left him on guard with a Casablanca-like look on his face.

Nov. 1.—Lieut. True Born took up his quarters with us. Gave him my dressing-room for bedchamber. Was awakened several times in the night by what I took to be Zeppelins, flying low.

Nov. 2.—Lieut. True Born offered to bet me five pounds to twenty that the war would be over by 1922.

Nov. 3.—Offered to teach me auction-bridge.

Nov. 4.—Asked me whether I could play “shove ha'penny.”

Nov. 10.—Lieut. True Born gave one of the regimental horses a riding-lesson. Came home grumpy and went to bed early.

Nov. 13.—Another riding-lesson. Over-heard him asking one of the maids whether there was such a thing as a water-bed in the house.

Nov. 17.—Complained bitterly of horse-copers. Said that his poor mount was discovered to be suffering from saddle-soreness, broken wind, splints, weak hocks, and two bones of the neck out of place.

Dec. 9.—7 p.m.—One of last year's billets, Private Merited, on leave from a gunnery course, called to see me and to find out whether his old bed had improved since last year. Left his motor-bike in the garage, and the smell in front of the dining-room window.

8 to 12 p.m.—Sat with Private Merited, listening to Lieut. True Born on the mistakes of Wellington.

12.5 a.m.—Rose to go to bed. Was about to turn out gas in hall when I discovered the lieutenant standing with his face to the wall playing pat-a-cake with it. Gave him three-parts of a tumbler of brandy. Said he felt better and went upstairs. Arrived in his bedroom, he looked about him carefully, and then, with a superb sweep of his left arm, swept the best Chippendale looking-glass in the family off the dressing table and dived



face down-wards to the floor, missing death and the corner of the chest of drawers by an inch.

12:15 a.m.—Rolled him on to his back and got his feet on the bed. They fell off again as soon as they were cleaner than the quilt. The lieutenant, startled by the crash, opened his eyes and climbed into bed unaided.

12.20 a.m.—Sent Private Merited for the M.O., Captain Geranium.

12.25 a.m.—Mixed a dose of brandy and castor-oil in a tumbler. Am told it slips down like an oyster that way—bad oyster, I should think. Lieut. True Born jibbed. Reminded him that England expects that every man will take his castor-oil. Reply unprintable. Apologized a moment later. Said that his mind was wandering and that he thought he was a colonel. Reassured him.



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12.40 a.m.—Private Merited returned with the M.O. Latter nicely dressed in musical-comedy pyjamas of ravishing hue, and great-coat, with rose-tinted feet thrust into red morocco slippers. Held consultation and explained my treatment. M.O. much impressed, anxious to know whether I was a doctor. Told him “No,” but that I knew all the ropes. First give patient castor-oil, then diet him and call every day to make sure that he doesn’t like his food. After that, if he shows signs of getting well too soon, give him a tonic. . . . M.O. stuffy.

Dec. 10.—M.O. diagnosed attack as due to something which True Born believes to be tobacco, with which he disinfects the house, the mess-sheds, and the streets of Berkhamsted.

Dec. 11.—True Born, shorn of thirteen pipes a day out of sixteen, disparages the whole race of M.O.’s.

Dec. 14.—He obtains leave to attend wedding of a great-aunt and ransacks London for a specialist who advocates strong tobacco.

Dec. 15.—He classes specialists with M.O.’s. Is surprised (and apparently disappointed) that, so far, the breaking of the looking-glass has brought me no ill-luck. Feel somewhat uneasy myself until glass is repaired by local cabinet-maker.

Jan. 10, 1917.—Lieut. True Born starts to break in another horse.

Feb. 1.—Horse broken.

March 3.—Running short of tobacco, go to my billet’s room and try a pipe of his. Take all the remedies except the castor-oil.

April 4, 8.30 a.m.—Awakened by an infernal crash and discover that my poor looking-glass is in pieces again on the floor. True Born explains that its position, between the open door and the open window, was too much for it. Don’t believe a word of it. Shall believe to my dying day that it burst in a frantic but hopeless attempt to tell Lieut. True Born the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

April 6.—The lieutenant watching for some sign of misfortune to me. Says that I can’t break a mirror twice without ill-luck following it. Me!

April 9.—Lieut. True Born comes up to me with a face full of conflicting emotions. “Your ill-luck has come at last,” he says with gloomy satisfaction. “We go under canvas on the 23rd. You are losing me!”