

HUMOURS OF A CANTEEN.

BY A WARD SISTER.

The scene: A large room with a corner separated by a broad counter; round the walls shelves filled with crockery, and stores of eatables. Behind the counter a very limited space, filled to overflowing by six ladies—mostly large ones—dressed in starched overalls, two of them cutting bread and butter, and making sandwiches for dear life, at a table that helps to fill up the standing room; another "washing-up" with feverish haste, trying to keep up with the ever-crowded trays of dirty cups and saucers and plates, continually arriving; a fourth pouring out tea and coffee with the mechanical swiftness of a piece of machinery; whilst two more vainly attempt to satisfy the needs of a dense crowd of men and boys in khaki, pressed three and four deep against the other side of the counter.

A huge fire burning in a kitchen grate, close to the canteen workers. Hot water must be sufficiently provided for washing up, although the night is sultry, and the month July.

A powerfully concentrated odour of khaki, leather belts and boots, and heated humanity!

More than three hours of feverish work, and another hour, equally feverish, of clearing up.

These are my impressions of an evening on canteen duty. When I thought of offering my services for the canteen of the local Soldiers' Club I found that I had chosen the most fashionable of the town's war charities, so much in demand that my offer of help remained unanswered for two months. I was then graciously permitted to take a weekly turn of four hours.

Work in a canteen has its humorous side, and I found it in observing the workers.

As a newcomer I moved and behaved in as unobtrusive a manner as possible, and was quite approved of because of my willingness to tackle the unpopular task of washing-up at any time.

Secretly I was much amused by the various helpers, who, after I had been washing up alone for an hour or so, would rush up and say: "Oh, Miss—, we really can't allow you to do all the dirty work; we *always* take our turns at this," and after drying a couple of plates or a cup would leave me again.

Canteen serving was, of course, the favourite duty. In theory it was taken in turns. One worker was very much disapproved of by the others, because, with some excuse or another, she would be always at the counter.

It was useless for the lady in charge of the canteen to put her to wash up, or make tea; she refused to lift the heavy teapots because they strained her hands, and washing-up made them rough.

The other workers were too polite to say to her face what they thought of her, but they used to come and murmur it in my ear.

Another good lady (quite nice in other respects)

had a perfect passion for management, although she was never the one in charge. She would leave whatever she was doing at the far end of the canteen, dart across, and take a jar of Bovril, or a tin of cocoa out of one's hands, just as one was about to mix a cupful, and say: "Oh, I should stand that jar on the window-ledge, if I were you, it's very much in the way there." Or she would put away half the things one had got out to use and return to her own work.

No one resented her interferences; she was regarded as hopeless. She wanted to do everybody's work, or show them how to do it.

Of course, canteen serving was what she preferred, but she would leave it to take the tea-making out of the hands of the worker told off for that duty, and superintend the sandwich-makers and the washing-up, whilst a queue of soldiers was lining up at the counter waiting to be served.

Another worker would say: "I'm sure you must be tired of washing up, Miss—but, you see, the doctor won't allow me to put my hands into water. I've had neuritis for fifteen years, and it's no use for me to attempt to dry the crockery, my wrists are so weak, I should be sure to drop it."

Which was not *quite* convincing when one saw her most days in the week driving her own motor in and out of town.

I began to regard my chapped and coarsened hands, after a couple of hours or so of continuous washing up, as a bit done for King and country.

There was a well-worn piano in the room, on which a succession of men would pick out "Tennessee" with one finger, or play that favourite old air, for those who can't play (I never knew its name), which consists of several thumps in the bass, $\frac{3}{4}$ time (never mind what notes are struck) and one finger drawn rapidly up and down two octaves of the treble.

Sometimes a soldier's lady friend would oblige with a few popular music-hall tunes. Once at the piano she was usually a long time before she left it.

The company did not seem to mind what was played, or how it was played, as long as there was some sort of a noise they could recognise.

A more or less patient row of men stood at the other side of the counter, late-comers trying to attract one's attention from the end of the row, and pretending they had been there for quite a long time.

"Cup o' tea, miss, please!" "Three pennorth o' bread and butter and some jam!" "Three pennyworth of bread and butter represented six rounds, well buttered—not margarined."

They never seemed able to make up their minds what to have when it came to their turn to be served, although they had probably been standing there considering the matter for some time. They would vacillate between "two pennorth of bread and butter, a pork pie, some jam, and three of them tarts, and a cup o' tea, please"—and "ham sandwiches and a cup of coffee," for as long as the patience of the next man would last.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)