

MR. NOBODY

LLEWELLYN HUGHES

THE LATE November rain had turned toward evening into a driving sleet from the north-east; and under the shelter of one of the company's storage sheds, damp and foul with the smell of hides, the lading-clerk of the River Horne Line Company was shivering. From somewhere the half-hour chimes of a clock came mournfully through the night. Pulling his hat well down over his ears Herbert Simmons set out against the driving rain, praying the pain in his chest would get no worse. He could of course take a Bridge bus, then transfer; but that meant an extra fare, and sheer necessity forced him to adhere to a shilling per week allowance for bus-rides.

It was the same homeward journey he had taken regularly for over four years. He knew every cracked and broken flagstone of the pavements, every shop and sign-post; from force of habit he cut across intervening streets and lanes precisely at the same spot. Gusts of cold rain curved and twisted about him, poured down on him from a screeching dance around a chimney-pot, flung round a near-by corner right into his face, and swept up again to do the same thing all over further along the way.

The vague fancy that there were two Herbert Simmonses returned

to him. One was already home. The *other*, spectral and strangely dissatisfied, lagged behind. He had been dimly conscious of the thing once or twice before. The *other* Herbert Simmons whispered of things far beyond his grasp, was bitterly envious for money, luxuries, wanted to hide aboard one of those South American tramps and go sailing away, deserting all cares, responsibilities. Just now, however, it was on a different tack. *You are near the end of your tether, Herbert Simmons. You ain't ever going to do anything worth while in this life. Look how your feet drag. It's too late for America and a new start. You're about done for, Herbert Simmons.*

For a moment he gave himself utterly over to his shadow, and, doing so, in a swift attack of miserable dissatisfaction, reviewed his whole life: one of nine children, his father's awful death, his tramp to London, the job as milk-wagon boy, the years in that grocery shop, his meeting with Ethel, the saving up of fifteen pounds with which to get married and start a home, the first child, the second, the . . . The wind shrieked with laughter at him. Even in France, during the war, his life had been absolutely colorless, gray, gray as the rain, the heavens. It hadn't been for the want of trying,

for the want of ambition; but he simply couldn't think of anything by which he could change himself, remedy his awful insignificance. Once, in a second of glorious exhilaration, he had volunteered for the job of crawling through barbed wire and bombing an enemy outpost; but even that was denied him; a countermanding order withdrew his battalion before his chance came. Now he was resigned to a more or less hopeless belief that he would meet, suddenly, round some corner or other, a new and startling development into which he would eagerly precipitate himself. He had no clear notion what this development might be, but it had fame and fortune in it, a garden with roses, a car . . .

The wind-swept rain tearing down a street he was crossing almost knocked him down. Immersed in his thoughts, Herbert Simmons had entirely lost track of his whereabouts and to his surprise was compelled to look up at the name on the brick wall. It was Nightingale Lane. Another whisper, coming from somewhere, made him dizzy. Why not turn up Nightingale Lane instead of continuing along St. Katherine's Way? Why not, for once in his life, go absolutely contrary to the monotonous clockwork of his habits? Why not, here and now, break away from that insignificant automaton of a lading-clerk known as Simmons? The mere fancy of it so exhausted him that he had to lean against the wall for support. He had an idea he was the only soul abroad in the whole of London and that against him the raging elements pitted all their strength and fury.

Down Nightingale Lane came the storm's legions, a phantom cavalry, their smoking limbs and draperies rising to incredible heights in contortions of jealousy. They charged him as they would a discarded rag, insistent on tearing him, an unknown lading-clerk, up and away, to whirl him on to some distant rubbish-heap. Spellbound, he likened them to the obscure forces that in life kept him in the background, sealed him in the ranks of mere nobodies. Why not oppose them? Why not clench his fists and smash into them? Yes, go up Nightingale Lane and on and on through this opposition to some Arcadia just beyond, for which a stirring in his breast indeterminately ached. Past Bethnal Green, past the last few houses on the outskirts. . . .

He shook his head as though it were all hopelessly beyond his understanding, then resumed his way, along Lower Thames Street, across London Bridge, head bowed, hands thrust deep into pockets, a solitary figure, homeward bound, step by step taking him nearer the little circle of wife and children. On the other side of the Thames he got an Elephant and Castle bus, parted with one of his three remaining pennies, and settled down to think of the smelly hides he'd have to count to-morrow, the Saturday afternoon in his bit of a garden, and a joke to make Ethel smile a little.

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"Here's father, mother!"

As he had surmised, supper was almost ready and Arthur and the baby put to bed. Margaret, despite his wet clothes and sodden boots, came rushing toward him, precipi-

tant with news she had kept locked in her heart all day. "Father," she began, pressing his cold hand to her burning cheek, "I want to tell you somethin'."

"In a moment. Be careful, darling. I'm wet through and through, you know."

"Margaret! Let your pore father take off 'is wet things, won't you?"

"It's a terrible night," said Mr. Simmons, shivering still. "Where shall I leave 'em, Ethel? In the hall 'ere, or in the kitchen? My boots are soaked like brown paper. Hope there's a pair of socks warming."

"Freddy! Spread your father an old newspaper. Come through the kitchen, 'Erbert." She regarded him with anxious eyes. "Is it gone to your underclothes?"

"I don't think so."

"That's a blessing. There's dry socks by the stove for you." Mr. Simmons crossed through, carefully stepping on the newspaper Freddy had laid for him, Margaret still holding on to his hand. "Now, Margaret, for goodness' sake leave your pore father alone for a minute. How's your chest, 'Erbert? I'll give it a rub with the ointment again afore you go to bed."

Margaret, obeying her mother, went up to the window, where she began to cry softly. Approaching her, Willie asked, "Did you tell him?" She gave two or three little sniffs and shook her head.

"Tell him what?" inquired Harry, overhearing.

"Nuffin'," said Willie.

"'Arry," called mother, "run into the bedroom an' get your father's other coat and wes'coat, there's a

good lad. And be careful not to wake the baby, won't you?" She turned to her husband. "Will you be changin' your trousers, 'Erbert?"

"They're pretty wet."

"Well, try and 'urry, dear, 'cause dinner's been ready a long while. You ain't half late to-night."

"Such an awful storm!" he told her as he pulled off his boots. "Can you spare a little 'ot water, Ethel? I'd better just dip my feet."

"Get your father the little bath, Willie, an' a towel." Noticing Margaret wiping her eyes and nose on the window-curtains, she gently but firmly pulled her away. "Now, Margaret, stop your sillyin' an' be a good girl. Get out the knives and forks for me."

In the kitchen Harry and Fred were making themselves useful. Mr. Simmons was particularly careful of his aitches before Fred. The boy was at the top of his class and had just gained full marks in the school examinations. Already he had been talking about going to college—though where the necessary money was to come from Mr. Simmons had no idea. Very proud of Fred, but more at ease with his other sons. "How did school go to-day, Harry?"

"Picked for goal against the Radnor Street school to-morrow. But I—but I wish I—" He stopped, and handed his father the dry socks. "Here, father dear."

"But what?"

"I ought to have a new pair of football knickers."

"What about the old ones?"

"They're all in rags, father. An' mother said that perhaps you—"

"But can't they be mended?"

"They look so patchy, father. The other boys'll 'ave decent ones."

Mr. Simmons was purposely silent; such a minor expense, but he couldn't afford it. He glanced up at Willie and diffidently asked him if last night's home-work was all right.

"'Rithmetic not bad; algebra all wrong."

"Umn—" He raised his eyebrows as much as to say: "Strange; very strange. After father had helped you for an hour, and everything!" A confused jumble of x 's and a plus b 's mocked him. No, he couldn't help him there; couldn't help him in anything. He pulled a gray sock on a red foot, timidly conscious that neither Willie nor Harry had as yet discovered what Fred, for some mysterious reason, kept to himself—their father's ignorance.

"I can't never get it right," said Willie, biting his finger-nails. "Will you 'elp me again to-night, father?"

"We'll see. But 'I can't never get it right' isn't quite correct, is it?"

"Yes."

"It ain't," contradicted Harry.

Mr. Simmons appealed for knowledge. "What say, Fred?"

"Two negatives make an affirmative," recited Fred.

"Yes. That's—that's what I thought," said his father miserably, passing the information on to Willie in a wise look.

"'Erbert, do 'urry up, there's a dear. The children is starving."

Stocking-footing it into his bedroom, Mr. Simmons hurriedly changed his trousers, emerged with them over his arm, put his wet clothes on the back of a chair near

the stove, and entered the living-room in readiness for the evening meal. They were all seated round the table waiting for him. Mr. Simmons never felt quite comfortable before all these hungry little mouths he was rightfully expected to feed; in their hungry glances he sometimes read, "Why don't you buy a little more meat and potatoes for us?" Many a time, when mother's back was turned, would he slip an extra piece of mutton or a potato from his own on to Harry's or Fred's plate—growing uncomplaining lads—and any little titbit that Ethel had lovingly placed before him was completely at the mercy of Margaret's fork. He gave two raps, and immediately all bowed their heads while he reverently, hopefully, pronounced a prayer.

"No, Willie, that piece is for father," said mother, as the nine-year-old requested a particular portion of Yorkshire pudding.

"Let 'im have it, Ethel."

"Don't encourage 'im, 'Erbert. I cooked that bit especially for you. There's plenty for all of us, see."

Four pairs of eager eyes watched the piling up of Mr. Simmons's plate, which naturally came first of all; the best potatoes, the nicest meat and two extra spoonfuls of gravy. Then came Harry's, then Fred's, then Willie's, and lastly Margaret's. Mrs. Simmons never got started until every one had been served; she always appeared indifferent about it anyway and preferred to pick the meat-bone and eat Willie's and Margaret's crusts instead of the nice brown potatoes. Long before that, however, respective plates were scraped and cleaned and every one

was ready for the pudding. This evening it was rice-pudding, with raisins. Perhaps Mrs. Simmons would get some; perhaps she would not. Sometimes she scraped the pan in which it had been baked, although when it was very tasty one of the boys got that privilege in addition to his regular helping. "Ethel," complained Mr. Simmons, "I really can't eat all this pudding. Let me put a bit on a plate for you?"

"No, 'Erbert. I've got a little saved in the kitchen." Up to now, Mrs. Simmons, taking care of her brood, hadn't eaten anything. She rose with a warning: "Now don't give any of it to Margaret or Willie, will you? 'Cause you need it yourself, 'Erbert." Her desire that the breadwinner be properly fed was evidently not unanimous, for while she was in the kitchen two spoons coming from right and left attacked Mr. Simmons's pudding and considerably reduced its dimensions. Then came tea, plenty of bread and butter, and a little jam.

Dinner over, they left the table, and Mrs. Simmons sat down to eat her cold meat and potatoes alone, dipping the odd crusts into the thickening gravy. When it was fine the two eldest boys went out for an hour or so, but to-night they played dominoes instead. Mr. Simmons dropped into his rocking-chair, and Margaret brought him his evening newspaper.

"Arthur's been messing with it again," explained Mrs. Simmons from the table. "Is it badly torn, 'Erbert?"

The paper was in a deplorable condition. "It's not bad," he replied, straightening it out.

"Who d'you think I saw to-day, 'Erbert?"

"Who?"

"That there Mrs. Forester I used to work for up in Portman Square. I thought I recognized 'er, so I goes up an' says 'Ow-do-you-do' to 'er."

"Well, well!"

"'Why, Ethel,' she says, 'ow are you?' she says.

"'I'm married now,' I says, 'these thirteen years.'

"'Appy,' she says.

"'Very 'appy,' I says; 'I got six children an' a good husband.'

"She seemed surprised like; kept looking me up and down, at my 'at and my fur stole all the time. 'Six children,' she says, sort of sneering at me. 'Ow amazing! I haven't got one.'" Mrs. Simmons was silent a moment. "Them sort never 'ave any, anyway."

Her husband rustled his paper.

"Yes; Mrs. Forester. She's got a bit fattish. But the clothes she wore! You should 'ave seen 'em. Wonderful." She sighed. "Some 'ave all, don't they?"

Mr. Simmons did not reply to that. Margaret had climbed on his lap and was snuggling her face close to his breast in an effort to hide fresh tears. The newspaper was dropped instantly. "Why, Margaret! Tears? Come now, tell father what it's all about." Willie stood by, noticeably involved in the proceedings. Mother was absorbed in her reflections, eating listlessly.

"It—it was on my way from s-school."

Willie said, "I was with 'er, father, and I didn't hear it drop or nuffin'."

"Didn't hear what drop?"

A silence, save for choked little

sobs. "I t-tied it up in my 'andkerchief and kept it in my dress pocket, and—and when I went to look for it my 'andkerchief an' all was gone." Her pent-up tears came now, in a deluge.

Then, suddenly, Mr. Simmons knew.

"We was going to buy sweets with it to-morrow afternoon," added Willie by way of explanation. "She was going to give me a 'a'penny of it; wasn't you, Margaret?" He looked up at his father. "She wouldn't tell mother she lost it."

Mrs. Simmons stopped in the act of cleaning her plate with a piece of bread. "What's the matter with 'er, 'Erbert? She's been crying ever since she came 'ome from school."

"She's lost her penny, mother," said Willie.

"What penny?" Was there an extra penny in her household that Mrs. Simmons knew nothing of? "What penny?"

It was an awkward question for Mr. Simmons to answer, but the cat was out of the bag now. "I gave 'er a penny last Wednesday," he confessed, slightly ashamed. As a matter of fact he had risen early that morning, and, it being a fine day, he walked all the way to Wapping Old Stairs. The penny saved had been secretly given to Margaret that night.

Mrs. Simmons, in a distressed tone of voice, said, "When I think of your pore feet, 'Erbert, it fair breaks my 'eart, it does."

"They're much better now, Ethel."

"Gawd knows you'd go naked for 'em and so would I. But there's a limit to everything. Besides, I bought Margaret some sweets last Saturday."

"She's only a little girl, and—" Margaret's grief touched him profoundly. He recalled her inarticulate joy when, last Wednesday, he surprised her with the penny, roguishly hinting that it be kept from mother; and now, while saving it for Saturday afternoon to share with her brother, she had lost it. He pressed the sob-wracked body to him, kissed her curly head. Slowly, fearfully, impelled by an ungovernable impulse, his fingers crept to his waistcoat pocket and closed on the edge of one of his two remaining pennies. Looking up guiltily he saw his wife watching him with her soft brown eyes. Mr. Simmons grinned foolishly.

"Now, 'Erbert dear—don't you do it. Please."

"Of course not, Ethel; of course not." He pulled away his hand and began to dry Margaret's tears with her handkerchief. "Come, darling, be a brave little girl and don't cry any more. To-morrow we'll go and look for that bad penny; it's sure to be hiding somewhere, and we'll find it all right; you'll see." He had other schemes up his sleeve that he kept to himself. She was all in all the world to him, and during her late illness he suffered agonies; for he thought he loved her best of all, though he admired Harry's manliness and stood in open respect of Fred's learning.

Gradually the sobs cooled and subsided, the swollen eyes closed in sleep, and from her eyelashes he wiped the last pendent tear. Mother was removing the things from the table, taking them into the kitchen. The boys were busy with their games and lessons. Mr. Simmons couldn't

control himself. Itching fingers once more fumbled in his waistcoat pocket, and this time they produced a penny; it was quickly wrapped in a little damp handkerchief, tied in a knot, and stuffed into a small dress pocket. A moment or so later, following an acquiescent nod from mother, he rose and carried his only daughter out of the room. After a while he softly returned, closed the bedroom door behind him, resumed his rocking-chair, sighed, picked up his torn newspaper, and began to read of the wonderful happenings in the great outside world.

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A loud knock upon the front door made him start. He watched his wife cross the room, heard her admit the visitor. A voice he knew, but couldn't exactly place, said, "Excuse me, missis, but does Mr. 'Erbert Simmons live here?"

Mr. Simmons went to the hall to meet him and saw a big, red-faced, thick-set man with a blue-black mustache, finely waxed. He remembered him at once, despite his civilian clothes. "Hallo, 'Erb! Last time I saw you was in the bloomin' trenches."

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Mr. Simmons, giving vent to his strongest expletive and beaming at the visitor. "I recognized your voice the minute you spoke at the door. Ethel, this is Sergeant-Major Prade. Well, I'm hanged! I've spoken of you often and often, major. 'Aven't I, Ethel?"

Mrs. Simmons first wiped her hand on her apron. "I thought you was a military man," she said with a bit of a smile.

"It's easy to tell 'em, missis." The sergeant-major inflated his

broad chest. "Now then, 'Erb! Straighten up a little for your missis and show her what's what. The good old Middlesex, eh!"

Mr. Simmons, continuing to beam, did straighten his back for a second. "Just take off your things, major. Like old times. Come in and sit down."

The soldier did so. "Aye, I can do with a bit of a rest, all right. Blim'me if I ain't searched the whole of Lunnon for you. Straight, I have! One house to another—all over the shop—every place you ever lived at. And what a day!"

Mr. Simmons felt a duty incumbent upon him. "Will you take a drop of something, major? A little brandy?"

"Will I take a drop of brandy?" He winked at Mrs. Simmons. "I'll take every drop I can get."

Mrs. Simmons went to the sideboard and produced a three-quarter-empty bottle and two small glasses, her husband watching her. "Get one for yourself, Ethel."

"I don't feel like it just now, 'Erbert."

Sergeant-Major Prade, his bowler-hat placed carefully under his chair, his hands resting, palm downward, on his knees, regarded Mr. Simmons with the old ferocious eye. "'Erb!" he commenced. "I've got a bit of news for you. I call it a lucky bit of news, and I only wish I was telling it to myself instead of to you. Ah!" Mrs. Simmons, bringing the drinks on a tray, set it down within easy reach on the table. "Well," said the sergeant-major, caressing his glass with thick fingers, "here's your 'ealth, missis—and yours, 'Erb. Good luck to the pair of you. And

believe me, I'm bringing you a bit of luck too."

The Simmonses' hearts beat a shade quicker.

"You remember the old colonel, don't you? Colonel Talbot?"

"He's Sir Frederick Talbot now, isn't he?"

"He is. And a braver and better officer never went to France. Always generous. Why, I remember the time—but that's another story. Yes, he's now Sir Frederick and a member of the House of Commons. Often comes up to the barracks, though; then it's drinks round for every one and half a crown here and five shilling there. There ain't one of us as wouldn't go down on our marrow-bones and lick his boots—same as it used to be over in France. One of the best of 'em was he; and still is."

He paused to take another swallow of brandy. "That's as good a brandy as ever I tasted, missis," he said. Mrs. Simmons acknowledged the compliment in a wan smile, glancing at the diminished contents of a bottle which had done duty for almost a year. "Well," continued the soldier, wiping purple lips with the back of his hand, "up he trots yesterday, with a friend of his. A man you've heard of, I'll bet." He paused again, in order to give the name a dramatic pronunciation. "Sir William Horpen, the painter! Heard of him, ain't you?"

Mr. Simmons shook his head; his wife didn't commit herself. The sergeant-major, who in all probability had not heard of the great artist until yesterday, appeared astounded. "What! never 'eard of Horpen? Well, strike me pink!"

"I've heard of him," said a voice from the window-ledge. "I've seen some of his paintings in the Grafton Galleries."

"Ush, Freddy dear!"

The boys had remained so quiet that Sergeant-Major Prade inspected his newly discovered audience with mingled surprise and perplexity. "What I've got to tell you, 'Erb," he said, scratching his head, "is a matter of extreme importance. See? Got to be kept quiet. There's only three of us, not counting you and the missis"—he looked at her—"got to tell her I s'pose—as knows anything about it. It's a secret!"

Somewhat puzzled and nervous, Mr. Simmons regarded his sons at a distance; then he looked up at the clock and noted the hour. "It's time for Willie to go to bed, in any case. Eh, mother! And, 'Arry!—supposing you and Fred play your game in the kitchen for a while. Me and Sergeant-Major Prade's got something to say."

They obeyed without a word. Mrs. Simmons also rose. "Would you like me to go, 'Erbert?"

"No, no, Ethel; you stay in 'ere." It was like an appeal for help. She sat down submissively, and respective doors closed softly on the departing boys.

"Good lads," commented the sergeant-major. He leaned nearer. "Got your old tunic, tin hat, gas-mask, 'Erb?" he asked in a half-whisper.

Mr. Simmons looked at his wife. "It's locked up in that there wooden chest, isn't it?"

"Good. You'll need 'em." Then he said: "The colonel—Sir Frederick, as is—wants to present to the

House of Commons a painting of the Unknown Soldier, done by this here Sir William Horpen. Well, up they trots to the barracks yesterday and examines the photograph of the old battalion that was took on Armistice day over in Ypres. Sir William Horpen gets out a little microscope he has in his pocket and looks at every bloomin' face for—well, over an hour. At last he puts his finger on one face and says, 'That's the man I want!'" The non-commissioned officer flipped Mr. Simmons on the knee with the back of his hand, then drew himself erect. "You, 'Erb!"

"Eh?"

"The colonel turns to me. 'Sergeant-major,' he says, 'who's that man?' I thinks for a minute.

"'Private 'Erbert Simmons,' I tells him right away.

"'All right,' says the colonel; 'find where he is and report to me; quick march!'"

Sergeant-Major Prade closed his thumb about his glass and drained the contents. "Had no trace of your whereabouts, cocky! It took me a day to find you!"

"Yes, but—but—"

Mrs. Simmons's fingers were restless; she kept picking at a loose thread in her apron. "What do they want 'im for?" she asked faintly.

"What do they want him for?" boomed the sergeant-major. The question seemed stupid, as if she hadn't been listening. "What do you think? to be the prime minister or something? Not this time, missis." He glared at them in a purple-faced condemnation of their ignorance. "They want him to pose for the picture, of course; to pose as the Unknown Soldier."

Husband and wife breathed easier. "Oh, is that all!" they said.

"All?" cannoned the soldier. "All? My Gawd! What more do you want? I wish I'd been picked for the honor, my lad, I can tell you. Think of your picture hanging in the House of Commons for ever and ever—long after all of us is pushing up the daisies. Why, you're a bloomin' hero if ever there was one. Don't that make you proud, missis?"

"It is wonderful," murmured Mrs. Simmons.

"Wonderful isn't the word for it. 'Just the man I want,' said Sir William. Why, it's marvelous; that's what it is." His heavy eyes responded to the feeling he had told his story well. "Now then, my lad, let's see you smile. Give me your hand, and say you're tickled to death."

But for some reason Mr. Simmons appeared reluctant. "You mean they—they want me to pose for 'em in my uniform?"

"That's hitting the nail right on the head, cocky."

"I've my work to look after, major. I've—I've the missis and six children to—depending on me. You see I've been with the River Horne Line Company over four years, and . . . I couldn't let nuffin' interfere with my work. Could I, Ethel?"

Sergeant-Major Prade swallowed whatever drops or half-drops of brandy were left in his glass as though it needed the addition of that stimulant to strengthen him in his criticism. "Look here, 'Erb!" he roared. "I can see you ain't appreciating this honor, or else you're as blind as a bat. Don't you see the glory of it? Don't you see what it means?"

It was a tremulous voice that answered: "I see what it means, all right. It means losing my job."

"Don't you do it, 'Erbert," came a tiny voice from Mrs. Simmons.

"What!" came the artillery. "Refuse an honor like this? An' me tramping all day in the rain like a lame duck to find 'im?" He laughed derisively in their faces. "Listen, my boy! Two of the greatest men in London wants you to represent the Unknown Soldier; they've picked you out from among thousands." He pressed this importance home with a tense pointing finger. "You! 'Erbert Simmons! I'm telling you straight that's an honor that comes only once; an honor that only one in a million can have. One in a million! You ain't doing this for me, cocky. You ain't doing it for the old colonel. You ain't doing it even for the House of Commons." Frightening them, he sprang to his feet and stood rigidly at the attention. "You're doing it for your country—for England! That's what you're doing it for. England!"

Mr. Simmons, strangely agitated and thrilled, slowly got to his feet, and before his late drill-sergeant his arms automatically dropped to his sides.

"Now then, let's hear you say it! Go on. Say you can't do it now!"

Mr. Simmons couldn't say it. "If that's how it is—" he began.

"Can't you see it is? What'll the picture mean but England? What are you supposed to represent but England?"

"I'll do it."

"Of course you'll do it." Sergeant-Major Prade sat down again, resenting the effort his theatricalism

had cost him. "I'll mention about your work to the colonel; you'll be seeing him yourself, anyhow. They want you to start on Monday. It'll only take a month or so; a couple of hours in the mornings and afternoons like; I've the address in my pocket here. But I hope you understand you can't say nothing to 'em where you work—I'll explain that in a moment. Anyway, with the help of the colonel and Sir William, getting a new job for yourself will be as easy as picking gooseberries off a tree."

"'Erbert!" pleaded Mrs. Simmons; "don't—don't—"

"Why not, missis? There'll be a hundred quid in it for 'im, besides the honor and glory."

"A hundred pounds!" repeated Mr. Simmons.

"Fifty, at least."

There was a silence. Mrs. Simmons's mouth worked funnily; then, with a stifled cry, she hid her face in her apron.

"I—I— Fill up your glass, won't you, major?" invited Mr. Simmons.

"Ta." The nickel-plated clock on the mantelpiece ticked away with noisy regularity until the soldier spoke again. "Now, 'Erb, there's just one thing more. It's got to be kept quiet—under your bloomin' 'at. There's only five of us in the know." He enumerated them on his fingers. "The colonel, this 'ere Horpen, myself, you, and the missis. Not another soul, mind! That's why you can't explain matters to your boss, down at your job. Wouldn't do for 'em to know; you can see that, can't you? The whole of England and—well, if it comes to it, the whole world—must never catch on. Savvy?"

Mr. Simmons blinked.

"It's the Unknown Soldier, see? And that means little Mr. Nobody is going to pose for it. In other words, cocky, you'll be representing the greatest hero in a land all right, only no one's got to know it. See?"

"I see."

"You've got to do more than see, my boy. Let's 'ave your word on it."

"I promise."

"And how about you, missis?"

Mrs. Simmons removed the apron from her face and looked up vacantly. Her husband explained, and she nodded.

"That's the promise of the wife of a soldier, missis; and you know what that means, don't you?"

Mrs. Simmons didn't know, but she nodded again. Sergeant-Major Prade reached for his bowler-hat. "'Erb," he said, "you remind me of the kid who cried for a plum, and in the end they had to cram it down his bloomin' throat. Oh! 'ere's the address!" He produced an envelop from his breast-pocket and laid it on the table. "Sir William marked it down hisself, see? That's his own fist. Be there by ten o'clock Monday morning." A glance at the clock brought a sharp whistle from his lips. "Blim'me, is it as late as all that? Midnight afore I gets 'ome. See if it's still raining, 'Erb!" he asked, struggling into his mackintosh coat.

Mr. Simmons opened the front door. "Yes," he said, visualizing his long walk in the morning. "'Ope it clears up by to-morrow."

"So do I. Going to see Chelsea play Liverpool?"

"N-no."

"I'm going if it rains cats and dogs.

Best match of the season. Well, good night, missis. So-long, 'Erb."

"Good night, major."

Returning to the room, Mr. Simmons sank into his rocking-chair and sat very still. Mrs. Simmons put away the brandy, emptied what drops were left from one glass to another, handed it in silence to her husband, and went into the kitchen.

"What did he have to say, mother?" asked Fred, the moment she entered.

"Nuffin' much, dear. Just an old friend of your father's—that's all." She poured hot water into a large pan in which an assortment of cups, dishes, and table utensils were indiscriminately piled, and commenced on her nightly duties. "Don't worry your father to-night, will you?" she told them quietly. "'E's fair tired out."

Bending over her dishes she looked weary and old. "Mother," said Harry, suddenly affected by her sad eyes, "you go and sit down with father. Fred an' me'll do the dishes for you."

She smiled at him. "You don't do 'em clean, darling. No; you an' Freddy just trot off to bed. It's late, see?"

They kissed her good night and went in to their father in the next room. Mr. Simmons perked up a bit when he heard them coming, and he tendered his withered cheek for two good-night kisses.

Fred remained behind a moment. "If you go to the Grafton Galleries, father, could I go with you? I went with the teacher once, and there was a painting by Sir William Orpen—a battle-field—that made me feel aw-

fully proud—of you, father. Teacher said he's one of the greatest painters in the world. He only paints great men, and they have to pay him a lot of money."

"Eh? What? Do they?"

"Oh, yes. He gets as much as a thousand pounds. More, I think."

"Well—we'll see. I've a few things I must do to-morrow. Well—we'll see. Good night, my lad."

"Good night, father dear."

In a little while Mr. Simmons joined his wife in the kitchen. "If I lost my job, Ethel, it would be terrible, wouldn't it?"

She didn't reply.

"But as the major says, Sir Frederick is bound to look after me, seeing as 'ow I'm doing this for 'im. An' a hundred pounds is a hundred pounds. Even fifty'd be a godsend. Wouldn't it? Freddy could 'ave his chance with all that, and—you could get that winter coat you liked in the shop, last month; you know, Ethel, that one with the fur on it. But keeping my job an' all seems too good to be true." Methodically he took off his coat and began to roll up his sleeves. "You know, Ethel, when 'e first started to speak—I thought I'd come into a bit of luck or something. Didn't you?"

"Now, 'Erbert, get to bed, there's a dear. I'll come an' rub your chest with the ointment in a minute. Then I got a bit of sewing to do on 'Arry's football trousers."

"What! an' let you do all them dishes alone! Not me!"

He seized a dish-cloth and took up his stand before a pile of unwashed plates. As he wiped them he drifted

into a reverie. He saw a huge painting of himself hanging in a heavy gilt frame in the House of Commons and thousands of people in a long line coming to look at it. A policeman in front of the picture kept moving them on. It was all very quiet, dignified, and awe-inspiring. He, Herbert Simmons, was also in the line. Yes, there he was, slowly looking about him and hoping that some one would recognize him, associate him with the famous painting, spread the news in excited whispers, and that the people would carry him on their shoulders as they would a national hero. But he remained totally unnoticed. Inch by inch he crept nearer the square of light illuminating the portrait, and at last he stood in front of it. The Unknown! Himself, to the life! "Move on, please," said the policeman. Just fancy! he wasn't allowed to stand an extra moment before his own painting. . . .

"What was it 'e called you?" asked Mrs. Simmons.

"Who?"

"That what's-'is-name. You know."

"Oh, the sergeant-major!" Mr. Simmons tried to smile, but his heart failed him. He moistened his dry lips. "Mr. Nobody," he said heavily.

She put her wet chapped arms about his neck and looked lovingly at him though red-rimmed tearful eyes. "Don't you believe 'im," she sobbed brokenly; "don't you believe 'im. Why, there ain't—there ain't a man in the whole of London . . ."

And Mr. Simmons thought she was very beautiful.



The CENTURION

JOHN ERSKINE



NEW YEAR RESOLUTIONS:—Every resolve for the future is a criticism of the past. It is an effort to free ourselves from those dead hands, habits, and memories which would keep us as we were. Tell me what vows you are making this January, and I shall know the history of your departing year. Or at least that portion of your history which will not depart with the year as it should.

Of all the fears which beset civilized man, the fear of the past is the strongest. Because science has disposed of most other terrors we now begin to look to the psychologist for some relief from this accumulating shadow, yet perhaps the good and the bad of what we have done and seen and suffered are too closely intertwined ever to separate—and we wouldn't give up memory altogether. Perhaps there is nothing to do with the bad parts of the past but to live them down. This calls for will-power. For centuries the church has used at the end of the year the prayer that the wills of the faithful may be stirred up. Secular man, by a deep instinct, makes in effect the same prayer when he frames his New Year resolutions. They are an exercise of his will, a defiance of his old self, a declaration of independence.

New Year's day has this special meaning for Americans, when it has any meaning at all. For us it is a moral occasion, a fast-day in spite of the meat and drink. We are never deceived into feeling that the year really begins in midwinter, while the days are still short and the sun far away. Under the old calendar men dated the year from the first break-up of winter and the earliest promise of spring, but with us January begins the unpleasant season, cold, rainy, windy, and slippery. We naturally think of our shortcomings in January. But Americans at all seasons have a tendency more than most people to renounce the past, even the good part of it. In our manners, our art, our politics, and our religion we are urged constantly to trust the future, to be ourselves, or, as Emerson told us, to stop building the sepulchers of the fathers, and build our own house instead. Every critic who urges us to write our books strictly in the present, without any indebtedness to the old culture of Europe, is urging on us a New Year resolution. Of course he may not himself follow this advice, but the importance of New Year resolutions never was that they should be kept; the main thing is to make them. There is a psychic advantage just in