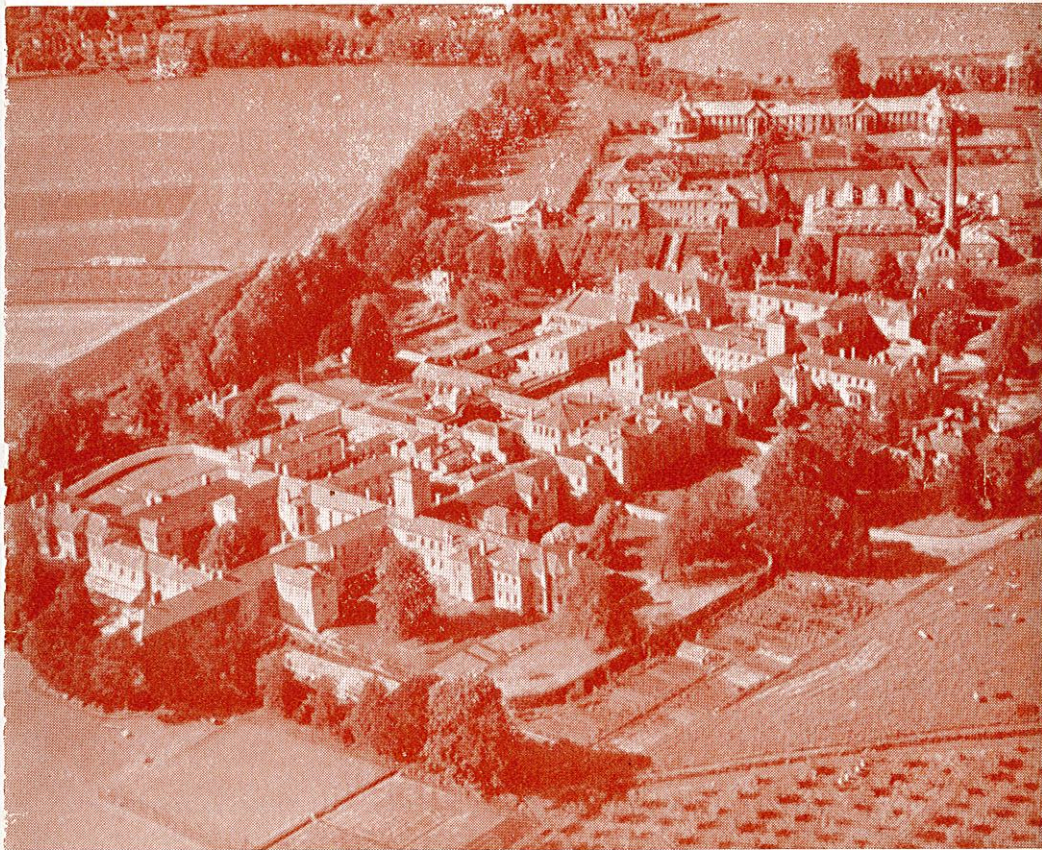


TYPESET

Vol. 3

No. 6

ROUNDWAY REVIEW



News and Views from Roundway Hospital and Old Park House, Devizes, Wiltshire

MAY 1955

The Lieutenant's Dilemma

by ERIC WALROND

"Don't see many of the darkies about now, do us?"

"Ah, they da put 'em on a round the clock grind now, see. Unloading convoys at Avonmouth Docks."

"Is that what 'tis?"

"Aye."

Up on the landing I glanced at the clock. I was early. Five minutes to seven. A moment later the G.I. stamped into the hallway. He strode through the door as if the disposition to step warily and take nothing for granted had, less than a month after the "black Yank" invasion, given way in him to something sharp and vaguely hostile.

"Where do you want to sit?" I said.

The G.I., short and chubby, a jockey at a Long Island race track in the days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, turned his head from side to side obviously not caring whether we joined the crowd down in the saloon bar, sought a refuge in the private bar or wandered out on the lawn where carp had been blown up during the Sunday evening raid on Bath when a huge, black, low-circling monster of a German bomber with a Spitfire on its tail had jettisoned one of its bombs in the canal flowing between the rear of the tavern and the wooded slopes of a hill.

"Oh, anywhere."

"Hang on a moment . . ."

I turned and went down to the bar. I got two foaming pints of beer, came back up the short flight of steps and rejoined the G.I. Across the hall from the landing the door of the private bar was half open. We walked in and sat down at a vacant table at the back of the small poky room. Two old women in black, a silver-haired old man and a middle-aged couple occupied three of the four tables standing at right angles from us.

"Cheers."

"Looking at you," said the G.I., raising his glass to his lips.

"Have a cigarette."

"No, you have one of mine."

"Okay."

The G.I. unbuttoned the flap on the left breast pocket of his tunic, produced a packet of cigarettes and shuffled out a couple on to the black gleaming tiles with which the table was inlaid.

"Haven't seen any of you boys lately," I said, lighting up. "I thought maybe you'd been confined to camp or something."

"We've been on strike."

"On what?" I cried.

"On strike. We boycotted the town."

Gently inclining himself towards me the G.I. lowered his voice. "You know how it is with the people in this town," he said, rolling his eyes *away* from me and over in the direction of the five other people in the room. "'Hello, darkey.' 'Good morning, darkey.' 'Oh, mummy, look at the darkie soldier!' 'Have you got any chewing gum, darkey?'" He paused, sat upright and stared ahead of him. "Well, we'd had enough of that 'darkey' stuff. We went to the company commander and told him we weren't going to have any more of it. We wanted to be sent back to the States."

The captain in command of the G.I.'s unit was a Regular Army officer from Georgia. One evening while firewatching I'd met him beside the waterless fountain in the Market Place. This, he'd told me with his eyes shining behind gold-rimmed spectacles in the black-out, was his first experience of Negro troops and he was thoroughly enjoying it. He'd even got so that he preferred Negro to white troops. Yes, sir, when it came to commanding troops give him Negroes every time.

"What did he say?"

"Oh," replied the G.I., "he hemmed and hawed and tried to soft soap us awhile till some of the boys sagged and now the whole thing is beginning to fizzle out."

"When did the strike begin?"

"About a week after we got here."

I reached for my glass . . .

"Another thing," said the G.I., "one of the boys in the outfit and I were standing on the river bridge one afternoon when a blonde passed by. A hayseed with a pitchfork on his shoulder strolling along on the other side of the bridge winked at us, jerked his head in our direction and sang out, 'All right, snow!'"

The G.I. paused, turned sideways and regarded me with a glitter in his black, low-slanted eyes. "What on earth did he mean? Was he trying to be funny? 'All right, snow!' We were so mad . . ."

I stubbed out my cigarette. "Drink up," I said. "The evening is young yet. You don't want to pay any attention to a remark like that. 'Snow' has nothing to do with colour. It's Wiltshire dialect. It means 'dost thee know!'"

"Dost thee what?"

"Know."

"Yes, yes, but what was he trying to say?"

"Something nice about the blonde. Something like 'righteous,' or . . ."

"Oh, I get it," cried the G.I., nodding his head.

I picked up the empty glasses.

"What will it be?"

"Same as before."

Outside the door the light was dim but not so dim that I could not see two of the officers from the G.I.'s unit standing in the hallway. I went down to the saloon bar and got two more pints of beer. When I came back up the steps the officers had not moved. They were still there.

Re-entering the room I saw that the G.I. was sitting with his legs stretched out under the table. He appeared to be taking things easily.

"Here's how," I said.

"How," murmured the G.I., taking a long drink of the beer.

Outside in the hall the two officers from the G.I.'s unit were slowly pacing back and forth. It was probably only a coincidence but every time they passed the door one of them

—a big, husky, bespectacled six-footer—would turn and look in our direction.

The G.I. suddenly drew up his legs. He sat perfectly still, almost rigid. “The lieutenant,” he growled, “he keeps on walking up and down, up and down . . .”

“Was he the officer you were waiting to drive back to camp when I saw you in the jeep this morning outside the jeweller’s shop?”

“No, that was another one.”

“Oh.”

The two officers passed by again.

“Any idea where our friend comes from?”

“Iowa,” cried the G.I. “He played football at college, and owns some sort of a manufacturing business. He never had much to do with Negroes before he joined the outfit and he seems to be feeling his way along. He once told me that all the employees in his business have got to be educated, but since there were no educated Negroes in the small town in Iowa where he’s located he has no Negroes on his pay-roll. I didn’t know how to take that.”

“Here he comes now.”

Leaving his brother officer outside the lieutenant, pale as ivory, slowly entered the room and without a flickering glance at anyone else came straight towards us. He rested his hands on the edge of the table and leaned forward with his eyes fixed unsmilingly on the G.I.

“What are you drinking, fellah?”

“Do what, lieutenant?” asked the G.I.

“What are you going to have?”

“But I’ve got a drink, lieutenant!”

“Then have another. A short one. Do you good.”

The G.I. cocked his head, elevated his brows and glanced down at the half-filled glass of beer in front of him. “Okay,” he said with a succession of quick little shrugs, “make it a gin if you like.”

The lieutenant slowly went out of the room, crossed the

hall and descended the steps to the saloon bar. Presently he came back up and again walking with slow, almost painful precision brought a sparkling glass of gin and set it down before the G.I.

"Thanks, lieutenant!" smiled the G.I.

"Don't mention it."

Silently gazing into space the lieutenant lingered for a moment beside our table, but when he turned to rejoin his companion I saw that he'd begun to perspire.

* * *

Tyre Burst

BELTING along, flat out—six miles to go and ten minutes to do it in. Push her up to 35 if possible and I might do it, then . . . Crack of Doom! and a hedge looming up where no self-respecting hedge should be.

"When in doubt, both feet out," a wrench at the wheel and a shuddering stop on the brink of the abyss—well, a five foot ditch, anyway.

(Masterly bit of handling, that! Might have been in the drink—or Eternity!

Phew! better smoke a cigarette and review the situation calmly.

I could change the wheel myself. I've seen it done . . . That is, if I can find the jack and if I can open the boot and if they put the spare back after the last puncture . . .

Still, all the best manuals say that if you stand looking helpless, every man in the neighbourhood will appear by magic and fight for the job. . . . Better give it a trial. . . .

Hmm! everything passing with averted eyes at top speed. Must be looking hopeless as well as helpless! (Note: change to Elizabeth Arden next payday.)

Well, no good languishing here getting frostbite. Better get on with the job.

The spare's here alright—that's something—and I suppose

this must be the jack, but what on earth to wind it up with? Ah well, shall have to use the pliers or something and hope for the best. Tedious.

Now for the nut-taker-off-er. That's easy. You just give a brisk turn. . . . You just give a turn. . . . You just give . . . Oh heck! it doesn't *want* to come off and it's no good adding a broken wrist to the frostbite (frostbite rapidly being counteracted by frustration-combustion). Better to add a little healthful locomotion—to the nearest telephone, if any.

Oh joyful sight! A cottage plus telephone, plus motor-bike! Here's someone who'll wield a pretty spanner and grovel lovingly in the dust. . . .

And he did—best sports jacket, and flannels and all. "It'll brush off," he said, and suited the action to the word inside ten minutes from the word "go", then nicely rounded off the job by waiting at the cottage door (complete with fiancé) to wave farewell at I slunk chastenedly by.

G. C. HELLIAR.

* * *

MAY QUIZ

1. What is is Howdah?
2. Where is Arthur's Seat?
3. Rebeccaites, Rechabites, Recusants: what were the aims of these groups of people?
4. How old are the oldest English hospitals?
5. The Seven Champions of Christendom: who were they?
6. What are the differences, if any, between (a) a *clock*, (b) a *timepiece*, and (c) a *watch*?
7. When was radium first discovered—in 1789, 1898, 1928 or 1936?

Answers on page 142.

* * *

NOTHING strengthens a man's conscience so much as witnesses.

