

Observations of an Orderly eBook

Observations of an Orderly

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I

MY FIRST DAY

The sergeant in charge of the clothing store was curt. He couldn't help it: he had run short of tunics, also of "pants"—except three pairs which wouldn't fit me, wouldn't fit anybody, unless we enlisted three very fat dwarfs: he had kept on asking for tunics and pants, and they'd sent him nothing but great-coats and water-bottles: I could take his word for it, he wished he was at the Front, he did, instead of in this blessed hole filling in blessed forms for blessed clothes which never came. Impossible, anyhow, to rig me out. I was going on duty, was I? Then I must go on duty in my "civvies."

It was a disappointment. Your new recruit feels that no small item of his reward is the privilege of beholding himself in khaki. The escape from civilian clothes was, at that era, one of the prime lures to enlistment. I had attempted to escape before, and failed. Now at last I had found a branch of the army which would accept me. It needed my services instantly. I was to start work at once. Nothing better. I was ready. This was what I had been seeking for months past. But—I confess it—I had always pictured myself dressed as a soldier. The postponement of this bright vision for even twenty-four hours, now that it had seemed to be within my grasp, was damping. However—! The Sergeant-Major had told me that I was to go on duty as orderly in Ward W—an officers' ward—at 2 p.m. prompt. I did not know where Ward W was; I did not know what a ward-orderly's functions should amount to. And I had no uniform. I was attired in a light grey lounge suit—appropriate enough to my normal habit, but quite too flippant, I was certain, for a ward-orderly. Whatever else a ward-orderly might be, I was sure that he was not the sort of person to sport a grey lounge suit.

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Still, I must hie me to Ward W. I had got my wish. I was in the army at last. In the army one does not argue. One obeys. So, having been directed down an interminable corridor, I presented myself at Ward W.

On entering—I had knocked, but no response rewarded this courtesy—I was requested, by a stern-visaged Sister, to state my business. Her sternness was excusable. The visiting-hour was not yet, and in my unprofessional guise she had taken me for a visitor. My explanation dispelled her frowns. She was expecting me. Her present orderly had been granted three days' leave. He was preparing to depart. I was to act as his substitute. Before he went he would initiate me into the secrets of his craft. She called him. "Private Wood!" Private Wood, in his shirt-sleeves, appeared. I was handed over to him.

Herein I was fortunate, though I was unaware of it at the time. Private Wood, who was not too proud to wash dishes (which was what he had at that moment been doing), is a distinguished sculptor and a man of keen imagination. At a subsequent period that imagination was to bring forth the masks-for-facial-disfigurements scheme which gained him his commission and which has attracted world-wide notice from experts. Meanwhile his imagination enabled him to understand the exact extent of a novice's ignorance, the precise details which I did not know and must know, the essential apparatus I had to be shown the knack of, before he fled to catch his train.

He devoted just five minutes, no more, to teaching me how to be a ward-orderly. Four of those minutes were lavished on the sink-room—a small apartment that enshrines cleaning appliances, the taps of which, if you turn them on without precautions, treat you to an involuntary shower bath. The sink-room contains a selection of utensils wherewith every orderly becomes only too familiar: their correct employment, a theme of many of the mildly Rabelaisian jests which are current in every hospital, is a mystery—until some kind mentor, like Private Wood, lifts the veil. In four minutes he had told me all about the sink-room, and all about all the gear in the sink-room and all about a variety of rituals which need not here be dwelt on. (The sink-room is an excellent place in which to receive a private lecture.) The fifth minute was spent in introducing me, in another room, the ward kitchen, to Mrs. Mappin—the scrub-lady.

A scrub-lady is attached to each ward; and most wards, it should in justice be added, are attached to their scrub-ladies. Certainly I was to find that Ward W was attached to Mrs. Mappin. Mrs. Mappin was washing up. Private Wood had been helping her. The completion of his task he delegated to me. "Mrs. Mappin, this is our new orderly. He'll help you finish the lunch-dishes." Private Wood then slid into his tunic, snatched his cap from a nail in the wall, and vanished.

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Mrs. Mappin surveyed me. "Ah!" she sighed—she was given to sighing. "He's a good 'un, is Private Wood." The inference was plain. There was little hope of my becoming such a good 'un. In any case, my natty grey tweeds were against me. One could never make an orderliesque impression in those tweeds. "Better take your jacket off," sighed Mrs. Mappin. I did so, chose a dishcloth, and started to dry a pyramid of wet plates. For a space Mrs. Mappin meditated, her hands in soapy water. Then she withdrew them. "I think," she sighed, "you an' me could do with a cup of tea."

And presently I was having tea with Mrs. Mappin.

I was afterwards to learn that this practice of calling a halt in her labours for a cup of tea was a highly incorrect one on Mrs. Mappin's part, and that my share in the transaction was to the last degree reprehensible. But I was also to learn that faithful, selfless, honest, and diligent scrub-ladies are none too common; and the Sister who discovers that she has been allotted such a jewel as Mrs. Mappin is seldom foolish enough to exact from her a strict obedience to the letter of the law in discipline. Mrs. Mappin, in her non-tea-bibbing interludes, toiled like a galley-slave, was rigidly punctual, and never complained. Her sighs were no index of her character. They were not a symptom of ennui (though possibly—if the suggestion be not rude—of indigestion caused by tannin poisoning). She was the best-tempered of creatures. It is a fact that if I had been so disposed I need never have given Mrs. Mappin any assistance, though it was within my province to do so. She would, without a murmur, shoulder other people's jobs as well as her own. Having finished with bearing children (one was at the Front—it was Mrs. Mappin who, on being asked the whereabouts of her soldier son, said, "'E's in France; I don't rightly know w'ere the place is, but it's *called* 'Dugout'"), she had settled down, for the remainder of her sojourn on this plane, to a prospect of work, continuous work. A little more or a little less made no difference to her. She had nothing else to do, but work; nothing else to be interested in, except work—and her children's progress, and her cups of tea. Her ample figure concealed a warm heart. Behind her wrinkled old face there was a brain with a limited outfit of ideas—and the chief of those ideas was *work*.

Our cup of tea was refreshing, but it would be incorrect to convey the notion that I was allowed to linger over such a luxury. There are few intervals for leisure in the duty-hours of an orderly in an officers' ward. Had the Sister and her nurses not been occupied elsewhere, I doubt whether I should have been free to drink that cup of tea at all—a circumstance of which perhaps Mrs. Mappin was more aware than I. At any rate the call of "Orderly!" from a patient summoned me from the kitchen and into the ward long before I had finished drying Mrs. Mappin's dishes.

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The patient desired some small service performed for him. I performed it—remembering to address him as “Sir.” Various other patients, observing my presence, took the opportunity to hail me. I found myself saying “Yes, Sir!” “In a moment, Sir!” and dropping—with a promptitude on which I rather flattered myself—into the manner of a cross between a valet and a waiter, with a subtle dash of chambermaid. Soon I was also a luggage-porter, staggering to a taxi with the ponderous impedimenta of a juvenile second lieutenant who was bidding the hospital farewell, and whose trunks contained—at a guess—geological specimens and battlefield souvenirs in the shape of “dud” German shells. This young gentleman fumbled with a gratuity, then thought better of it—and was gracious enough to return my grin. “Bit awkward, tipping, in these days,” he apologised cheerily, depositing himself in his taxi behind ramparts of holdalls. “Thank you, Sir,” seemed the suitable adieu, and having proffered it I scampered into the ward again. Anon Sister sent me with a message to the dispensary. Where the dispensary was I knew not. But I found out, and brought back what she required. Then to the post office. Another exploration down that terrific corridor. Post office located at last and duly noted. Then to the linen store to draw attention to an error in the morning’s supply of towels. Linen store eventually unearthed—likewise the information that its staff disclaimed all responsibility for mistakes—likewise the first inkling of a profound maxim, that when a mistake has been made, in hospital, it is always the orderly, and no one else, who has made it.

Engaged on these errands, and a host of intervening lesser exploits in the ward, I had to cultivate an unwonted fleetness of foot. I flew. So did the time. Almost immediately, as it seemed to me, I was bidden to serve afternoon tea to our patients. The distribution of bed-tables, of cups, of bread-and-butter (most of which, also, I cut); the “A little more tea, Sir?” or, “A pot of jam in your locker, Sir, behind the pair of trousers?... Yes, here it is, Sir”; the laborious feeding of a patient who could not move his arms;—all these occupied me for a breathless hour. Then an involved struggle with a patient who had to be lifted from a bath-chair into bed. (I had never lifted a human being before.) Then a second bout of washing-up with Mrs. Mappin. Then a nominal half-an-hour’s respite for my own tea—actually ten minutes, for I was behindhand. Then, all too soon, more waitering at the ceremony of Dinner: this time with the complication that some of my patients were allowed wine, beer, or spirits, and some were not. “Burgundy, Sir?” “Whiskey-and-soda, Sir?” I ran round the table of the sitting-up patients, displaying (I was pleased to think) the complete aplomb and nimbleness of a thoroughbred Swiss *garçon*, pouring out drinks—with concealed envy—placing and removing plates, handing salt, bread, serviettes.... After which, back to Mrs. Mappin and her renewed mountain of once-more-to-be-washed-and-dried crockery.

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It was long after my own supper hour had come and gone that I was able to say au revoir to the ward. The cleansing of the grease-encrusted meat-tin was a travail which alone promised to last half the night. (Mrs. Mappin eventually lent me her assistance, and later I became more adroit.) And the calls of "Orderly!" from the bed patients were interruptions I could not ignore. But at last some sort of conclusion was reached. Mrs. Mappin put on her bonnet. The night orderly, who was to relieve me, was overdue. Sister, discovering me still in the kitchen, informed me that I might leave.

"You ain't 'ad any supper, 'ave you?" said Mrs. Mappin. "You won't get none now, neither. Should 'ave done a bunk a full hower back, you should."

She drew me into the larder, and indicated the debris of our patients' repast. "A leg of chicken and some rice pudden. Only wasted if *you* don't 'ave it."

"But is it allowed—?" I was, in truth, not only tired but ravenous.

Sister, entering upon this conspiratorial dialogue, unhesitatingly gave her approval.

Cold rice pudding and a left-over leg of chicken, eaten standing, at a shelf in a larder, can taste very good indeed, even to the wearer of a spick-and-span grey lounge suit. I shall know in future what it means when my restaurant waiter emerges from behind the screened service-door furtively wiping his mouth. I sympathise. I too have wolfed the choice morsels from the banquet of my betters.

II

LIFE IN THE ORDERLIES' HUTS

In May, 1915, when I enlisted, the weather was beautiful. Consequently the row of tin huts, to which I was introduced as my future address "for the duration," wore an attractive appearance. The sun shone upon their metallic sides and roofs. The shimmering foliage of tall trees, and a fine field of grass, which made a background to the huts, were fresh and green and restful to the eye. Even the foreground of hard-trodden earth—the barrack square—was dry and clean, betraying no hint of its quagmire propensities under rain. Later on, when winter came, the cluster of huts could look dismal, especially before dawn on a wet morning, when the bugle sounding parade had dragged us from warm beds; or in an afternoon thaw after snow, when the corrugated eaves wept torrents in the twilight, and one's feet (despite the excellence of army boots) were chilled by their wadings through slush. Meanwhile, however, the new recruit had nothing to complain of in the aspect of the housing accommodation which was offered him. Merely for amusement's sake he had often "roughed it" in quarters far less comfortable than these bare but well-built huts—which even proved, on investigation, to contain beds: an unexpected luxury.

“I’ll put you in Hut 6,” said the Sergeant-Major. “There’s one empty bed. It’s the hut at the end of the line.”

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Thereafter Hut 6 was my home—and I hope I may never have a less pleasant one or less good company for room-mates. In these latter I was perhaps peculiarly fortunate. But that is by the way. It suffices that twenty men, not one of whom I had ever seen before, welcomed a total stranger, and both at that moment and in the long months which were to elapse before various rearrangements began to scatter us, proved the warmest of friends.

Twenty-one of us shared our downsittings and our uprisings in Hut 6. There might have been an even number, twenty-two, but one bed's place was monopolised by a stove (which in winter consumed coke, and in summer was the repository of old newspapers and orange-peel). The hut, accordingly, presented a vista of twenty-one beds, eleven along one wall and ten along the other, the stove and its pipe being the sole interruption of the symmetrical perspective. Above the beds ran a continuous shelf, bearing the hut-inhabitants' equipment, or at least that portion of it—great-coat, water-bottle, mess-tin, *etc.*—not continually in use. Below each bed its owner's box and his boots were disposed with rigid precision at an exact distance from the box and boots beneath the adjacent bed. In the ceiling hung two electric lights. These, with the stove, beds, shelves, boxes and boots, constituted the entire furniture of the hut—unless you count an alarm-clock, bought by public subscription, and notable for a trick of tinkling faintly, as though wanting to strike but failing, in the watches of the night, hours before its appointed minute had arrived. The hut contained no other furniture whatever, and in those days did not seem to us to require any. In the autumn, when the daylight shortened and we could no longer hold our parliaments on a bench outside, a couple of deck-chairs were mysteriously imported; and, as the authorities remained unshocked, a small table also appeared and was squeezed into a gap beside the stove. Some sybarite even goaded us into getting up a fund for a strip of linoleum to be laid in the aisle between the beds. This was done—I do not know why, for personally I have no objection to bare boards. I suppose linoleum is easier to keep clean than wood; and that aisle, tramped on incessantly by hobnail boots which in damp weather were, as to their soles and heels, mere bulbous trophies of the alluvial deposits of the neighbourhood, was sometimes far from speckless. But to me the strip of linoleum made our hut look remotely like a real room in a real house: it was a touch of the conventional which I never cared for, and I only subscribed to it when I had voted against it and been overborne. An extraordinary proposition, that we should inaugurate a plant in a pot on the stove's lid in summer, was, I am glad to say, negatived. It would have been the thin end of the wedge ... we might have arrived at Japanese fans and photograph-frames on the walls.

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Not that our Company Officer would have tolerated any nonsense of that kind. Punctually at eight-thirty, after the second parade of the day, he marched through each hut, inspecting it and calling the attention of the Sergeant-Major to any detail which offended his sense of fitness. On wet mornings, instead of parading outside, each man stood to his cot, and thus the comments of the Company Officer, as he went down the aisle, were audible to all. Stiffly drawn up to attention, we wondered anxiously whether he would notice anything wrong with our buttons, boots or belts, or whether he would “spot” the books and jam jars hidden behind our overcoats on the shelves. Nothing so decadent and civilian as a book—and certainly nothing so unsightly as a jam jar—must be visible on your barrack-room shelf. It is sacred to equipment, and particularly to the folded great-coat.

“The Art of Folding” might have been the title of the first lesson of the many so good-naturedly imparted to me by my new comrades. There was, I learnt, a right way and a wrong way to fold all things foldable. The great-coat, for instance, must at the finish of its foldings, when it is placed upon the exactly middle spot above your bed’s end, present to the eye of the beholder a kind of flat-topped pyramid whose waist-line (if a pyramid can be said to own a waist) is marked by the belt with the three polished buttons peeping through. The belt must bulge neither to the right nor to the left; the pyramidal edifice of great-coat must not loll—it must sit up prim and firm. And unless all your foldings of the great-coat, from first to last, have, been deftly precise, no pyramid will reward you, but a flabby trapezium: the belt will sag, its buttons won’t come centrally, and indeed the whole edifice of unwieldy cloth will topple off its perch on the narrow shelf—which was designed to refuse all lodgment for the property of persons who had unsound ideas on the subject of compact storage.

The second series of folderies to which the novice was initiated concerned themselves with his bedding. This consisted of a mattress, three blankets and a pillow. It is an outfit at which no one need turn up his nose. I never spent a bad night in army blankets, though when out on leave I am sometimes a victim of insomnia between clean cold sheets. But the moment the Reveille uplifted you from your couch, that couch had to be made ship-shape according to rule. No finicky “airing”! The mattress must be rolled up, with the pillow as its core, and placed at the end of the bed. On top of it a blanket, folded longwise and with the ends hanging down, was laid neatly; on top of *that* you put the other two blankets, folded quite otherwise; then you brought the first blanket’s ends over, and reversed the resultant bundle and pressed it down into a thin stratified parallelogram with oval ends. The strata of the said parallelogram, viewed from the aisle, must show no blanket *edges*, only curves of the blankets’ folds: the edges (if visible at all) must face inwards, not outwards. Correct folding, to be sure, gave no visible edges, viewed from either side; and, once you caught the knack, correct folding was just as easy as incorrect—though there were temperaments which did not find it so and which rebelled against these niceties.

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I was afterwards to learn that this mania for matching (if mania be indeed a legitimate word for a custom based on common-sense principles and seldom carried to the extremes which the recruit has been led to fear) obtains not only in the army but also in the nursing profession. Not long after I became a ward orderly I got a wiggling from my “Sister” because I had not noticed that every pillow-case of a ward’s beds must face towards the same point of the compass: the pillows on the vista of beds must be placed in such a manner that the pillow-case mouths are, all of them, turned away from anyone entering the ward’s door. Similarly the overlap of the counterpanes must all be of exactly the same depth and caught up at exactly the same angle, the resulting series of pairs of triangles all ending at exactly the same spot in each bedstead. These trifles reveal at a glance the professional touch in a ward, and are, I understand, not by any means the insignia of a military as distinct from a civilian hospital. They may or may not contribute to the comfort of the patient, but they betoken the captaincy of one whose methodicalness will in other and less visible respects most emphatically benefit him.

Our hut life was something more than a mere folding-up of bedding on bedsteads and great-coats on shelves. After midday dinner it was allowable to unroll the mattress, make the bed, and rest thereon—which most of us by that time (having been on the run since 6 o’clock parade) were very ready to do. There was half an hour to spare before 2 o’clock parade, and a precious half-hour it was. Snores rose from some of the beds where students of the war had collapsed beneath the newspapers which they had meant to read. Desultory conversation enlivened those corners where the denizens of the hut were energetic enough to polish their boots or sew on buttons. The one or two men who happened to be “going out on pass”—we were allowed one afternoon per week—were putting on their puttees and brushing-up the metal buttons of their walking-out tunics (otherwise known as their Square Push Suits). The buttons of their working tunics had of course been burnished before parade. The correct employment of button-sticks and of the magic cleaner called Soldier’s Friend; the polishing of one’s out-of-use boots and their placing, on the floor, with tied laces, and with their toes in line with the bed’s legs; the substitution of lost braces’ buttons by “bulldogs”; the furbishing of one’s belt; the propping-up of the front of one’s cap with wads of paper in the interior of the crown; the devices whereby non-spiral puttees can be coaxed into a resemblance of spiral ones and caused to ascend in corkscrews above trousers which refuse to tuck unlumpily into one’s socks—these, and a host of other matters, always kept a proportion of the hut-dwellers awake and busy and loquacious even in the somnolent post-prandial half-hour before 2 o’clock.

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But it was at night, at bedtime, that the hut became generally sociable. Lights-Out sounded at 10.15; and at 10.10 we were all scrambling into our pyjamas. In winter our disrobing was hasty; in summer it was an affair of leisure, and deshabelle roamings to and fro in the aisle, and gossip. When the bugle blew and the electric lights suddenly ceased to glow, leaving the hut in a darkness broken only by the dim shapes of the windows and the red of cigarette-ends, many of us still had to complete our undressing. We became adepts at doing this in the dark and so disposing of the articles of our attire that they could be instantly retrieved in the morning. Once between the blankets, conversation at first waxed rather than waned. The Night Wardmaster, whose duty it was to make the round of the orderlies' huts, disapproved of conversation after Lights-Out, and was apt to say so, loudly and menacingly, when he surprised us by popping his head in at the door. But—well—the Night Wardmaster always departed in the long run.... And then uprose, between bed and bed, those unconclusive debates in which the masculine soul delighteth: Theology; Woman; Victuals; Politics; Art; the Press; Sport; Marriage; Money—and sometimes even The War; likewise the purely local topics of Sisters and their Absurdities; Our Officers; The Other Huts; What the Sergeant-Major Said; Why V.A.D.'s can't replace Male Orderlies; What this Morning's Operations Looked Like; Whether an Officers' Ward or a Men's Ward is the nicer; Who Deserves Stripes; C.O.'s Parade and its Terrors; Advantages of Volunteering for Night Duty; The Cushy Job of being in charge of a Sham Lunacy Case; Other Cushy Jobs less cushy than They Sounded; and so forth; until at last protests began to be voiced by the wearier folk who wanted silence.

Silence it was, except for the thunder of occasional passing trains in the near-by railway cutting. These had little power to disturb. Tucked in the brown army blankets, which at first sight look so hard and so prickly, we slumbered, the twenty-one of us, as one man; until, with a cruel jolt, at 5.15 that wretched alarm-clock crashed forth its summons for the fastidious few who liked to rise in ample time to bath and shave before early parade. Sometimes I was of that virtuous band, and sometimes I wasn't; but, either way, I hated the alarm-clock at 5.15,—though not so virulently as did those members of the hut who never by any chance dreamt of rising until five to six. These gentry had reduced the ritual of dressing, and of rolling up their bedding, to a speed at which it might almost be compared to expert juggling: the quickness of the hand deceived the eye. At five minutes to six you would see the juggler asleep on his pillow, in blissful innocence; at six he would be on parade, as correctly attired as you were yourself, and having left behind him, in the hut, a bed as neatly folded as yours. The world is sprinkled with people who can do this kind of thing—and

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our hut was blessed with its due leaven of them. But I would not assert that they *never* had to put some finishing touches, either to their dress or to their hut equipment foldings, before the Company Officer's tour of inspection at 8.30. It sufficed that they would pass muster at 6 o'clock, when appearances are less minutely important. And the man who never rises till 5.55 detests an alarm-clock that whirrs at 5.15. The hour at which the alarm-clock should be set to detonate was one of our few acrimonious subjects of argument: I have even known it upset a discussion on Woman. But the early risers had their way, and the clock continued to be set for half an hour in front of Reveille.

The harsh vibration of the alarm at one end of the day, and the expiry of the Lights-Out talks at the other—these events marked the chief time-divisions in our hut life. While we were absent at work, our interests were many and scattered; but the hut was a nucleus for communal bonds of union which evoked no little loyalty and affection from us all. On the May morning when I first beheld that corrugated-iron abode I thought it looked inviting enough; but I did not guess how fond I was to grow of its barn-like interior and of the sportive crew who shared its mathematically-allotted floor-space. "Next war," one optimist suggested during a typical Lights-Out seance, "let's all enlist together again." There were protests against the implied prophecy, but none against the proposition as such. That is the spirit of hut comradeship ... a spirit which no alarm-clock controversies can do aught to impair; for though 5.15 a.m. is an hour to test the temper of a troop of twenty-one saints, 10.15 p.m. will bring geniality and garrulousness to twenty-one sinners.

III

WASHING-UP

The following substances (to which I had previously been almost a stranger) absorbed much of my interest during my first months as a hospital orderly:

Coagulated pudding, mutton fat and beef fat, cold gravy, treacle, congealed cocoa, suet duff, skins of once hot milk:

Plates, cups, frying-pans and other utensils smeared with the above:

Knives, forks and spoons, ditto.

I am fated to go through life, in the future, not merely with an exalted opinion of scullery-maids—this I should not regret—but also with an only too clear picture, when at the dinner table, of the adventures of each dish of broken meats on its exit from view. I

have been behind the scenes at the business of eating, or rather, at the dreadful repairs which must be instituted when the business of eating is concluded in order that the business of eating may recommence.

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There were days when the ward-kitchen was to me a battlefield and I seemed to be fighting on the losing side. This was when our scrub-lady was ill or had “got the sack” and it fell to me, the orderly, to do the washing-up single-handed. Those patients who were well enough to be on their feet were supposed to help. (I speak of a men’s ward, of course, not an officers’.) They did help, and that right willingly. Sometimes I was blessed by the presence of a patient with a passion for cleaning things. When there were no dishes to clean he would clean taps. When the taps shone like gold he would clean the hooks on the dresser. When all our kitchen gear was clean he would invade, with a kind of fury, the sink-room and clean the apparatus there. When this was done he would clean the ward’s windows and door handles. Between-times he would clean his boots and shave patients in bed. The new army is thickly sown with men like that. They are the salt of the earth. I would place them at the summit of the commonwealth’s salary list, the bank clerk second, and the business man, the artist and the politician at the bottom. At all events these were my sentiments when a patient of this type, convalescing, began to be able to help me with my kitchen chores. But it occasionally chanced that every single patient in the ward was confined to bed. It was then that I made my most intimate acquaintance with the catalogue of horrors I have cited.

You behold me, with my shirt-sleeves rolled up, faced by a heap of twenty plates, twenty forks, twenty knives and twenty spoons, all urgently requiring washing. Were these my whole task I should not shrink. They would be nicely polished-off long ere one-fifteen arrived—the time when I should (but probably shall not be able to) leave for my own meal in the orderlies’ mess. But there are two far more serious opponents waiting to be subdued—the dinner-tin and the pudding-basin. This pair are hateful beyond words. Their memory will for ever haunt me, a spectral disillusionment to spoil the relish of every repast I may consume in the years that are ahead.

The dinner-tin was a rectangular box some three feet long, twenty inches wide and six inches deep. It was made of solid metal, was fitted with a false bottom to contain hot water, and was divided internally into three compartments to hold meat, vegetables and duff. These viands were loaded into the tin at the hospital’s central kitchen. I had naught to do with the cookery—which I may mention always seemed to me to be excellent. My sole concern was with the helping-out of the food to the patients and the restoration of the dinner-tin to its shelf in the central kitchen. For unless I restored that tin in a faultless state of cleanliness, the sergeant in charge of the central kitchen would require my blood. The tin’s number would betray me. The sergeant needed not to know my name: all he had to do, on discovering the questionable tin, was to glance at its number and then send for the orderly of the ward with a corresponding number.

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He was a sergeant whose aspect could be very daunting. I never had to come before him on the subject of a dirty dinner-tin. But he and I had some small passages concerning “specials” (separate diets ordered for patients requiring delicacies). Sometimes the necessary forms for the specials had been incorrectly made out by a Sister with no head for army accuracy in minor clerical details. Thereafter it was my unlucky place to see the sergeant, and put the matter straight with him. I have survived those encounters. I have survived them with an enhanced respect for the sergeant and the organisation of his large and by no means simple department. There were moments, nevertheless, when I approached his presence with a sinking heart. For if I failed to “get round” him in the matter of coaxing another special for a patient, there was Sister to placate on my return to the ward; and it was quite impossible to persuade Sister that she could have made a mistake with her diet sheets, or, if she had, that it was of any consequence.

The dinner-tin was somewhat larger than the sink in which I was supposed to wash it. It was also very heavy. When full of food, and its false bottom charged with hot water, I could only just lift it, and my progress down the ward, carrying it from the trolley in the corridor to the ward-kitchen, was a perilous and perspiring shuffle. As soon as all the patients had been served I placed any left-over slices of meat in the larder: these would be eaten at tea. Then I drained out the hot water from the false bottom. Then (but only after experience had given me wisdom) I ran hot water from the geyser tap into the now empty meat, vegetable and duff compartments, and gave them a hurried swill: this to rid them of the pestilent dregs of fatty material which would otherwise have dried and glued themselves to the floor of the tin. The latter had now to be put on one side, for I must be back in the ward attending to my diners. Only when they had finished their meal, and their bed-tables had been removed, folded up and placed neatly behind each bed, could I tackle the tin in earnest.

I abhor dabbling in grease; but life is full of abhorrent dilemmas which must be endured; and the interior of that dinner-tin somehow got itself cleaned, every day, in the long run. During the early part of any given week I was almost happy over the job. For Monday was “Dry Store” day. On Monday, and on Monday only—and you were helpless for the remainder of the week if you forgot the rule—you could obtain, on presentation of a chit, blacklead for the stoves, metal-polish for the brass, rags for cleaning the floor, floor-polish, one box of matches, bath-brick, soft soap, and—soda. It is an extraordinary chemical, soda. Before I became a ward orderly I had no idea of the remarkable properties of soda. A handful of soda in boiling water, and behold the grease dissolve meekly from the nastiest dinner-tin! It was miraculous.

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When a pitying scrub-lady first showed me the trick I thought that all my troubles were at an end. Soda made the ward-kitchen seem like heaven. Alas, the supply of soda considered sufficient by the Dry Store authorities never lasted beyond Wednesday. On Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday the dinner-tin had to be cleaned out not by alkaline agency, but by sheer slogging hard labour. And when at last I stood it on edge to dry, and thought to go off duty with a clear conscience, I generally found that I had overlooked the waiting pudding-basin.

On the whole I am inclined to pronounce the pudding-basin a more obdurate utensil than even the dinner-tin. The pudding-basin, however, only appeared every second morning. On duff days (duff being served in the same tin as the meat and vegetables, though in a separate compartment) we had no pudding. By pudding I mean milk pudding—rice or sago or tapioca. Now a milk pudding, such as those my patients received, though perhaps it was looked askance at in the nursery, is food which, as an adult, I am far from despising. Rice pudding I have come with maturer years to regard as a delicacy. Sago and tapioca I still eat rather with amiable resignation than from choice. But any milk pudding, as I now know, has a most vicious habit of cleaving to the dish in which it was cooked. Rice is the least evil offender. The others are absolutely wicked. To clean oleaginous scum from a dinner-tin is not easy, but it is a mere bagatelle compared with cleaning the scorched high-tide-mark of tapioca or sago from the shores of a large metal pudding-basin. I have tried scraping with a knife blade, I have tried every reasonable form of friction, and I can simply state as a fact from my own personal experience (perhaps I am unfortunate) that those metal pudding-basins of ours would frequently yield to nothing less powerful than sandpaper.

I need scarcely say that sandpaper was not supplied by the deities of the Dry Store. Sandpaper did not come within their purview. It had no recognised use in hospital. Therefore it did not exist. But, observing that a succession of metal pudding-basins would be an insupportable prospect without sandpaper, I laid in a stock of sandpaper, paying for the same out of my own private purse. It was a cheap investment. Never have earnings of mine been better spent. Moreover, having once hit on the notion of giving myself a lift illegitimately, so to speak, I added to the smuggling-in of sandpaper a secret purchase of soda. Except that our scrub-ladies, each and all, discovering that the Dry Store's allowance of this priceless chemical had at last apparently been generous, caused it to fly at a disconcerting pace, and as a result sometimes left me short of it, my career as a washer-up afterwards became more comfortable.

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I shall never like washing-up. In the communal households of the future I shall heave coal, sift cinders, dig potatoes, dust furniture or scour floors—any task will be mine which, though it makes me dirty, does not make me greasily dirty. But if I must wash-up, if I must study the idiosyncrasies of cold fat, treacly plates, frying-pans which have sizzled dripping-toast on the gas-ring, frozen gravy, and pudding-basins with burnt milk-skins filmed to their sides, I shall be comparatively undismayed. For sandpaper is not yet (like the news posters) abolished; and soda—although I hear its price has risen several hundred per cent.—is still cheaper than, say, diamonds.

IV

A “HUT” HOSPITAL

People have curious ideas of the kind of building which would make a good war hospital. “The So-and-So Club in Pall Mall,” I have been told, “should have been commandeered long ago. Ideal for hospital purposes. Of course some of the M.P. members brought influence to bear, and the War Office was choked off....” And so forth.

It would surprise me to hear of anything that the War Office was held back from doing if it wanted to do it. Perhaps the least likely obstructionist to be successful in this project would be a club-frequenting M.P. The War Office has taken exactly and precisely what it chose—even when it would have been better to choose otherwise. In this matter of commandeering buildings for hospitals it may or may not have acted with wisdom; but at least it has been safe in avoiding the advice of the individual who jumps to the conclusion that just any pleasingly-situated edifice will do, provided beds and nurses are shovelled into it in sufficient quantities.

The indignant patriot who was convinced that chicane alone saved the So-and-So Club from being dedicated to the service of the wounded was quite unable to tell me whether the lifts—assuming that lifts existed—were roomy enough to accommodate stretchers; whether, if so, no interval of stairs prevented trollies from being wheeled to every ward; whether the arrangement of the building would allow of the network of plumbing necessitated by the introduction of numerous bathrooms and lavatories (for each ward must possess both); whether the kitchens were so located that they could supply food to top-floor patients without waste of carrying labour on the part of the orderlies’ staff. These problems, the mere fringe of the subject, had never occurred to our patriot. His idea of a hospital was a place where soldiers lie in bed and get well. (What queer notions visitors absorb of the *easiness* of hospital life!) He had not glimpsed the organisation which made the cure possible. The man in bed, a Sister hovering in the background with, apparently, nothing to do but look pleasant—these constituted, for him, the final phenomena of a war hospital. These phenomena, instead of being housed

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in a wood-and-corrugated-iron shed, might have been staged picturesquely in one of the luxurious salons of the So-and-So Club in Pall Mall. It was a shame that they weren't. He would write to the papers about it. Somebody must be blamed, somebody must be made to hustle. And meanwhile the Sisters and doctors who *were* installed in gorgeous mansions for their work were openly envying the fortunate ones who had been given those bare but efficient and compactly-planned sheds.

Some years ago a number of public buildings were earmarked for hospital use in case of war. It may surprise the indignant patriots to learn that any preparations whatever were made prior to the outbreak in 1914. Nevertheless all kinds of preparations actually were made. Mistakes and miscalculations may have marred those preparations: the fact remains that, as far as the Territorial Medical Service was concerned, the authorities had merely to press a button and hospitals came into existence. Thus a number of institutions—mostly schools—found themselves ejected from their own roof-trees: found, in short, (what many other folk were to learn later) that the State is omnipotent in war-time and that sectional interests fade into insignificance compared with the interests of the safety of the commonwealth. Some conception of the promptness with which this paper scheme of Sir Alfred Keogh's materialised at the outbreak of war may be gathered from the simple statement that the building of which I myself write was an Orphans' Home on August 4th, 1914. At 6 a.m. on August 5th it was a military hospital.

I do not say that it was a military hospital in working order. But if, by a miracle, wounded *had* turned up then, there was at least a staff of medical officers and orderlies on the premises to receive them. In point of fact it was some weeks before the first patients arrived. Those weeks, however, were not idle ones. The layman who considers that any large building can be turned instantaneously into a hospital would have had an eye-opener if he had witnessed the work done here. The mere removing of 95 per cent. of the institution's furniture was a colossal task; added thereto was the introduction of hundreds of beds, hundreds of mattresses, hundreds of sets of bedclothes, hundreds of suits of pyjamas, hundreds of—But why prolong a brain-racking list? Then there was the pulling-down and fixing-up of partitions, the removal of every single window for replacement by Hopper sashes, the fitting-in of bathrooms, lavatories, ward-kitchens, sink-rooms, dispensary, cookhouse, operating-theatre, pathological laboratory, linen-store, steward's store, clothing-store, detention-room, administration offices, X-ray department ... all these in a building which, spacious and handsome outwardly, was, as to its interior, a characteristic maze in the Scottish baronial style of architecture beloved by mid-Victorian philanthropists. How the evicted orphans will like to return to those stone-flagged

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passages and large airy dormitories, after having experienced the comforts of the banal but snug suburban villas in which they are at present located, I know not. There is a certain dignity about the Scottish baronial pile, I admit. The silhouette of its grey stone facade, rising above delightful lawns, makes a good impression—from a distance. Postcard views of it sell freely to visitors. But the best part of our hospital is hidden behind that turreted facade, and is much too “ugly” and utilitarian for postcard immortalisation.

The best part of our hospital—*the* hospital, to most of us—came into being when the commandeered Scottish baronial orphans’ asylum was found to be too small. Then were built “the huts.”

The word “hut” suggests something casual, of the camping-out order: a shed knocked together with tin-tacks, doubtfully weather-proof and probably scamped by profiteering contractors. Of the huts provided at certain training centres this may have been true. The finely austere and efficient ranks of hut-wards which constitute the main part of the 3rd London General Hospital are the very antithesis of that picture. They may look flimsy. They were certainly put up at a remarkable pace. I myself witnessed the erection of the final fifty of them. An open field vanished in less than a month, and “Bungalow Town” (as someone nicknamed it) appeared. You would have said that such speed meant countless imperfections of detail. No doubt some tinkering and modifications were bound to follow, when the regiment of workmen, carpenters, engineers, drainage specialists, electricians, had vanished. But, in the long run, the ideal hospital remained—a hospital with which the So-and-So Club in Pall Mall, for all its luxuriousness, could never hope to compare.

There are still a dozen wards—used mostly for medical cases—in the Scottish baronial building. Its rooms, too, provide the Administration with offices. Its great Dining Hall is a splendid Receiving Ward for the sorting-out and clearance of newly-arrived convoys of patients. We should be poorly situated indeed if we had not our Scottish baronial main building to be the hub of the hospital’s activities, or rather the handle from which springs the fan of the hospital’s great extension—the huts. Approaching the hospital the visitor sees nothing of those huts. As he walks up the drive he flatters himself that he has reached his destination. He discovers his mistake when, at the inquiry bureau in the entrance, he is informed that the patient whom he has come to interview is (say) in “C 13.” He is advised to go down the passage on his left, turn to his right, turn to the left again and then again to the right—after which he had better seek a further re-direction. Launching himself optimistically on this voyage he learns, long ere he has attained his goal, that a modern war-hospital can hide a considerable extent of pedestrianism behind a comparatively short Scottish baronial frontage. He will be fortunate if five minutes’ steady tramping brings him to the bedside of his friend in C 13.

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Perhaps he will content himself in his footsoreness by noting that, to reach C 13, he has not had to go up or down any stairs. This is one of the beauties of the hut system. It consumes a big area, but it is all on one level—the ground level. The patient on crutches can go anywhere without fear of tripping, the patient in a wheeled chair can propel himself anywhere, the orderlies can push wheeled stretchers or dinner-wagons anywhere. Our visitor for C 13, having escaped from the back of the Scottish baronial building, emerges into a vista of covered corridors, wooden-floored, galvanised-iron roofed. It is a heartbreaking vista to the poor woman who has had no bus-fare and is burdened by a baby in arms. It is a vista which seems to have no end. Corridor branches out of corridor—A Corridor, B Corridor, C Corridor, D Corridor, each with its perspective of doors opening into wards; and shorter corridors leading to store-rooms and the like. But the patient or orderly who has dwelt in a hospital where, though distances are shorter, staircases are involved—or where every trifling coming-and-going of goods or stretchers necessitates the manipulation of a lift—blesses those level, smooth corridors, with their facile access to any ward, to operating theatres, kitchens, stores, X-ray room, massage department, *etc.*, and their stepless exit into the open air.

Looked at from outside, a hut-ward is—to the aesthetic eye—a hideous structure. Knowing what it stands for, the science, the tenderness and the fundamental civilisation which it represents, we may descry, behind its stark geometrical outlines, a real nobility and beauty. Entering a typical hut-ward you behold thirty beds, fifteen on each side of the room. Between each pair of beds is a locker in which the patient stows his belongings. (Woe betide him if his locker is not kept neat!) In the central aisle of the room are the Sister's writing-table, certain other tables, chairs, and two coke stoves for heating purposes in winter. The floor is carpetless, and maintained in a meticulous state of high gloss by means of daily polishings. At a height of a few feet from the floor, the asbestos-lined walls cease and become windows. There is no gap in the continuous line of windows all down each side of the ward—a special type of window which, even when open, declines to allow rain to enter. In consequence of these windows the ward is not only very well lit, but also airy and odourless. When all the windows are open (which is the case throughout the entire summer and generally the case in winter also) the patient has the advantages of indoor comfort plus an outdoor atmosphere. At the end of the ward a covered verandah is spacious enough to take an extra couple of beds for those requiring completely open-air treatment.

The ward proper has certain additions: a kitchen with gas-stove and geyser; a sink-room with geyser and cleansing apparatus of special pattern; a bathroom with geyser; lavatories; a small room for the isolation of a patient on the danger-list; a linen-room; and cupboards. All these are packed neatly under that one rectangular corrugated roof which looked so ugly and so unpromising from outside.

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Do not pity the wounded soldier because he is quartered in a “hut.” The word sounds unattractive. But if it is the right kind of hut, he is in the soundest and most sanitary type of temporary hospital that the mind of man has yet devised. The rain-drops may rattle a shade noisily on the roof, the asbestos lining may be devoid of ornamentation, but as he lies in bed and contemplates that unadorned ceiling he is a deal better off than if he were gazing at the elaborate (and dust-harbours) cornices of the So-and-So Club’s grandiose smoking-lounge in Pall Mall.

V

FROM THE “D” BLOCK WARDS

If you walk up the corridor at half-past four on certain afternoons of the week you will meet a mob of patients trooping from their wards to the concert-room. Being built of wood and corrugated iron, the corridor is an echoing cave of noises. It echoes the tramp of feet—and army-pattern boots were not soled for silence. It echoes the thud-thud of crutches. It echoes the slurred rumble of wheeled chairs and stretcher-trolleys. But, above all, at half-past four on concert days it echoes happy talk and chaff and boisterous laughter.

As often as not, the loudest talk, the cheeriest chaff, the most spontaneous laughter, emanate from the blue-clad stalwarts who have mustered from the “D” Block wards.

“D” Block contains the wards for eye-wound cases.

Here they come, a string of them, mostly with bandages round their heads. The leading man owns one good eye—a twinkling eye—an eye of mischief—an eye (you would guess at once) for the girls. (But the eye’s owner probably calls them the “pushers.” Such is our language now.) Behind him, in single file, and in step with him, march a gang of patients each with his hand on the shoulder of the man in front. Tramp, tramp! Their tread is purposely thunderous on the bare boards of the corridor. They sing as they advance. It is a ragtime chorus whose most memorable line runs, “You never seem to kiss me in the same place twice.” A jaunty lilt, to be sure, both in tune and in rhythm. Tramp, tramp! The one-eyed leader swerves round a corner, roaring the refrain. His followers swerve too. Suddenly the Matron is encountered, emerging from her room. “Fine afternoon, Matron!” The leader interrupts his chant to utter this hearty greeting. And, with one voice, “Fine afternoon, Matron!” exclaim his followers. But they do not turn their heads. Each with his hand resting on the shoulder of the man in front they go steadily on, towards the concert-room, with an odd intentness, glancing neither to one side nor the other. For though, at their leader’s cue, they have hailed the Matron, they have not seen her. They are blind.



The spectacle of men—particularly young men—who have given their sight for their country is, to most observers, a moving one. Melancholy are the reflections of the visitor who meets, for the first time, a promenading party of our blind patients. It is the plain truth, nevertheless, that the blind men themselves are far from melancholy. One of the rowdiest characters we ever had in the hospital was totally blind. The blind men's wards are notoriously amongst the least sedate. I offer no explanation. I simply state the fact. I will fortify it by an anecdote.

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It came to pass that eight complimentary tickets for a Queen's Hall matinee were received by the Matron, who in due course allotted them to seven "D" Block patients. An orderly, detailed to take them to the hall, completed the octette. Corporal Smith, the orderly in question, recounted his adventures afterwards. "Never again," quoth he, "shall I jump at a matinee job if there are blind chaps in the party. They're the deuce."

You must understand that we hospital orderlies regard the task of shepherding patients to an entertainment in town as an agreeable form of holiday. I have had some very pleasant outings of that sort myself. But not—I am thankful to recall, in the light of Corporal Smith's narrative—with blind men. One-legged men are often a sufficient care, in manoeuvring on and off omnibuses. Apparently helpless cripples have a marvellous gift for losing themselves, entering wrong trains, and generally escaping—as the hour for return draws nigh—from one's custody. And the city seems to be full of lunatics ready to supply alcohol or indigestible refreshments to the most delicate war-hospital inmates. Even with ordinary patients the orderly's afternoon excursion is sometimes not unfraught with anxiety. But blind patients, as Corporal Smith said, are the deuce.

Out of his party, four were totally blind, two could recognise dimly the difference between light and darkness, and one had a single good eye.

Queen's Hall was reached, by bus, without mishap. After the performance there was tea at an A.B.C. shop. Here Jock, one of the totally blind men, a Scotchman—all Scots are "Jocks" in the army—distinguished himself by facetiae (audible throughout the whole shop) on the English pronunciation of the word 'scone,' and intimated his desire to treat the company to a ballad. This project was suppressed, but "a silly fool in a top hat threatened to report me for having given my men drink," said Corporal Smith. "Jock gave *him* the bird, not 'arf. But I thought it about time to be going home."

So the party prepared to go home.

The bus was voted dull. Somebody suggested the tube. Corporal Smith consented.

He had forgotten that at Oxford Circus station the lifts have been abolished in favour of sliding staircases. Confronted by the escalator, Corporal Smith halted his party and informed them that they must walk down by the ordinary stair. The escalator was not safe for blind men. Unfortunately, Jock had sniffed a lark; the one-eyed man backed him up; the party—elated perhaps by their tea—would not hear of anything so humdrum as a descent by the ordinary stair. They were going on the sliding stair. They insisted. Corporal Smith argued in vain. In vain he exerted his (purely nominal) authority. His charges mocked him. The one-eyed man leading, with Jock in his wake, they launched themselves at the sliding stair. In sheer desperation Corporal Smith brought up the rear, supporting two of the more timid venturers as best he might. None of the group except Corporal Smith himself, as it turned out, had ever travelled on an escalator before. But

they had heard a comic song about a sliding stair, and they wished—Jock especially—to sample this metropolitan invention.

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By dodging forward to place each blind man's hand upon the banister, Corporal Smith managed to send off his patients without a stumble. But as the stair inexorably lowered them into the bowels of the earth he realised, only too vividly, what might happen at the foot of the descent. The evening rush of suburb-bound passengers had begun and the staircase was rather crowded. Nobody seemed to realise that the khaki-overcoated men who stood so still upon the steps were not the usual hospital convalescents out on leave and able to look after themselves. Corporal Smith, delayed by one man who had hesitated at the top before taking the plunge, beheld his charges below him, hopelessly dotted, at intervals, amongst the general public. It was impossible for him to struggle down ahead, to the bottom of the staircase, to guide the men off as they arrived. This task, he hoped, would be adequately performed by the one-eyed man.

It might have been. The one-eyed man was game for anything. But Jock, arriving in the highest good humour at the bottom of the staircase, was tilted sideways by the curve, and promptly sat down on the landing-place. Instead of rising, he proclaimed aloud that this was funnier even than England's pronunciation of the word 'scone.' Whereupon various hurrying passengers, including an old lady, tripped over his prone form. The sensation of being kicked and sat upon appealed to Jock's sense of humour. The more people avalanched across him the more comic he thought it. And in a moment there was quite a pile of wriggling bodies on top of him. For though the public managed on the whole to leap over, or circumvent, the obstacle presented by Jock's extremely large body, none of his blind comrades did so.

"Every single one of them fell flop," said Corporal Smith; "I give you my word."

But were they downhearted? No! They regarded this mysterious hurly-burly of arms and legs as a capital jest. So far from being alarmed or annoyed, they shouted with glee. The old lady, who had gathered herself together and was directing a stream of voluble reproof at Corporal Smith for his "callousness and cruelty to these unhappy blind heroes," retired discomfited. Jock's comments routed her more effectively than the Corporal's assurance that the episode was none of his choosing.

The party at last sorted itself out and was placed upon its feet once more. It was excessively pleased with its exploit. Hilarity reigned. Corporal Smith, relieved, made ready to conduct his squad to the platform.

Alas, a bright idea occurred to Jock. Why not go up the other sliding stair and down again?

Agreed, *nem. con.* At least, Corporal Smith's *con.* was too futile to be worth counting.

"I had to go with the blighters," said he. "There was no end of a crowd by this time. And Jock and some of the others fell over at the top again. And there was a row with the ticket-collector. And people kept saying they'd report me. *Me!* And when I'd got my

party down to the bottom for the second time, and some of the tube officials had come and said they couldn't allow it and we must buzz off home, I lined the fellows up to march 'em to the train, and dash me if two weren't missing. They'd given me the slip."

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The two truants, it may be added, could not be found. Corporal Smith had to return without them. At a late hour of the evening they appeared, not an atom repentant, at the hospital, having persuaded someone to put them into the correct bus. One of them, Jock, explained that, being from the North, he had desired to seize this opportunity of seeing the sights of London. Jock, I may remind you, is totally blind. Jock's guide, the man who had volunteered to show him the sights and who had only once been in London before, could see very faintly the difference between light and dark.... Thus this pair of irresponsibles had fared forth into the dusk of Regent Street.

* * * * *

It sounds a very horrible fate to be blinded. But somehow the blind men themselves seldom seem to be overwhelmed by its horribleness. If you want to hear the merriest banter in a war hospital, visit the blind men's wards. The pathos of them lies less in the sadness of the victims than in the triumphant, wonderful fact that they are *not* sad. I wish we others all inhabited the same mysteriously jocund spiritual realm as Jock and his comrades, who come tramp-tramping to the concert-room down the corridor from the D wards.

VI

WHEN THE WOUNDED ARRIVE

The receiving hall of the hospital is its clearing house of patients. It is a huge room, with a lofty and echoing roof, a little in the style of a church. Before the war, when the building was a school, this rather grandiose apartment no doubt witnessed speechifyings and prize distributions. May the time be not far distant when it will once again be used for those observances! Meanwhile its vast floor is occupied by ranks of beds.

Those beds are generally untenanted. Visitors who, like the lady in the play, have taken the wrong turning, are apt to find themselves in the receiving hall, and, gazing at its array of vacant beds, have been known to conclude that the hospital was empty. (As if any war-hospital, in these times, could be empty!) But our patients have only a short acquaintanceship with the receiving-hall beds: these beds are momentary resting-places on their journey healthwards: they are not meant to lie in but to lie *on*. The three-score wards for which the receiving hall is the clearing house are the real destination of the patients; down long corridors, in wards far cosier because less ornate than this, the patient will find "his" bed ready for him, the bed which he is not to lie on but *in*.

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We orderlies meet each convoy at the front door of the hospital. The walking-cases are the first to arrive—men who are either not ill enough, or not badly enough wounded, to need to be put on stretchers in ambulances. They come from the station in motor-cars supplied by that indefatigable body, the London Ambulance Column. The walking-case alights from his car, is conducted into the receiving hall, and ten minutes later is in the bathroom. For the ritual of the bath must on no account be omitted—although now not so obviously imperative as in the early period of the war. Few patients reach us who have not first sojourned, either for a day or two or for weeks, in hospitals in France. They are therefore merely travel-stained, as you or I might be travel-stained after coming over from Dublin to Euston. The bath is thus a pleasure more than a necessity. Whereas there was an era, when our guests came straight from only too populous trenches....

“O.C. Baths,” as the bathroom orderly was nicknamed, had to be circumspect in the performance of his job.

The few minutes which the walking-case spends in the receiving hall are occupied (1) in drinking a cup of cocoa, and (2) in “having his particulars taken.”

Poor soul!—he is weary of giving his “particulars.” He has had to give them half-a-dozen times at least, perhaps more, since he left the front. At the field dressing-station they wanted his particulars, at the clearing-station, on the train, at the base hospital, on another train, on the steamer, on the next train, and now in this English hospital. As he sits and comforts himself with cocoa, a “V.A.D.” hovers at his elbow, intent on a printed sheet, the details of which she is rapidly filling-in with a pencil. For this is a card-index war, a colossal business of files and classifications and ledgers and statistics and registrations, an undertaking on a scale beside which Harrod’s and Whiteley’s and Selfridge’s and Wanamaker’s and the Magasin du Louvre, all rolled into one, would be a fleabite of simplicity. Ere the morrow shall have dawned, our patient’s military biography will be recounted, by various clerks, in I don’t know how many different entries. If you are curious, refer to one of our volumes of the *Admission and Discharge Book: Field Service Army Book 27a*. Open it at any of its closely-written pages and see the host of ruled columns which the orderly in charge of it must inscroll with reference to each of the many thousands of patients who pass through our hospital per annum. The columns ask for his Regiment; Squadron, Battery or Company; Number; Rank; Surname; Christian Name; Age; Length of Service; Completed Months with Field Force; Diseases (wounds and injuries are expressed by a number indicating their nature and whereabouts); Date of Admission; Date of Discharge or Transfer; Number of Days under Treatment; Number of Ward; Religion; and “Observations”—a space usually occupied by the name of the hospital ship upon which our friend crossed the Channel, and the name of the convalescent home to which he went on bidding us adieu.

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Having furnished the preliminary statements which lay the foundation of this compendious memoir, the walking-case thankfully finishes his cocoa, picks up the package of “blues” which has been put at his side, and departs, with his fellows, to the bathroom. Here he is tackled by the Pack Store orderlies, who take from him, and enter in their books, his khaki clothes. These he must leave in exchange for the blue slop uniform which, *pro tem.*, is to be his only wear. When he emerges from the bathroom he is attired in what is now England’s most honourable livery—the royal blue of the war-hospital patient. And (though perhaps the matter is not mentioned to him in so many words) his own suit is already ticketed with an identification label and on its way to the fumigator. This is no reflection on the owner of the suit ... but there are some things we don’t talk about. Mr. Fumigator-Wallah is not the least busy of the more retiring members of a war-hospital staff. He is not in the limelight; but you might come to be very sad and sorry if he took it into his head to neglect his unapplauded part off-stage.

The walking-cases are still splashing and dressing in the bathroom when the ambulances with the cot-cases begin to appear. Now is the orderlies’ busy time. Each stretcher must be quickly but gently removed from the ambulance and carried into the receiving hall.

Four orderlies haul the stretcher from its shelf in the ambulance; two orderlies then take its handles and carry it indoors. At the entrance to the receiving hall they halt. The Medical Officer bends over the patient, glances at the label which is attached to him, and assigns him to a ward. (Certain types of cases go to certain groups of wards.) The attendant sergeant promptly picks a metal ticket from a rack and lays it on the stretcher. The ticket has, punched on it, the number of the patient’s ward and the number of the patient’s bed in that ward. This ceremony completed, the orderlies proceed, with their burden, up the aisle between the beds in the receiving hall.

Arrived at the bed, they lower their stretcher until it is at such a level that the patient, if he is active enough, can move off it on to the bed; if he is too weak to help himself he is lifted on to the bed by orderlies under the direction of the receiving-hall Sister. The stretcher is promptly removed and restored to its ambulance. If the patient is in an exceptionally suffering condition he is not placed on the receiving-hall bed; instead—the Medical Officer having given his permission—his stretcher is put on a wheeled trolley and he is taken straight away to his ward, so that he will only undergo one shift of position between the ambulance and his destination. The majority of stretcher-cases, however, reach us in a by no means desperate state, for, as I say, they seldom come to England without having been treated previously at a base abroad (except during the periods of heavy fighting). And it

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is remarkable how often the patient refuses help in getting off the stretcher on to the bed. He may be a cocoon of bandages, but he will courageously heave himself overboard, from stretcher to bed, with a gay *wallop* which would be deemed rash even in a person in perfect health. Our receiving hall, at a big intake of wounded, when every bed bears its poor victim of the war, presents a spectacle which might give the philosopher food for thought; but I suspect that, if he regarded its actualities rather than his own preconceptions, what would impress him more than the sadness would be on the one hand the kindliness, brisk but not officious, of the staff, and on the other the spontaneous geniality of the battered occupants of the beds. The orderlies can spare little time for talk, but the few chats which they are able to have with patients whom they are helping to change their clothes, or to whom they are proffering the inevitable cocoa (which is a cocktail, as it were, prior to the meal which will be served in the men's own ward), are punctuated by jokes and laughter rather than the long-visaged "sympathy" which the outsider might—quite wrongly!—have pictured as appropriate to such an assemblage.

The stretcher-case, before he is taken to his ward, must also "give his particulars," must also be interviewed by the Pack Store officials, and must also have assigned to him his blue uniform (wherewith are a shirt, a cravat, slippers and socks) in anticipation of the time when he shall be able to use his feet again and promenade our corridors and grounds. He receives the customary packet of cigarettes (probably the second, for he often gets one at the railway station too), and then, on another stretcher, mounted on a trolley, is wheeled off to his ward. Here, bestowed in bed at last, we leave him to his blanket-bath, his meal, his temperature-taking and chart filling-in by the Sister, his visit from the doctor, and all the rest of it. For the moment we see no more of him; we must race back to the receiving hall, and, if there are no more patients to take away, return the trolley to its proper nook, put straight the blankets and pillows on the beds, sweep the floor, and tidy up generally, in readiness for the next convoy's advent.

Presently the huge room, beneath its dim arched ceiling, is silent and empty once more. The four ranks of beds, without a crease on their brown blankets, are bare of occupants. The Sister and her probationers have vanished. The Pack Store orderlies have carried off their loot of dirty khaki tunics and trousers for the fumigator. The clerical V.A.D.'s have gone to enter "particulars" in ledgers and card-indices. The cookhouse people have removed their cocoa urn. The sergeant is inspecting the metal ward-tickets left in his rack. A glance at them tells him how many beds, and which beds, are free in the hospital; for the tickets have no duplicates; any given ticket can only reappear in the rack when

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the bed which it connotes is out of use and awaiting a newcomer; the ticket hangs from a nail in the wall beside the patient's bed just so long as that bed is tenanted. So the rack of metal tickets might almost take the place of that important document, of which a freshly-compiled edition is typed every morning, the Empty Bed List; and the sergeant is meditative as he sorts into the rack the tickets which have newly been sent in from the Sisters of wards where there have been departures. "Not much room in the eye-wound wards," he ponders; or, "A lot of empties in the medicals." And then ... the tinkle of the telephone....

"Another convoy expected at 6.15? Twenty walking-cases and seventeen cots. Right you are!"

And at 6.15 the party of orderlies will be back again at the front door, again the motor-cars will stream up the drive, again the ambulances will come with their stretchers, and again the receiving hall will awaken from its interlude of silence to echo with the activities incidental to a clearing house of those damaged human bundles which are the *raison d'être* of our great war-hospital.

VII

"T.... A...."

War-hospital patients are of many sorts. It is a common mistake of the arm-chair newspaper devourer to lump all soldiers together as quaint, bibulous, aitch-dropping innocents, lamblike and gauche in drawing-rooms, fierce and picturesque on the field, who (to judge by their published photographs) are continually on the grin and continually shaking hands either with each other or with equally grinsome French peasant women at cottage doors or with the local mayor who congratulates them on the glorious V.C.'s which, of course, they are continually winning. In a war hospital that harbours many thousands of patients per annum, we should know, in the long run, something about the characteristics of Tommy Atkins; and it is with resentment that I hear him thus classified as a mere type. He is not a type. Discipline and training have given him some veneer of generalised similarities. Beneath these, Tommy Atkins is simply the man in the street—any man in any street; and if you look out of your window in the city and see a throng of pedestrians upon the pavement you might just as well say that because they are all civilians they are all alike as that, because all soldiers wear khaki, they are all alike.

I have a quarrel with the Press on the score of its persistent fostering of this notion that "our gallant lads" (as the sentimental scribe calls them) are a pack of children about whose exploits an unfailing stream of semi-pathetic, semi-humorous anecdotes must be put forth. Even the old professional army exhibited no dead level either of blackguards

on the one hand or humble Galahads on the other. But whatever may have been the case before the war, all the armies of Europe are now alike in this, that they are composed of civilians who merely happen to

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have adopted a certain garb for the performance of a certain job—and, be it remarked, a temporary job. That garb has not reduced the citizens, who have the honour to wear it, to a monotonous level either of intelligence or of conduct: nor even of opinions about the war itself. I have had fire-eaters in my ward who breathed the sentiments of *John Bull* and the *Evening News*, and I have had pacifists (they seemed to have fought no less bravely) who, week by week, read and approved Mr. Snowden in the *Labour Leader*; I have had Radicals and Tories, and patients who cared for neither party, but whose passion was cage-birds or boxing or amateur photography; I have had patients who were sulky and patients who were bright, patients who were unlettered and patients who were educated, patients who could hardly express themselves without the use of an ensanguined vocabulary and patients who were gently spoken and fastidious. Each of them was Tommy Atkins—the inanely smirking hero of the picture-paper and the funny paragraph. Neither his picture nor the paragraph may be positively a lie, and yet, when the arm-chair dweller chucklingly draws attention to them, I am tempted to relapse into irreverence and utter one or other (or perhaps both) of two phrases which T. Atkins is himself credited with using *ad nauseam*—“Na-poo” and “I *don’t* think.”

When I assert—as I do unhesitatingly assert—that no one could work in a war-hospital ward for any length of time without an ever-deepening respect and fondness for Tommy Atkins, it is the same thing as asserting that the respect and fondness are evoked by close contact with one’s countrymen: nothing more nor less. A hospital ward is a haphazard selection of one’s fellow-Britons: the most wildly haphazard it is possible to conceive. And the pessimistic cynic who, after a sojourn in that changing company for a month or two can still either generalise about them or (if he does) can still not acknowledge that in the mass they are amazingly lovable, is beyond hope. The war has taught its lessons to us all, and none more important than this. For myself I confess that I never knew before how nice were nine out of ten of the individuals with whom I sat silent in trains, whom I glanced at in business offices or behind counters, whom I saw in workshops or in the field or who were my neighbours in music-halls. They were strangers. In the years to come I hope they will be strangers no longer. For they and I have dressed alike and borne the same surname—Atkins.

Of course, there remain a few generalisations which *can* safely be risked about even so nondescript a person as the new Tommy Atkins. As practically all the Tommy Atkinses are, at this moment, concentrated on the prosecution of one great job, it is natural that their main interests should revolve round that job. They all (for instance) want the job to be finished. They all (within my experience) want

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it to be finished well. They nearly all desire earnestly to cease soldiering as soon as the job *is* finished well. I never yet met the man (though he may exist, outside the brains of the scribes aforementioned) who, having tasted the joys of roughing it, is determined not to return to a humdrum desk in an office: on the contrary, that office and that humdrum desk have now become this travelled adventurer's most roseate dream. I have conversed with patients drawn from nearly every walk in life, and I do not remember one who definitely spoke of refusing to go back to his former work—if he could get it.

One of my patients had been a subterranean lavatory attendant. You would have thought his ambitions—after visits to Egypt, Malta, the Dardanelles and France—might have soared to loftier altitudes. He had survived hair-raising adventures; he had taken part in the making of history; although wounded he had not been incapacitated for an active career in the future; and he was neither illiterate nor unintelligent. Yet he told me, with obvious satisfaction, that his place was being kept open for him. I was, as it were, invited to rejoice with him over the destiny which was his. I may add that the singular revelations which he imparted as to the opportunities for extra earnings in his troglodyte trade extorted from me a more enthusiastic sympathy than might be supposed possible.

That agreeable domestic pet, *homo sapiens*, remains unchanged even when you dress him up in a uniform and set him fighting. He is always consistently inconsistent; he is always both reasonable and unreasonable. You can try to cast him in a mould, but he resumes his normal shapelessness the moment the mould is removed. Expose him to frightful ordeals of terror and pain, and he will emerge grumbling about some petty grievance or carrying on a flirtation with another man's wife or squabbling about sectarian dogmas or gambling on magazine competitions or planning new businesses—in fact, behaving precisely as the natural lord of creation always does behave. No member of our hospital staff, I imagine, will ever forget the arrival of the first batch of exchanged British wounded prisoners; It was the most tragic scene I have ever witnessed. It is a fact, for which I make no apology, that tears were shed by some of those whose task it was to welcome that pitiful band of martyrs. We had received convoys of wounded many a time, but *these* broken creatures, so pale, so neglected, so thin and so infinitely happy to be free once more, had a poignant appeal which must have melted the most rigid official. (And we are neither very official, here, nor very rigid.) Well, amongst these liberated captives was one who told a sad tale of starvation at his internment camp. There is little doubt that it was a true tale, in the main. On that I make no comment. I simply introduce you to this gentleman, who had been restored to his native land after ten months of entombment, in order to mention that on the following morning, when his breakfast was placed before him, he turned up his nose at it. Loudly complaining of the poorness of the food, he leant out of bed, picked up a brown-paper parcel which had been his only luggage, and produced from it some German salted herring, which he proceeded to eat with grumbling gusto.

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That is not specially Tommy Atkins; it is *homo sapiens* of the hearthside, whether in suburban villa or in slum, for ever dissatisfied (more especially with his victuals) and for ever evoking our affection all the same.

No; Tommy Atkins is never twice alike. He is unanimous on few debatable matters. One of them, as I have said, is the desirability of finishing the war—in the proper way. (But even here there are differences as to what constitutes the proper way.) Another is (I trust I shall not shock the reader) the extreme displeasingness of life at the front. I would not say that our hospital patients are positively thankful to be wounded, nor that they do not wish to recover with reasonable rapidity. But that they are glad to be safe in England once more is undeniable. The more honour to them that few, if any, flinch from returning to duty—when they know only too well what that duty consists of. But they make no bones about their opinion. Not long ago I was the conductor of a party of convalescents who went to a special matinee of a military drama. The theatre was entirely filled with wounded soldiers from hospitals, plus a few nurses and orderlies. It was an inspiring sight. The drama went well, and its patriotic touches received their due meed of applause. But when the heroine, in a moving passage, declared that she had never met a wounded British soldier who was not eager to get back to the front, there arose, in an instant, a spontaneous shout of laughter from the whole audience. That was Tommy Atkins unanimous for once.

He was unanimous too, I should add, in perceiving immediately that the actress had been disconcerted by his roar of amusement. The poor girl's emotional speech had been ruined. She looked blank and stood irresolute. At once a burst of hand-clapping took the place of the laughter. It was not ironical, it was friendly and apologetic. "Go ahead!" it said. "We're sorry. Those lines aren't your fault, anyway. You spoke them very prettily, and it was a shame to laugh. But the ass of a playwright hadn't been in the trenches, and if your usual audiences relish that kind of speech they haven't been there either."

So much for Tommy Atkins in his unanimous mood—unanimously condemning cant and at the same time unanimously courteous. Now that I come to reflect I believe that, in his best moments, these are perhaps the only two points concerning which Tommy Atkins *is* unanimous. Whether he lives up to them or not (and to expect him unflinchingly to live up to them in season and out of season is about as sensible as to expect him perpetually to live up to the photographs and anecdotes), we may take them as his ideal. He dislikes humbug: he tries to be polite. Could one sketch a sounder scaffolding on which to build all the odd divergencies—crankinesses and heroisms, stupidities and engagingnesses—which may go to make the edifice of an average decent soul's material, mental and spiritual habitation?

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Postscript.—An expert—one of England's greatest experts—who has read the above tells me that I have not done justice to the old professional army men of Mons and the Aisne. When wounded and in our hospital they *did* want to go back to fight. But their sole reason, given with frankness, was that they considered they were needed: the new army, in training, was not ready: it would be murder to send the new army out, unprepared, to such an ordeal.

This authority, who has interviewed many thousands of convalescents, further remarked: "The wounded man who has been under shell fire and who professes to be eager to go back, whether ordered or no, is a liar. On the other hand, the scrimshankers who try to get out of going back, when they should go back, are an amazingly small minority."

VIII

LAUNDRY PROBLEMS

A number of oddly unmasculine duties fell to the lot of the R.A.M.C. orderly prior to the time when "V.A.D.'s" were allowed to take his place (at least to some extent) throughout our English war-hospitals. One of my first tasks in the morning was the collecting and classification of my ward's dirty linen. The work cannot be called difficult. It would be an exaggeration to say that it demands a supreme intellectual effort. But to the male mind it is, at least, rather novel. The average bachelor has perhaps been accustomed to scrutinise his collars, handkerchiefs and underclothes before and after their trips to the laundry. He has seldom, I think, had intimate trafficking with pillow-cases, sheets, counterpanes and tablecloths. In the reckoning of these he is apt to make mistakes and to lapse into a casualness which, in a woman familiar with household routine, would be improbable. "Sister's" sharpest reproofs were called forth by errors made in connection with this daily exchange of clean for dirty linen.

A form, of course, had to be filled in. (The army provides a form for everything.) This form presents a catalogue of eighty-one separate items, from "Blankets" ("Child's," "Infant's"—I do not know what is the difference between them, and I never had to deal with either—"G.S."—whatever that may be—and "White") to "Waist-coats, Strait." It distinguishes between ten kinds of "Cases"—pillow-cases, paillasse-cases, and the like: for example, there are "barrack" bolster-cases and "hospital" bolster-cases; and you must not confound "hospital" mattress-cases with "officers'" mattress-cases. You are misled if you imagine that the heading "Cases" has exhausted the possibilities which appeared to be latent in that noun; for, in addition to the ten unqualified "Cases" there are seven more, defined as "Cases, slip." Can you wonder that the orderly, presented

with a bin-full of confused and crumpled objects ready for the wash, and told to count them and enter their numbers in

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the appointed columns, occasionally made a wrong guess? Then there were eight sorts of “Cloths”—tablecloth, tray-cloth, distinctive cloth, and so forth. (To how many lay minds does “distinctive cloth” convey any meaning?) Counterpanes you would think to be obvious enough; but that remarkable compilation, the *Check Book for Hospital Linen* (“Printed for H.M. Stationery Office....” etc.), recognises four varieties. It also allows for four varieties of sheets, four of aprons and four of trousers. Of towels it knows six.

Each ward has a certain stock of linen in its cupboard. That stock can only be kept at the proper level by strict barter of a soiled object for a clean duplicate of the same object. As there are three hundred and sixty-five days in the year on which this transaction occurs, and sixty wards’ bundles of linen to be dealt with by both the Dirty Linen Department and the Clean Linen Department on each of those days, it is clear that exactitude in the filling-in of the form aforementioned becomes an affair of almost nightmare importance. Bring back from the Clean Linen Store three dusters instead of the four dusters which you previously handed in at the Dirty Linen Store, and your cupboard will, to the end of time, be short of one duster which it should have possessed. Even if Sister fails to pounce promptly on the evidence of the loss, the quartermaster’s dread stocktaking will ultimately find you out. Your cupboard declines to correspond with his book-entries. And there is trouble brewing, in consequence. (But indeed, if the loss of a single duster were the sole crime revealed on stocktaking day, you would be fortunate.)

The orderly, with an obese bundle of washing on his back, plods from the ward to the Dirty Linen Store at quarter to nine every morning. I say he “plods” because the bundle is generally too heavy for transportation at a rapid pace. Twenty sheets are usually but a part of the bundle; and twenty sheets are alone no light burden. Between his teeth—both his hands being occupied with the balancing of the bundle—he carries his chit: that indispensable list. Arrived at the store he dumps the bundle on the ground, opens it, and pitches its contents piecemeal over a counter to one of the staff of the store. One by one the objects are named and counted aloud, as they fly across the counter, the staff orderly simultaneously checking the list and keeping an eye on what he is receiving. For we may, by guile, palm off on him one sheet as two. It can be done, by means of a certain legerdemain which comes with practice. Or we may have received from the Dry Store, amongst the rags meant for cleaning purposes, a couple of quite worn-out socks, not a pair, and long past placing on human feet: these derelicts, with a rapid motion, can be passed over the counter amongst the good socks, and only later in the day will the Dirty Linen Store officials detect the fraud—when it is impossible to locate its perpetrator. The store-orderly’s job is therefore one requiring some astuteness: his checking of the list has to be achieved at a high speed and in the midst of a babel; for as many ward-orderlies are present as the length of the counter will accommodate, and they are all getting rid of their dirty-linen bundles at the tops of their voices.

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Altercations, I am afraid, were not infrequent in the epoch when the actors in this drama were of the male sex. (Even now, when the scene is mainly feminine, I believe differences of opinion continue to arise, but doubtless the language in which they are conducted is seemlier if no less deadly.) The store-orderly had a marvellous eye for the difference between two kinds of shirts which are worn by our patients. One kind has a pleat in the back, the other kind hasn't; and I confess I occasionally transposed them, on the form. It was fatal to do so. There was a separate line for each brand of shirt and there must be a separate entry. The store-orderly's trained powers of observation could see that pleat, or the absence of it, even as the shirt slid across his line of vision in a torrent of other shirts. His hand shot out and grabbed it back from joining the heap on the floor within the counter. His pencil poised itself from the ticking-off of the items on the form. "Wrong again!" he would cry, sometimes in anguish and sometimes in anger. And there was nothing for it but to apologise. To keep on good terms with the various orderlies in the various stores was the secret of making one's life worth living—a secret even profounder than that of keeping on good terms with Sister: to be sure it was (though she seldom realised it) the very foundation of the art of keeping on good terms with her. You could not even begin to please Sister unless, at the end of those incessant journeyings of yours which she did not see, you had dealings with store-orderlies who were obliging and who would give you the things which the taskmistress had sent you to fetch (or would drop a kindly hint as to where and by what means you could acquire them). The Dirty Linen Store orderly who declined to accept your plea for forgiveness when you had been obtuse enough to see a fomentation-wringer in a tea cloth, could devastate the harmony of a whole forenoon. A sweet reasonableness was undoubtedly the note to strike when such a contretemps occurred.

Having got quit of the last item in your bundle, you returned to the ward to attend to other (and generally less entertaining) duties until such time as it was proper to repair to the Clean Linen Store. The staff of the Clean Linen Store, a huge department whose system of book-keeping is enough to make the brain reel (for here sheets, *etc.*, are dealt with not in dozens but in thousands), had in the interim received your chit from their colleagues of the Dirty Linen Store. These latter, rashly or otherwise, had guaranteed its accuracy by initialing it. Accordingly, in the Clean Linen Store, a fresh bundle was ready for your acceptance, its contents consisting of duplicates of the objects now on their way to the laundry.

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It was unwise, however, to accept this neatly folded and virginal bundle without investigation. It might contain what the chit demanded; or it might not. Before you could carry it off you must yourself initial, and finally bid farewell to, the chit: thereby certifying that you had got what you claimed. To make sure of this you would be well advised to undo the bundle, and (as far as was practicable in a jostling crowd of fellow-orderlies similarly employed) run through the whole of its contents, computing them with precision: twenty sheets, twelve pillow-cases, nine bolster-cases—it is only too easy to miss the difference in the sizes of these—seventeen hand-towels, two operating-aprons, eleven handkerchiefs, ten pyjama trousers, ten sleeping-jackets, and so on. When you had ticked-off all these separate items in the list you scribbled your initials thereon and fled with your bundle—to find, as often as not, that Sister, sorting the things into her cupboard, could discover a mistake after all. This meant a humble return to the Clean Linen Store to beg for the mistake's rectification; and the sergeant in charge had merely to take your chit from his file, and show you your own initials on it, to prove that you were in the wrong.

It is conceivable that by means of a ward stocktaking and a reference of the results to the figures in the sergeant's huge ledger, you might have proved that you were not in the wrong. But the only time I ever knew one of these disputes to be thus put to the test I admit I wished that I had refrained from so temerarious an adventure. Somehow or other I had managed to come back to the ward with three clean pillow-cases fewer than the tale of dirty ones I had taken away. And Sister was exceedingly cross. The particular Sister whose drudge I was at that period was rather apt to be cross; and this was one of her crossdest days. She threatened to "report" me, and in fact did so. I was not—as she seemed to expect—shot at dawn. I merely underwent a formal reproof from a high authority who perhaps (but this is a surmise) knew Sister's idiosyncrasies even better than I did. There remained, nevertheless, the pressing problem of the three strayed pillow-cases. These Sister commanded me to obtain from the Clean Linen Store. But you cannot go to the Clean Linen Store and say "Please give me three pillow-cases." The Clean Linen Store either says "Why?" (a question which, under the circumstances, is flatly unanswerable), or else tells you, in language both firm and ornamental, that you have already had them: your initialed chit testifies the fact.

At all events, after some parley, the Clean Linen Store sergeant (who was less of an ogre than he pretended) offered to strike a bargain with me. If I would count all the pillow-cases, in and out of use, in my ward, and bring him the total, he would compare the said total with the figures in his ledger. Those figures he would not divulge to me. But if the number I announced was three short of the number in his ledger, he would give me the three, and say no more about it.

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The bargain seemed a fair one. In Sister's absence I spent a precious half-hour of what should have been my "afternoon off" in counting all the pillow-cases I could find in the ward. A good-natured probationer, who sympathised with me in my difficulties (she too had suffered), counted them also. A convalescent patient interested himself in the problem: he also went the round of the beds, and investigated the cupboard, counting all the pillow-cases. We three each arrived at the same total. Armed with this total I marched back to the sergeant in the Clean Linen Store.

He turned up his ledger and ran his finger down the page till he came to the entry of pillow-cases opposite to my ward. And then he laughed a laugh of fiendish glee.

"Do you know," he said, "that instead of having three pillow-cases too few, you've seven too many!"

Such are the traps set by the business man, the expert of ledgers, for the innocent amateur. We had actually got more pillow-cases than we were entitled to. All unwittingly, in my eagerness to placate Sister, I had published the mild chicanery in which she had indulged on behalf of her ward. The sergeant, growing grey in the solution of these abstruse mathematical and psychological mysteries, had suspected this Sister all along. He enlightened me. She had recently been transferred from another ward—and in her going had (against the rules) wafted with her a small selection of that ward's property.... And now there would be a surprise stocktaking in her new ward: the seven surplus pillow-cases—and perhaps other loot—would have to be explained. Sister, in short, was in for a *mauvais quart d'heure*.

It was a suitable penalty for her crossness. It should have taught her the perils of crossness. With regret I add that she did not envisage the episode in that light. She was merely rather crosser than before. It was without any profound sorrow that I soon afterwards bade her farewell, on her departure to overseas spheres of activity. But she had at least afforded me a lesson in the importance of accuracy over my dirty and clean linen bundles. Never again would I risk the ordeal of a surprise stocktaking; never again would I risk a combat with a ledger-fortified sergeant; never again would I risk any attempt at the tortuous in my dealings with the classifications of the eighty-one items on the tear-off leaf of that dire volume, the *Check Book for Hospital Linen*.

IX

ON BUTTONS

In one of his recent books Mr. H.G. Wells expresses a surprised annoyance at the spectacle of spurs. Vast numbers of military gentlemen (he observed at the front) go clanking about in spurs although they have never had—and never will have—occasion

to bestride a horse. Spurs are a symbolic survival, a waste of steel and of labour in manufacture, a futile expenditure of energy to keep clean and to put on and take off.

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When I first enlisted I felt a similar irritation in regard to buttons. His buttons are a burden to the new recruit. Time takes the edge off his resentment. Time is a soother of sorrows, a healer of rancours, however legitimate. Nevertheless one's buttons remain for ever a nuisance. I do not complain that I should have to make my bed, polish my boots, keep my clothes neat. These are the obvious decencies of life. But the daily shining-up of metal buttons which need never have been made of metal at all, which tarnish in the damp and indeed lose their lustre in an hour in any weather, which, moreover, look much prettier dull than bright—this is enough to convert the most bloodthirsty recruit into obdurate pacifism.

It is to be presumed that in the pipe-claying days of peace the hours were apt to hang heavy in barracks, and the furbishing of buttons was devised not alone for smartness' sake, but to occupy idle hands for which otherwise Satan might be finding some more mischievous employment. The theory—though it throws a lurid light on the unprofitableness of a soldier's profession when there is no war to justify his existence—is not devoid of sense. But why this custom, designed for that excellent mortal, the T. Atkins who walked out with nurse-maids, and was none too busy between-whiles, should be forced upon a totally different (if no less estimable) T. Atkins whose job hardly gives him a moment for meals—let alone for dalliance with the fair—I cannot pretend to fathom. It is arguable that the ornamental soldier is suited by glossy buttons and may properly lavish time and trouble thereupon. It is not arguable that glossy buttons are a valid feature of the garb of a humdrum and harassed hospital orderly.

Many a time, footsore and aching with novel toil, I could have groaned when, instead of lying down to relax, I had to tackle the polishing of that idiotic panoply of buttons. My tunic had (it still has) five large buttons in front, four pocket-flap buttons, two shoulder buttons, and two shoulder numerals, "T.—R.A.M.C.—LONDON." My great-coat had (it still has) five large front buttons, two shoulder buttons and two shoulder numerals, three back belt buttons, two coat-tail buttons. My cap had (it still has) a badge and two small strap-buttons. All these must be kept brilliant. And, in addition, there was the intricate brasswork of one's belt.

Are the wounded any better looked after because a tired orderly has spent some of his off-duty rest-hour in rubbing metal buttons which would have been every bit as buttonable had they been made of bone?

Many were the debates, in our hut, over the button problem. The abolition of metal buttons being impracticable—the bold project of a petition to the King and Lord Kitchener was never proceeded with—two questions alone interested us: (1) which was the best polish, and (2) which was the quickest and easiest system of polishing. The shabby peddler-cum-boot-maker who had somehow established,

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at that period, a monopoly of the minor trade of our camp, vended a substance (in penny tins) called Soldier's Friend. This was a solidified plate-polish of a pink hue. Having—as per the instructions—“moistened” it, in other words, spat upon it, you worked up a modicum of the resulting pink mud with an old toothbrush, then applied same to each button. When you had rubbed a pink film on to the button you proceeded to rub it off again, and lo! the tarnish had departed like an evil dream and the metal glistened as if fresh from the mint. If you were very particular you finished the performance with chamois leather. Thereafter you lost the last precious five minutes before parade in efforts, with knife-blade or clothesbrush, to remove from your tunic the smears of pink paste which had failed to repose on the buttons and had stuck to the surrounding cloth instead. Luckily, Soldier's Friend dries and cakes and powders off fairly quickly. It is a lovable substance, in its simple behaviour, its lack of complications. I surmise that somebody has made a fortune out of manufacturing millions of those penny tins. There is at least one imitation of Soldier's Friend on the market, and, like most imitations, it is neither better nor worse than the original. Except for the name on the outside of the tin, the two commodities cannot be told apart. No doubt the imitator has likewise made a fortune. If so, both fortunes have been amassed from a foible to whose blatant uselessness and wastefulness even a Bond Street jeweller or a de-luxe hotel chef would be ashamed to give countenance.

One member of the hut's company, more fastidious than his fellows, objected to expectorating on to his Soldier's Friend. Rather than do so he would tramp the fifty yards to our wash-place and obtain a couple of drops of water from the tap. (The same man thought nothing of keeping a half-consumed ham, some decaying fruit, and an opened pot of Bovril all wrapped in his spare clothes in his box under his bed. That is by the way. I am here concerned not with human nature, but with buttons.) Plain water, however, was voted less effective than the more popular liquid. The scientifically minded had a notion that human spittle contained some acid which Nature had evolved specially to assist the action of Soldier's Friend. I am bound to say that I was of the anti-plain-water party myself. For a space I became an adherent of the experimentalists who moistened their Soldier's Friend with methylated spirit, alleging that the ensuing polish was more permanent. I lapsed. My small bottle of methylated spirit came to an end, and on reflection I was not sure that its superiority over spittle had been proved. Nothing, in the English climate, can make the sheen of metal buttons endure, at the outside, more than one day. “Bluebell,” “Silvo,” and the other chemico-frictional preparations in favour of which I ultimately abandoned Soldier's Friend, are alike in this—that their virtue lies in frequent application, diligence

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and elbow-grease. They are, every one, excellent. Their inventors deserve our gratitude. But our gratitude to their inventors must be nothing compared with their inventors' gratitude to the person who decreed that the hard-pressed T. Atkins of the Great War should wear (at least in part) the same needless finery as the relatively otiose T. Atkins of Peace. May that despot, whoever he be, depart to a realm of bliss—I suppose it would be bliss to him—where he has to do hospital orderlies' chores in an attire completely composed of tarnishing buttons, every separate one of which must hourly be brought up to the parade standard of specklessness.

X

A WORD ABOUT "SLACKERS IN KHAKI"

When the ambulances containing a new batch of wounded begin to roll up to the entrance of the hospital they are received by a squad of orderlies. To a spectator who happened to pass at that moment it might appear that these orderlies had nothing else to do but lift stretchers out of ambulances and carry them indoors. The squad of orderlies have an air of always being ready on duty waiting to pounce out on any patient who may arrive at any hour of the day or night and promptly transfer him to his bed. I have known of a visitor, witnessing this incident, who commented on it in a manner which showed that he imagined he had seen our unit performing its sole function; he pictured us existing purely and simply for one end—the carrying of stretchers up the front steps into the building. He was kind enough to praise the rapidity with which the job was done—but he held it to be a job which hardly justified the enlistment of so considerable a company of able-bodied males. What, exactly, we did with ourselves during the long hours when ambulances were *not* arriving, he failed to understand. I suppose he pictured us twiddling our thumbs in some kind of cosy club-room situated in the neighbourhood of the front door, from whence we could be summoned as soon as another convoy hove in sight.

The truth of the matter is quite otherwise. Arrivals of wounded, even when they occur several times a day (I have known six hundred patients enter the hospital in forty-eight hours), are far from being our chief preoccupation. Admittedly they take precedence of other duties. The message, "Convoy coming! Every man wanted in the main hall!" is the signal for each member of the unit who is not engaged in certain exempted sections to drop his work, whatever it is, and proceed smartly to report to the sergeant-in-charge. The telephone has notified us of the hour at which the ambulances may be expected; the hospital's internal telephone system has passed on the tidings to the various officials concerned; and, five minutes before the patients are due, all the orderlies likely to be required must "down tools," so to speak, and line-up at the door. They come streaming from every corner of the hospital and of its grounds.

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Some have been working in wards, some have been pushing trolleys in the corridors, some have been shovelling coke, some have been toiling in the cookhouse or stores, some have been shifting loads of bedding to the fumigator, some have been on “sanitary fatigue,” some have been cleaning windows or whitewashing walls, some have been writing or typing documents, some have been spending their rest-hour in slumber or over a game of billiards. Whatever they were doing, they must stop doing it at the word of command.

If the convoy be a large one, its advent may even mean, for the orderlies, the dread announcement, “All passes stopped.” The luckless wight whose one afternoon-off in the week this happens to be, and who has probably arranged to tryst with a lady friend, finds, at the gate, that he is turned back by the sentry. In vain he displays his pass, properly signed, stamped and dated: the telephone has warned the sentry (or “R.M.P.”—Regimental Military Policeman) that the passes have been countermanded. Until the convoy has been dealt with, the pass is so much waste paper, and the unfortunate orderly’s inamorata will look for him and behold him not. How many painful misunderstandings this “All passes stopped” law has given rise to, one shudders to guess.

But indeed no war-hospital orderly ever arranges any appointment without the proviso that he is liable to break it. The folk who imagine that the hospital orderly enjoys a “cushy job” (to use the appropriate vernacular) seldom make sufficient allowance for this painful aspect of it. The ordinary soldier in training in an English camp has his evenings free, and certain other free times, which are nearly as sure as the sun’s rising. The hospital orderly is *never*—in theory at any rate—off duty. His free moments are regarded not as a right but as a favour: no freedom, at any time, can be guaranteed. He is liable to be called on in the middle of the night, or at the instant when he is going off duty, or when at a meal, or when resting, or when on the point of walking out in pursuance of the gentle art of courtship. And he must respond, instant, or he will find that he has earned the C.B.—which in this instance means not Companion of the Bath, but Confined to Barracks, a punishment as hard to bear as the cruel “keeping in” of our school-days.

Without presuming to compare either the importance or the onerousness of the hospital orderly’s work with that of the soldier capable of going to the front to fight, I would here add that the critic who watches the stretcher-carrying and thinks it a pity that able-bodied males should be wasted on it, is doing the system (not to mention the men themselves) an injustice. For the men whom he sees are not, as a matter of fact, able-bodied, even though muscular enough to stand this short physical effort. Excitable old gentlemen who believe that they can decide at a glance whether a man is medically fit, and write to

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the Press about the “shirkers” they think they have detected, were of the opinion, long since, that the R.A.M.C. should be combed out. Certain journals made a great feature of this proposal. Whatever may be the case elsewhere, I can only say that as far as our unit was concerned it had already, months before the newspaper agitation, been combed out five times; and this in spite of the fact that, at the period when I enlisted, our Colonel declined to look at any recruit who was not either over age or had been rejected for active service. The unit was thus made up, even then, of elderly men and of “crocks.” (This was before the start of the Derby Scheme and, of course, considerably before the introduction of Universal Service.) Perhaps it is allowable to point the moral against the “shirker”-discovering armchair patriots aforesaid: that no small proportion of our unit was composed of over-age recruits who, instead of informing the world at large that they wished they were younger, “And, by Gad, I envy the lads their chance to do *anything* in the country’s cause,” did not rest until they had found an opening. In my own hut there were two recruits over sixty years of age. Elsewhere in the unit there were several over fifty. Our mess-room at meal times was, and still is, dotted with grey-haired heads, not of retired army men rejoined, but of men who, previous to the war, had lived comfortable civilian lives. At a later date, when the few fit men that our combings-out revealed had gone elsewhere, the unit was kept up to strength by the drafting-in either of C3 recruits or of soldiers who, having been at the front and been wounded, or invalided back, were marked for home duty only. So much for the “slackers in khaki” which one extra emphatic writer (himself not in khaki, although younger than several of the orderlies here) professed to discover in the R.A.M.C. Those “slackers” may be having an easier time of it than the heroes of France, Gallipoli, Salonika, Egypt and Mesopotamia. But they are not having so easy a time as some of their detractors.

The hospital orderly is not (I think I may assert on his behalf) puffed up with foolish illusions as to his place in the scheme of things. It is a humble place, and he knows it. His work is almost comically unromantic, painfully unpicturesque. Moreover—let us be frank—much of it is uninteresting, after the first novelty has worn off. Work in the wards has its compensations: here there is the human element. But only a portion of a unit such as ours can be detailed for ward work: the rest are either hewers of wood and drawers of water or else have their noses to a grindstone of clerical monotonousness beside which the ledger-keeping of a bank employee is a heaven of blissful excitements. You will find few hospital orderlies who are not “fed up”; you will find none who do not long for the war’s end. And I fancy you will find very, very few who would not go on active service

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if they could. On the occasions when we have had calls for overseas volunteers, the response has always exceeded the demand. The people who, looking at a party of hospital orderlies, remark—it sounds incredible, but there *are* people who make the remark—“These fellows should be out at the front,” may further be reminded that “these fellows” now have no say in the choice of their own whereabouts. Not a soldier in the land can decide where or how he shall serve. That small matter is not for him, but for the authorities. He may be thirsting for the gore of Brother Boche, and an inexorable fate condemns him to scrub the gore of Brother Briton off the tiles of the operating theatre. He may (but I never met one who did) elect to sit snugly on a stool at a desk filling-in army forms or conducting a card index; and lo, at a whisper from some unseen Nabob in the War Office, he finds himself hooked willy-nilly off his stool and dumped into the Rifle Brigade. This is what it means to be in khaki, and it is hardly the place of persons not in khaki to bandy sneers about the comfortableness of the Linseed Lancers whose initials, when not standing for Rob All My Comrades, can be interpreted to mean Run Away, Matron’s Coming. The squad of orderlies unloading that procession of ambulances at the hospital door may not envy the wounded sufferers whom they transmit to their wards; but the observer is mistaken if he assumes that the orderlies have, by some questionable manoeuvre, dodged the fiery ordeal of which this string of slow-moving stretchers is the harvest.

XI

THE RECREATION ROOMS

We rather pride ourselves, at the 3rd London, on the fame of our hospital not merely as a place in which the wounded get well, but as a place in which they also “have a good time.” The two things, truth to tell, are interlinked—a truism which might seem to need no labouring, were it not for the evidence brought from more rigid and red-tape-ridden establishments. A couple of our most valued departments are the “Old Rec.” and the “New Rec.”—the old and new recreation rooms. The new recreation room, a spacious and well-built “hut,” contains three billiard tables, a library, and current newspapers, British and Colonial. This room is the scene of whist-drives, billiard and pool tournaments, and other sociable ongoing. Sometimes there is an exhibition match on the best billiard table: the local champion of Wandsworth shows us his skill—and a very pretty touch he has: once the lady billiard champion of England came, and defeated the best opponent we could enlist against her—an event which provoked tremendous applause from a packed congregation of boys in blue.

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The old recreation room is fitted with a permanent stage for theatricals and concerts. It is also our "Movie Palace." (I think our hospital was the first to instal a cinematograph as a fixture.) During the morning the floor area is dotted with miniature billiard tables—which are never for a moment out of use. In the afternoon these are removed; some hundreds of chairs replace them; and at 4.30 we begin an entertainment—music, a play (we have had Shakespeare here), lantern slides, films, or what not. Those entertainments, which have continued unbrokenly since the hospital began to function in 1914, constitute the outstanding feature of the "good time" enjoyed by 3rd Londoners. The "Old Rec." and its crowded concerts will be a memory cherished by hosts of fighting men from the homeland and from overseas.

In the original hospital plan—drawn up before the war—the Old Rec. (which is a part of the main school building) was marked down to be a ward of forty beds. Its structure, its internal geography, and the sheer impossibility of providing it with the essential sanitary conveniences, would make it unsuitable to be a ward of four beds, let alone of forty. On this account its allotment for recreation purposes would be excusable. But the Old Rec. and the New Rec. too, for that matter, justify their superficial waste of bed-space on other—and unanswerable—grounds. It is a mere matter of common sense to arrange some centre to which the patient can repair and employ his leisure when he is sufficiently well to potter about though not well enough to be discharged from hospital. Instead of idling in his ward and disturbing the patients who are still confined to bed—and who, often, are urgently in need of quietness—the convalescent departs to one or other of the recreation rooms, morning and afternoon, where he can make as much noise as he likes and where he can meet and fraternise with his comrades from every front. (What exchanging of stories those recreation rooms have witnessed!) On the one hand, then, the seriously ill patient is not annoyed by the roving in the ward of the walking patients; and on the other the walking patients are not irked by the necessity for keeping quiet at a period when returning health stimulates them to a wholesome desire for fun. Both kinds of patients, thus, may legitimately be said to get better more quickly than they would have had a chance to do were it not for the recreation rooms. It is within the writer's knowledge that the medical staff of the hospital, on being consulted as to the "bed value" of the recreation rooms, unanimously agreed that their existence reduced the average sojourn of the hospital's inmates by a definite "per day" ratio: that ratio, so far from showing a bed-space waste, worked out at a per-annum gain of bed-space equivalent to a ward—if such a colossal ward could be conceived!—of upwards of 300 beds. So much for a point which might not appear to be worth detailed explanation,

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but which has here been glanced at in order that critics (for, unbelievable though it sounds, there have been curmudgeons to growl of spoiling the wounded by too much pleasure) may be answered in advance. The recreation rooms are a paying investment both to the hospital and to the State. This is our trump card in any “spoiling the wounded” controversy—though I dare say that most of us would not, in any case, care twopence whether the concerts and films and billiards were an investment or an extravagance: nothing would stand in the way of our ambition to provide the now proverbial “good time” for all the guests of the 3rd London.

Scores of concerts of an excellence which would have been noteworthy anywhere have been presented to our assemblages of wounded in the Old Rec. Singers, musicians, actors and actresses have come and given of their best. Miss Hullah’s Music in War Time Committee (that delightful body), and Mr. Howard Williams’s parties, are perhaps our greatest regular standbys. Certain sections of the public know Mr. Howard Williams’s name as a famous one in other fields of activity: to thousands of soldiers it is honoured as that of the man who tirelessly organised scrumptious tea-parties, pierrot shows, exhibition boxing contests, nigger troupe entertainments—a list of jollifications, indoors in winter and in the open air in summer, infinite in variety and guaranteed never once to fall flat. A curious Empire reputation, this of Mr. Williams!

Yesterday, for instance, a nigger troupe visited the hospital. To be exact, they were the Metropolitan Police Minstrels (“By Permission of Sir E.R. Henry, G.C.V.O., K.C.B., C.S.I., Commissioner”); but no member of the audience, I imagine, could picture those jocose blackamoors, with their tambourines and bones, as really being anything so serious as traffic-controlling constables. That their comic songs were accompanied by a faultless orchestra was understandable enough. One can believe in a police band. One is not surprised that the police band is a good band. To believe that the ebony-visaged person with the huge red indiarubber-flexible mouth who sings “Under the archway, Archibald,” and follows this amorous ditty with a clog dance is—in his washed moments—the terror of burglars, requires unthinkable flights of imagination. As I gazed at this singular resurrection of Moore and Burgess and breathless childhood’s afternoons at the St. James’s Hall—the half circle of inanely alert faces the colour of fresh polished boots—the preposterous uniforms and expansive shirt-fronts—the “nigger” dialect which this strange convention demands but which cannot be said to resemble the speech of any African tribe yet discovered—I found that by no effort of faith or credulity could I pierce the disguise and perceive policemen.

It is at least twenty years since I met a nigger minstrel in the flesh. Vague ghosts of bygone persons and of piquant anachronisms seemed to float approvingly in the air: the Prince Consort, bustles, the high bicycle, sherry, Moody and Sankey, the Crystal Palace, Labouchere, “Pigs in Clover,” Lottie Collins, Evolution, Bimetallism: hosts of

forgotten images, names and shibboleths came popping out from the brain's dusty pigeon-holes, magically released by the spectacle of the nigger troupe.

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Yes, I was indeed switched into the past by Mr. Bones, Massa Jawns'n and the rest. And yet the present might have seemed more emphatic and more poignant. One felt, rather than saw, an audience of several hundred persons in the dim rows of chairs. And laughing at the broad witticisms of the niggers, or enjoying their choruses and orchestral accompaniments, one forgot just what that half-glimpsed audience consisted of; what it meant, and how it came to be here assembled.

Of course when the lights were turned up in the interval, one beheld the usual spectacle: stretchers, wheeled chairs, crutches, bandaged heads, arms in splints, blind men, men with one arm, men with one leg: rank on rank of war's flotsam and jetsam, British, Australians, New Zealanders, Newfoundlanders, Canadians, come to make merry over the minstrels: in the front row the Colonel and the Matron, with officer patients; here and there an orderly or a V.A.D.; here and there a Sister with her "boys." It was a family gathering. I descried no strangers, and no one not in uniform—unless you count the men too ill to don their blue slops: these had been brought in dressing-gowns or wrapped in blankets. No mere haphazard audience, this, of anybody and everybody who chooses to pay at a turnstile! Entrance to this hall is free ... but the price is beyond money, all the same.

A family party it was, decidedly. Thick fumes of tobacco smoke uprose from it. (Shall we ever abandon the cigarette habit, now?) Orderlies continued to arrive and stow themselves discreetly in corners: by some strange providence each orderly had found that for a while he could be spared from ward or office. Staff-Sergeants, Sergeants, Corporals—mysteriously they made time to leave their various departments. Even a bevy of masseuses (those experts eternally on the rush from ward to ward) had peeped in to see the nigger minstrels. And everybody was pleased: every jest and every conundrum got its laugh, every ballad its applause. Not that we ever "give the bird" to those who come to amuse us. Offer us skill in any shape or form—pierrots, niggers, pianist, violinist, conjurer, ventriloquist, dancer, reciter: any or all of these will be appreciated warmly.

Yesterday, for the nigger minstrels, there were no empty chairs. Until, in the midst of Part II ("A Laughable Sketch"—*vide* the programme—wherein female roles were doubly coy by reason of the masculinity of their falsetto dialogue and remarkable ankles) a messenger stole hither and thither, whispering to the orderlies, who promptly tiptoed from the room.

A convoy of new arrivals demanded our presence.

The silent ambulances were gliding up to the entrance of the hospital. Orderlies, fetched from their jobs and from the entertainment, lined up in the rain to take their places in the quartettes of bearers who lifted out the stretchers. The Assistant Matron, standing in the shelter of the door, checked her list; the Medical Officer handed out the

ward tickets; the lady clerks from the Admission and Discharge Office took the patients' particulars. And the bathroom became very busy.

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As I started to wheel a much-bandaged warrior to his ward, the recreation-room door opened and a burst of music-cum-essence-of-nigger emerged on his astonished ears. I was a little doubtful as to whether our new guest would not think his reception somewhat flippant in key. The poor fellow was visibly suffering, and the sound of tambourines and comedians' guffaws seemed a scarcely proper comment on his condition. I might have spared myself these misgivings. "Say, chum," he interrogated me feebly, "what's that noise?" "Nigger minstrels, old man." "Golly!—and have I got to go straight to my bed?"

Alas, he had to. It would be long before he could be well enough to be taken to one of our entertainments. But, had he been given his way, he would have gone direct from his fatiguing overseas journey into the Old Rec. to join the family party and chuckle at Mr. Bones and Massa Jawns'n.... No doubts assailed *his* mind as to whether it was right to "waste bed-space" on mere frivolities. A nigger minstrel show was to him a deal more important, in fact, than his wound. And perhaps, in instinct, he was not far wrong.

XII

THE COCKNEY

Before I enlisted I was lodging in a house which it was occasionally convenient to approach by a short cut through an area of slumland. One night when traversing this slum—the hour was 1.30 a.m.—I was stopped by a couple of women who told me that there was a man lying on the ground in an adjacent alley; they thought he must be ill; would I come and look at him?

They led me down a turning which opened into a narrow court. This court was reached by an arched tunnel through tenement houses. The tunnel was pitchy black, but I struck matches as I proceeded, and presently we came upon the object of my companions' solicitude—a young soldier, propped against the wall and with his legs projecting across the flagstones. The women had, in fact, discovered him by tripping over those legs in the darkness.

They were slatternly women, but warm-hearted; and when I had managed to arouse the gentleman in khaki and hoist him to his feet (for the cause of his indisposition was plain—and he had slept it off) they called down blessings on my head and overwhelmed our friend with sympathy which he did not wholly deserve and to which he made no rejoinder. Nor did he vouchsafe any very lucid answer when I asked him whither he was bound. I was prepared to pilot him—but I could hardly do so without knowing towards which point of the compass he proposed to steer, or rather, to be steered. "I know w'ere I want'er go," was all I could get out of him. Very well; if he knew his address, it was no concern of mine; he could lead on; I would act as a mere supporter. In this capacity, with my arm linked firmly in his, I brought him forth from the tunnel to

the street (he had no wish, it seemed, to go through the tunnel into the court), and here we bade farewell to the ladies.

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"Which way now?" I inquired. My charge responded not, but crossed to a corner and meandered up one of those interminable thoroughfares which lead out of London into the suburbs. Trudging with him and helping him to sustain his balance, which was not as stable as could be wished, I plied him with mildly genial conversation and at last elicited a few vague answers. These were couched in the cockney idiom, but I caught a faint nasal twang which led me to suspect that the speaker had come from the other side of the Atlantic. Yes—he told me he had just arrived from Canada.

We had proceeded a short distance when on the further side of the street I descried a golden halo which outlined the silhouette of a coffee stall. It occurred to me that a cup of hot coffee would be a good tonic to disperse the last symptoms of my friend's indiscretion, so I deflected him across the road, and we brought up, together, alongside the coffee-stall's counter.

Lest the reader should be unacquainted with that unique creation, the coffee-stall, I must explain that it is nocturnal in habit, emerging from its lair only between the hours of 11 p.m. and 7 a.m. It is an equipage of which the interior is inhabited by a fat, jolly man (at least according to my experience he is always fat and jolly) surrounded by steaming urns, plates of cake, buns of a citron-yellow hue, pale pastries, ham sandwiches and packets of cigarettes. The upper panels of one of its sides unfold to form a bar below and a penthouse roof above, the latter being generally extended into an awning. The awning is a protection for the customer not against the sun—a luminary from whose assaults the London coffee-stalls have little to fear—but against the rain. Thanks to these awnings, and the chattiness of the fat, jolly man, and the warmth exhaled by the urns, and the circumstance that the public houses are shut, our coffee-stalls are able to sell two brownish beverages, called respectively coffee and tea, which otherwise could hardly hope to achieve the honour of human consumption.

Fate has guided me on many midnight pilgrimages through the town, and I have imbibed, sometimes with relish, the liquids alluded to; I have also partaken of the pallid pastry and the citron-yellow buns. I am therefore in a position to write, for the benefit of persons less well informed, a treatise on coffee-stalls. This I shall refrain from doing. The one point it is necessary for me to mention is that the fat, jolly man, being deplorably distrustful, does not supply casual customers with teaspoons. You may have a cup of alleged tea (one penny) or a cup of alleged coffee (one penny); a dollop of sugar is dropped into the cup; the fat, jolly man gives the mixture a stir-round with a teaspoon; then he places the cup before you on the bar; but the teaspoon is still in his grasp. I dare say he would lend you the teaspoon if you requested him to do so; but unless you have that audacity he prefers to keep the teaspoon on his side of the bar, out of harm's way. This may seem strange, when you perceive that the teaspoon is fashioned of a metal unknown to silversmiths and might be priced at threepence. But even a threepenny teaspoon is a souvenir which some collectors would not despise.

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Presumably regular customers receive teaspoons, for teaspoons lie in a heap on the fat, jolly man's side of the counter. This was the case at the coffee-stall before which the young soldier and I ranged ourselves. And the heap of teaspoons seemed to exercise a curious fascination upon the soldier. He continued to stare at them for some minutes after I had set in front of him his cup of coffee. Then he stared at the fat, jolly man, who was cutting slabs from a loaf. He stared for a long time, making no reply to my remarks.

Rain began to patter on the awning—it had rained earlier in the night—and I became aware of a figure, lurking in the background on the pavement, beyond the awning's shelter, but within the radius of the haze of light projected therefrom. It was a wretched, slinking figure, that of an elderly man with bleared eyes and a red nose: one of those pariahs who haunt cabstands and promote the cabs up the rank when the front vehicle is hailed. This special specimen of his breed appeared to be a satellite of the coffee-stall proprietor: perhaps he helped to tow the stall to its berth. Whatever might be his function, he lingered on the outskirts of the ring of light, watching us; and the young soldier, in his slow scrutiny of the stall and its surroundings, caught sight of him, and stared stolidly, as he had stared at everything else.

I was in the act of drinking my coffee when the soldier suddenly leant across the counter, picked up a spoon, turned, and threw it at the derelict whose face wavered on the edge of the lamplight's circle. The victim of this extraordinary attack dodged the missile, then grovelled after it in the gutter. Meanwhile the fat man (instantaneously ceasing to be jolly) gave vent to an angry protest.

"Wotcher do *that* for? Chuckin' my spoons abart! Drunk, that's wot you are!"

"Ain't drunk!" said the soldier.

"Wotcher chuck my spoon at 'im for, then? 'E ain't done you no 'arm."

"Yus 'e 'as," was the soldier's surprising retort.

"No 'e ain't."

"Yus 'e 'as."

"No 'e 'ain't. 'E ain't done you no 'arm."

To which the derelict chimed in (he had retrieved the spoon and now advanced timidly with it under the awning): "I ain't done *you* no 'arm"—a husky, whimpering chorus to his fat patron.

The soldier fixed the derelict with a fierce glare. "Yus you 'ave," he reiterated.



I was wondering how the dispute might develop, but evidently my ear is unattuned to the nuances of these dialectics. The soldier's glare and the soldier's tone must have betrayed themselves to the two other men as factitious; the derelict, anyhow, lost his nervousness and, approaching nearer, scanned the soldier with dim, peering eyes; then broke into a joyous grin and exclaimed:

"Lumme, if it ain't ol' Bert!"

And the fat man, leaning on his counter, and likewise examining the soldier, cried, "Ol' Bert it is!"

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"Knew you in two ticks," grunted Bert. "Same ol' 'Arry." (This was the derelict.) "Same ol' 'Erb." (This was the fat—and once again jolly—man.)

Explanations ensued. Bert, the young soldier, was a native of these parts. He had emigrated to Canada five years previously. To-night, *en route* for the front, he had returned. Earlier in the evening there had been ill-advised libations; he had started for his home, felt sleepy, sheltered from the wet in a tunnel quite familiar to him, and there been discovered by the ladies and roused by myself. Arrived at the coffee-stall he had recognised in its proprietor a former pal and another former pal in 'Arry the derelict. To throw the spoon at 'Arry was merely his playful mode of announcing his identity.

I left the trio reviewing the past and exchanging news of the present. My services, it was clear, would no longer be required by the prodigal. He and his mates gave me a hearty good-night.

I did not guess how intimate was soon to be my association with the Berts and 'Arries and 'Erbs of the world. I was to be their servant, to wait upon them, to perform menial tasks for them, to wash them and dress them and undress them, to carry them in my arms. I was to see them suffer and to learn to respect their gameness, and the wry, "grousing" humour which is their almost universal trait. In my own wards, and elsewhere in the hospital, I came in close contact with many cockneys of the slums. Even when one had not precisely "placed" a patient of this description, the relatives who came to him on visiting days gave the clue to the stock from which he sprang. The mother was sometimes a "flower girl"; the sweetheart, with a very feathered hat, and hair which evidently lived in curling pins except on great occasions, probably worked in a factory. These people, if the patient were confined to bed, sat beside him and talked in a subdued, throaty whisper. But I have seen the same sort of patient, well enough to walk about, meet his folks on visiting afternoons at the hospital gate. There is a crowd at the hospital gate, passing in and going out; hosts of patients are waiting, some in wheeled chairs and some seated on the iron fence which fringes the drive. The reunions which occur at that gate are exceedingly public. Our East Ender is perhaps accustomed to publicity; his slum does not conceal its feelings—it quarrels, and makes love, without drawn blinds, and privacy is not an essential of its ardours. Be that as it may, these meetings at the hospital gate, which are not lacking in pathos, have sometimes manifested a tear-compelling comicality when the actors in the drama belonged to the class which produced Bert.

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In a higher class there is restraint and a rather stupid bashfulness. I have seen a wounded youngster flush apprehensively and only peck his mother in return for her sobbing embrace. That is not Bert's way. He knows—he is not a fool—that his mother looks a trifle absurd as, with bonnet awry, she surges perspiring past the sentries, the tails of her skirt dragging in the dust and her feet flattened with the weight of over-clad, unwholesome obesity they have to bear. But he hobbles sprily to meet her, and his salute is no mere peck, but a smacking kiss, so noisy that it makes everyone laugh. He laughs too—perhaps he did it on purpose to raise a laugh: that is his quaint method; but the fact remains that, whatever his motive, he has managed to please his mother. She is sniffing loudly yet laughing also, and one could want no better picture of human affection than this of Bermondsey Bert and his shapeless, work-distorted, maybe bibulous-looking mother, exchanging that resounding and ungraceful kiss at the hospital gate. I have heard Bert shout “Mother!” from a hundred yards off, when he spied her coming through the gate. No false shame there! No smug “good form” in that—nor in the time-honoured jest which follows: “And ’ave you remembered to bring me a bottle of beer, mother?” (Of course visitors are not allowed to introduce alcohol into the hospital—otherwise I am afraid there is no doubt that mother would have obliged.)

In one of our wards we harboured, for a while, a costermonger. This coster, an entertaining and plucky creature who had to have a leg amputated, received no callers on visiting day: his own relatives were dead and he and his wife had separated. “Couldn’t ’it it orf,” he explained, and with laudable impartiality added, “Married beneath ’er, she did, w’en she married me.” As the lady was herself a coster, it was plain that here, as in other grades of society, there are degrees, conventions and barriers which may not be lightly overstepped. “Sister,” however, thought that the patient should inform his wife that he had lost his leg, and prevailed on him to send her a letter to that effect. A few days later he was asked,

“Well, did you write and tell your wife you had lost a leg?”

“Yus.”

“I suppose she’s answered? What has she said?”

“Said ’m a liar!”

Her retort had neither disconcerted nor offended him. He was a philosopher—and, like so many of his kind, a laughing philosopher. When he was sufficiently recovered from his operation to get about on crutches he was the wag of the ward. He took a special delight in those practical jokes which are invented by patients to tease the nurses, and devoted the most painstaking ingenuity to their preparation. It was he who found a small hole in the lath-and-plaster wall which separates the ward from the ward’s kitchen. Through this hole a length of cotton was passed and tied to the handle of a mug on the kitchen shelf. At this period,

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owing to the Zeppelin raids, only the barest minimum of light was allowed, and the night nurse, when she entered the kitchen, went into almost complete darkness. No sooner was she in the kitchen and fumbling for what she required than a faint noise—that of the cup being twitched by the cotton leading to the mischievous coster's bed—arose on the shelf and convinced her that she was in the presence of a mouse. She retreated, and perhaps if any convalescent patient had been awake she would have enlisted his aid to expel the mouse; but in the ward the patients were, as one man, snoring vociferously. It was this slightly overdone snoring, at the finish, which gave birth to suspicions and caused the trick to be detected.

The night nurses do not have a placid time of it if their patients are at the stage of recovery when spirits begin to rise and the early slumber-hour which the hospital rules prescribe is not welcome. String-actuated knaveries, more or less similar to the mouse-in-the-kitchen one, are always devised for the plaguing of a new night nurse. Sometimes in the dead of night, when utter silence broods over the ward, the gramophone will abruptly burst into raucous music: its mechanism has been released by a contrivance which gives no clue to the crime's perpetrator. The flustered nurse gropes her way down the ward and stops the gramophone, every patient meanwhile sitting up in bed and protesting against her cruelty in having awakened them by starting it. Half an hour after the ward has quietened, the other gramophone (some wards own two) whirrs off into impudent song: it also has been primed. Nurse is wiser on future occasions: she stows the gramophones, when she comes on duty, where no one can tamper with them. Even so, she may have her nerves preyed upon by eerie tinklings, impossible to locate in the darkness; these are caused by two knives, hung from a nail fixed high up in the rafters. By jiggling a string, which is conducted over another rafter and down the wall to his pillow, the patient makes the knifeblades clash. Sometimes two strings, leading to different beds, complete this instrument of torture. After a determined search, nurse finds one string, and, having cut it, flatters herself that she has got the better of her enemies. Not a bit of it. She has scarcely settled in her chair again before the tinklings recommence. The second string is in action; and as she hunts about the ward for the source of the melody in the ceiling, muffled convulsions of mirth, from the dim rows of beds, furnish evidence that her naughty charges are not getting the repose which they require and to ensure which is part of the purpose of her presence.

A nurse who happens to be unpopular never has these pranks played upon her. They are in the nature of a compliment. Nor do they occur in a ward where there is a patient seriously ill. It is impossible to imagine war-hospital patients acting inconsiderately towards a distressed comrade. This observation renders all the more amusing the scandalised concern which I once beheld on the demure physiognomy of a visiting clergyman when he gathered the drift of certain allusions to a case on the Danger List.

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The name of the Danger List explains itself. When a patient is put on the Danger List, his relatives are sent for and may be with him whether it is the visiting afternoon or not. (If they come from the provinces they are presented with a railway pass and, if poor, are allotted lodgings near the hospital, a grant being made to them from our Benevolent Fund.) For the information of the V.A.D.'s who answer visitors' questions in the Enquiry Bureau at the main entrance to the hospital, a copy of the Danger List hangs there, and it is on record that an awestruck child, seeing this column of patients' names, and reading the heading, asked, "What does 'Danger List' mean? Does it mean that it's dangerous to go near them?" Now in Ward C 22 a patient, a cockney, was on the Danger List—which circumstance availed nothing to depress his spirits. In spite of considerable pain, he poked fun at the prospect of his own imminent demise, and was himself the chief offender against the edict of quietness which "Sister" had issued for her ward. He *would* talk; and he *would* talk about undertakers, post-mortems, epitaphs and the details of a military funeral. "That there top note of the Last Post on the bugle doesn't 'arf sound proper," he said—a verdict which anyone who has heard this beautiful and inspired fanfare, which is the farewell above a soldier's grave, and which ends on a soaring treble, will endorse. "But," he went on, "if the bugler's 'ad a drop o' somethin' warm on the way to the cemetery, that there top note always reminds me of a 'iccup. An' if 'e 'iccups over me, I shall wanter spit in 'is eye, blimey if I won't."

This persiflage had been going on for a couple of days and getting to be more and more elaborate and allusive, infecting the entire ward, so that the fact that the man was on the Danger List had become a kind of catchword amongst his fellows. Entered, in all innocence, the clergyman. ("The very bloke to put me up to all the tricks!"—from the irreverent one.) At the same moment a walking patient, also a cockney, who had been reading a newspaper, gave vent to a cry of feigned horror. "Boys!" he announced, "it says 'ere there's a shortage of timber!"

Guffaws greeted this sally. Everyone saw the innuendo at once—everyone except the clergyman, and when he grasped the point, that Ol' Chum So-and-So was on the Danger List and a shortage of timber was supposed to imply that he might be done out of a coffin, he was visibly shocked. Perhaps he did not understand cockney humour.... However, one may add that our irrepressible friend, at the moment of writing, is off the Danger List (albeit only after a protracted struggle with the Enemy at whom he jeered), and is now contriving to be as funny about life as he was funny—and fearless—about Death.

I caught sight to-day of another cockney acquaintance of mine, whose Christian name is Bill, trundling himself down the hospital drive in a wheeled chair. Perched on the knee of his one leg, with its feet planted on the stump which is all that is left of the other, was his child, aged four. Beside him walked his wife, resplendent in a magenta blouse and a hat with green and pink plumes.

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The trio looked happy, and Mrs. Bill's gala attire was symbolical. When Bill was in my ward he too was on the Danger List. I remember that when he first came to us, before his operation, and before he took a turn for the worse, his wife visited him in that same magenta blouse (or another equally startling) and that for some reason she and "Sister" did not quite hit it off, "had words," and subsequently for a period were not on speaking terms. Later, when Bill underwent his operation, and began to sink, his bed was moved out on to the ward's verandah. Here his wife (now wearing a subdued blouse) sat beside him, hour after hour, while little Bill, the child, towed a cheap wooden engine up and down the grass patch, oblivious to the ordeal through which his parents were passing. It was my business, as orderly, to intrude at intervals upon the scene on the verandah, to bring Bill such food as he was able to tolerate. On the first occasion, after Bill's collapse, that I prepared to take him a cup of tea, Sister stopped me. "Don't forget to take tea, and some bread and butter, to that poor woman. She looks tired. And some milk for the child." "Very good, Sister." I cut bread-and-butter, and filled an extra mug of tea. "Orderly! What are you doing?" Sister had reappeared. And I was rebuked because I was going to offer Mrs. Bill her tea in a tin mug (the patients all have tin mugs) and had cut her bread-and-butter too thick. I must cut dainty slices of thin bread-and-butter, use Sister's own china ware, and serve the whole spread on a tray with a cloth. All of which was typical of Sister, who from that day treated Bill's wife with true tenderness; and Bill's wife became one of Sister's most enthusiastic adorers.

It came to pass, after a week of pitiful anxiety, that the Medical Officer pronounced Bill safe once more. "Bloke says I'm not goin' ter peg art," he told me. I congratulated him and remarked that his wife would be thankful when he met her, on her arrival, with such splendid news. "I'll 'ave the larf of my missus," said Bill. "W'en she comes, I shall tell 'er I've some serious noos for 'er, and she's ter send the kid darn on the grarse ter play. Then I'll pull a long fice and hask 'er ter bear up, and say I'm sorry for 'er, and she mustn't tike it too rough, and all that; and she 'as my sympathy in 'er diserpainment: *she ain't ter get 'er widow's pension arter all!*"

I believe that this programme was carried through, more or less to the letter. Certain it is that I myself overheard another of Bill's grim pleasantries. He was explaining to madame that they must apprentice their offspring to the engineering trade. "I wanter mike Lil' Bill a mowter chap, so's 'e can oil the ball-bearings of me fancy leg wot I'm ter get at Roehampton." The "fancy leg" ended by being the favourite theme of Bill's disgraceful extravaganzas. He would announce to Sister, when she was dressing his stump, that he had been studying means of earning

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his living in the future, and had decided to become a professor of roller skating. He would loudly tell his wife that she would never again be able to summons him for assault by kicking: the fancy leg would not give the real one sufficient purchase for an effective kick. And she was not to complain, in future, about his cold feet against her back in bed: there would be only one cold foot, the other would be unhitched and on the floor. And of course there were endless jokes about what had been done with the amputated leg, whether it had got a tombstone, and so forth: some of the suggestions going a trifle beyond what good taste, in more fastidious coteries, would have thought permissible. But Bill had his own ideas of the humorous, and maybe his own no less definite ideas of dignity. In this latter virtue I counted the fact that although once or twice, when he was very low, he gave way to a little fretting to me, he never, I am convinced, let fall one querulous word in the presence of his wife. She sat by her husband's side, and when things were at their worst the two said naught. The wife numbly watched her Bill's face, turning now and then to glance at the activities of little Bill with his engine, or to smile her thanks to the patients who sometimes came and gave the child pickaback rides. When I intruded, I knew I was interrupting the communings of a loving and happily married pair; and the "slangings" of each other which signalled Bill's recovery and his wife's relief, did nothing to shake my certitude that, like many slum dwellers, they owned a mutual esteem which other couples, of superior station, might envy.

Personally I have never known a cockney patient who did not evoke affection; and as a matter of curiosity I have been asking a number of Sisters whether they liked to have cockneys in their wards. Without a single exception (and let me say that Sisters are both observant and critical) the answers have been enthusiastically in the affirmative.

XIII

THE STATION PARTY

An earnest shopman not long ago tried to sell me a pair of marching-boots, "for use"—as he explained, lest their name should have misled me—"on the march." Had he said "for use after the war" he might have been more persuasive. When I told him that marching-boots were no good to me, it was manifestly difficult for him to conceal his opinion that, if so, I had no business to flaunt the garb of Thomas Atkins. When I added that if he could offer me a pair of running-shoes I might entertain the proposition, his look was a reproach to irreverent facetiousness.

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A grateful country has presented me with one pair of excellent marching-boots. But a hospital ward is no place in which to go clumping about in footgear designed to stand hard wear and tear on the high-roads; and my army boots, after two years, have not yet needed re-soling. I wore them, it is true, during my period of service with the Chain Gang, as a squad of outdoor orderlies, engaged in road-making, was locally called. And I wear them when we have a "C.O.'s Parade"—an occasion on which naught but officially-provided attire is allowable. It would take a century of C.O.'s parades, however, to damage boots put on five minutes before the event and taken off five minutes after: the parade itself necessitating no sturdier pedestrianism than is involved in walking less than a hundred yards to the ground and there standing stock-still at attention.

I do not say that hospital orderlies never go for a march: only that marching bulks relatively so small in our programme that any special equipment for the purpose sounds a little ironical. The issue of ward-shoes, now, was a real boon. Not that all the pairs with which our unit was suddenly flooded by the authorities proved as silent as they were intended to be. Some of them squeaked; and the peregrinations of the orderly thus afflicted were perhaps more vexatious to the ear of a nervous patient at night than even the clatter of honest hobnails. And the soles were thin. A pair of ward-shoes lasted me on the average one month. If only worn within the ward they might have lasted longer—though not so very much longer. According to regulations, you were not allowed to wear ward-shoes except within the confines of the ward. No doubt it was expected that every time you were sent on an errand outside the ward you would solemnly take off your ward-shoes and put on your marching-boots—then, on the return, take off your marching-boots and put on your ward-shoes—but life as a nursing orderly is too short for such elaborations of etiquette. It was nothing unusual, when one was working in a ward which lay at a distance of quarter of a mile from the hospital's main building, to be sent to the said main building a dozen times in a single morning. This incessant message-bearing had to be done, if not at the double, at any rate at nothing slower than five miles per hour in the morning (the busy time); in the afternoon a speed of four miles per hour might sometimes be permissible. At all events, running-shoes, as I told the shopman, would not have been inappropriate during certain periods of crisis.

From time to time our tasks were interrupted by the notes of a bugle—or the shrilling of the Sergeant-Major's whistle—demanding our presence for an intake of new patients. A party of orderlies was wanted to go to the railway-station to help to remove stretcher-cases from the ambulance train. The station lies at a distance of a mile from the hospital, and this small pilgrimage, achieved a few score times, is practically all I know of the veritable employment of marching-boots.

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I regretted when a change of plans diverted the ambulance trains to the central termini for evacuation. The interlude of a station-party trip was far from unwelcome. Lined up on the parade ground we were put in charge of a corporal. "Party, 'shun! Right turn! Quick march!" Off we trudged, round the back of the hospital, down the drive, out past the sentry and away along the road. Presently, "Party, march at ease!" Cigarettes were lit, talking was allowed, and someone would raise a tune. How pleasant it is to march to singing! To march to a drum-and-fife band must be wonderful. Or a brass band—! Those joys will never be mine. Almost all the marching I shall have done in the great war will be summed up in these tiny promenades from the hospital to the railway-station, their rhythm sustained by self-raised choruses, none too melodious.

Occasionally an officer would be descried, on the pavement. Then "Party, 'shun!" Cigarettes were concealed. The song died. "Eyes left! ... Eyes front! Party, march at ease!" The cigarettes reappeared, the song was resumed. Approaching the station, "Party, 'shun!" Cigarettes were thrown away. Here, in the chief street, we must make a smart show. A crowd is gathered round the station gate, attracted by the array of Red Cross vehicles within. Police are keeping back the curious. The way is cleared for our arrival. "Left wheel!" Now is our one moment of glory. We swing round, through the lane of gaping sightseers, and tramp-tramp in style across the station yard and under the archway, flattering ourselves (perhaps not without justification) that there are spectators whose eyes pursue us with secret envy at the serious import of our task.

The station platform, when we reached it, was generally a blank perspective devoid of all living creatures except ourselves. Fate decreed that we should be summoned long before the train was due. I have kicked my heels for many a doleful hour on that platform, and the reflection that "they also serve who only stand and wait" was chilly comfort if—as frequently happened—we had been hurried off dinnerless. The convoys' arrivals always seemed to coincide with dinner-time. On our return to the hospital we should find that the rations had been kept hot for us. But, in the meanwhile, an empty stomach was a poor preparation for the strain of carrying stretchers up the stairs from the station platform to the ambulances; and those of us who could produce pennies for automatic-machine chocolate gained an instant popularity. The longest period of waiting drew to an end at last, however. The platform assumed a livelier air. The station-master appeared from his den. Officers of the Army Medical Service and the Red Cross strolled down. And the stairs and platform echoed to the pattering of the feet of hosts of industrious "Bluebottles," fetching stretchers and blankets.

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The blue-uniformed volunteers who form a portion of the London Ambulance Column are nicknamed the Bluebottles in allusion to their dress. It is a nickname which, let me say at once, any man might be proud of. I know not whether the history of the Bluebottles has yet been written, but certain it is that their doings have got into newspaper print less often than they deserved. For theirs is a double role which truly merits the country's admiration. While carrying on the commerce of the Empire—that vital commerce without which there would be bankruptcy and no sinews of war, nor indeed any England left to defend—they have vowed themselves also, of their own free-will, to the helping of the wounded. Day or night the Bluebottle is liable to be called from his desk or his home by the telephone: like the Florentine Brother of the Misericordia he must instantly hurry into his uniform and rush to the place appointed. He may be busy or he may be tired; no matter: his vow holds good. Off he goes, to the railway-station to meet the hospital train and evacuate its stretchers.

Myself, I have the deepest respect for the Bluebottles and for their energy in a cause which must often be not only fatiguing, but, from a commercial point of view, extremely inconvenient. It would be absurd to pretend, nevertheless, that the less responsible khaki-wearing R.A.M.C. do not cherish a mild contempt for all Bluebottles. There is no reason for that contempt. It is idiotic, childish—a humiliating exhibition of the silliness of masculine human nature. Members of our station-party who had enlisted but a week back, and who knew nothing whatever of their work, would, in a whisper, mock the Bluebottles—although every Bluebottle had taken first-aid classes and passed examinations at which most of the mockers would have boggled. The Bluebottles were “civilians” ... there you have it. We—who would probably never do any battlefield soldiering in our lives—looked down on all civilians who had the impudence to wear a uniform of any sort. Such is the behaviour of the sterner sex at a moment when its sole thought should be of sensible and efficient co-operation in the performance of duty.

For of course it was our duty to co-operate with the Bluebottles. The theory with which we beguiled ourselves, that the Bluebottles were physically starvelings and required our Herculean aid to lift the stretchers up the stairs, was palpably nonsense. Still we told ourselves that we, as disciplined soldiers, were here to give a hand to a civilian mob who might otherwise faint and fail. A singular delusion! Time has proved its falsity, for with the issue of fresh orders our station-parties ceased to function: the Bluebottles now make shift without us—and without, as far as I know, any mishap.

The hospital train was eventually signalled. We were ranked, at attention, at the foot of the stairs. The Bluebottles stood by their stretchers. There was hurrying hither and thither of officials. Sometimes our Colonel, having motored from the hospital, appeared on the platform to see that all was well, and you may be sure that we endeavoured to look alert in his august presence. And finally the train glided into the station.

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The hospital trains seemed to be never twice the same: South Westerns, North Westerns, Great Northern, Midlands, Great Central, Lancashire and Yorkshires—I saw them all, at one time or another, their sole affinity being the staring red crosses painted on each coach. A coach or two consisted of ordinary compartments, for sitting-up cases; the rest were vans the interiors of which had been converted into wards by means of bunks. Access to each van-ward was gained by a wide pair of sliding doors in its centre. These doors, when the train had come to a standstill, were opened by pallid-looking orderlies, who lowered gangways and then gazed forth at us, while they awaited orders, with the lack-lustre eyes of men who had been deprived of the proper allowance of sleep.

As soon as the list of the Medical Officer on the train had been checked with that of the Medical Officer on the platform, the evacuation began. Walking-cases were sent off first—generally a tatterdemalion crew, hobbling and shuffling along the platform, and, at one stage of the war, with trench mud still clinging to their clothes. They seldom needed our assistance: the Bluebottles (even if feeble folk) were deemed by our corporal to be fit to give any weak walking patient an arm, or carry his kit. The walking patients, in fact, were a mere episode. Motor-cars whirled them off, five or six at a time, and they might be half through the process of being bathed at the hospital before the last stretcher-case was quit of the train. The stretcher cases were our concern. Pairs of Bluebottles, each carrying a stretcher, entered the van-wards and anon reappeared with their burden. Now came our cue to act. As the stretcher approached the foot of the stair two of our number stepped forth from the rank, each taking a handle from a Bluebottle; the stretcher thus proceeded on its course up the stair carried by four men, one on each handle—two Bluebottles and two R.A.M.C.'s.

That flight of iron stairs from the platform to the road seemed no very arduous ordeal for the first half-dozen journeys. There was a knack about keeping the stretcher horizontal: the front bearers must hold their handles as low as possible; the rear bearers must hoist their handles shoulder-high. It was all plain sailing and perfectly easy. Four men to a stretcher is luxurious. At least it is luxurious on the level, and if you have not far to go and not many consecutive stretchers to carry. But when the convoy was a large one, when the bearers were too few and you had no sooner got rid of one stretcher than you must run down the stairs and, without regaining your breath, grab the handle of another and slowly toil up again to the ambulances ... yes, even on the coldest day it was possible to be moist with perspiration; and as for the hot weather of the 1915 summer, when one of our Big Pushes was afoot, or when returned prisoners came from Germany (those were memorable occasions!)—you might be pardoned a certain aching in the arm-muscles.

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It was on one of these busy days that I discovered that the comical prejudice of khaki against the Bluebottles was not (as I had hitherto supposed) confined to the young swashbucklers of the home-staying R.A.M.C. It was seldom our custom to enter the hospital trains. An unwritten law decreed that Bluebottles only should enter the train: the R.A.M.C. limited themselves to carrying work outside, on the platform and stair. But on this occasion the supply of Bluebottles had, for the moment, run short, and our party took a turn at going up the gangways and evacuating the van-wards. As it happened, I and my mate on the stretcher were the first khaki-wearers to invade that particular van-ward. And as we steered our stretcher in at the door and down the aisle of cots a shout arose from the wounded lying there: "Here are some real soldiers!"

It was too bad. It was base ingratitude to the devoted band of Bluebottles who had, up till that instant, been toiling at the evacuation of the ward—and who, as I chanced to know, had been up all the previous night, carrying stretchers at Paddington and Charing Cross, while we slept cosily. But—well, there it was. "Here are some real soldiers!" Khaki greeted khaki—simultaneously spurning the mere amateur, the civilian. I could have blushed for the injustice of that naive cry. But it would be dishonest not to confess that there was something gratifying about it too. It was the cry of the Army, always loyal to the Army. These heroic bundles of bandages, lifting wild and unshaven faces from their pillows, hailed *me* (a wretched creature who had never heard a gun go off) as one of their comrades! My mate and I, as we adjusted our stretcher at a cot's side, and braced ourselves against the weight of the patient, winked covertly at one another. "A nasty one for the Bluebottles!" he said. And it was.

All the same I seize this opportunity of offering my homage to the Bluebottles. They have done—are still doing—their bit, and that right nobly. Thousands of British soldiers have cause to bless them and also to be thankful for the existence of that great voluntary institution, the London Ambulance Column.

* * * * *

When at last the train had been emptied and the ultimate stretcher was *en route* for the hospital, our party gathered once more at the top of the stair, lined up, and was glanced-over by the corporal lest any man had seized the opportunity to play truant. There were occasions when some thirsty soul, chafing at the rigours of the strict teetotalism enforced by our rules, was found to have vanished in the hurly-burly: his destination, the up-platform refreshment-bar, being readily surmisable. He had cause to regret his lapse if it were noticed before he slipped back unostentatiously into our ranks. Then, "Party, 'shun! Left turn! Right incline—quick march!" Off we swung, out into the streets—cheered by the urchins who still hovered round the gate—and so, at the rapidest possible pace, home to dinner and a smoke: these (in my case at any rate) being preceded by the thankful relinquishment of my seldom-worn and therefore none too friendly marching-boots.

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XIV

SLANG IN A WAR HOSPITAL

Every ward in the hospital has a bathroom attached to it, but in addition to these there are two large bathrooms, each containing a number of baths, which are used by walking patients and also by the orderlies. The more recently built of these bathrooms is divided into private cubicles. In the older one the baths are on a more sociable plan, with no partition walls sundering them. The spectacle, in the “old” bathroom, when a convoy of walking cases has arrived, is one which should appeal to a painter. Clouds of steam fill the air, and through the fog you perceive a fine melee of figures, some half dressed, some statuesquely nude, towelling themselves or preparing to wash, or shaving at bits of mirror propped on the window-sills. Pink bodies wallow voluptuously in the deep porcelain-ware tubs, which are of the shape and superb dimensions of Egyptian sarcophagi. Sometimes a patient with a wounded arm, unable to help himself, is being soaped and sponged by an orderly; or you may see a cheerful soul, with an injured foot, balanced on the rim of the bath and giving himself all the ablutions which are practicable without the disturbance of bandages. No one who has frequented our bathrooms would ever doubt that the British Army loves cleanliness and hot water. Of cold water I cannot speak with the same enthusiasm.

A newly-arrived convoy of course monopolises the bathroom; but throughout the whole day, at almost any hour, you will find a patient or two here; for by the rule of the hospital it is allowable for any patient—once he has been given permission to take an unsupervised bath at all—to take a bath whenever he likes. Consequently it happens often that half a dozen orderlies may be bathing at the same time as half a dozen patients—and it need not be added that the occasion is one for pleasant chats and the barter of anecdotes. For this reason, if for no other, I always elected to use the “old” bathroom: the “new” one, with its closed cubicles, was less fruitful in conversations.

The “old” bathroom was the exchange (and perhaps the starting-point) of many of our hospital rumours. I imagine that every war hospital is a hotbed of rumours. Ours certainly was, and is. Amongst the orderlies there are incessant rumours about promotions, about the chances of the unit being sent abroad, about surprise inspections, about the imminent arrival of impossibly large convoys, about news—received privately by the Colonel over the telephone—of defeats or victories. Nine times out of ten the rumour turns out to be groundless. But this does not cause the output of rumours to diminish. Apparently the army is a prolific soil for rumours, inasmuch as they have a special name: a rumour is called a *buzz*. “Only a buzz” (“it’s only a rumour”) is an expression often heard on the lips of soldiers. In India it is sometimes “a bazaar buzz” (a rumour circulating in the bazaars); here it is, naturally, a bathroom buzz.

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Many were the choice examples of slang and of colloquialisms which I culled in the bathroom, sitting comfortably in my bath and communing with my neighbour in the next bath. I remember one morning making the acquaintance of an Australian who had recently recovered from a bad attack of trench feet. Four of the toes of one foot were missing, and the fifth looked far from sound. My friend was examining this lonely toe with a critical gaze, and I sympathised with him over its condition. "Ah!" he said, "that toe is a king to what it was." He went on to tell me (what I could well believe) that to get your "plates of meat" frostbitten wasn't such a "cushy wound" as it was cracked up to be by those who had never experienced its sufferings. "When I went sick the doctor thought he'd rumbled me swinging the lead. But as soon as he spotted them there toes of mine—the ones that's gone—I could see he knew I'd clicked a packet, square dinkum, this trip." ("Square dinkum" or "dinkum" is an Antipodean verbal flourish, which broadly approximates to the American "Sure enough" or the English "Not 'arf.")

Certain of these neologisms are common enough in civilian life—have been imported into the army since 1914—but others (and the more interesting ones, as I hold) were, until the war, limited to the barrack-room. British regiments which had been abroad used an argot of considerable antiquity, some of it of Oriental origin (e.g. "blighty," meaning "home": hence "a blighty wound," or simply "a blighty," an injury sufficiently serious to cause the victim to be invalided to England). Whether the derivations of army slang have been investigated I do not know. It appears to me to be a subject worth examination. I am not myself a philologist, but in the bathrooms and elsewhere in the hospital I have heard and noted a small collection of slang phrases and idioms, and these may be worth recording. Such expressions as "swinging the lead" (malingering or deceiving or acting in a hypocritical manner or getting the better of anyone) have lost their novelty. So has "rumbled," which means to be discovered or detected or found out. These words have now spread far beyond the confines of the army. And indeed the rapidity with which all slang and all catch-phrases can be disseminated offers a rather alarming prospect. For whereas, before the war, slang at its silliest was often quite local, nowadays its restriction within given localities has in the nature of things become impossible. A war hospital such as ours contains inmates from every county in Britain, as well as from every colony. The same intermingling occurs on an infinitely greater scale in training-camps and at the various fronts. All these centres are hotbeds of slang: the men go home from them, carrying to their native places slang which would never, in ordinary times, have penetrated there. In the army you will hear a Scotchman doing what he never did before—dropping his aitches. He

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has caught it from his English comrades. You will hear him say “Not ‘arf”—an inane tag which, despite its popularity in London, failed to find any foothold north of the Tweed before the war. “Not ‘arf” was mouthed by Sassenach comedians on the music-hall stages of Edinburgh and Glasgow, and was grinned at for what it was worth: the streets did not adopt it. Now the streets will hear it and will use it: it is one of Jock’s souvenirs from his campaign.

I am afraid that another triviality which has hitherto been to the taste only of the south of England is fated to “catch on,” by means of the same missionaries, from Land’s End to John o’ Groat’s, and even in the colonies. Rhyming slang is extraordinarily common in the army, so common that it is used with complete unconsciousness as being correct conversational English. My friend of the king-like toe spoke of his feet as “plates of meat”—and this though he was an Australian, not a cockney. If he had had occasion to allude to his leg he would probably have called it “Scotch peg.” A man’s arm is his “false alarm”; his nose, “I suppose”; his eye, “mince pie”; his hand, “German band”; his boot, “daisy root”; his face “chevvy chase”; and so forth—an interminable list. What exactly was the *raison d’être* of this pseudo-poetic mania I do not know, but I suspect that it originated, in the distant past, with the poverty of rhyme-invention on the part of the writers of the cruder kind of pantomime songs—“round the houses,” for example, being both a rhyme to and a synonym for “trousies” (garments beloved of those bards!)—and thus the vogue developed. This is only a theory. The one thing certain is that a clumsy form of slang, devoid of the humour and compactness which justify slang—and which were on the whole once characteristic of metropolitan slang—has tickled the ear of some millions of men who, but for the war, would never have fallen under its temptation. The only thing to hope for is that it will run its course and perish—like “What ho, she bumps!” and “Now we shan’t be long!”—without leaving any visible and permanent trace upon the language.

“Clicked,” another word used by my trench-feet associate, resembles much modern slang in the breadth and elasticity of its application. To click can be either advantageous or baneful, according to the circumstances. A soldier asks a superior for a favour, and it is granted. That soldier has clicked. Or if he finds a nice girl to walk out with, he has clicked. Or if he is given a coveted post, he has clicked. But he has also clicked if he is suddenly seized on to do some menial duty. He has clicked if he is discovered in a misdeed. And he has clicked a packet if he gets into trouble generally. On such an occasion, it may be added, the N.C.O. or officer who administers a reproof (“ticks him off”), and does so in angry terms, “goes in off the deep end.”

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Not all army slang is lacking, indeed, in a facetious irony. Miserable conditions in the desert or in the trenches, bad accommodation, doubtful food—anything which cannot arouse the faintest enthusiasm of any sort—these, in the lingo of our now much-travelled and stoical troops, are “nothing to write home about.” Surely there is an admirable spirit in this sarcasm. It crops up again in the hospital metaphor “going to the pictures.” That is Tommy’s way of announcing that he is to go under the surgeon’s knife, on a visit to the operating theatre. Again, there is a sardonic tang in the army’s condemnation of one who has been telling a far-fetched story: he has been “chancing his arm” (or “mit”). Similarly one detects an oblique and wry fun in the professional army man’s use of the word “sieda” to mean “socks.” (The new army more feebly dubs them “almond rocks.”) “Sieda” has been brought by the Anzacs from Cairo, and with them it means “Good morning!”—a mere friendly hail, now used with great frequency. But the veterans of older expeditions in Egypt and in India, when they had been on the march, took their socks from their perspiring feet and lay down to sleep; and in the morning—well, their socks said “Sieda!” to them when they awoke, and were christened accordingly.... Or again, the socks (or other property) might have vanished in the night—in which case there had been “hooks about” (pilferers about). If one of those “hooks” were caught, he would be first “rammed in the mush” (put in the guardroom), and then, if his guilt were established, he would be observed “going over the wall” or “going to stir” (going to the detention prison).

A few other slang words which I have come across in the hospital, and which seem to me to bear the mark of the old army as distinct from the new, are: “bondook,” a rifle; “sound scoff” (to the bugler, to sound Rations); “scran,” victuals, rations; “weighing out,” paying out; “chucking a dummy,” being absent; “get the wind up,” be afraid (and “put the wind up,” make afraid); “the home farm,” the married quarters; “chips,” the pioneer sergeant (carpenter); “tank,” wet canteen; “tank-wallah,” a drinker; “tanked,” drunk; “A.T.A. wallah,” a teetotaller (from the Army Temperance Association); “on the cot” or “on the tack,” being teetotal; “jammy,” lucky (and “jam,” any sort of good fortune); “win,” to steal; “burgoo,” porridge; “eye-wash,” making things outwardly presentable; “gone west,” died (also applied to things broken, e.g. a broken pipe has “gone west”); “oojah,” anything (similar to thingummy or what-d’ye-call-it); “push,” “pusher,” or “square push,” a girl (hence “square-push tunic,” the “swagger” tunic for walking-out occasions). The words for drunkenness are innumerable—“jingled,” “oiled,” “tanked to the wide,” “well sprung,” “up the pole,” “blotto,” etc.; but I smell the modern in some of these; their flavour is of London taverns rather than of the dusty barrack squares of India, Egypt, Malta, and Gibraltar.

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But who can delve to the ultimate springs of slang? A verb which I never met before I enlisted was “to spruce.” This is almost, if not quite, a blend of “swinging the lead” and “doing a mike.” To spruce is to dodge duty or to deceive. A man who contrived to slip out of the ranks of a squad when they were performing some distasteful task would be said to “spruce off.” Or he would be denounced as a “sprucer” if he managed to arrive late for his meal and yet, by a trick, to secure a front place in the waiting queue at the canteen. A word in constant employment, “spruce”! It was new to me when I became an orderly, and for a long time I thought that it was peculiar to our unit, in the same manner that the jargon of certain boys is peculiar to certain schools. But I concluded later that it might have a remote and roundabout origin in the old army slang, “a spruce hand” at “brag”—the latter being a variant of the game of poker, and a spruce hand, apparently, one which, held by a bluffer, contained cards of no real value.

Some day these etymological mysteries must be probed. Perhaps the German professors, after the war, can usefully wreak themselves on this complex and obscure research. Meanwhile the above notes are offered not as a serious contribution to a subject so immense, but rather as a warning. The infectiousness of slang is incredible; and this gigantic inter-association of classes and clans has brought about a hitherto unheard-of levelling-down of the common speech. Accent may or may not be influenced: the vocabulary undoubtedly is. Nearly every home in the land is soon going to be invaded by many forms of army slang: the process in fact has already begun. If we were a sprightlier nation the effect might not be all to the bad. But most of our slang-mongers are not wits. “He was balmy a treat,” I heard a soldier say of another soldier who had shammed insane. That is what we are coming to: it is the tongue we shall use and likewise (I fear) the condition in which some of us will find ourselves as a result.

XV

A BLIND MAN’S HOME-COMING

In my boyhood I had the ambition—it was one of several ambitions—to become a courier. The *Morning Post* advertisements of couriers who professed to be fluent in a number of languages and were at the disposal of invalid aristocrats desiring to take extensive (and expensive) trips abroad, aroused the most romantic visions in my mind. A courier’s was the life for me. I saw myself whirling all over Europe—with my distinguished invalid—in sleeping-cars de luxe. Anon we were crossing the Atlantic or lolling in punkah-induced breezes on the verandahs of Far Eastern hotels. It was a great profession, that of the experienced and successful courier.

I have never been a courier in quite this picturesque acceptance; and yet, in a humbler sense, I have perhaps (to my own surprise) earned the title. As an R.A.M.C. orderly I have more than once officiated as travelling courier—yes, and to distinguished, if far from affluent, invalids. They ought, at least, to rank as distinguished; for the reason they

needed a courier was because they had given their health, or limbs, or eyesight, in defence of their country.

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It happens only too often that when a patient is discharged from hospital he is not fit to make his journey home alone. An orderly is detailed to accompany him. Sometimes the lot has fallen on me. Generally the trip is a short one, to some outlying suburb of London or to some town or village in the home counties; but sometimes my flights have been further afield, to Ireland, or Wales; and once I went to Yorkshire with a blind man.

That Yorkshire expedition was singularly lacking in drama and in surface pathos, yet its details remain with great clearness. The piece of damaged goods which, being of no further fighting use, was being returned with thanks to the hearthside from whence it came, was an individual answering to the unheroic cognomen of Briggs. A high-explosive shell had been sent by the Gods to alter the current of Briggs's career. Briggs came through all that part of the war which concerned him without a scratch upon his person—only after the arrival in his immediate vicinity of the high-explosive shell he was unfortunately unable to see. Never again would Briggs be of the slightest value either as a soldier or in his civilian trade, which was that of driver of ponies in a coal-mine. Consequently, as a distinguished invalid (with the sum of one pound in his pocket to comfort him until such time as his pension should materialise), Mister—no longer Private—Briggs, for the first and presumably the last time in his existence, went travelling with a courier.

A car supplied by the National Motor Volunteer Service awaited Briggs and his courier at the hospital entrance. Here the introduction between Briggs and his courier took place. Ours is a large hospital, and I had never to my knowledge encountered Briggs before that moment. I beheld a young fellow (he was only twenty-three) with a stout, healthy visage which wore a pleasant smile and would have been describable as roguish, only ... well, the eyes of a blind man, whatever else they are, are not conducive to a roguish mien. They were eyes not visibly damaged: nice blue eyes. And they stared at nothingness. I was in the presence of a stripling who, a few weeks ago, must have owned a mobile face, and was in rapid process of developing a quite different face, a face which still might—it certainly did—grin and laugh, but which would gradually gain, had already begun to gain, a set expressionlessness that overlaid and strangely neutralised its grins and its laughter.

Blind men's faces may have beauty, even vivacity, or a heightened intelligence and fire; but there is a something, hard to define, of which they are sadly devoid. The windows of the soul are dimmed. The face inevitably changes. And if even I, who knew not Briggs, could perceive that Briggs's face must thus have changed, how much more conspicuous would the change be to the partner whom Briggs had left seven months before and to whom I was now leading him back—his wife.

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Briggs, a civilian once more, sported reach-me-down garments which fitted him surprisingly—our Clothing Store sergeant is the kindest of souls and expends infinite patience on doing his best, with government-contract tailoring, to suit all our discharges. His overcoat, which might have been called a Chesterfield in Shoreditch, pleased Briggs, as he told me in the car: he drew my attention to its texture and warmth, he admiringly fingered it. “I might ha’ paid thirty bob for that there top-coat,” he surmised. “A collar an’ a tie an’ all, too! Them boots ain’t so dusty, neither: they fit me a treat. Goin’ ’ome to my missus in Sunday clobber, I am.” You would have said that he thought he had emerged from his hazards with rather a good bargain. A jumble of ready-made clothes—and a pension! The visible world gone for ever! These were his souvenirs of the great war. And, “Ah,” he said, when I ventured on some allusion to his blindness, “it might ha’ bin worse. I don’ know what I’d ha’ done if I’d lost a leg, same as some of them other poor jossers in th’ hospital!”

(And this, marvellous though it sounds, is the standpoint of no small number in the legion of our Briggses.)

The motor ride was another source of gratification to Briggs. Seated beside me, the wind beating on his sightless orbs, he discoursed of the wonders of petrol. “Proper to take you about, them cars. W’ere are we now? ’Ave we far to run, like?” I told him we were traversing Battersea Park and that our destination was St. Pancras. It transpired that he was a stranger to London. This drive through London was, as it were, an item in his collection of experiences, to be preserved with the cross-channel voyage and the vigils in the trenches. “Shall we go by Buckingham Palace?” I told him we shouldn’t; then, observing that he was disappointed, I asked the driver to make the detour. So at last I was able to inform Briggs that we were passing Buckingham Palace: I turned his head so that he looked straight towards that architectural phenomenon. It was, of course, invisible to him. No matter. He wished to be able to boast, to his wife, that he had seen (he used that verb) the house where the King lived.

His wife—he married a month before he enlisted—had been notified of his return; but I suggested that at St. Pancras we might telegraph to her the actual hour of the train’s arrival, in case she should desire to meet it. The idea commended itself to Briggs: he had not thought of such a thing: telegraphing had perhaps hardly come within his purview, at least so I surmised when, the telegraph-form before me, I asked him what he wished me to write. He began cheerily, as though dictating a letter of gossip:—“*My dear wife—*” Economy necessitated a taboo of this otherwise charming method of communication. “*Arriving Bradford five-thirty, Tom,*” was the result of final boilings-down, which took so long that we nearly achieved the anticlimax of missing our train altogether.

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Now at Bradford (at the end of one of the chattiest five hours I ever spent in my life) no Mrs. Briggs was perceptible. I kept my patient on the platform until every other passenger had gone: I marched him up and down the main area of the station. Each time I caught sight of a woman who looked a possible Mrs. Briggs I steered my charge into her vicinity. In spite of a piece of information which Briggs had imparted to me on the journey—namely, that he expected soon to become a father—I was surprised that his wife had not come to the station to welcome him. However, it was plain that Briggs himself was not particularly surprised, nor, what was more important, disappointed. Nothing could damp his eternal placidity and good humour. He proposed that from this point onward he should pursue his journey alone. “Nowt to do but git on th’ tram,” he said. “It’s a fair step from ’ere, but I knows every inch of t’ way.” At all events (as of course I could not allow this) he would now act as my guide. And he did. “First to the right.... Now we’re goin’ by a big watchmaker’s-and-jeweller’s.... Now cross t’ street.... Now on th’ corner over there by t’ Sinnemer is w’ere we git our tram.”

The tram in due course appeared, and we boarded it. “Tha mun pay thruppence only, mind,” he warned me when the conductor came round. “It’s a rare long ride for thruppence.” So it proved to be—through wildernesses which were half meadow and half slum, my cicerone at every hundred yards pointing out the notable features of the landscape. On our left I ought to see the so-and-so public house; on our right the football ground—I should know it by the grand-stand jutting above the palings; further on were brickworks; further still a factory which, my nose would have told me, even if Mr. Briggs had not, dealt with chemicals; then, on the skyline, a pit-head; then another; then a mining village with three different kinds of methodist church and two picture palaces; then a gap of dreary, dirty fields. And then, nearing dusk, the village where my friend lived, and where also was the terminus of the tram route.

We quitted the tram and walked down a street of those squalid brick tenements which coal-mining seems to germinate like a rash upon the earth’s surface. The debris and the scaffoldings of pits were dotted about the adjacent countryside. Sooty cabbage-patches occupied the occasional interspaces in the ranks of houses. Briggs directed me across a cinder path in one of these cabbage-patches. “See them three ’ouses at the bottom of the ’ill? The end one’s mine.” We approached. No sign of the wife. Surely she would be on the look-out for her husband? Also there was a sister and a brother-in-law—the latter in a prosperous way of business as a grocer near-by: Briggs had told me of them. Would not they be watching for him? I began to be anxious. Not once, but several times, I had heard of the wounded soldier returning to his home and finding no home: both

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home and wife had gone. (Those are bitterly tragic tales, which a realist must write some day.) Still, as we came nearer, I saw nobody at the cottage door. "Is th' door open?" asked Briggs. Yes, it was open. When we were at the end of the cabbage-patch, and I could discern the interior of the cottage parlour (into which the door opened direct), it became clear that three persons were there. One of them, a man, obviously the brother-in-law, came and peeped out of the window at us, and turned and spoke to his companions. Of these two, both women, one rose from her chair and the other remained seated. But none of the three came to the door.

I have met northern dourness and the inarticulate manner which is such a contrast to the gushing and noisy effusion of the south. By a paradox it is not inconsistent with the familiar conversationalism to which Briggs had treated me, a stranger. But I admit I found Briggs's family circle a little embarrassing. They were respectable people: the cottage was neat and decently furnished, its occupants were sprucely dressed. I fancy they were in their best clothes; certainly their demeanour—and the aspect of the table in their midst—denoted a great occasion. This table, as I saw when I assisted Briggs up the steps into the room, had indeed borne a well-spread tea. No very acute powers of deduction were required to decide, from the crumbs on the white cloth and on the dishes, that there *had* been bread and butter and jam and cake. Of these not a vestige (except the crumbs) remained. Briggs and I were an hour behindhand, and the relatives who awaited the wanderer had eaten the banquet laid to welcome him: or so it appeared. I have no doubt that all sorts of delicacies were in the cupboard; the kettle on the hob was probably on the boil; perhaps buttered toast was in the oven. The fact remains that devastation was on the table.

However, Briggs did not see the table, and the table's state occupied me only for a fraction of a second. I was more concerned with the three people in the parlour and with their reception of my patient. The pale woman in the chair by the fire was evidently Briggs's wife. She stared at us, as we entered, but said absolutely nothing. Nor did the other and slightly younger woman, his sister, say anything. She too stared. And the man stared, and said nothing.

"Well, here we are," I announced—an imbecile assertion, but I produced it as cheerfully and matter-of-factly as I knew how. I unhooked my arm from Briggs's, and made as though to push him forward into the family group.

"Nay!" said Briggs. "I mun take my top-coat off first."

I helped him off with his coat. Not one of the three members of his family had either moved or spoken—beyond one faint murmur, not an actual word, in response to my "Here we are." But Briggs seemed to know that his folk were in the room with him, and

he neither accosted them, expressed any curiosity about them, or betrayed any astonishment at their silence.

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When he had got his coat off I expected him to move forward into the room. A mistake. Mine must be a hasty temperament. They don't do things like that in Yorkshire, not even when they have come home blinded from the wars. Briggs put out his hand, felt for the cottage door, half closed it, felt for a nail on the inner side of it, and carefully hung his coat thereon.

Now I could usher him into the waiting family circle.

No. I was wrong.

Briggs calmly divested himself of his jacket. He then felt for another door, a door which opened on to a stair leading to the upper storey. On a nail in this door he hung his jacket. And then, in his shirt-sleeves, he was ready. Shirt-sleeves were symbolical. He was home at last, and prepared to sit down with his people.

Of the actual reunion I saw nothing, for I promptly said I must go. It was imperative for me to hurry back, or I should miss my train.

"You'll stay an' take a sup of tea with us," said Briggs.

I couldn't, though I should have liked to do so, in some ways, and in others should have hardly dared to be an intruder on such a meeting. I shook hands with my patient. Looking back as I went out of the door I saw Briggs's wife still seated, motionless, in her chair. She had not opened her lips. It was impossible to divine what were her emotions. She was very pale. There were no tears in her eyes as she stared at her young blind husband. But I think there were tears waiting to be shed.

I looked back again when I reached the end of the path across the cabbage-patch. The cottage door was still open. In the aperture stood the younger of the two women, Briggs's sister. She waved to me and smiled. It was evident that it had struck her that I ought to have been thanked for my services, and she was expressing this, cordially if belatedly. I waved my hand in return, and hastened up the street towards the tram.

My hurry was fruitless. I missed my train in Bradford, and stayed the night at an hotel, thus (with appropriate but improper extravagance) concluding this particular performance in the role of travelling courier to a distinguished invalid. As I sat over a sumptuous table d'hôte—this was long before the submarine blockade and the food restrictions—I wondered what Briggs's wife said to Briggs; and I made up a story about it. But what I have written above is not a story, it is the unadorned truth, which I could not have invented and which is perhaps better than the story. In his courier's presence Briggs addressed not one word to his wife, and his wife addressed not one word to him; nor did his sister or his brother-in-law. Nor did any of this trio address one word to me.

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY HAZELL, WATSON AND VINEY, LD., LONDON AND
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Transcriber’s note: Spelling and punctuation have been normalized.