

THE CHEF

“THE thing about the Army that’s the most curious,” said the informing Smithy, “is that you never know what a chap’s been before he enlisted.

“You see a nice-lookin’ chap, smart tunic, white belt, little boots, an’ a nice curl down over ’is for’ead, an’ you say to yourself, ‘That chap was a gentleman before ’e enlisted, I’ll bet,’ but the chances are he was only a costermonger.

“Similarly you see a chap untidy, a chap who don’t like shavin’, an’ generally keeps hisself to hisself, an’ you put ’im down as a corner boy, when the chances are he’s ’ad a good education, an’ as likely as not ’e’s been a chap like you—made ’is livin’ by puttin’ bits in the paper.

"There's quite a lot of respectable young fellers in the Army supposed to be single who dursen't go near a work'ouse for fear 'arf a dozen little 'eds will pop over the wall an' start shoutin' 'Father,!' "

"I don't trouble my 'ead very much about what a chap's been, although I've often wondered what Nobby was before 'e enlisted.

"We 'ad a bit of an argument about it the other day when Nobby was out, an' Spud Murphy said he thought Nobby must 'ave been somethin' that gets money without work.

"'I'll bet,' sez Spud, 'if you look on Nobby's attestation paper you'll see 'im described as a "labourer," like all chaps are that don't like work.'

"Dusty Miller thought Nobby must 'ave been a railway porter, because he never gets pally with a chap unless 'e's got some money.

“At any rate,” said Smithy with a faint grin, “the question was, in a manner of speaking, settled, for a few days after Nobby was sent for to the orderly room an’ paraded before the Adjutant.

“‘I see,’ sez the Adjutant, who was looking over Nobby’s papers, ‘that you describe yourself as a “cook”—is that right?’

“‘Yes, sir,’ sez Nobby, without battin’ an eye.

“‘What sort of a cook are you?’ says the Adjutant, lookin’ ’ard at Nobby.

“‘Very good, sir,’ sez Nobby modestly.

“‘Well,’ sez the Adjutant, ‘we’re tryin’ a new system of messin’, so you can report yourself to the master cook for duty—you’re “B” Company’s cook.’

“There was tremendous excitement in ‘B’ when it got out that Nobby was the new cook. Spud Murphy went up an’

saw the Adjutant, an' asked to be transferred to another company.

"'I don't want to say anything about Private Clark, sir,' 'e sez, 'büt I'm a very delikit eater, an' Clark an' me ain't good friends.'

"All the chaps got round Nobby in the barrack room an' started firin' questions at him.

"'What are you going to make us, Nobby?' they sez.

"'Wait an' see,' sez Nobby, cautious.

"'Are you a French cook, Nobby?'" sez Weary Thompson.

"'A bit French,' sez Nobby, 'an' a bit Spanish. I'm what you call a shef.'

"'What's that, Nobby?'"

"'That's the bit of French I was tellin' you about,' sez 'e.

"Nobby went out into the town an' bought a cookery book that tells you 'ow to take stains out of silk dresses an' 'ow

to clean old pictures, an' started studyin' this for all 'e was worth.

" Nobby took over the duty on Monday, an' after havin' a few words with the master cook about some kit the sergeant missed as soon as Nobby came on duty, he sort of calmed him by tellin' him about a few French dishes 'e'd learnt about.

" ' We'll 'ave some " Poulett de Anchester " to-day,' sez Nobby.

" ' What's that?' sez the master cook—Sergeant Brown, the fat sergeant, you know.

" ' Roast chicken an' caper sauce,' sez Nobby proudly.

" ' Don't be a fool, Clark,' sez the sergeant, unpleasantly. ' We 'aven't got any chicken, you know that.'

" ' Then we'll 'ave pot purri,' sez Nobby, very quick.

" ' What's that?' sez the sergeant, bewildered.

" 'Anything we've got,' sez Nobby.

"Everybody was talkin' about the dinner, an' we was all wonderin' what we'd get in the way of food.

"Spud Murphy got his name took on the ten o'clock parade for speakin' in the ranks.

" 'This afternoon,' 'e sez, very gloomy, 'the pioneers 'll be wheelin' a barrer round the square, ringin' a bell an' shoutin', "Bring out your dead," the same as it was at the great fire of London.'

"When the cook-house bugle went there wasn't a man of 'B' left in the canteen—they was all sittin' tight in the barrack-room waitin' for the orderly man to bring in the dinner.

"It come up all 'ot an' steamin'.

"There was potatoes an' cabbage an' a curious lookin' lot of meat an' stuff. Spud Murphy looks over it, sniffs, an' sez :

“ ‘ I’ll ’ave some potato an’ cabbage.’

“ As a matter of fact,” explained Smithy, “ the dinner was very nice indeed, an’ Spud began to feel small when we told ’im how we was enjoyin’ it.

“ When we’d nearly finished it, there was a bit of a commotion outside, an’ in rushes a chap from ‘ C ’ Company. He dashes up to the table an’ takes a long look at the tin the dinner come up in, an’ then shouts :

“ ‘ ‘ Ere ! you bloomin’ thieves, you’ve got our dinner ! ’

“ ‘ How so ? ’ sez the corporal in charge of the room.

“ ‘ There’s been a mistake, corporal,’ sez the chap from ‘ C,’ excited ; ‘ you’ve got our dinner, an’ we’ve got yours.’

“ ‘ Well,’ sez the corporal very kindly, ‘ you’re welcome to it.’

“ ‘ Ho, are we ! ’ sez the ‘ C ’ man shakin’ his ’ead fiercely. ‘ Well, just

come an' 'ave a look at the stuff we've got.'

"So we all finished up our dinner quick, with the 'C' chap lookin' on with tears in his eyes, an' walks over to 'C' Company room. The dinner was steamin' on the table, an' everybody was standin' a long way off lookin' wild an' hungry.

"'What's up?' sez our corporal.

"'That,' sez the corporal of the other room, very agitated, 'that's what's up,' sez 'e, pointin' to the dinner.

"We all looked at it; it looked all right. We smelt it; it smelt all right.

"'Taste it,' sez the other corporal.

"Our corporal 'esitated a bit, then sampled the gravy.

"Just then the orderly officer arrived to ask if there was any complaints. 'E was just goin' to ask when 'e saw our corporal.

“What’s the matter with Corporal White?’ ’e sez; ‘is ’e took ill?’

“‘No, sir,’ sez the other corporal, an’ then explains about the dinner, whilst me an’ another chap assisted our corporal into the fresh air.

“When we got back the officer was talkin’.

“‘Send for Private Clark,’ ’e sez. So they did, an’ in a minute in walks Nobby lookin’ very pleased with hisself—one of our chaps ’ad told him what a success our dinner was, an’ he thought the orderly officer had sent for ’im to show the ‘C’ cook ’ow to make a dinner.

“I will say,” said Smithy enthusiastically, “old Nobby looked every inch a shef. White coat, white ’at, an’ very nearly white apron.

“‘Clark,’ sez the orderly officer sternly, ‘did you prepare this?’

“Nobby was surprised to see ‘B’s’

dinner in 'C's' room, but 'e looked at it, an' sez, 'Yes.'

" 'What do you call it?' sez the officer.

" 'Pot purri,' sez Nobby boldly.

" 'Why pot purri?' sez the officer.

" Nobby thought a bit.

" 'Because it's poured out of a pot,' 'e sez.

" The officer looks very 'ard at Nobby.

" 'What's this?' he sez, stirrin' a curious lookin' thing round with 'is cane.

" Nobby looks at it an' gasps, an' jst then the master cook, who'd been sent for, come in.

" 'Sergeant!' Nobby sez, quite excited, 'look at this!'

" The sergeant looked, an' he gasped too.

" 'P'raps,' sez Nobby sternly, 'you'll apologize now for accusin' me of stealin' your blackin' brush.'"