

BY HORACE WYNDHAM.



THE "General Return of the British Army" tells its readers that 222,373 non-commissioned officers and men comprise the effective strength of the Regular forces at the present moment. No statistics, however, are obtainable from which one can accurately ascertain the number of families in the United Kingdom which have one or more of their members privileged to wear the Queen's scarlet. Nevertheless, it may be safely asserted that there are very few English households indeed that have no connection with the Service. Under these circumstances, the immense amount of interest that is ever centred round the Army is perfectly natural. Unfortunately, the supply of information respecting the soldier's calling is severely limited, for, save when engaged on active service, the man in red is but little heard of.

It is a pity that this should be the case, for even in piping—or, rather, pipeclaying—times of peace, the daily round of duty in barracks is full of interest. Every season of the year has its own special work for the soldier, and the present one of winter is no exception. Foremost among the host of duties that now claim his attention is—according to his own views on the subject—the highly important one of preparing for Christmas. As the 25th of December only occurs once in twelve months, he naturally endeavours to make the most of it when it does come, and with this intention strains every nerve to make the day pass off successfully. His praiseworthy efforts in this direction are, it is pleasing to be able to record, ably seconded by his superiors. Thus, at Christmas time the commissioned ranks unbend to a marked extent, and the most cordial relations exist between all grades for

these few hours. The reins of discipline are temporarily relaxed, and there is a general air of "standing at ease" that makes the day of special mark to the wearers of the Queen's scarlet wherever they may be stationed.

The Christmas festival throughout the Army is observed in a manner that is extremely characteristic of the British soldier. This is that of thoroughness. Nothing that is in the least degree slipshod is permitted to pass muster in connection with the day's routine. As a matter of fact, the 25th of

Spartan-like diet upon which the soldier is usually sustained is now replaced by a generous menu of turkey, beef, ham, plum-pudding, fruit, and practically unlimited beer. For the supply of all these good things the soldier is largely dependent upon the state of the canteen exchequer of his battalion. That is to say that, according to the amount of profit earned by this institution during the year, so will pecuniary grants be made therefrom at Christmas time for the purpose of purchasing seasonable fare. Then



PREPARATIONS IN THE COOK-HOUSE.

December is approached in a spirit that is almost akin to solemnity, and upon those charged with the direction of the different preparations for its due observance a heavy weight of responsibility rests. Upon their discharge of their duties depends the success or failure of the day.

The proverbial connection between Christmas and good cheer is in the Army observed to the letter, and a large quantity of refreshments—both solid and liquid—has, accordingly, to be procured. This is by reason of the fact that, on this eventful day, the rather

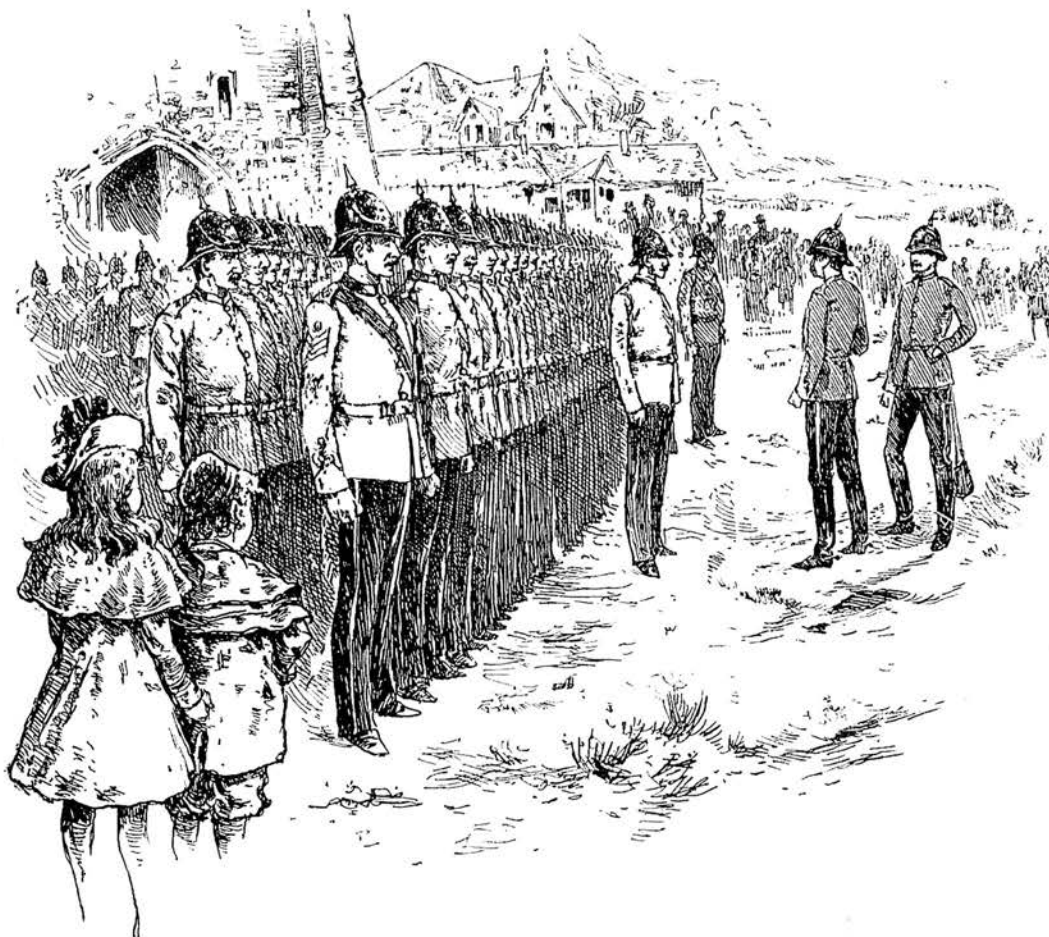
the commissioned ranks usually come forward as well and subscribe liberally towards the same purpose. It often happens, too, that officers who own preserves give orders for a present of game to be sent to the men of their companies just now. Then, after the solids have been thus arranged for, attention is devoted to the liquids which are necessary for washing them down. These take the form of barrels of ale, stout, and porter—spirits being rigorously tabooed—a small quantity of wine, and an ample supply of mineral waters. All these are taken charge of by the colour-

sergeants of each company, and kept by them under lock and key until dinner-time on the 25th. This, as may be imagined, is a highly necessary precaution.

Just as coming events cast their shadows beforehand, so will a visit to a barrack-room during the few days that precede the great festival make abundantly clear what season is at hand. Thus, groups of men will be seen sitting round the fireplace busily occupied in stoning raisins for the pudding, or divesting geese and turkeys of their feathers; others will be engaged in fashioning festoons of coloured paper and wreaths of holly for decorative purposes; and a third party will

perform their work out of sight of most observers.

At 6 a.m. the sounding of *réveille* on the barrack-square by the bugler of the quarter-guard officially intimates to all concerned that Christmas Day has at last arrived. Ere the last sound of the call has finally died away into the frosty air, the great pile of buildings that houses the six or seven hundred men occupying the barracks becomes a scene of activity. Lights twinkle from numerous windows, and scores of men pass rapidly along dimly illuminated passages, *en route* to the lavatories, where they hastily perform their necessary ablutions. These



CHURCH PARADE.

be making themselves useful as messengers between the cook-house and the men's quarters. It is because space is so limited in the former institution that a part of the preliminary culinary preparations have to be carried out in the barrack-room. The press of work, too, makes this extraneous assistance very welcome to the accredited *chefs*, who, like the stokers on a battleship,

completed, beds have to be neatly made up, floors swept, and rooms generally garnished.

There is no drill carried out to-day, for in the Army Sunday routine is observed on Christmas morning. Accordingly, as soon as breakfast is over, all hands set to work to smarten themselves up for church parade. The "fall-in" for this ceremony will probably

be sounded at half-past ten. On account of the fact that a large number of men are enjoying a month's furlough just now, the number attending this parade is usually of rather attenuated proportions. However, there will probably be some 300 at any rate following the band to the garrison church. As soon as the building is reached and the troops are disposed of in the seats appropriated to their use, the chaplain commences the service.

This is not of any great duration, for, knowing his congregation as he does, the

have been busily employed in making active preparations for the dinner that is about to take place. For this purpose the barrack-room tables (which, in special honour of the day, are on this occasion covered with cloths) have been laid for the meal, the liquids brought in, and the rooms smartened up afresh. At twenty minutes to one the bugle peals out its welcome bidding: "*Come to the cook-house do-o-or, Boys!*" and away rush the orderlies to this important institution. Here they receive from the company cooks the dishes allotted to their respective messes



THE COLONEL'S INSPECTION.

military cleric wisely refrains from indulging in a long disquisition upon the purpose for which they are assembled. Instead of this, he delivers a brief, plainly expressed discourse that is productive of infinitely more good than would be a volume of sermons from the most eloquent members of the whole Episcopal Bench.

On the conclusion of the service the troops are marched back to barracks and dismissed to their own quarters. During their absence, the men detailed to act as "cooks' mates"

and carry them off to their rooms, where they are quickly carved by another batch of helpers. The dinners for the men on the quarter-guard are taken to them by the orderly-men, and similarly those for such others as are absent on picquet-duty are put aside.

On the stroke of one o'clock the hard-worked bugler sounds again, and everyone is now required to be sitting down in his place at the table. Five minutes later a business-like attack is being carried out upon

the good cheer that loads the festive board. The junior N.C.O.'s act as waiters, and are kept busily employed in ministering to the lusty appetites of the diners. Imperative demands for "another yard of ham here," or "a pound or two off the turkey—with plenty of padding, corporal," arise on every side, and a cheerful popping of corks, mingling with a thirst-inspiring trickling from the

of the day, is going round the barracks. In a minute or two the party arrives at our typical room and is received by the colour-sergeant. The commanding officer expresses a hope that the men are enjoying their dinner, and turns to leave. This is the cue for the N.C.O.

"Beg your pardon, sir," he commences, with much confusion, "but the company



AFTER-DINNER SMOKING CONCERT.

beer-barrels, testifies abundantly to the appreciation with which their efforts are being met.

Suddenly the colour-sergeant, who is temporarily presiding, orders a cessation of hostilities and calls everyone to "attention." His quick ear has detected a clanking of swords and jingling of spurred heels in the corridor outside, and he knows that this heralds the approach of the colonel, who, accompanied by the adjutant and subaltern

would—er—like—that is—er—would be proud to drink your very good health, sir."

"Dear me," returns the colonel, blandly, simulating great surprise, "I'm extremely obliged, really."

"Sherry wine, or port, sir?" inquires the colour-sergeant, advancing towards him with two black bottles, and trying to recollect the respective liquors in each.

"Oh, whatever you like, colour-sergeant," returns the other, accommodatingly. "Not

too much though," he adds, hastily, as a large glass of "sherry wine" is handed him.

"'A' Company—Attention!" commands the N.C.O., in his drill-parade voice. "I have much pleasure in proposing the health of our colonel. Private Jones, just keep your hands off that plum duff for half a minute."

"Here, here! For he's a jolly good fellow—Proper sort to make old Kruger sit up!" and various other complimentary epithets are promptly called forth by this address. When the applause has subsided somewhat, the colonel seizes his opportunity.

"Non-commissioned officers and men of 'A' Company," he remarks, "I am much gratified at the honour you have paid me. Glad to see you enjoying yourselves, and hope you will all spend a merry Christmas." Then he snatches up his sword, and, signalling to the other members of his party, promptly hurries off to the next company's block.

After the commanding officer has thus been toasted, a similar compliment is paid to the captain and subalterns who administer the affairs of the assembly. As precisely the same ceremony takes place in every barrack-room at this time, it can well be under-

stood that a good deal of toasting is got through.

At length, however, the colonel's tour is completed, and he retires to his own quarters. The other officers and the sergeants follow his example, and accordingly withdraw to their own messes, where they also celebrate the festive occasion in an appropriate, if rather different, manner. In the barrack-rooms the rank-and-file are now left to themselves for the remainder of the afternoon. This is generally spent in the carrying out of a smoking concert—for alcoholic refreshment always seems to incline the soldier's thoughts towards harmony. Accordingly, a temporary stage of forms and tables is hastily erected, and the budding Sims Reeves among the revellers are called upon to display their vocal talents. Thus a couple of hours or so are agreeably passed, and, as long as any liquid remains in the beer-barrels, no one seems to think of seeking distraction elsewhere. By nightfall, however, the troops usually commence to change into "walking-out" dress, and soon the barracks are practically deserted. At 9.30 p.m. a roll-call takes place, and, three-quarters of an hour later, the sounding by the orderly bugler of "lights out" proclaims the official expiry of Christmas Day.

