

Gymnastics in the Army.

BY CHARLES KNIGHT.



It is not too much to say that the brilliant reputation the British Army has attained throughout the world, as an efficient fighting force, is due, in great part, to the splendidly complete and scientific course of gymnastics through which every individual recruit is required to pass. True, the raw material is of the finest, but this does not obviate the necessity for careful, persistent handling and working up towards perfection.

A wholly extraordinary improvement is always noticeable in the "setting-up" of the men after they have completed the regulation course, which, by the way, extends over a period of ten weeks, with compulsory practice lasting an hour and a half every day; this, however, is often supplemented—such is the enthusiasm of the men—by the voluntary attendance of many recruits during the evening.

Virtually from his enlistment, the recruit (who commences drill at the *dépôt* of his regiment) has ample facilities given him for physical exercise in the well-appointed military gymnasium; and the fact that elaborately-fitted establishments of this kind are now also to be found at all *dépôts*, as well as at regimental head-quarters, is plain proof that the authorities are perfectly sensible of the immense importance of this part of a soldier's training.

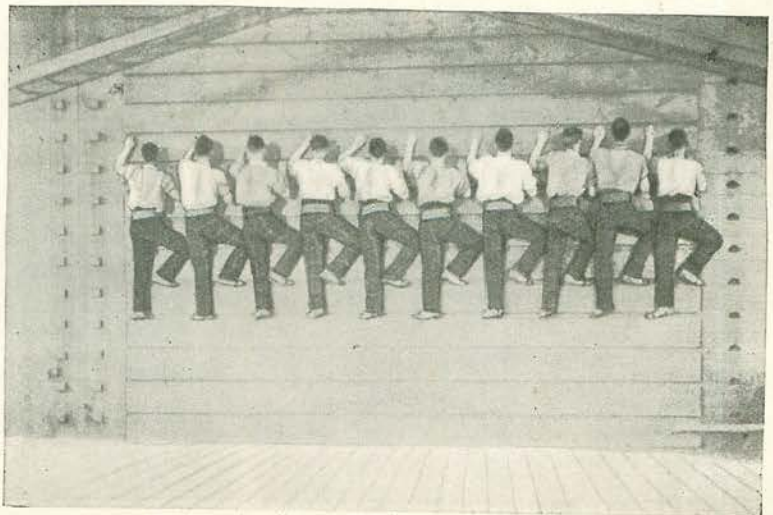
It would be difficult, indeed, to find a more complete military gymnasium than that at Parkhurst, the present station of the 2nd Scottish Rifles, lately returned from India. Here it was that I procured my photographs—faithful snapshots all—together with the necessary information, for which I am greatly indebted to the Regimental Chief Instructor, Staff-Sergeant Skinner. Perhaps

I should mention that a regular monthly inspection takes place in the gymnasium at Parkhurst.

The first reproduction in this article depicts what is known as "escalading practice," which I witnessed at the east end of the Parkhurst Gymnasium. Here we see a series of planks, 9in. wide and 1½in. thick, built on to the wall from floor to ceiling. These pitch-pine boards are placed parallel to, but at intervals from, one another, in order to admit of all the men obtaining a grip and foothold. In the picture, ten men are seen escalading this wooden wall with apparent ease, keeping perfect time with hands and feet as, by word of command, they ascend what does duty for one of the defences of an enemy.

On being permitted to glance at Staff-Sergeant Skinner's well-kept register book, I was surprised to note the amazingly regular attendance of all the men—always excepting, of course, those who were on the sick-list. The sergeant also called my attention to the measurements of the men, taken on joining the class, as compared with those registered upon their dismissal as efficient.

"We take their weights on that machine yonder," remarked the energetic, painstaking officer to me; "also the measurements of the chest, forearm, and upper arm. You will note that in every case the ultimate improvement is more or less striking. Take my last



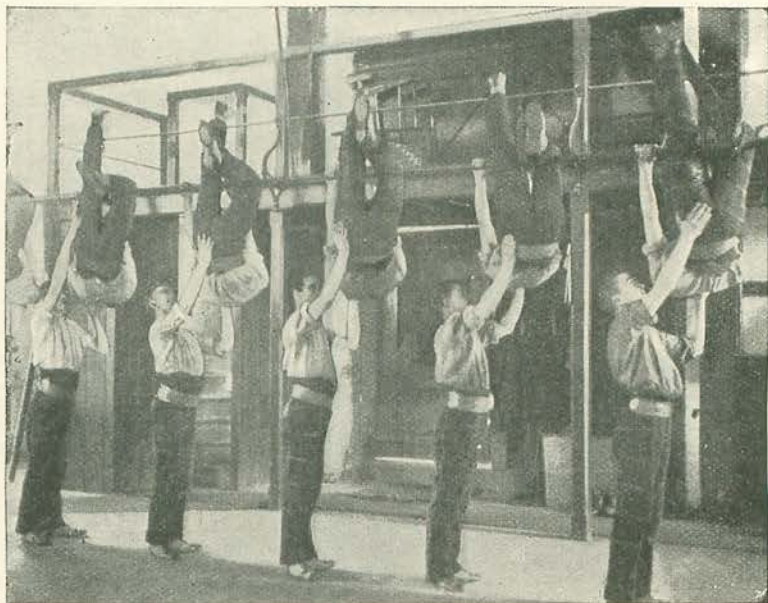
"ESCALADING" PRACTICE.

class. Here you see the increase in each individual weight was $2\frac{1}{2}$ lb.; chest, $1\frac{1}{4}$ in.; and forearm and upper arm, $\frac{1}{4}$ in.

"I may say, however," added the sergeant, "that this class was hardly up to the average, because, for one thing, it is exceeded by the all-round average struck at the end of the year."

During all the exercises which it was my privilege to witness, I noticed that the men were continually exhorted to keep their bodies erect and their chests thrown well forward. Immediately opposite the escalading wall, at the other end of the building, is an iron bar which extends across the entire width of the gymnasium, but of which only a section is shown in the second photograph here reproduced. In this illustration, one rank is seen assisting the other above the bar. Presently, by a movement termed "right-leg acting," which really means the swinging of that limb, together with a strong pull of the arms, the men raise themselves to a sitting posture on the bar.

I was fortunate enough to see the Parkhurst men go through many picturesque

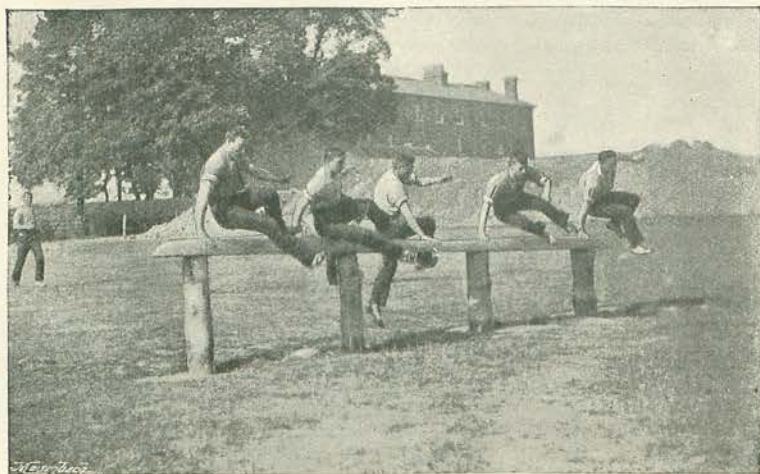


"RIGHT-LEG ACTING" ON THE BAR.

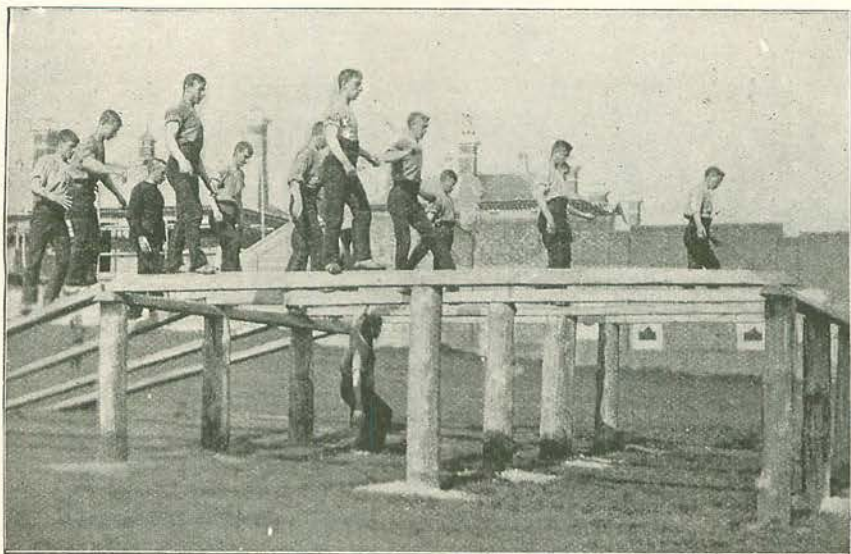
manceuvres, beginning with the simplest exercises upon the parallel bars and going on through dumb-bell and Swedish drill to jumping, obstacle climbing, escalading, and lastly, bayonet "attack and defence" practice.

At the back of the gymnasium at this place is a very large drill-field, and here Sergeant Skinner has lately been furnished with a series of "obstacles," more or less difficult of negotiation, and altogether constituting a very novel and desirable addition to the more ordinary apparatus within the building itself. The first of these consists of the half of a tree-

trunk, placed horizontally about 3 ft. from the ground, and this the men are required to clear without touching. In the next illustration given the men are seen negotiating a similarly constructed obstacle, fixed about 4 ft. 6 in. above the ground. It will be seen that in this instance they are allowed to use one hand, and have a run of about 30 yards. The man at the far end of this



NEGOTIATING THE FIRST OBSTACLE.



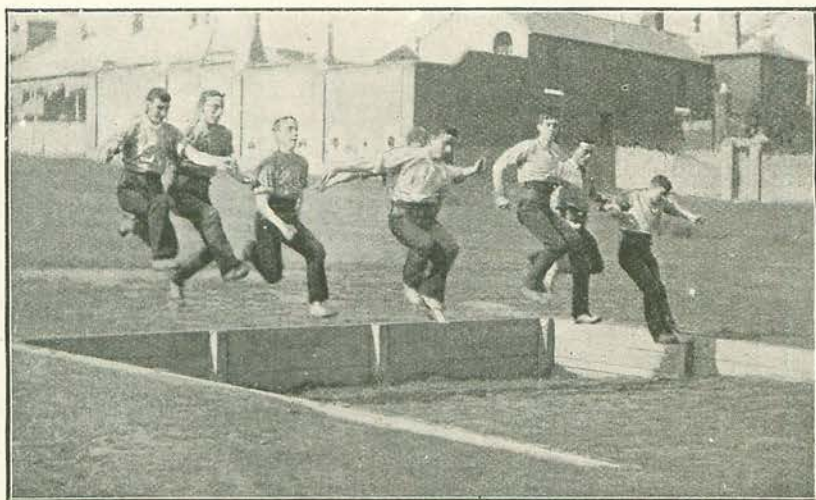
ANXIOUS MOMENTS—CROSSING THE BRIDGE.

obstacle is a recruit of whom great things may be expected. He ran with the rest, but made carefully for the far end of the obstacle, where he placed his right hand and then vaulted easily over something like four feet of wintry atmosphere. Behind will be seen a belated individual who probably came to grief over the first tree-trunk.

Still advancing, the panting pupils are presently confronted by the bridge-like structure shown in this picture. There is a bit of the tight-rope business about this, and for some of the men it becomes a veritable *pons asinorum*. As a fact, the men have to walk across on split tree-trunks, of which the convex barkless part is uppermost. When I took this photograph these recruits had already received four weeks' training, and yet their frantic endeavours to accomplish this slippery peregrination reminded me forcibly of the scene on certain festive occasions when eager rustics

attempted to negotiate a horizontal greasy pole, in the hope of winning an indifferent joint, or a purse containing a wholly inadequate sum. In this illustration it will be seen that one recruit has fallen through—gone under, in fact; yet his fellows are so intent on looking after themselves that no hand is outstretched to help the man below, who, no doubt, is wondering where he is, and how he got there. Wherein is a moral which need not be dwelt upon here.

Now consider attentively the next photograph reproduced in this article. The brave fellows have left behind them what we may call the recruits' Rubicon, and have advanced



THE WATERLESS WATER-JUMP.



SCALING THE WALL.

firmly, though in sadly depleted numbers, towards the next obstacle, a realistic water-jump, lacking only water. Again, note the scramble for the far end. It is very questionable, indeed, whether these energetic fellows would come on with such a show of energy if it were possible to get a dismal ducking in the event of a short jump. However, they cleared the thing in grand form, and advanced as one man upon the last and most formidable obstacle, which is shown in the accompanying illustration. This represents a solid wall rather more than 8ft. in height, and with no foothold worth mentioning. In the photograph the right files of the squad are being helped up by their comrades below, and

then, on being pretty firmly established on the top, they extend a strong helping hand to the left files below. The expression, "a strong helping hand," is mild and euphonious. I regret to say that that same hand is almost invariably applied to the scruff of the neck of the man who is to be helped up. Naturally, then, there is considerable competition as to who shall be first to sit astride the wall, for clearly it is not a pleasant thing to be dragged up by the neck, or even by the hair, on to a wall 8ft. high.

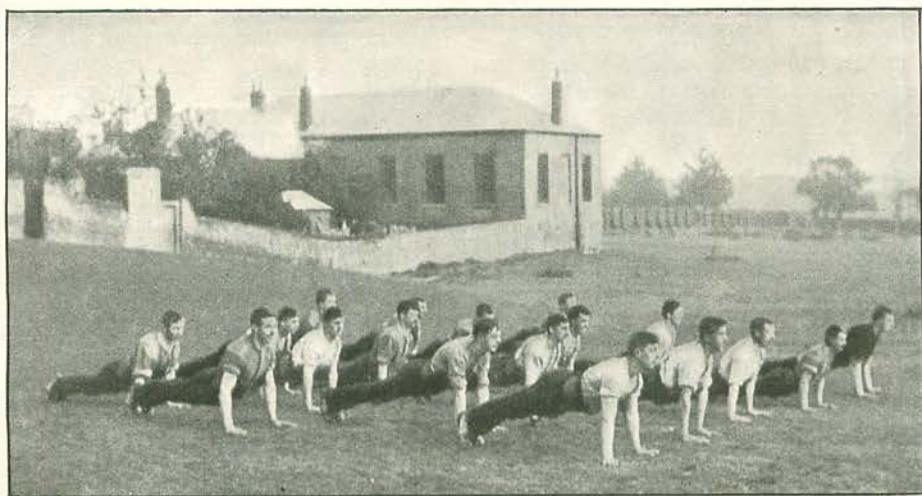
"Facilis Descensus." This picture shows all the recruits leaping down the other side of the last obstacle with evident relish. Of course, the only thing to be avoided in this case is reaching the ground too soon, when, probably, a



THE RIGHT FILES HELPING UP THEIR COMRADES.



SWARMING INTO THE ENEMY'S POSITION.



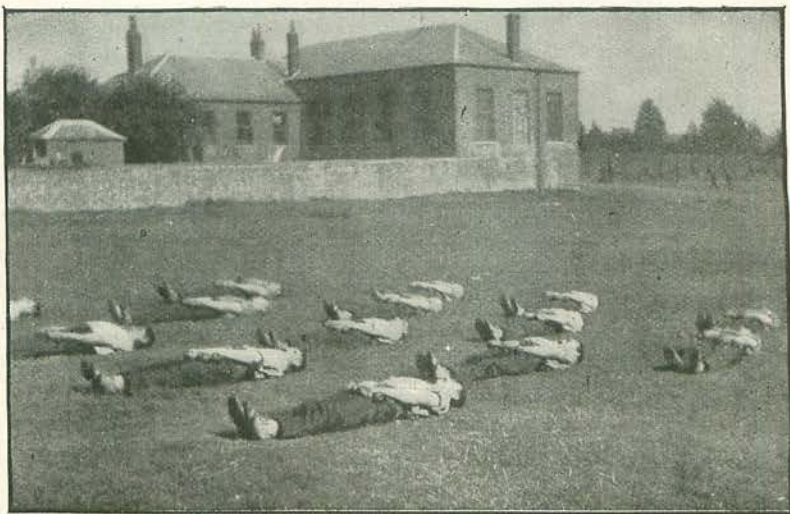
EXERCISE FOR STRENGTHENING THE ARMS.

companion will incontinently descend upon your neck. The men are now supposed to have entered, after a series of vicissitudes and more or less exciting adventures, into a thoroughly well-protected position; and a more practical piece of work than the whole of this obstacle business could not possibly be devised as a part of the recruit's instruction.

After a brief rest, the full squad went through the dumb-bell exercises, this being the merest child's play after the "up hill and down dale" career they had just completed. The standing exercises with dumb-bells held in each hand are mainly designed to strengthen the recruit's arms. These are very varied, but I imagine it would be difficult to arrange any exercise better calculated to strengthen the arms than the one shown in the next reproduction. The men all appear to be looking anxiously ahead, probably awaiting the command to assume another posture; for this kind of thing is not pleasant, especially if the man in front extends himself at great length and places his feet upon the

hands of the recruit behind him. It is equally obvious that the most advantageous position during these exercises — as also during a real, lively battle — is in the rear rank.

In the next illustration the recruits are laid out as dead men. They are very much alive, however, and are provided with dumb-bells, which, while in this prostrate position, they manipulate in such a way as to strengthen the stomach. Here, again, there is some risk of the dumb-bell slipping from the grasp of one man and alighting upon the nose of his fellow. It is an interesting fact, too, by the way, that the powers that be are indebted to that renowned "strong man," Sandow, for their present system of dumb-bell exercise. For it is well known that Sandow's really

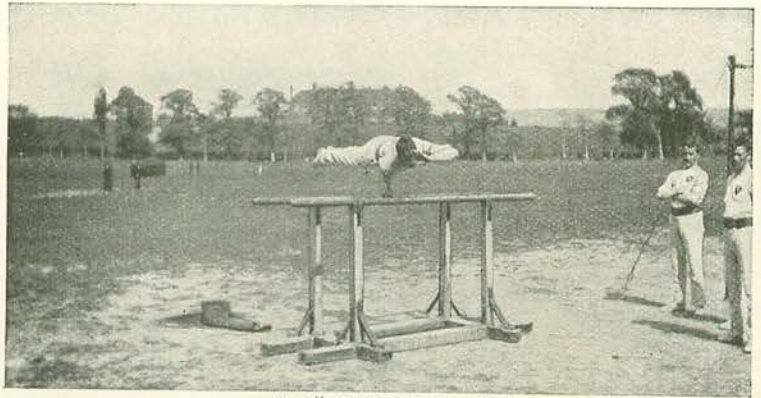


PROSTRATE DUMB-BELL EXERCISE.

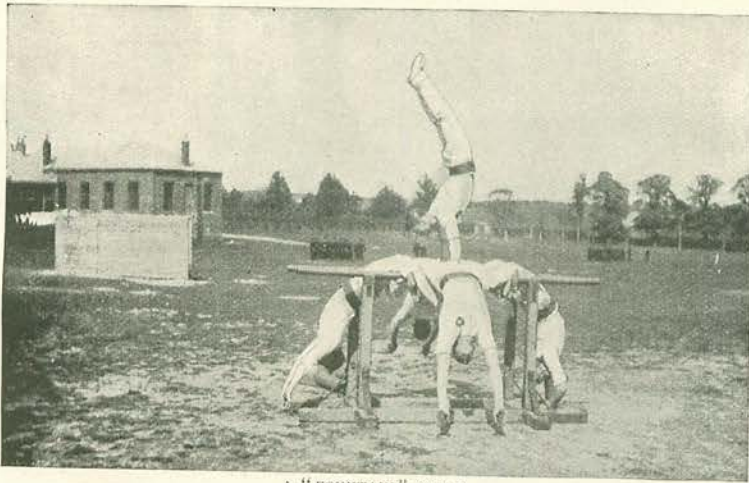
which could not be surpassed, even at Aldershot.

The accompanying illustration shows in progress a very difficult feat known as "the one-armed plant." This is performed on the parallel bars, and I need hardly say it is only accomplished by the few.

Next is shown a



THE "ONE-ARMED PLANT."



A "FOUNTAIN" GROUP.

very effective "fountain group," also formed on the parallel bars. This sort of thing is

placed ready for the reception of the gallant sergeant on his return to *terra-firma*.

obviously calculated to strengthen and harden the muscles, to induce suppleness, and to inspire the men with confidence in themselves.

In the last picture my genial informer, Staff-Sergeant Skinner, is seen leaving the horizontal bar by a back somersault. It would also be a thoroughly expeditious way of leaving this life, were it not for the stout mattresses that are



LEAVING THE HORIZONTAL BAR BY A BACK SOMERSAULT.