

## A BILLET IN ARCADY.

There are billets and billets — oh! such billets!

Those immediately behind the trenches are usually mere husks of buildings. Once upon a time they may have been village schools or dwelling-houses or barns or stables—but now they are ruins: that and nothing more. They are not picturesque, and their powers of protection against rain or wind or shrapnel are woefully limited. Sometimes, it is true, they possess a certain interest for zoologists: I have seen Tommies, whom you would never have suspected of a passion for natural history, hunting around, ardent and lynx-eyed, for some of the “specimens” that their billet harboured.—But that is another story.

Often our billets are lofts above outhouses, and having roofs so low that one is compelled to adopt always the “half-shut knife” attitude so abhorred of Army instructors. The frequent sudden contact of one’s head with the rafters develops one’s “bumps” and bad temper. A

small square opening in the gable of the house gives access to the loft. Situated just under the arch of the roof, and far above a man's head, it looks like the entrance to a dove-cot. To reach the platoon's bed-sitting-room one has to climb a rickety ladder—(the ladders we obtain on these occasions are invariably rickety and have several rungs missing)—and then warily crawl or wriggle through the hole in the wall. As it is obviously impossible to hoist a dixy to our eyrie, meals are issued on the ground at the foot of the ladder. Then will you see Highlanders performing the most fantastic equilibristic feats. Balancing two mess-tins of stew in each hand, and with one dangling from his teeth, a man steers a perilous course up the shaky ladder, at the same time trying to dodge the heels of the preceding man and the gravy that splashes from his mess-tins, and to tell him, through tightly clenched teeth, exactly what he (the bottom dog) thinks of his clumsy efforts.

In districts further removed from the line there is greater variety in billets. Sometimes we have rested in a French military barracks, and again have lived in the atmosphere of culture that permeates a Ladies' College. A tobacco factory has been our dwelling place, and once we shivered o' nights in a tileworks where icy

draughts converged from every quarter of the globe.

But I am going to tell you of an occasion when I "clicked" for a billet out of the ordinary run.

The battalion had just finished a long spell in the trenches and, marching back, halted a night in a rural district remote from any town or village. There was difficulty in obtaining billets, and those eventually commandeered were scattered over a wide area.

The Headquarters Staff was billeted in the various outbuildings of a farm, the particular haven allotted to myself and some others being a small ramshackle barn with rough earthen floor, and already tenanted by a number of fowls. Immediately on arrival, being very tired and hungry, we set about "drumming up"—which, in the civilian tongue, means "getting tea ready." I was deputed to "square-push" Madame of the Farmhouse—to make myself pleasant to her, and then request the use of her fire to boil some water. Apparently I succeeded in making myself sufficiently agreeable to Madame, for she not only granted my request, but invited me and a fellow "square-pusher" to sleep in the farm kitchen for the night.

"Some billet you've clicked for! You're laughin' now," commented our messmates when

they learned: while one remarked that we had surely "pee-hee'd Madame to some tune." (To "pee-hee," I may explain, is Atkinsian for "to ingratiate one's self with"—"to suck in with.")

It was as quaint and picturesque a billet as any in which I have reposed my tired clay since coming to this country of strange and woeful contrasts. A great square room it was, with stone paved floor and a low raftered ceiling of dark oak. The fireplace, with its spacious ingle, entirely filled one end of the kitchen, and a big dresser covered with blue-patterned china masked the greater part of one wall. In a corner was a little *prie-dieu*, and on the walls hung several cheap lithographs of the Madonna and the Christ and some blue China plates.

On a projecting nail in one of the oaken beams of the ceiling swallows had builded a nest, and in the early morning, when Monsieur had thrown open the door, we were surprised by a sudden flutter of wings and two swift streaks of white as the parent birds flew out into the sunshine—the first intimation we had had of their presence in the room. All morning they flew in and out the low doorway, coming and going to and from the nest which held all their little world of hope, and paying not the slightest heed to the two humans, accoutred in all the

strange panoply of war, who shared the farm kitchen with them.

Behind the house was a cherry orchard with a "living river" flowing by the foot of it—a placid little burn all overhung with willows. And in the golden morning we bathed in its cool waters and completed our toilet in the orchard, our shaving mirrors stuck up on the gnarled trunks of the trees.

Followed one of the peacefullest, laziest days we had known for long. With a dozen others I lay on the green sward under a cherry tree in the orchard and wrote letters and amused myself with a French novel: and again did nothing but lie on my back and watch the lozenges of blue sky gleaming through the tangled greenery overhead—a greenery splashed with the splendid scarlet of the fruit. And all day long we ate cherries—for some of which we paid M'sieu the farmer, while others we stole from the trees; and, of course, these were the best and sweetest.

So the day wore to its close—a day of sunshine and peace and idle happiness. As subsequent events proved, it was the last such day that any of us were to know for long—the last that very many were ever to know.

For the soldier the road from Arcady to hell is often only a few hours' travel.