

# PICKET

BY GRANVILLE BARKER

'YOU'RE for picket, sir,' says the orderly.

We have an orderly to clean our barrack room. And for Colonel's inspection on Saturday it certainly is so aggressively clean, so immaculately, protestingly spic and span, that the sight would make any Colonel, you'd think, suspicious of what its state may be on — Thursday, let us say. But he'd never be such a poor sportsman as to turn up then. No; the army is either on parade or off. A Colonel has, it seems, many of the attributes of our childhood's God. The Sergeant-Major stands to him — and us — very much as did our head nurse. But he does not, thank goodness, shake a warning finger and exclaim: 'Children, whatever you are doing the Colonel always sees!' So sometimes that pathetic orderly can get the barrack room clean, and at other times — well, at other times it's Thursday.

The orderly is pathetic because the war has recalled him to barracks. I guess him to have been an ostler in some omnibus stables in civil life. A decaying trade, I suppose, but cheerfuller than this. As we come in from parade he'll eye us as he might his returning horses, though with less favor. Some of us are 'sir' to him, and some are not. It is hard for him to reconcile our anomalous cadethood with any one correct attitude. In the old army etiquette was certain and settled. But at us white-banded-what-d'ye-may-call-ems most of the privates of the permanent cadre wink pallishly.

N.C.O.'s may call us rather aggressively by our names, by our Christian names if they know them. We observe of course a stony correctness toward officers, who are as stonily correct in return. For the orderly these considerations are complicated by tips.

He gives a limited hand to cleaning *us*, too. We are more closely inspected, by a long way, than is the room; and, while buttons I can do, and boots I am a fair dab at, pipeclay is for long a mystery to me.\* So, when the dread word falls that one of us is for picket or for guard, the helping hand must be unlimited a full hour. The honor of the room will be involved in my appearance for one thing. For another there's my chance of 'getting off.'

'But you won't get off,' says the orderly. 'Picket never does. Give us your boots.'

I give him my boots and search for a clean cap-band.

'A picket from number nine did once,' says the orderly. 'But the guard can't have been up to much. And Fraser in number nine he's for guard to-night. He'll have their kit.'

One man too many, it must be explained, is detailed for picket and guard, and on a preliminary inspection the smartest gets off. Much competition then in smartness; and room number nine has furnished itself, if you please, with a special guard kit, kept immaculate for these occasions.

\*Pipeclay properly so-called is out of date. There are selections of patent things, penny tins of them, in the dry canteen nowadays. I fancy some fine war fortunes may have been made out of the cleaning of soldiers' buttons and belts.

'Everything,' says the orderly, 'boots to gloves.'

And number nine boasts that you'll never find a man from that room on guard.

The orderly does his best by me.

'Here's a better belt than yours,' he says, 'but you might step up here after first relief and put your own on. I'll never get this the same again.'

My left boot balks him.

'Must have put some grease on it somewhere,' he says. 'That's as bright as it'll come. And look at the other! You'd better wear Mr. Bullock's boots.'

'Won't he mind?' I ask.

'He won't mind,' says the orderly.

I leave that barrack room like a *débutante* to her first ball. Woe betide me if I speck my specklessness or blur my shininess. There is mud on my way. I circumvent it, like a cat, walking rather crampedly, I must confess, in Mr. Bullock's perfect boots.

I join the other candidates for 'getting off.' Three of them are at high-water mark of immaculate splendor. The fourth is but humanly correct and clean.

'I'm for it,' he says. 'You chaps — two hours' sweat or tip your orderly half a crown — and then it's a toss up.'

More immaculates arrive, and we mutually inspect each other.

The Sergeant arrives. He falls us in and inspects us, touches us up here and there, is precise as to position of a lanyard. 'And, for Gawd's sake, don't finger your sword like that,' he says. He stands us at ease, and 'shuns' us, and stands us at ease again. *Da capo, da capo, da capo.*

The Orderly Officer arrives. He has a sword which he draws in a deprecating way. We are definitely 'shunned,' and the ordeal begins.

I am glad that a few weeks in the

army has taught me not to want too irresistibly to smile on these occasions. But there is something amazingly comic about it. Mrs. Jarley's wax works! Our cap badges, our caps, our white bands. Our jacket collars — are they properly stiffened? (We wear jackets and not tunics, please note, and we stiffen the collars of them.) Our lanyards, our buttons — every button! Our belts — and the jacket is lifted to see that the belt makes no false show. Our gloves, our breeches, our puttees, our boots. I trust he has noticed that our faces are clean. If the Board School question came, 'And have you washed behind your ears?' I should never be surprised.

He is passing at the back of us now. He overlooks me and my neighbor most cursorily. Picket will not 'get off,' that's clear. Spurs are the immediate test, I can feel that — and he's pausing there on the right, pausing rather long. It's a near thing between two of them. Then — 'Lift your feet up,' I hear him say. 'That'll do.' Then, 'Lift your feet up' again. He is looking at the blacking on the in-steps of their boots! It is a near thing. Then 'Two paces to the rear; march.' Which of the immaculates it is I cannot see; the communist from number nine or another.

The Sergeant marches us off and there is the outgoing guard to face us as we halt, trying to look as if they cared not a damn about being relieved. Their Bombardier says to our Bombardier, 'Since taking over this guard nothing unusual has occurred.' He says it most solemnly. Then we set to partners, and the old guard marches off.

Picket goes to the stables, which are quieting down now for the night. Half a dozen horses are sick. Poor beasts, they have no understanding of it at all, and they turn you such a questioning

eye. Have *you* done this thing to them?

'Can't you cure me at once, can't you bridle and bit what's wrong and drive it away? But if you can't, oh, do leave me alone.'

One of them has — is it strangles? 'The animal displays a tendency to lie down, and must not be permitted to do so, or in his struggles serious injury may result,' says the textbook. A stableman stood by to prevent him lying down and swore at him, not unkindly, the while. Other things were practised on him, too, which I noted, and in consequence did very well with 'strangles' in the horse-management examination a week later. 'It's an ill wind. . . .'

All's quiet at last, except for the clicking of hoofs and the rattling of chains. The stable bars are up, but doors are to be left open though through this summer night. I fall to trying how slowly I can pace my rounds; how I can vary the going of them. I begin to regret Bullock's boots, since the splendor of them has availed nothing, and my feet ached enough with a day's barrack tramping to start with. Never mind, we are beating the Germans. *I* am beating the Germans. *I* am beating them by pacing these stables this summer evening in a heavy cap and stiff collar and Bullock's boots. And it is only thus that they can be beaten, only through this that the world can be free again. Whereat *I* am content and would (God knows!) be more content with more discomfort, content to offer some real sacrifice. But to that test we bring all the use of these seemingly useless things; the hither and thither and up and down; the discipline which is to be an outward and visible sign of the new born military grace within. My patience only springs, when, admitting our every

ignorance of military ways, they will not answer to that test.

It was dark and the searchlights had begun to make their rectilinear patterns in the sky when I was relieved.

I picked up the remnants of a meal. I changed Bullock's beautiful boots for my own and the comparative comfort of them. I settled in a corner of the guard room to read. Green's *English People* is a good war-time book. What we Britons have tumbled through in our time! But a guard room is not the place for reflective reading. I tried my drill book. 'At the command ——' and so on for great lengths.

Later came another two hours' tramp round the stables while the barracks went to bed; and I asked them 'who went there?' and they said they were my friends. This time my lantern was a companion of a sort. I looked in on the sick horses, too. They turned uneasily at the swinging light.

'And now,' said I, after second relief, 'I'll get some sleep.' Against orders or not, off come my spurs and my boots and jacket and belt. Woe betide me if we are suddenly 'turned out!' But sleep comes hardly in a guard room. Only the boy trumpeter slept; and he snored, unforgettably, unforgivably. And late-comers tumbled clatteringly in and tumbled clatteringly out, and the atmosphere grew very thick indeed.

I was safely up and out at two. I yawned as I took the lantern; the other picket yawned as he gave it me.

It was a queer two hours that followed.

Darkness but for my lantern. Sometimes a lean cat would slip across the light, searching its prey or its kind.

Silence, but for the noise the horses made. I have a fancy that in these

quiet hours *thoughts* are born to them — embryo thoughts that perish when any sound or sight brings back their easy servitude again. For here, tonight, I am in common case with them as they stand uneasily in their stalls; and I, threading my path, now this path, now that, till surely one has threaded them all, find even as a horse must find —

‘I have bumped this corner of the manger, I have run my nose along it, I have bumped that. I have stretched up till the rope checked, I have stretched down, I have nuzzled that lump of salt wherever it will go. I have stamped with this hoof and that; first, one, two, three, four; now, three two, one, four; then, four, two, three, one; now, one, three, four, two; and so on and on!’

Just so, I pacing my round, counting my steps, lulled by rhythm and by number which is rhythm, fall into some such automatism, out of which (for me certainly) a thought will be born. As now. My mind says Barren Figtree; and then Baron Figtree. (This is from a book of a hundred riddles that I had as a small child:) ‘What English nobleman is mentioned in the Bible? Baron Figtree.’ Or did they spell it ‘Barren.’ This unaccountable mental motor within me plays elaborately with delicacies of pronunciation for purposes of a pun. Barron or Baren? Barron Figtree; Baren Figtree. The thing obsesses me for a whole round of stable A. If I don’t shake it off I’ll be asleep. I stand and stamp the ground and work my neck, stretch it and strain it even as the horses do, that being the recognized safeguard.

At this point of mentality then I am on quite common ground, I do believe, with my stable companions, restless and rhythmic near me. For me, with reasonable human arrogance be it said, it is a descent. This is not true thought,

if by thought we mean idea bridged more or less creatively to idea. For them it is the present summit of self-consciousness perhaps.

Number Forty-three there, the off-wheeler, still and attentive; he is not asleep. Something quite alien to fodder, stables, harness — something from beyond all the animal experience that he has fulfilled has settled on his brain — as a fly settles. It makes no movement, no demand, but it is there, a strange, insistent, troubling thing. Presently it will fly away, and with relief he’ll fall to his instinctive round again. But back and back it will come to him, and to his generations, in differing and developing forms, till a memory is created and questioning begins; and questioning brings answer, and from that grows.

To-night (this is the complement of my fancy), I, sleepy on my round, have been back to that point from which Forty-three, he and all his kind, are moving, ever moving upward in the scale of things.

And so, it being four o’clock, comes my relief. I seek the guard room; as I pass the sentry he gives me a wry grin.

There, on the little hammock beds let down, lie the ‘spare parts’ of this machinery of watch and challenge. But really, says the unregenerate civilian in me, one policeman would do the whole job more efficiently and with much less chatter.

The light is very dim, the air all blind with smoke; and — oh, but they do reach the very extreme of ugliness as they lie there. Only the trumpeter boy redeems the group, and he still snores.

There’s anarchy in sleep. There’s the damned truth of the world without false shame, false pride. Whence has had to come much regimenting, much

etiquette and law and war. For the hardness of our hearts? For the slackness of our souls and the feebleness of our minds?

To picture the true worth of our wise men, picture them asleep. The House of Commons and the House of Lords, all unreservedly asleep. The Cabinet, the Bench of Bishops, the War Office — snoring. Carlyle saw them naked and it soured his mind to them forever. See them asleep and snoring, it might well dip you in despair.

I step gingerly to the spare hammock bed and lay myself down. Soon,

Reveille

as upon Forty-three, the off-wheeler, settles the obsessing image of such an idea, as, waking him, should welcome bring sleep to me. But some too tired part of my brain perversely combats it, leaving poor *me* the helpless battleground till —

The small trumpeter has tumbled up to help blow reveille. I tumble up at the sound, for once a welcome sound. Cap, boots, spurs, British warm, and blanket; Green's *English People* and my gloves, I tumble off with them and to my barrack room again.

Another day begun; of hither and thither and up and down.

## THE SAILOR

BY H. G. D.

Back to your lips across the whole broad world,  
Back to the same dear lips which kissed 'Good-bye,'  
Mother, I came: and now they are no more.

What though from Universe to Universe,  
Some day I follow whither you have gone  
Unresting, till I find your lips again?

I cannot find them now when I go home:  
I only find the memory of them,  
And the memory of my coldness and your tears.

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