AN ADDITIONAL PLEA FOR THE RECRUIT.

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This paper is an extension of a former one, entitled, "A Plea for the Recruit," which appeared in this Journal in September, 1903. The need for recruits is becoming greater than ever, and the efforts made to attract men to the Colours have proved almost complete failures. For this result it is impossible to deny that the Army Medical Department is largely responsible; and it behoves us, as members of that Service, to remove any reproach attaching to ourselves for causing a condition to arise that is of the gravest consequence to the nation itself.

As recruiting officers we stand at the very threshold of the soldier's life in the Army; only through our hands can he enter, and just as we tighten or slacken the meshes of the net, so can the numbers enlisted be enlarged or diminished. It has lately been shown that out of 8,359 men presenting themselves for enlistment in the Army and Militia, only 2,138 were finally approved. The bulk of the men rejected owed their fate to the unwillingness of the medical examiners to certify their fitness for Service. This unwillingness was, in most cases, not due to any real conviction that the men were actually unfit for enlistment, but to the fact that it was known that on arrival of the men at their various depôts they would then be rejected by the Medical Inspectors of Recruits and others whose ideals regarding recruits are fixed at impossible standards. The ingenuity of these officials is expended in seeking for flaws and defects which in their opinion may justify the discharge of many recruits who have already passed a severe test, but who fail to reach the arbitrary standards fixed by these officers. It might be contended that it is a matter of no consequence to the officers who, in the first instance, pass the men as fit, what may become of them afterwards; but, as a matter of fact, a medical officer who is conscientious in the performance of his duty, and, moreover, a skilled expert in it, is anything but satisfied when a few weeks, or even days, after he has passed a man, who in his opinion is a highly satisfactory recruit, he learns that his man has been rejected at the depôt as "unlikely to become an efficient soldier"; or because his feet are considered too flat; or he has too few teeth;
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or he has some approach to a varix. Let it be noted that in these instances, far too numerous to mention, these men have never been allowed to indicate in any way whether or not they are fitted for the Service. They are incontinently discharged at sight, because they fail to reach a standard which is far beyond anything that the regulations have laid down. The zeal of the Inspectors makes them pursue the shadow for the substance; and in their desire to secure efficiency, they drive the latter out of existence altogether. The result is that the officers who conduct the primary examinations feel that it is impossible for them to pass men under existing conditions; and a high percentage of rejections is reached. It is a strange topsy-turvy condition we have arrived at. The men are most badly needed, and the War Office exhausts itself in efforts to create attractions in a military career. But it is all to no purpose; the gate of entrance is so narrowed that the men, however willing and anxious they may be to serve, are debarred at the threshold, often by real, but more often by fancied disabilities, which are by a perverse fate created by those whose only desire should be to fill the ranks with ordinary samples of sound young English manhood. It is well known to recruiters that the fear of rejection at the examination is now exercising a most deterrent influence on the better class of would-be recruits. To be known as a man who has been “rejected for the Army” is not an advantage, and the men will not run the risk; confidence has been destroyed and cannot easily be regained.

We are approaching a 75 per cent. ratio of rejections; what is to be the end of it all? For years past the average of rejections varied from 33 per cent. to 41.6 per cent.; the changes from time to time made in the standards of fitness accounted for the differences; but now we are on the down grade, and it is impossible to say what figure we shall reach on present lines. The Inspectors seem to think the meshes of the net have been made too wide, and for their part are determined that none but the most perfect shall pass through. What can be the outcome of a policy like this? Dissatisfaction everywhere; it is the worst form of pedantry possible. The men are angered and disappointed by their rejection for they know not what; the recruiting staff are disgusted beyond words at the result of their efforts to secure good men; and the military authorities are dismayed at the dwindling ranks, and are at their wits' end to find men to fill them. It is not easy to say what is the ideal formed by the Inspectors regarding the fitness of men for the Army. It seems to be an almost impossibly high
one, unless, of course, they intend to pass only those free from all spot or blemish. Such a standard can be adhered to, without doubt, but in that case the Army must dwindle to zero.

From the earliest days the Service has failed to attract the men who are physically the fittest; this is not an unnatural result of military conditions; the War Office has done much to remove drawbacks; not always, perhaps, quite wisely; but no concessions it can make will overcome the initial difficulty that awaits the recruit at the very first step to enlistment. For this we, the Recruiting Medical Officers, are responsible; and we alone can remove the bar.