

MUD.

You know the brave, saucy swing of a Highland regiment as it marches along a city street to the shrilling of the pipes. The kilted lads, so gay and debonnair, so spruce and trim from spats to cap-badge, have won your admiration.

If only you could see them now—if only you could see the uniform that is theirs.

Their kilts are now of khaki colour, and when dry—which is very seldom—would stand upright of themselves; for dry mud makes for rigidity. Each man wears a pair of long rubber boots which reach to the top of the thighs; and while some are content to wear their kilt over these in the ordinary way, others make a desperate attempt to stuff the folds inside the tops of the boots. Over the tunic a stout leather jerkin is worn, armless, and descending well below the hips. And if you can conceive of a coating of thick mud over all, varying from a quarter inch to an inch in thickness, and a muddied stubble of beard that effectively disguises the most familiar face, you have a mental picture of the once swanky Highlanders.

The battalion orderlies, whose duty it is to carry messages from headquarters to the various companies in the line, have improved even on the foregoing dress, for they have altogether discarded the kilt while in the trenches. They are literally clothed in sackcloth—and mud instead of ashes, for the lower parts of their bodies and the upper parts of their legs are voluminously swathed in sandbags. The appearance they thus present, if not exactly picturesque, is at all events sufficiently quaint and arresting.

No comedian of the halls ever appeared in a costume more fantastic or ridiculous to the eye than ours; in pre-war days it would only have been necessary for us to walk on any stage to evoke roars of laughter.

“Wouldn't I just cut a dash in Bond Street with these togs on?” sighed a Highlander the other day, “‘the shady side, the ladies' side of Bond Street!’ And”—surveying the thick shapelessness of his rubber-booted legs—“wouldn't I just be a star turn as the hind legs of a pantomime elephant!”

Yes, it's fortunate that we are still able to laugh at the absurdity of our appearance. If we are scarecrows, we are at all events fairly cheerful ones.

I encountered my friend Gussie in Cheyne Walk yesterday. I was going down that busy thoroughfare and he was going up—at least he had been, but at the moment of our meeting he was a fixture, he was securely anchored, he was as incapable of forward movement as the statue on the Nelson Column in Trafalgar Square. In short, he was embedded in mud, that was thicker than porridge, nearly to the hips.

“Hullo!” said Gussie, “you’re the very man I’ve been looking for.”

I asked a silly question. “What you doin’ here?” I queried.

“Oh, just havin’ an airin’ an’ puttin’ a good thick poultice round my legs.” This was “spoke sarcastic.” “I’ve been stuck here for a quarter of an hour waitin’ on someone to give me a hand out, an’ I’ve turned seven different kinds of colour with fear that the Allemands would begin strafein’ me or snipin’ at me with their 9·2’s while I had taken root here. Give’s a hand, will you?”

I was only sunk in mud to the knees, so I was comparatively well off, but my legs ached with the constant effort of tugging and straining to be free of the mud. The extrication of Gussie was quite a long job, for I had no spade wherewith to dig him out, and in extending him a hand

I had to be careful that I was not pulled into the hole that had engulfed him.

But at length he stood in only two feet of mud, and we remained awhile to congratulate ourselves on our successful efforts and to compare notes on the week's events.

"What's Baker Street like?" asked Gussie when it was time for us to part. "I think I'll try it."

"Oh, Baker Street's your best way," I answered. "I swam down it this morning—the water was glorious. I had a lovely bathe."

"How deep?" asked Gussie.

"Oh, about four inches above the knees," I told him. "But it's really, truly water, you know—not more than a few inches of mud at the bottom. I washed my face in it this morning."

"Bon!" said Gussie. "I thought there was something unusual about your appearance. I see what it is. You've got a complexion instead of an ordinary untinted plaster cast. Tut! such snobbishness—must be washed even if it's in a mud puddle, and you call yourself a soldier. Fie!"

Then we continued on our separate ways, lurching and plunging through the mud.