

Rudyard Kipling

The New Army in Training



Редьярд Киплинг

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I

THE MEN AT WORK

The ore, the furnace and the hammer are all that is needed for a sword.
—Native proverb.

This was a cantonment one had never seen before, and the grey-haired military policeman could give no help.

‘My experience,’ he spoke detachedly, ‘is that you’ll find everything everywhere. Is it any particular corps you’re looking for?’

‘Not in the least,’ I said.

‘Then you’re all right. You can’t miss getting something.’ He pointed generally to the North Camp. ‘It’s like floods in a town, isn’t it?’

He had hit the just word. All known marks in the place were submerged by troops. Parade-grounds to their utmost limits were crowded with them; rises and sky-lines were furred with them, and the length of the roads heaved and rippled like bicycle-chains with blocks of men on the move.

The voice of a sergeant in the torment reserved for sergeants at roll-call boomed across a bunker. He was calling over recruits to a specialist corps.

‘But I’ve called you once!’ he snapped at a man in leggings.

‘But I’m Clarke Two,’ was the virtuous reply.

‘Oh, you are, are you?’ He pencilled the correction with a scornful mouth, out of one corner of which he added, “‘Sloppy” Clarke! You’re all Clarkes or Watsons to-day. You don’t know your own names. You don’t know what corps you’re in. (This was bitterly unjust, for they were squinting up at a biplane.) You don’t know anything.’

‘Mm!’ said the military policeman. ‘The more a man has in his head, the harder it is for him to manage his carcass – at first. I’m glad I never was a sergeant. Listen to the instructors! Like rooks, ain’t it?’

There was a mile of sergeants and instructors, varied by company officers, all at work on the ready material under their hands. They grunted, barked, yapped, expostulated, and, in rare cases, purred, as the lines broke and formed and wheeled over the vast maidan. When companies numbered off one could hear the tone and accent of every walk in life, and maybe half the counties of England, from the deep-throated ‘Woon’ of the north to the sharp, half-whistled Devonshire ‘Tu.’ And as the instructors laboured, so did the men, with a passion to learn as passionately as they were taught.

Presently, in the drift of the foot-traffic down the road, there came another grey-haired man, one foot in a bright slipper, which showed he was an old soldier cherishing a sore toe. He drew alongside and considered these zealous myriads.

‘Good?’ said I, deferentially.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Very good’ – then, half to himself: ‘Quite different, though.’ A pivot-man near us had shifted a little, instead of marking time, on the wheel. His face clouded, his lips moved. Obviously he was cursing his own clumsiness.

‘That’s what I meant,’ said the veteran. ‘Innocent! Innocent! Mark you, they ain’t doin’ it to be done with it and get off. They’re doin’ it because – because they want to do it.’

‘Wake up! Wake *up* there, Isherwood!’ This was a young subaltern’s reminder flung at a back which straightened itself. That one human name coming up out of all that maze of impersonal manoeuvring stuck in the memory like wreckage on the ocean.

‘An’ it wasn’t ‘ardly even necessary to caution Mister Isherwood,’ my companion commented. ‘Prob’ly he’s bitterly ashamed of ‘imself.’

I asked a leading question because the old soldier told me that when his toe was sound, he, too, was a military policeman.

‘Crime? Crime?’ said he. ‘They don’t know what crime is – that lot don’t – none of ‘em!’ He mourned over them like a benevolent old Satan looking into a busy Eden, and his last word was ‘Innocent!’

The car worked her way through miles of men – men route-marching, going to dig or build bridges, or wrestle with stores and transport – four or five miles of men, and every man with eager eyes. There was no music – not even drums and fifes. I heard nothing but a distant skirl of the pipes. Trust a Scot to get his national weapon as long as there is a chief in the North! Admitting that war is a serious business, specially to the man who is being fought for, and that it may be right to carry a long face and contribute to relief funds which should be laid on the National Debt, it surely could do no harm to cheer the men with a few bands. Half the money that has been spent in treating, for example...

THE NORTH IN BLUE

There was a moor among woods with a pond in a hollow, the centre of a world of tents whose population was North-Country. One heard it from far off.

‘Yo’ mun trail t’ pick an’ t’ rifle at t’ same time. Try again,’ said the instructor.

An isolated company tried again with set seriousness, and yet again. They were used to the pick – won their living by it, in fact – and so, favoured it more than the rifle; but miners don’t carry picks at the trail by instinct, though they can twiddle their rifles as one twiddles walking-sticks.

They were clad in a blue garb that disguised all contours; yet their shoulders, backs, and loins could not altogether be disguised, and these were excellent. Another company, at physical drill in shirt and trousers, showed what superb material had offered itself to be worked upon, and how much poise and directed strength had been added to that material in the past few months. When the New Army gets all its new uniform, it will gaze at itself like a new Narcissus. But the present kit is indescribable. That is why, English fashion, it has been made honourable by its wearers; and our world in the years to come will look back with reverence as well as affection on those blue slops and that epileptic cap. One farseeing commandant who had special facilities has possessed himself of brass buttons, thousands of ‘em, which he has added to his men’s outfit for the moral effect of (*a*) having something to clean, and (*b*) of keeping it so. It has paid. The smartest regiment in the Service could not do itself justice in such garments, but I managed to get a view of a battalion, coming in from a walk, at a distance which more or less subdued the – er – uniform, and they moved with the elastic swing and little quick ripple that means so much. A miner is not supposed to be as good a marcher as a townsman, but when he gets set to time and pace and learns due economy of effort, his developed back and shoulder muscles take him along very handsomely. Another battalion fell in for parade while I watched, again at a distance. They came to hand quietly and collectedly enough, and with only that amount of pressing which is caused by fear of being late. A platoon – or whatever they call it – was giving the whole of its attention to its signalling instructors, with the air of men resolved on getting the last flicker of the last cinema-film for their money. Crime in the military sense they do not know any more than their fellow-innocents up the road. It is hopeless to pretend to be other than what one is, because one’s soul in this life is as exposed as one’s body. It is futile to tell civilian lies – there are no civilians to listen – and they have not yet learned to tell Service ones without being detected. It is useless to sulk at any external condition of affairs, because the rest of the world with which a man is concerned is facing those identical conditions. There is neither poverty nor riches, nor any possibility of pride, except in so far as one may do one’s task a little better than one’s mate.

DUTIES AND DEVELOPMENTS

In the point of food they are extremely well looked after, quality and quantity, wet canteen and dry. Drafts come in all round the clock, and they have to be fed; late guards and sentries want something hot at odd times, and the big marquee-canteen is the world's gathering-place, where food, life's first interest to man in hard work, is thoroughly discussed. They can get outside of a vast o' vittles. Thus, a contractor who delivers ten thousand rations a day stands, by deputy at least, in the presence of just that number of rather fit, long, deep men. They are what is called 'independent' – a civilian weakness which they will learn to blush over in a few months, and to discourage among later recruits; but they are also very quick to pick up dodges and tricks that make a man more comfortable in camp life, and their domestic routine runs on wheels. It must have been hard at first for civilians to see the necessity for that continuous, apparently persnickety, house-maiding and 'following-up' which is vital to the comfort of large bodies of men in confined quarters. In civil life men leave these things to their womenfolk, but where women are not, officers, inspecting tents, feet, and such-like, develop a she-side to their head, and evidently make their non-commissioned officers and men develop it too. A good soldier is always a bit of an old maid. But, as I heard a private say to a sergeant in the matter of some kit chucked into a corner: 'Yo' canna keep owt redd up ony proper gate on a sand-hill.' To whom his superior officer: 'Ah know yo' canna', but yo' mun try, Billy.'

And Heaven knows they are trying hard enough – men, n.c.o.'s, and officers – with all the masked and undervoiced effort of our peoples when we are really at work. They stand at the very beginning of things; creating out of chaos, meeting emergencies as they arise; handicapped in every direction, and overcoming every handicap by simple goodwill, humour, self-sacrifice, common-sense, and such trumpery virtues. I watched their faces in the camp, and at lunch looked down a line of some twenty men in the mess-tent, wondering how many would survive to see the full splendour and significance of the work here so nobly begun. But they were not interested in the future beyond their next immediate job. They ate quickly and went out to it, and by the time I drove away again I was overtaking their battalions on the road. Not unrelated units lugged together for foot-slogging, but real battalions, of a spirit in themselves which defied even the blue slops – wave after wave of proper men, with undistracted eyes, who never talked a word about any war. But not a note of music – and they North-countrymen!

II

IRON INTO STEEL

Thanda lohā garam lohe ko marta hai (Cold iron will cut hot iron).

AT the next halt I fell into Scotland – blocks and blocks of it – a world of precise-spoken, thin-lipped men, with keen eyes. They gave me directions which led by friendly stages to the heart of another work of creation and a huge drill-shed where the miniature rifles were busy. Few things are duller than Morris-tube practice in the shed, unless it be judging triangles of error against blank-walls. I thought of the military policeman with the sore toe; for these ‘innocents’ were visibly enjoying both games. They sighted over the sand-bags with the gravity of surveyors, while the instructors hurled knowledge at them like sling-stones.

‘Man, d’ye see your error? Step here, man, and I’ll show ye.’ Teacher and taught glared at each other like theologians in full debate; for this is the Scot’s way of giving and getting knowledge.

At the miniature targets squad after squad rose from beside their deadly-earnest instructors, gathered up their target-cards, and whisperingly compared them, five heads together under a window.

‘Aye, that was where I loosed too soon.’ ‘I misdoubt I took too much o’ the foresight.’ Not a word of hope and comfort in their achievements. Nothing but calvinistic self-criticism.

These men ran a little smaller than the North-country folk down the road, but in depth of chest, girth of fore-arm, biceps, and neck-measurement they were beautifully level and well up; and the squads at bayonet-practice had their balance, drive, and recover already. As the light failed one noticed the whites of their eyes turning towards their instructors. It reminded one that there is always a touch of the cateran in the most docile Scot, even as the wolf persists in every dog.

‘And what about crime?’ I demanded.

There was none. They had not joined to play the fool. Occasionally a few unstable souls who have mistaken their vocation try to return to civil life by way of dishonourable discharge, and think it ‘funny’ to pile up offences. The New Army has no use for those people either, and attends to them on what may be called ‘democratic lines,’ which is all the same as the old barrack-room court-martial. Nor does it suffer fools gladly. There is no time to instruct them. They go to other spheres.

There was, or rather is, a man who intends to join a certain battalion. He joined it once, scraped past the local doctor, and was drafted into the corps, only to be hove out for varicose veins. He went back to his accommodating doctor, repeated the process, and was again rejected. They are waiting for him now in his third incarnation; both sides are equally determined. And there was another Scot who joined, served awhile, and left, as he might have left a pit or a factory. Somehow it occurred to him that explanations were required, so he wrote to his commanding officer from his home address and asked him what he recommended him to do. The C.O., to his infinite credit, wrote back: ‘Suppose you rejoin,’ which the man did, and no more said. His punishment, of course, will come to him when he realises what he has done. If he does not then perish in his self-contempt (he has a good conceit of himself) he will make one first-rate non-commissioned officer.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

I had the luck to meet a Sergeant-Major, who was the Sergeant-Major of one's dreams. He had just had sure information that the kilts for his battalion were coming in a few days, so, after three months' hard work, life smiled upon him. From kilts one naturally went on to the pipes. The battalion had its pipes – a very good set. How did it get them? Well, there was, of course, the Duke. They began with him. And there was a Scots lord concerned with the regiment. And there was a leddy of a certain clan connected with the battalion. Hence the pipes. Could anything be simpler or more logical? And when the kilts came the men would be different creatures. Were they good men, I asked. 'Yes. Verra good. Wha's to mislead 'em?' said he.

'Old soldiers,' I suggested, meanly enough. 'Rejoined privates of long ago.'

'Ay, there might have been a few such in the beginning, but they'd be more useful in the Special Reserve Battalions. Our boys are good boys, but, ye'll understand, they've to be handled – just handled a little.' Then a subaltern came in, loaded with regimental forms, and visibly leaning on the Sergeant-Major, who explained, clarified, and referred them on the proper quarters.

'Does the work come back to you?' I asked, for he had been long in pleasant civil employ.

'Ay. It does that. It just does that.' And he addressed the fluttering papers, lists, and notes, with the certainty of an old golfer on a well-known green.

Squads were at bayonet practice in the square. (They like bayonet practice, especially after looking at pictures in the illustrated dailies.) A new draft was being introduced to its rifles. The rest were getting ready for evening parade. They were all in khaki, so one could see how they had come on in the last ten weeks. It was a result the meekest might have been proud of, but the New Army does not cultivate useless emotions. Their officers and their instructors worked over them patiently and coldly and repeatedly, with their souls in the job: and with their soul, mind, and body in the same job the men took – soaked up – the instruction. And that seems to be the note of the New Army.

WHAT THE ARMY DOES AND THINKS

They have joined for good reason. For that reason they sleep uncomplainingly double thick on barrack floors, or lie like herrings in the tents and sing hymns and other things when they are flooded out. They walk and dig half the day or all the night as required; they wear – though they will not eat – anything that is issued to them; they make themselves an organised and kindly life out of a few acres of dirt and a little canvas; they keep their edge and anneal their discipline under conditions that would depress a fox-terrier and disorganise a champion football team. They ask nothing in return save work and equipment. And being what they are, they thoroughly and unfeignedly enjoy what they are doing; and they purpose to do much more.

But they also think. They think it vile that so many unmarried young men who are not likely to be affected by Government allowances should be so shy about sharing their life. They discuss these young men and their womenfolk by name, and imagine rude punishments for them, suited to their known characters. They discuss, too, their elders who in time past warned them of the sin of soldiering. These men, who live honourably and simply under the triple vow of Obedience, Temperance, and Poverty, recall, not without envy, the sort of life which well-kept moralists lead in the unpicketed, un-sentried towns; and it galls them that such folk should continue in comfort and volubility at the expense of good men's lives, or should profit greasily at the end of it all. They stare hard, even in their blue slops, at white-collared, bowler-hatted young men, who, by the way, are just learning to drop their eyes under that gaze. In the third-class railway carriages they hint that they would like explanations from the casual 'nut,' and they explain to him wherein his explanations are unconvincing. And when they are home on leave, the slack-jawed son of the local shop-keeper, and the rising nephew of the big banker, and the dumb but cunning carter's lad receive instruction or encouragement suited to their needs and the nation's. The older men and the officers will tell you that if the allowances are made more liberal we shall get all the men we want. But the younger men of the New Army do not worry about allowances – or, for that matter, make 'em!

There is a gulf already opening between those who have joined and those who have not; but we shall not know the width and the depth of that gulf till the war is over. The wise youth is he who jumps it now and lands in safety among the trained and armed men.

III

GUNS AND SUPPLY

Under all and after all the Wheel carries everything. —Proverb.

One had known the place for years as a picturesque old house, standing in a peaceful park; had watched the growth of certain young oaks along a new-laid avenue, and applauded the owner's enterprise in turning a stretch of pasture to plough. There are scores of such estates in England which the motorist, through passing so often, comes to look upon almost as his own. In a single day the brackened turf between the oaks and the iron road-fence blossomed into tents, and the drives were all cut up with hoofs and wheels. A little later, one's car sweeping home of warm September nights was stopped by sentries, who asked her name and business; for the owner of that retired house and discreetly wooded park had gone elsewhere in haste, and his estate was taken over by the military.

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