Turning Out a Tommy

by Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932

Illustrations by Helen Mekie

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THE King needs young men to serve him. He wants to make them fit for active service. He wants to train them so that if, by an unthinkable series of disasters, we find ourselves fighting for our national existence, he can raise his finger and beckon to his colours trained, self-reliant men with the traditions of some proud regiment—men physically fit to do battle for their homes and their women-kind.

When I was a boy of seventeen I was a weed. I was drifting aimlessly along the road which leads to thirty-five shillings a week and a clerkship. I reckoned 1 was a cut above wearing a red coat. I valued my freedom—in other words, I hated discipline. And I found that I had no freedom. I had no officer to order me here and there, but I had a hollow-chested, hock-bottle-shouldered senior clerk, who talked to me as though he owned me body and soul.

And in a moment of inspiration I joined the army.

I served for seven years, and I've never ceased to thank God that I did so intelligent a thing. I found a new caste—a new and splendid friendship. Seven years in the army made me a man—lifted me out of the rut—took me away from the miserable pettiness of life. It led me to new and wonderful lands; it gave me a sense of authority and self-assurance.

It gave me pocket-money, schooling, comforts, and admitted me to the glorious Freemasonry of soldiering.

Seven years I served in England and in Africa. I have lived with the armv, starved with the army, and nearly died with the army.

My chums were all men like you—chaps you meet who are neither one thing nor the other till the army collars them and dresses them into shape.

Most young men have one fear about joining. They are shy of being new chums; they don't like the idea of appearing as awkward novices. But to-day there are thousands of youngsters all new to the game. They are all recruits together.

Some mothers—especially middle-class mothers—think that the life is too rough, that the class of man you meet is too coarse for their tenderly-nurtured sons. That isn't true. Nothing is too rough for healthy youth as long as it is clean and decent. Providing beds are comfortable and food is good, and the habitation of the soldier is sanitary, that is all that matters.

And as to the men, they are fine fellows good sportsmen and the truest of friends. I was a private in the army—a private who took the rough with the smooth. I kicked over the traces and broke my leave and went to a military prison in the bad old days, and I got into all kinds of scrapes. There was nothing holy in my composition; I asked for all the trouble I got—and I got it bv return of post.

The recruits who are going up now have advantages of which I did not dream. In the first place, they have a good chance of seeing active service—which the average soldier spends his life without seeing. They are not going into barracks, because barracks are pretty well occupied in one way and the other. A few of them will go under canvas, but the majority are being billeted—that is to say, little parties of them are lodging with private families in the neighbourhood of headquarters.

Their training is different to what it is in normal times. They are learning the essentials, and they are working hard to learn. They are learning to march, to shoot, to act with initiative. Ninety per cent, of recruits when the rifle is put into their hands for the first time, and they are asked the invariable question: „Why is this rifle given to you?" as invariably answer: „To defend my life."

The first big lesson the recruit learns is conveyed in the drill instructor's caustic correction: „Your life, my lad, isn't worth defending; this rifle is given to you for the destruction of the King's enemies."

Illustration:
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Now that is the beginning and the end of a recruit‘s training. He is given a rifle (I refer, of course, to the infantry recruit) for the destruction of the King‘s enemies, and all his training is to the end of employing his weapon in the most advantageous manner. He learns to carry it and its „food“ long distances, to bring his rifle from Mons to Paris and back to the German border, so to stiffen his frame that he can use his rifle with little or no fatigue, to handle his rifle smartly with the same easy, second-nature familiarity with which he handles a knife and fork, to know its idiosyncrasies and its humours, and to place himself in certain positions in wartime so that the rifle may not change proprietorship.

We are not bothering soldiers much about ceremonial. We are not jawing their heads off if all the rifles do not come up to the „slope“ at the same time; yet the young soldier must master some of the ceremonial side of army life, not because he may be called upon to present arms, but because all this drill serves two purposes: it muscles up a man, and it teaches him how to hold, swing, and carry his rifle so that he may use it almost unconsciously, as a man uses a walking-stick.

The business of the recruit is to learn to march—to swing through country lanes with that fine swing of shoulder, that swanky little hunch which only the British soldier understands.

He must learn to shoot, so to train his eye and brain that when eye says „backsight—foresight and enemy all in line,“ brain will say to finger—„Press gently—don‘t pull as if you were drawing beer, but press firmly—so.“

He must learn to be independent and yet one of a whole at the same time, to attack and defend in open order where everything is up to him, but he is conscious of supreme direction, and is ready to obey that superiority.

Open order fighting takes two or three years to learn, but if he gives his mind to it, he will learn it in two—battles.

Illustration:
The recruit learns to dig trenches—
and his back aches a bit the first day.

The new recruit goes to gym as a matter of course. It does him all the good in the world. He learns to dig trenches—and his back aches a bit the first day, his hand is blistered the second, but on the third he wonders what there is in it that is so difficult. All the time the „Kitchenarios“—that is what the men at the front call the new army—are at work—good soldier‘s work. There is no room for a slacker in Kitchener‘s army.

He has to get up with the lark, and be on parade after a hasty mug of coffee and a snatch of bread-and-butter for the early morning drill. He goes off to breakfast—then drill again.

More than half the horror of the average recruit‘s existence lies in the cleaning of his spotless white „straps“, and the polishing, pipe-claying, brushing, and burnishing for commanding officer‘s parade. It must be confessed that whilst the „Kitchenario“ has to keep his body speckless, he hasn‘t much to do in the way of fancy work on his clothes.

One thing, however, he must learn—and that is to pack his kit in the smallest and most compact compass. He has to carry that kit—knife, fork, spoon, lather-brush, razor, soap, towel, spare shirts, boots, bible, prayer-book, etc.—that is absolutely essential. This kit of his is the whole of his wardrobe; it is his valise, suit-case, manicure set, and cabin trunk. Everything he wants on campaign he will find there. If it isn‘t there, he mustn‘t want it.

Illustration:
He has to get up with the lark, for there is no room for a slacker in Kitchener‘s army.

And remember that this pack is only to enable him to live in comfort, so that he may be fit to carry and use the rifle which is placed in his hands for the destruction of the King‘s enemies.

The recruit slings himself into his kit, and falls in after breakfast for C.O.‘s parade. He will drill again, and yet again before lunch, and after lunch (they call it dinner in the army), and he will vary his barrack-yard drill with gym., with trench digging, and with route marches, short at first, and growing gradually longer.

Oh! those gorgeous marches in October and November, when the air is keen and sweet, and there are white mists on the tired fields, and the boots ring upon the hard roads, and the verv soul of man is a-chuckle with the joy of life !

A visit to one of the big camps where the recruits are being trained shows with what zest they enter into their training. It is little wonder that their military progress is so swift when the amount of work they cram into a day is considered.

Here is a day‘s programme:

Reveille…	5.30 a.m.
Coffee and biscuit…	6 a.m.
Parade…	6.30 a.m.
Breakfast…	7.30 a.m.
Parade…	9 a.m.
Dismissed…	12 noon.
Dinner…	12.30 p.m
Parade…	2 p.m.
Tea…	4.30 p.m.
Leave camp…	5 p.m.
Lights out…	10.15 p.m.

Dinner is a great event, and the amount of roast beef, potatoes, haricot beans, and plum „duff“ which is disposed of speaks volumes for the glorious health-giving life which they lead. Hard work, perhaps, but, bank clerk or labourer, they all enjoy it!

Gradually, the recruit will find his slack, bent shoulders stiffen; he will find a new zest in things. He will learn how fine a thing is manhood when it is applied to the service of the State. He will welcome the end of the day when, if he is not chosen for guard (they take you in alphabetical order), he can go down to the

canteen or „coffee-shop“, where a piano tinkles musically and the roaring choruses of songs attest the recruit‘s new lung power.

Then one day will come the order, and the new battalion, a thousand strong, filled with finely-set young men who would not recognise their former selves if they met them by chance, go through the town to the waiting troop- train—to the waiting troopship. There is a swift run across Channel, with a convoy of destroyers to guard them, and then by and by they come to the Army which Knows—lean, soiled men, with untidy beards, who will watch the new soldiers, and watching, will approve.

Illustration:
The new soldier will welcome the end of the day when he can go down to the canteen or „coffee-shop“, and roar out popular choruses with his chums.