

THE SPECTATOR

May 18, 1918

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THE AMERICAN MARINES.

"SIR, I thank you for permission to go ashore."—"Aren't you the cook?"—"Yes, Sir."—"How long do you want?"—"Just till six bella, Sir."—"Who're you leaving in charge of the galley?"—"Mott, Sir."—"Mott? Where's Schultz?"—"On the binnacle-list, Sir. Hit the deck yesterday an' sprained his ankle. But there's only slungullion to get, Sir; an' Mott's all right at that."—"Better go before the mast. If the Skipper hasn't any objection, I'll give you shore-leave."

It sounded like the opening of a sea-romance by the late W. Clark Russell. Yet I was on dry land, within a stone's-throw of the spot wherefrom I am now writing. The only canvas was that of a tent or two among rows of Adrian huts; the sole funnel was the gaunt chimney of an open-air oven; the nearest thing to a mast was a flag-pole. An enlisted man was asking an officer if he might walk from this cantonment to town, returning at 11 o'clock, and was explaining that, his chief assistant having hurt himself in a fall, the beef-stew for mess would be prepared in the kitchen by a competent substitute. Whereto the officer was replying that it would be necessary for the applicant to go to the Captain's office and obtain there an assurance that the petition had the Captain's "O.K." In brief, I was in a camp, ashore, of the U.S. Marines.

Kipling was right. That poem of his about the British "Jollies" jumps into your mind the moment you become a guest of their American counterpart and continues to justify itself so long as you remain. I have been living with him for a bit, and—both because he carries his sea-lingo ashore and his shore-rifle afloat, and because he is as much an amphibian in duties as in mind—I can think of the Marine, not as a "special chrysanthemum," but only as "soldier an' sailor too." He has done police-duty across half the world—from Porto Rico to the Philippines—and now he is policing in France. He has fought in Cuba and the islands of the Pacific, in Mexico and Hayti—everywhere, he has justifiably boasted, he was "The First to Fight"—and now, although a little hurt at not being allowed to be the earliest to pull a trigger among our men in Europe, his has at least the distinction of having been the earliest and readiest unit of them that arrived for such a purpose on the eastern shore of the Atlantic.

The first Marine that I saw when I came to the city near here was one of a squad unloading stone from a railway-car for the construction of a pier; around about were similarly employed squads of Engineers and negro contract-labourers from Louisiana. The last Marine that I saw to-day, before retiring to his Commander's office to write this article, was, with businesslike calm, subduing five tall men by means of one short club. Of him, when he had refused my proffered help with quiet scorn and secured his prisoners by his own unaided efforts, I asked a question. "Why don't the infantry care for us?" he snapped back. He nodded at his five charges. "That's why. O' course they say we go out of our way to beat 'em up, but o' course it ain't true. Our

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job's to keep things quiet, an' we can do it best by not seein' fellows unless they want to be seen." "Still," I urged, "you don't dislike it—this sort of thing?" He grinned broadly. "'First to fight'!" he chuckled. To the other Marine just mentioned—to the member of the stone-hauling squad—I put, I remember, another query. "What do you think of Pershing?" "Well," he answered, "Pershing don't seem to think much of us." That man was sore because his corps had to cart stone when it wanted to fight. He might have argued that General Pershing thinks a good deal of the Marines because he trusts so much to their performance.

For the Marines are everywhere. They are the first Americans you see when you land; they are maintaining order at our ports of entry. All the way across the country and through the American Camp, it is a Marine that you note at every station—a Marine that comes up to you with blank-book and poised pencil, and the demand, firm but polite: "Let me make a note of your movement-orders, Sir." In Paris, as in every French town and village where there are U.S. troops, there also are the Marines, on patrol duty by night and traffic-control duty by day, their blue sea-service uniforms changed for land uniforms of khaki and around their left arms the red brassard bearing the black initials "M.P." "What are those fellows, Sir?" a Gordon Highlander once asked me on the Rue de Rivoli. "Marines," I told him. "The letters stand for 'Military Police.'" "Oh," he said, "I heard you had some of your Congressmen over here, an' I was wonderin' if these was them, an' if the letters meant 'Member o' Parliament.'" Finally, at this and other seaside cities, the Marines are both "shore-cops" and stevedores. "But only for a little while," they one and all assure you, even the officers: "The Brass Hats are sure to let us fight soon."

"Now 'is work begins by Gawd knows when, and 'is work is never through;

'E isn't one o' the reg'lar Line, nor 'e isn't one of the crew.

'E's a kind of a giddy harumfrodite—soldier an' sailor too!"

The Marines have two salient characteristics: their ability to make something out of nothing and to do it quickly, results in their establishing themselves at once and with a minimum of damage to surroundings; and, since they bring ashore with them the sea-tradition of cleanliness and order, they are, when not the first to fight, the First to Clean. I recall a French seaport at which none of our men had ever landed before a certain ship began to disgorge an equal number of soldiers and Marines; the latter were under canvas before the former had left the dock; the Marines had even collected kindling from ash-heaps and had their cook-stoves going. A few nights since, I saw a newly arrived company of them march into this camp; when I visited their quarters at 6 a.m. you would have supposed that they had been born and bred there. "All our own work but the stone-foundations for the ovens," a sergeant assured me, "an' we'd have done that, only these French Johnnies insisted that it was a job for the Boche prisoners."

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What sort of men are they ? They will answer that interrogation with a ready brevity. "The best," they will say—and, after living among them, I am not so sure that they are wrong. By one of the odd freaks of their anomalous law of organization, their surgeons and chaplains are sailors, whereas all the rest of the corps is, in each individual case, one half land and one half sea. Perhaps because distance makes for romance, the majority of our Marines in this camp come from the plains ; here is the band of a State Agricultural College in the Mississippi Valley that enlisted as a unit, and across the way is housed a company seventy members of which joined in a body from the University of one of our Central North-Western commonwealths. Most of them never saw the ocean before they volunteered for service. "You know," one of these told me, "when we raw fellows got on the transport, we found they'd remembered only the sailor side of us and given us hammocks to sleep in—regular hammocks, only half too short for a grown man and two-thirds too narrow. We'd never been to sea before ; it was all we could do to climb into the things, and more than we could do to stay there. So we just rolled 'em up for pillows an' slept on the deck."

Don't, however, suppose that the majority of Marines are green men. Though by far the larger part volunteered, by far the larger part volunteered long ago. Some day somebody will write a romance of the Marines, and when he does he need not draw on his imagination ; he need only collect the data—when their stolid modesty will vouchsafe it—from such veterans as we have here, who began as those boys from Kansas or Minnesota are beginning now. He need but tell the story of that sergeant of thirty, who looks twenty-five, and who enlisted at sixteen ; of how he ran away to sea, like one of W. H. G. Kingston's boys ; of that cloudless day when he rowed under fire across the unprotected strip of water to patrol the streets of Vera Cruz, and of the succeeding night, when he, and three other men, held a freight-car, loaded with explosives, against an armed Mexican mob. He need only gain the confidence of this lad from Pittsburg to learn of hand-to-hand fights that began against outnumbering Mexican Regulars, drawn from their cover on roofs and behind chimneys, and ended in repelling rear-attacks of the Mexican police. "You see that grizzled old fellow over there ?" a Captain asked me. He himself was young enough to have been the "old fellow's" son, but the old fellow was still tough enough to have been the Captain's twin brother. "Well, he's had a lot of it—Philippines, Boxer Rebellion, Vera Cruz, and Hayti. You know, in the Marines, when we can't think of the generic name for anything, we call it a 'gadget' or a 'gilguy.' Now, this man has won two Congressional Medals and has another coming. When we sighted the French coast, I was standing, where he couldn't see me, just behind him ; and I heard him say : 'I got two o' them gadgets now, an' one on its way. I wonder if I'll get another over here.'"

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The Marine, as I've said, carries all his sea-terms ashore, and his vocabulary is almost entirely nautical. When he stops what he has been doing, he "belay" it; when you tell him to prepare to do something else, you order him to "stand by" for it; and when he is called before his commanding officer, he is brought "up before the mast." Though he falls on a country road, he "hits the deck"; when he is slightly ill, he goes "on the binnacle-list"; and when he must at last enter hospital, even if a motor-ambulance carries him to a building at a street-corner, it carries him to the "sick-bay." He gets a stripe for every enlistment, and the stripes are "hashmarks"; he keeps himself "shipshape" as much ashore as afloat; the kitchen is the "galley" wherever it may be; the guard-house is the "brig" by land as well as by water; and a Captain is always a "Skipper." On ship, at leisure-hours in the evening, the Marines light a lamp in their quarters and smoke; they call it "lighting the smoking-lamp," and in camp their dismissal to leisure remains "lighting the smoking-lamp," even when there is no lamp about and the tobacco is exhausted. Their Central and South American service has contributed "pronto" for "quickly," has twisted "mañana" into "slowly," and they now use "hombre" for "prisoner." What new terms they will learn from their work in France, Heaven only knows.

It is all kinds of work, in all kinds of weathers, at every hour of the clock. Here Marines are hauling stone with Engineers and contract-labourers. Throughout the American Zone in France, they are the policemen that never sleep. The day may come when they are holding their bit of the line against the Boche Boys from Western farms and men from Manila and Vera Cruz, they are pure grain that is being poured into every one of a dozen of the horrible hoppers of war,

REGINALD WRIGHT KAUFFMAN.

Near a French Port, January —, 1918.

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