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Ware, John F. W. 1818-1881.

Publication/Creation

Boston : American Unitarian Association, 1863.

Persistent URL

https://wellcomecollection.org/works/t423qhcw

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Army Series.] [No. 12.

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BY

JOHN F. W. WARE.

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ON PICKET.

"JUST in from picket," was the cheery salutation, as I stood in a company street of one of our regiments of the Army of the Potomac. And the weary soldier threw aside his overcoat, placed his gun in its rack, and came and sat with me, and talked of that one place the soldier never forgets, never is weary of thinking or speaking of, — *home*.

Out upon picket, at the exposed front, on solitary watch, under momentary peril, how constant, how soothing the thought of home! If it sometimes make one sad, it oftener ennobles the man, deepens his affections, enlightens him as to his duties there, and quickens and strengthens a resolve to make that home a more blessed place when God permits him to come to it again. It happened that some years ago I put together a little book especially for the sick, and when the war broke out sent the few remaining copies to be used in the hospitals. At that terrible battle of Chancellorsville, one of those noble men whose devotion has so ennobled our struggle fell while leading his men to the assault.

Shortly after there came into my hands one of those very books I had sent out, with his name in it, all worn and soiled by exposure and use, and on the fly-leaf of it a pencilled letter to his wife, in which he spoke of it as his constant companion when he was away on picket duty, as he then was, and of the longing he always had, when he read things in it that pleased him, that he could read them aloud to her in his own home. Surely, those long, lonely, perilous hours, those dreary watches of the night, can have none so blessed relief and ministering as thoughts of home; and he is the wise man, and will be the truer soldier, who makes use of them to cement more closely the union of hearts which time and absence and circumstance should only draw closer and closer.

But picket life does not allow of continued, quiet thought. It is a time of excitement, activity, vigilance. It is near the foe, and it may be near to death. It is at a distance from relief. It requires individual energy, prudence, sagacity, courage, decision. Not only personal safety and life are at stake, but the safety of the army lying behind, — perhaps of the cause. A single indiscretion, a moment's flinching, the slightest relaxing of discipline or vigilance, may bring on terrible disaster. The commander relies upon the courage, the fidelity, the report of his pickets. They hold everything in their hands. Only the other day the

negligence of a single vidette brought about a mortifying reverse on the banks of the Rappahannock.

A soldier does not need to be told of this, you say. And yet it will do no harm to remind him of it, because soldiers have forgotten this duty, — have slept, or been surprised at their posts. They have sometimes been guilty of that very thing a soldier never should be guilty of, — neglect of watchfulness in the face of the enemy. The old Romans were, perhaps, the best soldiers the world has seen. It was sure death to a Roman to be found asleep at his post, or to be known to have left it. When the city of Pompeii came to be unearthed, there was found at the city's gate the remains of the Roman sentinel there. The city had warning of its doom. The people fled, but no order came to him, and grimly, determinedly, he stayed at his post and died, and his mouldering frame ages afterward has preached solemnly and sublimely of fidelity to trust. That dead soldier has spoken living words.

To guard against surprise, that is the great duty of the picket. It is surprise an army has most need to dread, — a watchful, ingenious, original move on the part of the enemy, upsetting all old theories of approach or assault, coming in, as Napoleon used to, just where and when and as he ought not to. If all battles were fought according to the books, if there were no scope for strategy, if

the resources of tactics were all exhausted, if all were known about the foe that would be known were he drawn up, like an old Grecian phalanx, fair and square in the open field, there could be no surprise, there could be no place for picket duty. But just the most dangerous thing to an army is the surprise a wary, accomplished antagonist may spring upon it, — not the ambush that may entrap a small body, but a concerted, combined movement that may take an exposed flank or rear, or a feebly supported centre, — that may throw itself, resistless as an avalanche, as our enemy has so often done, upon one point, when it has *seemed* attacking another. The picket becomes the vital force in the army, — the central pivot on which its safety turns. His infidelity is its destruction.

So it is that life's great danger is from surprises. There is a very large class of sins which may justly be called *sins of surprise*. They are the things we do not mean to do, do not want to do, but are always doing. They are not the worst things perhaps, not so bad as the things we do deliberately, not in themselves very large things, separately do not show any great moral obliquity or do a great amount of harm, yet their perpetual recurrence is doing great mischief to character, and bringing mortification upon ourselves, disappointment, and in the end, it may be, despair. The Apostle confessed his annoyance from this class when he said,

The evil that I would not, that I do." At times his moral vigilance grew slack, and then his enemy was upon him.

It is so with us all. You and I are constantly tripped up by some little contemptible thing, which watches its opportunity, and is down upon us, has mastered, pinioned us, and is leading us captive before we know it. You and I are every day suffering and ashamed at the facility with which we allow ourselves to be surprised into sayings, doings, feelings which in our watchful moments we would not allow for our lives. You and I a hundred times a day are off our guard, and do some unworthy deed, say some untrue thing, have some unholy feeling, are false to some duty, for no other reason, and we suffer all manner of mortification and self-condemnation, and then, next day, do very much the same things again.

Cannot we help this? I think so. The difficulty is a simple one. *We are off our guard*, and I believe it is true in the army as it is in life, that when a man is negligent of his duty, he loses, in part, his courage. He is for the time being a coward. He has lost the moral support which fidelity gives. He is no longer quick, sharp, shrewd, self-reliant. He has lost a large element in all courage; for courage is never a single thing, but has elements none of which you subtract but at a loss. The man off his guard is never reliable. The attack is unlooked

for. That disconcerts him. He cannot rally at once. He cannot collect his methods of defence. The enemy has him at a vantage. There is no withstanding him. You are down in the dust, wounded, beaten, perhaps half dead. Vigilance would have prevented this, — vigilance, which, like the eye of God, never slumbers nor sleeps. You remember that the Saviour lays his stress upon that word, *Watch*. It comes in again and again as the sum of his teaching and warning. He shows the disasters that will come if men will not watch, and I think we all feel that our great mistake, the source of our misery and our fear, is the wretched way in which we heed the Saviour's word. Even while the traitors draw nigh we sleep.

There is an instance of the way in which a man is surprised into a sin in the history of Peter. Jesus had told him that he would betray him. Peter had declared that he would not though he should die with him. We should suppose he would be on his guard. Probably his very assurance threw him off his guard. He felt that to be impossible, ceased to think about it, relaxed, gave up his watch there, went among the men in the court-yard, stood and warmed himself, perfectly at ease and self-confident, and when the maid spoke to him, utterly surprised, he denied knowing anything about his Master; then, having committed himself, he began to curse and to swear to make his first falsehood seem liker to the

truth. Peter's fault was in allowing himself to be surprised, in being off duty. His after denials were only to support the first. His first was his real sin, and that was because his self-confidence allowed him to sleep when he should have waked and watched. Our own experience is written out for us in that incident. Confident in ourselves, we forget the demands of caution, we withdraw our guards, and then comes swift, sure overthrow.

The man who maintains his watch as Christ maintained his cannot be surprised, cannot be overthrown. There is no power or wile strong enough. So he foiled the tempter, and only so he kept the mastery over him. The tempter masters us because we have not the Saviour's spirit. That is omnipotent; and once it possesses us, we through it are also omnipotent. The very gates of hell cannot prevail against us.

I think God has placed every human being on picket duty, thrown him out to the front, in the felt presence of his enemies, and bidden him *watch*. That is his one paramount duty, not to himself alone, but to others. Persistently he neglects it, he falls into error and sin. "I didn't think," "I didn't remember," "If I had only my wits about me," is his exclamation and excuse. It seems to set the matter right with himself, while his great duty was to think, to have his wits about him, to be on guard. We are able to do everything God

has set us to do. Failure is always only man's infidelity.

When Washington dismissed his general, St. Clair, to the charge of an army which had again and again under other leaders fallen into ambush and been defeated, his last instruction, repeated with emphasis, was, — "*Beware of a surprise.*" Yet with that warning ringing in his ears, the unfortunate general was surprised and more terribly beaten than any who had gone before. Washington well knew the country and the enemy against which his general marched. In the open field, from a visible foe, he had little to fear. It was against the surprise he needed to guard. And so we march through a country in which our virtue has little to fear so long as we are in the open fields, so long as we can see our enemy, so long as he marshals and arrays his forces in front. It is the ambush, the surprise, of which we need to beware, — the secret, sudden onslaught, not the attack that shows itself and threatens and acts deliberately and opens at long range, but the attack that springs upon us, that makes no noise, with a Zouave dash takes us on the run and uses the bayonet. This attack we are to fear, watch against; but even this is not invincible. Eternal vigilance is said to be the price of liberty. It is the price of immunity from any, every sin. Pay it, and no sin can vanquish you, no surprise disturb.

"My soul, be on thy guard;
Ten thousand foes arise;
The hosts of sin are pressing hard,
To draw thee from the skies.

"O watch and strive and pray!
The battle ne'er give o'er;
Renew it boldly day by day,
And help Divine implore.

"Ne'er think the victory won,
Nor lay thine armor down:
Thy arduous work will not be done
Till thou obtain thy crown."