

June 17, 1918

DOUGHBOYS LOSE COOTIES AND GROUGH

Great Transformation Wrought by Disinfecting Plant Upon Americans from Trenches.

Special Correspondence of THE NEW YORK
TIMES.

WITH THE AMERICAN ARMY IN FRANCE, May 20.—Down a dusty road come a half hundred Yanks. They are marching with full equipment. They are dirty; their hair needs cutting, their faces need washing, mud is upon them, from the top of their heads to the hob-nails of their shoes. They are quiet. They are grouchy. Every now and then one, and then another, halts long enough to scratch himself. They scratch with a vengeance. They have good cause to scratch.

It is half an hour later. Up the same road come the same half hundred Yanks. Their faces are shining. Their clothes are clean. Their mud is gone, and, instead of scratching, they are singing. The tune is "Suwanee River," and then it breaks into "What the Hell Do We Care?"

If you seek the cause of the transformation you will pay full attention to the fact that they are not scratching. They had parted with the "cooties" they had brought with them on their return from a stretch in the trenches. No soldier hates trench vermin more than the American soldiers does, and so there is no soldier more glad to be rid of them.

Let us go back and follow the half hundred where they were coming down the dusty road. With a Sergeant at their head they marched down a little hill and halted at the bottom, where there nestled in a clump of green trees one long shed and several smaller ones. Near by was a shack with steam pouring from a little chimney. On the side of the long shed it said: "Disinfecting Plant," and then below, "Loaned and Erected by the American Red Cross."

As they halted at the end of the big shed they were met by a trim and intelligent-looking young Corporal.

"I'm all ready for you fellows," he said.

"You ain't a damn bit too soon," was the reply from a lanky New England lad. "I've got all the cooties in France."

"You're a liar!" came from the Sergeant.

"Shut up, for Gawd's sake!" implored a doughboy. "I thought this was a cootie graveyard, not a session of Congress. Get busy, Sergeant."

And the Sergeant did. He opened the door of his shop and led the doughboys in.

"Turn on the water, Tom!" he yelled through a closed door, and in a moment I heard the patter of water on a floor. The shower was warming up.

Then the Sergeant gave each of the men a number. There were rows of low-standing tables, on each of which was a number corresponding to the one held by a soldier boy. Each soldier got a big net bag and a little canvas bag. As they undressed an attendant turned on the steam into a big vat at the end of the room. In ten minutes or less the soldiers had stripped. All their clothes were put into the net bags, each bearing its number. Their valuables were put into the little canvas bags, which they kept with them. And then, each man naked, bearing in one hand his shoes and in the other his canvas bag, entered the shower room. The little bags and shoes were stored in numbered compartments at the end of the shower room.

COOTIES

The Sergeant just come from the trenches was the first man through the door. He hesitated a minute, stuck his hand underneath the nearest end of the long shower, felt the water was warm, and stepped under.

"Oh, boy!" he yelled in a voice that could be heard a mile. And then he called: "Step in, lads, the water's fine!"

And in two seconds fifty men were underneath the showers, rubbing issue soap over their bodies and replacing their grouches with smiles. In a bit that lot of men, who a few minutes before were "cussing" everything from east to west, were singing at the tops of their voices.

Meanwhile, their clothes, all bundled in the net bags, had been put into the steam chest, and some thousands of vermin were departing this life. The temperature within that chest was such that no living thing could stand it.

I walked through the shower room, where by this time the men were rubbing their clean bodies red with good, big Turkish towels. Then they filed into the dressing room where, on properly numbered tables, each man's clothes were awaiting him. They were hot from the steam, but, to my surprise, were dry. Each man was given a brand-new suit of underclothes. Then, still singing, they dressed.

Somewhere in the Bible it says something about men being changed in the twinkling of an eye. It may have been a long twinkle, while those men were going through that disinfecting plant, but they sure were changed. They entered a bedraggled, dirty, grouchy lot of sorry-looking doughboys. They came out with faces shining and spirits new. They knew they had before them the first good night's rest in some time and sans scratching.

As they marched out into the Spring sunlight of the beautiful afternoon, the Sergeant stuck his tin kelly on the back of his head and spoke as follows:

"This ain't such a bad life after all. In fact, if it wasn't for the boches and the cooties, it would be a damn fine world."

"Righto!" said the lanky New Englander. And they marched back up the hill.