

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE UNITED STATES ARMY?

“WELL, what is wrong?” (with emphasis on the “is”), asks the plain citizen. He is so accustomed to think of the army and navy as among “the best ever” that he is completely nonplussed when to his question he receives the reply: “Wrong? Why just this: during the last year nearly five thousand enlisted men deserted, and during the past ten years there have been *over fifty thousand deserters from our regular army.*” Truly an astounding and humiliating piece of information for the plain citizen! And if *he* is disgusted with it, is it surprising that the Adjutant-General, in his latest report, says: “That there should have been nearly five thousand desertions from the army of the United States during the last fiscal year is simply a disgrace to the army and a reproach to American citizenship”? The percentage of desertions for the same period was 4.97, whereas in the British army it was only 1.7, and this in an organization of 263,000 men. Mr. Bailey Millard, from whose article on “The Shame of our Army,” in the *Cosmopolitan*, these figures are taken, says we shall gain no consolation by looking into the details. Not an atom.

For example, take the Sixth Infantry. From that regiment 142 men deserted, or 12 per cent. of the whole number. Blackest of all records . . . was that of Company K of the 28th Infantry, located at Fort Snelling, Minnesota. Of the men in this company *nearly one third* became disgusted with the service and fared forth to other fields of usefulness.

Fort Snelling is an attractive place from a soldier's point of view; the barracks are new and comfortable; and the climate, save in winter, is not severe. The men who deserted did not like the officers over them, nor the kind of work they had to do. Doubtless Mr. Millard is right when he says:

It is a shock to most young Americans who have enlisted in the army to taste the delights of military life to find that the most important part of their training, from the viewpoint of their post commander, is to dig ditches, wash pots and pans, wait on table, clean out stables, sweep off walks, or cut brush in the hot sun. Those were the conditions the deserters just mentioned found in the army. Soon they began to loathe the life. It sickened their souls, it humbled their pride, and they ran away from the service.

It must be frankly confessed that the more one reads of Mr. Millard's article the less palatable do the assertions he makes become. For instance, it is anything but gratifying to one's national pride to read that, whereas in the colored companies there were three with no desertions in 1909, and few desertions

from the others, yet among the white companies in the United States and dependencies *there were only five from which there were no desertions.*

There is another point on which as a nation we can scarcely pride ourselves, and that is the way we treat deserters. In 1908 the War Department decided that something must be done to stop the wholesale desertion from the army. The Bertillon system of measuring, photographing ("mugging"), and finger-prints records was introduced. Four thousand posters with a photograph were issued in each case; and the reward for the capture of a deserter was raised from ten dollars to fifty. Private detective agencies soon reaped a fat harvest, and in 1909 there were gathered in 2,257 runaways. To quote Mr. Millard further:

The War Department is bent upon correcting the "laxity of public opinion" on the subject of desertion. . . . When a man deserts from our army in these peaceful times, he loses his rights of citizenship, his pay and his clothes, is dismissed with dishonor from the service, and, if captured, is condemned to hard labor and prison fare. If in the meantime he should try to return to the army, by going to another post, he is not only sentenced for desertion but also for fraudulent enlistment. The "mugging" and the finger-prints give him no chance of escape.

They manage things better in England. Long ago they discovered that the harsher you are with the deserter the more there is of him. Consequently year by year the punishment for desertion has been decreased; and the aim has been to remove the stigma of prison from deserters entirely. Thus we read:

If a British soldier deserts in time of peace, he retains his citizenship and is often taken back into the army. In 1908, of 4,766 deserters, 1,728 re-joined the army. In the case of the U. S. Army, those 1,728 would have been lost to the service and most of them would still be in prison cells.

It is claimed that one great cause of desertion from our army is the long absences from their regiments of so many officers. The work of training them devolves upon inexperienced young men; and, as one private put it: "Soldiers hate to obey the orders of some young squirt fresh from the Point." That many men do not want to stay in the army is shown by the fact that in three years 4,589 bought their way out of it. This is easy enough for the sons of well-to-do parents; but the poorer brother in arms has no alternative but to run away, be dishonorably discharged, be placarded all over the country, and, if captured, serve a term in prison, and lose his citizenship.