

Army Reform

Opinions of Private Smith

by Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932

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Bibliographic Note

Between 1904 and 1918 Edgar Wallace wrote a large number of mostly humorous sketches about life in the British Army relating the escapades and adventures of privates Smith (Smithy), Nobby Clark, Spud Murphy and their comrades-in-arms. A character called Smithy first appeared in articles which Wallace wrote for the *Daily Mail* as a war correspondent in South Africa during the Boer war.⁽¹⁾ The Smithy of these articles is presumably the prototype of the character in the later stories.

In his autobiography *People* Edgar Wallace describes the origin of his first „Smithy“ collection as follows: „What was in my mind ... was to launch forth as a story-writer. I had written one or two short stories whilst I was in Cape Town, but they were not of any account. My best practice were my *Smithy* articles in the *Daily Mail*, and the short history of the Russian Tsars (*Red Pages from Tsardom*) which ran serially in the same paper. Collecting the *Smithys*, I sought for a publisher, but nobody seemed anxious to put his imprint upon my work, and in a moment of magnificent optimism I founded a little publishing business, which was called *The Tallis Press*. It occupied one room in Temple Chambers, and from here I issued *Smithy* at 1 shilling and sold about 30,000 copies.“

Mr. Edgar Wallace writes, in the *London Daily Mail*:

Private Smith—his comrades, I am informed, call him „Smithy“ for short—entertained me yesterday with many stories of Army reform.

There was a time, explained Smithy, when all the chaps used to get very excited if it came out that there was going to be a brand new Army. You see a lot in the papers, you hear a lot about what’s going to happen, but reveille still goes at 6 a.m., „B“ Company still has jam for breakfast three days a week, and you step off with the left foot, just about the same as usual. The only feller I ever knew, he said, who made anything out of Army reform was Nobby Clark—Private Clark, of B. He continued:

A Business Head.

Nobby is a chap with a business head, as you may say; I mean that he is always thinking out new ways of making money without working for it. One day—oh, years an’ years ago it was—one of the young fellers at the War Office got out a new idea. I don’t exactly know what it was, and it afterwards came out that he didn’t either. But what he did know was that the Army before he came to the War Office was in a very bad state, and it was a good job for everybody he’d happened to be driving down Pall Mall and noticed it. We all got a bit excited when we heard we were going to be reformed, and lots of fellers joined the Army Temperance Association, because Nobby put it about that all teetotallers were going to get a penny a day extra. They gave Nobby their money to mind, so that the temptation of the cursed drink should not overcome ‘em, and later, when it was found out that there was nothing about being teetotal in the now Army reform, they had quite a lot of trouble in getting their money back.

„It’s no good your comin’ to me,“ sez Nobby to one of ‘em, a young teller named Spud Murphy. „I’m goin’ to keep you out of the accursed canteen so that you can get the extra penny a day for bein’ a temp’rance soldier.“

„There ain’t any penny a day,“ sez Spud, wrathful.

„Wait and see,“ sez Nobby, very calm.

So they waited for a week, then went to Nobby again. They couldn’t find him, because he’d got a telegram from London saying, „Come at once, your sister is horribly ill. Bring Private Smith, as she wants to see him.“

So me and Nobby got five days' leave and went up to town, and had the time of our lives.

When we got back all the young fellers who'd given Nobby money to mind said that if Nobby didn't hand it over there was going to be trouble. So Nobby gave 'em all that he had, an' said he kept the rest for Interest.

A Reform that did not come off.

Then Nobby put it about that the new Army reform was going to make all soldiers wear collars and ties, but somehow, the fellers wouldn't believe it; an' the stock collars and pink ties that Nobby bought cheap at Hills', the drapers in the High street, was a dead loss.

But we thought something must be going to happen, because the newspapers were filled with Army reform, and old chaps, writing from the Army and Navy Club, saying what a disgraceful thing it was. „Colonel, Retired“, they signed theirselves.

There was all sorts of rumors in the regiment. Once we heard that soldiers was to have eggs for breakfast every day of their lives; once if was put about that there was going to be no more church parades; but things went on as usual, and as far as I could see the only change we got was in the weather, for it rained for three weeks on end, an' we didn't have a single parade, which was very good.

That was the first Army reform I remember. Then there was another one. It came out in orders that a lot of Army Corps was to be formed, an' the Anchester Regiment was ordered down to Salisbury to join the 45th Army Corps. When we got there we was the only soldiers in sight.

„Where's the Army Corps?“ sez the colonel, an' nobody knew. The adjutant asked a chap who happened to be on Salisbury Plain, and the chap said he didn't know, but just before we arrived he'd seen a dog eating something, so the colonel told him he was a fool. And the adjutant asked another man—a man from Salisbury—and the man began turning out his pockets to prove that he hadn't got it. We never saw the 45th Army Corps, an' we never found it, though I think (here Smithy paid a delicate compliment to the power of the Press) that if they'd put an advertisement in the papers:

LOST.—A small Army Corps; lame in one leg, bob-tailed, does tricks, wears a sailor hat, and answers to the name of „Broddie,“

they might have got it.

Then we had another Army reform, but I don't think that one came off.

„Value for Cash.“

The other day Nobby came into the canteen in a great state of mind.

„There's a new Army reform,“ he sez.

„Is it something you want to sell?“ sez Spud Murphy.

„No, its—“

„Do you want to mind our money?“ sez Spud.

„Don't be silly," sez Nobby; „It's about every man being worth his money—“
„Ah!" sez Spud, noddin' his head, „I knew it was something about money.“

Well, from what Nobby said, it appears that there's a new Army reform made up by a new chap at the War Office, and it's pretty serious this time.

„Every soldier must be worth his money," sez Nobby, and he read a bit out of the paper.

„What does that mean?" sez Spud; so Nobby explained.

Nobby is a very plausible chap, an' by the time he'd finished explaining how the Army was going to be run on piecework lines he'd got all the chaps feeling very uneasy.

„I'm sorry for you, Spud, because I know, you don't like work—I don't suppose you'll draw more than half a crown a week.“

„But how are they going to work it out?" sez Spud, trying to do sums in his head.

So Nobby went on explaining.

„Penny for drill parade, tuppence for commanding officers's parade, threepence for kit inspection, fourpence for guard, fourpence-ha'penny for gymnasium, an' so on," sez Nobby, very glib.

Spud, who's a pal of the color-sergeant's, and is excused all parades, looked very miserable, and said you can't believe all that you read in the papers.

Real, and Parliamentary.

„I don't know what this new Army reform is going to do," Smithy went on, philosophically, „but I don't suppose it will do much. You see there are two armies. The Army that you and me know—fellers who wear uniforms an' go walking out on Sundays with their best girls—the Army that marches an' cleans its rifles an' gets run in for making an improper reply to a non-commissioned officer. Then there's another Army that nobody understands except civilians, and that's all about money and Acts of Parliament and politics. The Act of Parliament army is the army they're always reforming without our noticing it.“

A feller of ours, a chap named Bertie, who was a billiard marker before he enlisted and sounds all his aitches, started giving me and Nobby his opinion about the Army the other day.

„The fact is, my dear Clark," he sez in his haw-haw voice, „economics and efficiency are not necessarily incom-something-or-other.“

Nobby pulls him up sharp.

„Talking about eco-what-d'ye-call-it, Bertie, I think it's your turn to pay for the beer," he sez.

„I'm talking about Army reform," sez Bertie.

„And I'm talking about beer," sez Nobby, „so don't change the subject.“

⁽¹⁾ See *Kitchener's The Bloke*, *Christmas Day on the Veldt*, *The Night of the Drive*, *Home Again*, and *Back From The War—The Return of Smithy* in the collection Reports From The Boer War.