ELEMENTARY HYGIENE IN THE BARRACK ROOM.

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The condition of the barracks, which forms the soldiers' principal environment, is always important, but it is especially so just now when many new barracks are being built, and when there seems a tendency to waste public money over costly and impractical experiments, such as separate cubicles and the like, while simple and obvious improvements cannot be carried out "for lack of funds." The subject has been dealt with by many authorities as far as regards ventilation, cubic space, warming, drainage, &c.; these will not be touched on here, but there are various minor matters, perhaps of less fundamental importance, but still intimately affecting the life and well-being of the soldier, which are worth considering.

The term "barrack room" covers the accommodation provided for the soldier, whether it be in the newest red brick or in the oldest and dingiest of Georgian buildings, in the damp casemates of a fortress, or a galvanised iron hut on Salisbury Plain. Consequently we have to adapt our views to all sorts and conditions of buildings, many of them old and insanitary, but at present too costly to be rebuilt. One thing only is common to all, insecurity of tenure; men and officers come and go at short intervals as if they were emulating the wandering Jew, and this alone makes it difficult to get an intelligent interest taken or money expended in improving the condition of the soldiers' quarters. Commanding officers do not care to sanction expenditure on institutes, &c., when they are likely to have to pack up and move on in a few months, and the men also, feeling themselves but temporary tenants, do as little as possible to their rooms.

That barracks can be made attractive in appearance is shown at Portsmouth by the very handsome Victoria Barracks. That they are usually hideous is a fact obvious to every body. This point affects recruiting, for the boy who stares through the railings gets a bad impression of the service from a building grimmer and more forbidding than a gaol or workhouse. It also affects the soldier, who will more easily work to keep a place clean and sanitary when there is some tangible result to show for his trouble, instead of stone and wood-work so old that no cleansing produces
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a visible effect. "As bare as a barrack room" is proverbial, and with the constantly changing population not much can be done to alter this, unless we imitate our astute German neighbours and hang up military axioms and records of victories upon the walls. Something of the kind would be very desirable, for there is no doubt that the constant contemplation of the bare white-washed walls tends to dull the observing faculty, which now-a-days is of such importance to the soldier. Ultimately, the condition of any barrack room, both moral and material, depends upon the non-commissioned officer who has charge of it; and if he is slack or careless, no one else will be able to get that room kept straight. It is therefore desirable that corporals before promotion to sergeant should gain some slight knowledge of hygiene—the barest outline, such as is taught in the board schools, would suffice to give them some idea how to look after their men.

The cubicle system, which originated with the Rowton houses, and has been advocated by many amiable humanitarians, must be condemned in toto. It renders proper ventilation, cleanliness, and supervision impossible, is enormously costly, and serves no useful purpose whatever. The average recruit has never been accustomed to solitude and dislikes it excessively; moreover, the cubicle system would do much to discourage the sense of comradeship in the barrack room which it is so desirable to foster. The gentleman private, to whom the cubicle would be a boon, might well be allowed to live out of barracks, like the corresponding class of conscripts in foreign armies. The existing barrack room is overcrowded, not perhaps as to cubic space per head, but certainly as to floor space. This is obvious when we notice how the men's cots stand nearly touching one another. Quite one-third of the beds should be removed so as to give more floor space. A hospital pattern bedside table might be issued to each man in which to keep his property, and two or three wooden chairs might supplement the present rough benches. A door-mat is also a necessity, not a luxury as it is at present rated by the authorities; it would save dirt being brought into the room, diminish the necessity for washing the floor, and so reduce dampness in the room and the diseases associated with it. Outside the room altogether a cupboard should be provided with a slate floor for mops, scrubbing brushes and pails. These are at present kept in a corner of the room, and being always damp, make the floor wet and cause the "sour smell" one so often notices in barrack rooms.

That atrocity the "long-handled scrubber" should be abolished.
The time-honoured system of sluicing down the room with bucketfuls of water, and then propelling the resulting mess out of the door and down the passage or stairs with the aid of these implements, has nothing to recommend it; it does not clean, it leaves the floor damp for days, while the water passes through the boards into the ground, or into the ceiling of the room underneath. The results in either case are objectionable, and the soldier must learn to scrub out his room on his hands, and knees, with soap and water and an ordinary scrubbing brush, as the sailor does. Those convenient articles, the dust-pan and brush, are not at present recognised in the Army or Navy, yet they are very labour-saving contrivances and could not fail to reduce the amount of floor washing required.

It is an urgent matter that the ventilators provided in the barrack rooms should be fixed so that the soldier cannot close them, and be out of his reach so that he cannot stuff them up. This he will do if possible, for his dread of fresh air, especially at night, is intense. It would be a good thing to adopt the system of placing a board at the bottom of every window frame, so that the lower sash can never be shut down, but must overlap the upper one. The guard-room is even worse in the matter of ventilation than the barrack, and it is the foul atmosphere within rather than the cold without which is responsible for the sentries' pneumonia. We might here note that the "plank bed," which is reserved in gaols for the punishment of refractory criminals, has heretofore been the portion of the soldier every time he goes on guard—which may be every third or fourth day—as well as the whole time he is a "guard-room prisoner." Pipe clay, which is to a considerable extent responsible for the dusty atmosphere of the barrack room, will doubtless some day become extinct with other ancient military customs.

The connection between gas-jets and contagious disease has not perhaps been previously pointed out, though it is a very real one. The gas in a barrack room is, as a rule, darkness visible; many a man would stay in and read his book or newspaper, or write a letter, if he could only see to do so; but finding that impossible, he goes out into town and so into trouble. Something can be accomplished by seeing that the gas-jets are renewed at proper intervals; but it should be possible to obtain incandescent burners, as the cost is not prohibitive. In the most modern barracks electric light has been installed, but even then by using incandescent lamps of bad pattern, or too few of them, it is quite possible to get ill-lighted rooms.
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It would be of great advantage if dining rooms were instituted in all barracks, so that the men need not feed, live and sleep in one room. This has been often advocated, and possibly the recent investigations into the spread of enteric fever by clothing, &c., will hasten the action of the authorities in this direction. In India the verandahs are used for this purpose, and at home the men may be seen, of their own choice, dining outside their rooms in any shady spot they can find. The provision of dining rooms would make the barrack rooms healthier, and would also lead to improvement in the food, which at present suffers from being broken up into small portions for the different messes, so that there is a good deal of waste. The soldier’s dietary is excellent in theory, but is upset in practice by the capriciousness of the men, and by beer. The former might be met by a greater variety in cooking, and especially by the issue of butter or jam to diminish the terrible waste of bread which at present takes place. In respect of beer, the great evil is the opening of the canteen before meals. The soldier, possibly tired and thirsty, drinks beer on an empty stomach until, when the dinner hour arrives, his appetite has vanished. If regular dining rooms were provided, it would be quite easy for a man to be allowed his pint of beer with his dinner, and this would probably conduce to sobriety. The official tea hour is half-past four, and after this somewhat slender meal there is nothing else until next morning’s breakfast. The writer’s experience is that the only way to fill this gap is by giving facilities to the men for purchasing suppers at the regimental institute. Men, as a rule, like to do this, whereas an official issue of soup, after the novelty has worn off, soon loses its attractions. Moreover, a late meal keeps the cooks and orderly men late at work, and those who wish to go out of barracks for the evening will not wait for it. There is no reason why a man should not be able to get at least as good a meal at his own regimental institute as at any coffee shop or supper room in the town. Military tea is still made on prehistoric lines, and is weak, sweet and nasty; but until each mess has its own tea-pot (which is not at present contemplated), it is difficult to suggest a remedy. An earthenware mug has lately been sanctioned as an alternative to the bowl at present used, but the price is quite prohibitive. It would be a good thing to issue a mug for tea or water to every man, as well as a salt-cellar, pepper and mustard-pot to each mess. For want of these the waste of salt and mustard is enormous. Some kind of covered tray to carry the men’s dinners from the cook-house to the barrack room is also
essential—at present they are exposed to dust, rain and germs, arriving at best in a lukewarm condition.

The "wash-houses" are another adjunct to the barrack room which need attention. In the older barracks they are always stowed away in a dark corner, and in the darkest corner of the wash-house itself stands the black, depressing slate bath. It is now, however, possible for a man to get a hot bath in barracks; five years ago it was not. Much money has been unwisely spent in providing fixed wash-hand basins and brass taps. These are useless, as for some reason the plugs and chains at once disappear, and soon the taps also become hors de combat. A fixed shelf and movable tin basins are alone required; these basins will also supply the place of the fixed foot-baths which have been erected with much care and ingenuity, but are very seldom used. If the money these things cost had been spent in admitting air and light and enamelling the baths, the result would make for cleanliness. The cause of cleanliness might also be assisted by occasional sanitary lectures; and if the men were taught to keep their nails cut short there would be little need for chiropodists.

The condition of the regimental institute varies a good deal according to circumstances and the particular idiosyncrasy of the regiment. Ventilation is usually defective, and the arrangements for washing up and water supply in the temperance room are often capable of improvement. The system at present in vogue of making the liquor bar as unattractive as possible defeats its own object, as the men seek more comfortable quarters in the public-houses outside.

Regimental libraries should be carefully looked after by the authorities, and stocked with really good books, as ennui is only second to dirt as a predisposing cause to disease. Workshops have been started with the same excellent object, but men, as a rule, fight shy of them, feeling that it is the duty of the soldier to loaf and smoke when parades are done. Smoking, both in the Army and Navy, be it noted, is every day becoming more and more a matter of the consumption of large quantities of cheap cigarettes, and the effect of this upon the system, especially of the young soldier or recruit, is a matter for serious investigation. The only trades which seem to find favour with the soldier are gardening and hair-cutting (apart from the official occupations of tailoring and boot-making), and the former certainly makes for health and the latter for cleanliness.

These rather desultory notes have purposely not touched on the
more scientific side of hygiene, but rather on minor points where
the comfort and probably the health of the soldier might be im-
proved without any great expense, or any great alteration, in the
existing order of things. More barrack rooms would certainly be
required; but in most barracks there are rooms at present empty,
and there is no reason why dining rooms should not be utilised for
purposes of recreation after meals.